

Synthesis Essay

From Tech User to Learning Designer: Change over Time

When I began my Masters of Arts in Education Technology (MAET) program, I viewed technology primarily as a set of tools that could make my job more efficient. Whether I was creating presentations, sharing resources digitally, or incorporating online activities into instruction, my focus was often on what technology could do. As I progressed through the program, however, I began to realize that the true value of technology is not found in the tools themselves but in how those tools can transform learning experiences. The MAET program challenged me to rethink my assumptions and become more intentional in the instructional decisions I make. While I entered the program seeking to learn new skills, I left it with a different mindset.

One of the most significant changes the program has created in me is how I approach instructional design. Before the MAET program, I would often plan lessons by starting with content and activities. Now, I begin by considering my learners' needs, desired outcomes, and meaningful ways for students to demonstrate their understanding in different ways. The program has taught me that effective learning experiences do not happen by accident. Instead, they require careful design, reflection, and an understanding of how students engage with information. As a result, I now spend more time analyzing learning goals and less time searching for the newest educational trend or technological tool.

One of the courses that has had the greatest impact on my thinking was CEP 800: Psychology of Learning in School and Other Settings. While I had already received my minor in psychology I was excited to learn more about how psychology can be used to help improve learning outcomes. This course focused on learning about different schools of thought centered around learning and then practicing that knowledge by developing or thinking about ways we could bring that way of thinking/learning to our classroom. By focusing on behaviorism, cognitivism, social theories, critical theories, out of school learning, and adult theories of learning I became much more focused on developing my own theory of learning. In my theory of learning, learning is a complex, dynamic, and ongoing process rather than a finished product measured only by an outcome. Instead learning emerges through the continuous interaction of experience, behavior, cognition, social participation, and cultural context. This results in changes not only in knowledge and behavior but also in identity and participation within communities. Learning then is not a static object that can be transferred from one person to another; rather, it is an evolving pattern of knowledge, behavior, and identity that develops through continuous interactions with people, tools, environment, and communities over time. Through increasing my understanding of my own theory of learning I can be a more effective educator in the classroom. This shift in my thinking has had a direct impact on my classroom practice as a social studies teacher. Previously, I often viewed learning as content acquisition and measured success

primarily through how well students were able to recall that information. Through CEP 800, I began to realize that learning is also connected to identity, participation, and meaningful engagement with ideas. This realization has encouraged me to design future learning activities that allow students to take greater ownership of their learning and connect historical content to their own life experiences. For example, rather than focusing exclusively on lectures or traditional assignments, I have incorporated more opportunities for students to use discussion, collaboration, and inquiry-based learning. Through this students are encouraged to analyze multiple perspectives, construct arguments, and engage with authentic historical questions. These changes reflect my belief that learning occurs most effectively when students actively participate in the process and see themselves as contributors rather than passive recipients of information. CEP 800 helped me understand that learning is not simply about what students know at the end of a lesson or day but also about how they develop as thinkers and members of a learning community.

Another course which significantly influenced me was CEP 813: Electronic Assessment for Teaching and Learning. Prior to this course, I would often view assessments as something which happened after instruction. CEP 813 challenged that perspective by demonstrating how assessments can be a guide to learning throughout the entire instructional process. I learned how formative assessments can provide valuable feedback, inform instructional adjustments, and create opportunities for student reflection. This course helped me see assessment as an ongoing conversation rather than a final measurement. It accomplished this through the creation of various sandbox assessments. These were different assessments that we would create with various restrictions placed on the creation of these assessments. They would start with basic restrictions such as the technique being used for the assessment, which could be something like creating a new product or design. While at first this made it relatively easy to come up with different types of assessments, more and more restrictions would be put on these sandbox assessments. Eventually we would have technique, structure (formative or summative), technology used, response, and design restricting our sandbox assessments. Through adding more restrictions it actually increased the quality of the assessments we were creating. This showed me that sometimes putting restrictions on your own work even if there aren't any can be a useful way to think outside of the assessment box when crafting different forms of assessment. Because of this, I am now a more intentional assessment designer who examines a variety of factors and puts limitations on my creations with the understanding that it will improve my final product.

A third course that deeply impacted my professional practice was CEP 817: Learning Technology by Design. This course pushed me to think more critically as a designer rather than simply as an educator. I was encouraged to identify an authentic problem, develop solutions, test ideas, and refine my work through feedback. What struck me the most was after I identified my problem the first step wasn't to start brainstorming but instead we were asked to empathize with

our students. This empowered me to take into consideration my students as the first thought as opposed to being a second or third thought. This reshaped my thinking around developing curriculum, creating assessments, or dealing with issues in my classroom to be more focused around experimentation and revision rather than trying to get it perfect on the first attempt. This mindset has given me both the framework and ability to take more risks, embrace feedback, and continually improve instructional practices instead of remaining stagnant. The emphasis on empathy and design thinking has also shaped how I approach challenges that arise in my classroom. Rather than immediately focusing on my perspective as the teacher, I now spend more time considering the experiences and needs of my students. This shift has helped me better understand barriers to engagement and identify ways to make learning experiences more accessible. Through interviews, feedback, and observation, I have become more intentional about gathering student input before making instructional decisions. As a result, I am designing learning experiences that are more responsive to student needs and interests. This process has reinforced the idea that effective educational design is not about creating a perfect product but about continuously refining instruction through feedback, reflection, and iteration.

While each of these courses has provided unique insights, the most meaningful aspect of the MAET program was how the courses built upon each other and contributed to a larger transformation in my thinking. CEP 800 helped me understand how people learn and challenged me to develop a clear philosophy of learning. CEP 813 expanded that understanding by showing me how assessment can support and guide learning rather than simply measure it. CEP 817 then provided a design framework which allowed me to apply those ideas in practice. Rather than viewing learning, assessment, and instructional design as separate responsibilities, I now see them as interconnected parts of a single process. Effective learning experiences begin with an understanding of learners, are supported through meaningful assessment practices, and are strengthened through continuous design and revision. This synthesis of ideas is perhaps the most important outcome of my experiences in the MAET program because it has fundamentally changed how I approach my work as an educator.

One of the MAET program goals is to think in new ways, and this is the goal I believe I have achieved the most fully throughout my experience in the program. Early on, I often looked for the “right” answer or the easiest and most efficient approach to a problem. MAET consistently challenged that viewpoint because rather than rewarding simple solutions, the program encouraged me to become more flexible, creative, and innovative in my problem solving approaches. A powerful example of this growth can be found in my work with the sandbox assessment activities. These assignments required us to create both formative and summative assessments while working within specific constraints and limitations. At first, the restrictions felt frustrating. I wanted the freedom to create assessments using familiar methods and tools. However, as I worked through these different challenges, I discovered that these limitations often spark creativity.

The sandbox activities forced me to think differently about assessment design. Instead of defaulting to the traditional quizzes or tests, I had to focus on what students truly needed to demonstrate and then find an innovative solution for them to do it. The restrictions encouraged me to consider alternative formats, creative uses of technology, and developing more authentic demonstrations of learning. In many cases, the final products were stronger because the constraints pushed me beyond my comfort zone. These experiences taught me an important lesson that extends far beyond assessment design. In education, we frequently face limitations involving things like time, resources, technology access, and student needs. The sandbox activities helped me develop the mindset that obstacles should not be viewed as barriers but as opportunities for innovation. This perspective has transformed how I approach challenges in my professional role. When faced with constraints, I now ask myself how those limitations may inspire a different and potentially better solution to my problem.

The MAET program also changed the way I view my responsibilities as an educator. I no longer see my role as simply delivering content or managing different learning activities. Instead, I view myself as a designer of experiences, a facilitator for learners, and an advocate for meaningful engagement. The program demonstrated that technology integration is not about using more tools; it is about creating opportunities for deeper learning. It is not enough to place technology in front of students. Effective educators must thoughtfully design classroom environments where technology can enhance critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving.

Looking back, I am amazed by how much my thinking has evolved throughout the program. The courses I completed, the projects I designed, and the reflections I wrote have all contributed to my growth as an educator and instructional designer. Most importantly, the MAET program taught me to approach challenges with curiosity, creativity, and empathy. It has encouraged me to question assumptions, explore alternative perspectives, and continuously seek improvement. As I complete this program, I recognize that the greatest outcome is not a degree or a portfolio of completed assignments. It is the transformation of how I think. Through courses like CEP 800, CEP 813, and CEP 817, along with experiences like the sandbox assessments, I have become more reflective, innovative, and intentional in my work. The MAET program has encouraged me to develop the confidence to think in new ways and that mindset will continue to shape the rest of my professional practice long after graduation.