Learning [What] Is Important

by Christopher Munn

When I started my first full-time teaching job in a high school classroom, it had been eight years since I graduated from Indiana University's School of Education. After eight years of working with college students and young professionals, I was ready to jump back into a traditional classroom setting and teach high school students. While I had been developing many leadership and communication skills in my previous jobs, I knew that my pedagogical knowledge and skills had gathered a little rust. During that tough first year back in the classroom, I felt I needed a boost. I needed to better prepare and develop myself professionally. It was that time that I decided to further my education by pursuing a master's degree. From my time working at Michigan State University, I knew they had excellent programs in Education, and the Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) online program stood out to me immediately. I had been interested in technology my entire life and I was eager to unlock its power in the sphere of education. However, while I did learn about many new technologies and their potential use in schools in the MAET program, I found myself continually coming back to the heart of education, which is student learning. Yes, the most important thing I learnt in graduate school was that learning is most important.

As I began my journey in the MAET program, I was eager to learn about new technology trends in education. The first three courses (CEP 810-812) comprise the graduate certificate in educational technology and were an excellent introduction to the broader program. While I was introduced to a multiple of websites, tools, and technological advances that I could use in my instruction, I was constantly reminded about the purpose of these resources. My professors did a great job of helping me understand the central role of student learning in the discussion of educational technology. In CEP 810 we looked at several learning theories and I was introduced to the TPACK framework, which represents the relationship between pedagogy, content, and technology. The TPACK was revolutionary in my thinking about the role of technology in education. Before I thought I needed to learn what technology tool to use or how to use it. But now I realize I need synthesized knowledge about how to use technology and instructional strategies to teach specific concepts, as well as knowing how the use of technology changes our understanding of the content and of how to teach the content. In CEP 811 I learned about the Universal Design for Learning, which stretched me to consider how to improve every aspect of my lessons and instructional resources to maximize student learning. In CEP 812 I was inspired by Robert Marzano's strategies for effective teaching and learning, and I was further challenged with researching a technology solution to a wicked learning problem. These introductory courses did a masterful job of not just showing me the possibilities of utilizing technology in education, but more importantly re-focusing my attention on the purpose of education, which is student learning.

After finishing the first four classes of the MAET program, I had a sharper focus on the purpose of my studies in educational technology and I was fully primed for an even greater dose of inspiration in the next two classes. In the summer of 2013, I took CEP 800 and CEP 815, and these two courses were very influential in shaping my perspective on teaching, technology, learning, and leadership. *CEP 800: Psychology of Learning in School and Other Settings* was the course that most poignantly brought me back to the meaning of my calling and career, as it obviously emphasized learning. We studied different definitions of learning and were provoked to consider how students come to know and understand things. I produced a digital story about two learning models, describing the use of games to help students learn English. I interviewed students to gauge their understanding of the development of the world and then created a podcast outlining my discovery. This class did the best job of allowing me to explore student learning and demonstrate my findings using technology. I was able to learn new technology skills while maintaining a focus on the centrality of student learning. In *CEP 815: Technology and Leadership* I

was surprised yet again to find that student learning became a pivotal issue. One of the most transformative concepts I learned in the MAET program came from this class as we studied missional thinking versus instrumental thinking. I realized that so many technology goals are considered in isolation from learning goals, with money or time often being more pressing issues in the decision making process. Missional thinking says that the school's mission of improving student learning will be kept on the forefront when making any decision about technology, and technology needs and opportunities must be evaluated through an educational context. At this time I was preparing to take over leadership of a new Technology Committee at my school, and this class came at a perfect time. As a result of this class, I was better equipped to advise school leadership on technology-related issues and to lead the committee in a way that kept our gaze fixed on improving learning in the school. This framework also helped me personally make decisions on what kinds of resources to use in my own classroom.

Another influential course in my personal and professional development was *CEP818: Creativity in Teaching and Learning.* I was excited to take this class and was expectant that it would be unique and challenging. Dr. Punya Mishra did not disappoint me, as this class opened up my eyes to the world of creativity. It was my first time to really study the topic, and the more I learned, the more I felt I needed to learn. It was overwhelming at times to consider the amount of literature and research on the topic of creativity, but the class did a nice job of giving me several thinking tools that I could develop myself and also share with my students. I believe this course set me on another journey to continue exploring the role of creativity in education. As I was taking this course, I was involved in the planning of a special Leadership Week at my school. A team of two other teachers and myself pooled our minds and talents to create a strategy board game called the "Better World Game" for our students to play during the week. Many teachers and students praised us for putting together such a creative and engaging activity, and students were further challenged to grow in their own creativity during the gameplay. A few weeks later, the whole school would be studying creativity for five weeks as part of our Character Development program. Fresh off taking a graduate class on creativity and helping create the board game, I was uniquely positioned to lead the school in discussing creativity. I gave an inspirational lecture to the whole student assembly, I designed lessons, and I put together resources that helped students consider how they can develop their creative thinking skills. Throughout the process of studying creativity in CEP 815 and then trying to implement some of that knowledge in my professional setting, I became convinced that this concept is magical and students crave opportunities to study and practice creativity, but also that I have so much more to learn in how to teach more creatively and help students grow in their own capacity for creativity.

In the past two years, I have grown deeply in my ability to utilize technology to improve student learning. My journey in the MAET program further instilled in me the importance of keeping the students at the center of discussions on education. Too often I get wrapped up my own instruction or the resources available at my school, while forgetting that those things are secondary to learning goals. I have learned new skills and improved other skills when it comes to technology tools, and I have a much wider and deeper knowledge of the technology available for educational use today, including its opportunities and drawbacks. I also believe that I am a better leader and a better communicator today as a result of these ten courses. Ultimately, though, I believe I am a better teacher today than I was before I started this master's program. In the midst of learning many new ideas and new tools, I was reminded that student learning is central to education, and I am dedicated more now than ever to providing the best environment possible for my students to learn.