

## **Through the Lens of a Wandering Sailor: A Synthesis of a Transformed Mind**

By: Abigail Kuhn

To synthesize, one must experience transformational thinking (Root-Bernstein, 1999, p. 296). It is, therefore, fitting that I begin to end my time in the Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) program at Michigan State University with a synthesis. This should not only capture my own transformation, but also hopefully lead to the same in others, including my students and those I seek to influence. My time as an MAET student has proven to be transformative in ways I could not have anticipated. I confess that I entered the program feeling like I *had* to do something. I felt unsure of what direction to take, much like a wandering sailor enjoying simply being on the sea. I liked what the MAET program had to offer. It sounded like the program included many of my interests. This feeling of being forced into something did not sit well with me, and it certainly is not something I desire for my students. I come to the end, however, with a renewed appreciation for deep, meaningful learning, the power it holds for students, and the role technology can play in these experiences. More importantly, I recognize my role in creating these opportunities for students, and it is not something I take lightly. According to Robert and Michele Root-Bernstein (1999), “thinking – *all* thinking – involves, or at least *should* involve, a synergistic interaction between our sensations and abstract knowledge.” (p. 305) Just as my experience has challenged my own thinking in this way, I seek to do the same for my students.

As I begin to piece together what this program has meant, and will continue to mean, for me, I am reminded how much my own learning affects the learning of my students. My thinking and learning should mirror what I want to see in them, which is why my time in this program can be powerful for them as well as for me. On a whole, the MAET program has brought back into my focus much of what I learned during my undergraduate years, but with a deepened sense that I could look at these ideas in new ways that may help transform student learning. At the center of these changes is the understanding that technology is a tool that when used well can provide rich learning experiences for students. Regardless of changing technology, these central ideas to teaching and learning will remain critical. I was not formally introduced to the Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework until

my time in the summer cohort in 2014, but I can see how this theme began in my early courses. This framework helped to solidify my own ideas about how technology should be used in teaching and learning. TPACK consistently serves as a reminder that technology should be integrated in ways that help transform student understanding. Instead of focusing on technology, and therefore the temptation to use technology simply because we have it, TPACK keeps student learning at the center.

One of the most influential courses I took during my time in the MAET program was *CEP 882: The Nature and Design of Compelling Experiences*. It has always been my mission as a teacher to bring learning experiences to life for students, but I had not thought much about what other disciplines might teach us about compelling experiences. This course began to challenge me to dig more deeply into what makes learning compelling for students. As a history teacher, I find the stories of the past to be fascinating, but I know students struggle at times to understand the significance of those stories. Throughout this course we focused on the arts and what specific techniques people in these disciplines use to create compelling work. I find great joy in discovering analogies and connections to other things, so it was no surprise that the initial module that began with photography captivated me in ways that carried through the semester. When I began to consider what leading lines do in photographs, what the hook does in music, and how the design of an architectural space affects the way we feel, I marveled at the ways that I could apply the same ideas to learning. In one of the final pieces for this class, we were asked to focus on ten lessons we felt could be learned through the nature and design of compelling experiences. As I reflected on what this meant in a world full of ever-changing technology, I realized that regardless of the tools used to create compelling experiences for students, I must consider these ten ideas. Indeed, this is at the heart of the TPACK framework that has become so central to the way I view the role technology can play in meaningful learning experiences for students.

Many of the ideas expressed in CEP 882 resurfaced in new ways in *CEP 818: Creativity in Teaching and Learning*. I often felt that this course paired well with CEP 882 because of this relationship, and I found myself making connections almost from the beginning. Much like there is a feeling associated with the nature of compelling experiences, and there are specific ways we can design learning opportunities to help create these in students, creativity can play a role in how we do this. I enjoyed reading *Sparks of Genius* by Robert and Michele Root-Bernstein (1999) and exploring specific thinking tools that can help develop creativity and doing so with a specific topic of study in mind. I chose to expand on

my interest in ancient and modern Chinese leadership. I found that while I looked at ways to integrate creativity using technology, I inevitably could see evidence of the 10 lessons from CEP 882. Indeed, creativity and compelling experiences can be deeply connected, which is an idea that I must consider as I move forward in my teaching. Early in this course, I noticed myself searching for ways that I could integrate these thinking tools into my classroom, and I have been excited to see how well my students respond. I have encouraged students to look for patterns as we study different ancient civilizations, and we used imaging and analogies to explore cultural diffusion. Creativity has always been something that I desire to have in my classroom, but this course provided an opportunity for me to consider what this looks like more formally, including the critical role that creativity can play in innovation and critical thinking. Using these tools in my classroom allows me to see even more clearly which students have a deep understanding of concepts and are making connections to other disciplines.

Since my school does not have some of the state-of-the-art technology found in other schools, I must search for creative ways to integrate the technology I do have access to and for alternate sources of funding for any additional technology we may need. This is an area where using creativity in my leadership, both in and out of the classroom, will be necessary. Throughout the MAET program, I learned to repurpose technology, which is in essence choosing to look at something from a different angle and ask good questions about how a piece of technology may support student learning.

My time in the East Lansing summer cohort in 2014 proved to be one of the most meaningful experiences of my time in the MAET program. During this six-week hybrid program that integrated three courses, I had the opportunity to experience again what it means to be a student in a classroom, but even more importantly, a student in a 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. Until that point, my time in the MAET program had been solely online. While I enjoyed the flexibility of this learning experience and the ways in which it provided me with what learning looks like in this context, I found that the summer cohort reminded me that my traditional school experience was very different than students today. As I sat in our classroom on the first day, I felt overwhelmed. I reflected on this feeling and was reminded of the fact that I had never before been a student in a classroom with so much technology. My undergraduate years never included my own laptop, never included social media, and only barely included cell phones. This made me realize that I could have described myself as an imposter when I first began the MAET program; I may have been a bit of a skeptic when it

came to the role of technology in the classroom. I continue to appreciate how my experience in the summer cohort can help me better understand my students. My use of technology should lead students to better questions and more innovation. It also solidified for me that we should be teaching students how to think critically about when and how we use technology, and these are skills we should not take for granted. The group I worked with throughout these six weeks was exactly what I needed for renewing the joy of learning in me and reminding me what meaningful learning looks and feels like in a more traditional 21<sup>st</sup> century setting. I discovered what using technology for learning means for me personally, and experienced first hand the idea that technology does not need to define us, but is a tool for us to use to deepen our learning.

While the courses and topics during that summer were integrated, I especially enjoyed the work we did for *CEP 822: Approaches to Educational Research*. In that class we explored a deep misconception about a particular issue. As we read about how difficult it is to create conceptual change, I became increasingly interested in what this means for my teaching. This took the idea of understanding students' background knowledge to a new level for me, and I now find myself not only looking for these misconceptions in my students but for new ways to approach conceptual change. In their book *Made to Stick*, Dan and Chip Heath (2008) address how very difficult it is to unstick an idea. Creativity in my own thinking as I seek to reach students who may have deeply-seeded ideas about particular events and ideas in history, economics, and politics becomes critical to looking at how to build conceptual change in students' thinking. It is also essential that I consider where my own misconceptions could be holding me back in my teaching and affecting my students in ways I may not even realize. Constant reflection and using an open mind to actively seek these out is the first step to careful planning as I move forward.

I have always been someone who loves to make connections, and my time in the MAET program is no different. Throughout all of my courses, I found myself thinking about how topics reminded me of discussions in other courses. To me, this is what Root-Bernstein (1999) mean when they describe synthesis and the intersection of our senses and abstract knowledge. Indeed, this is what my time in the MAET program has been. Interestingly, Evelyn Glennie, a famous deaf percussionist, played a role in all three of the courses I described above. I see this as no accident, but as a reminder that these connections in my experience have allowed the MAET program to be transformative. In her TED talk "How to Truly Listen," Glennie says, "My job is all about listening. My aim really is to teach the world to

listen.” My job as an educator is not much different. The quality of experiences I engage my students in directly affects how they learn to listen to the world around them and engage with it in ways that bring about their own synesthetic learning. I may have begun this MAET journey as a wandering sailor who was not entirely sure what she was getting herself into, but I am reminded that wandering is not synonymous with being lost, and I end my time in this program with a direction and focus my wandering.

## References

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