

The Road to Success Begins with One Step

By Vincent Lindquist

During the fall of 2013, I was tasked with teaching a “hybrid/blended”-learning learning course in economics. This was my first contract job since I graduated with my bachelor’s degree and completed my student teaching. The year prior, I had spent seven and a half months teaching four subjects in a “long-term substitute” position. I had finished second place in several job interviews and finally landed a job, I was somewhat over my head in accepting. During my undergraduate degree program, we had maybe only spent one half of one day talking about “blended learning” and now I was to be designing a course in it. The course would meet in person on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday: online Tuesday and Friday. I had to prove myself in this new district so I began reading and researching about educational technology and Master’s degree programs. I applied at Michigan State University (MSU) and enrolled in courses in the Spring of 2014.

My goal was simple: develop applicable skills for “blended learning” instruction.

Throughout the program, I have learned and grown immeasurably beyond this narrow learning goal. It all started with taking *one step* and applying to MSU’s Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) program.

This program has given me an entirely new framework for teaching and learning. While my undergraduate degree and yearlong internship from MSU prepared me to step into the classroom, the MAET program has deepened my understanding of the creative process of developing effective learning experiences for all students. The program has changed the way I approach planning and connecting with colleagues in **four specific ways**.

1. Technology is a **TOOL** to meet an objective more effectively. It is a “means”, not an “ends”.
2. Teach students **SKILLS**, not only content.
3. Be a **LEADER**. Step up at school in leadership positions to help others grow and inspire positive changes.
4. **COLLABORATE**. Don't close your door and keep your skills buried. Ask colleagues (at school and online teacher community), share ideas, and grow together.

Coming of age in the 1990s and 2000s technology has been a regular part of my life. As a student and teacher, I have got to see the transition of wheel in TV screens and overhead projectors to smartboards, mounted projectors, and Youtube. In my undergraduate studies courses in education, instructors assumed that because we grew up around it and use it daily, technology use in the classroom would be an easy transition. I believe many teacher-prep programs assume that teaching prospective teachers “good teaching strategies” will directly correlate to applying that to teaching with technology. Prior to 2014 and my first course in the MAET program, I would have argued and believed this point.

Yet as I advanced in my teaching career, both during student teaching and in my first year, I found out that although our tools have advanced, our teaching strategies and instructional methods remain the same. This is a problem. Both new teachers and old experience the same problems and results though using different tools. As a new teacher, I thought using a powerpoint slide show and embedding a couple Youtube clips to my lecture made me superior as an educational technologist. However, there really is no difference between using a powerpoint presentation and writing with a “SMART” pen versus an overhead projector and chalk board. Besides a fancier look, it is the same and yields the same results. I could navigate the web and

use computer resources better than older teachers, but I was not using the technology to innovate new approaches and discover solutions to “wicked” educational problems.

During my first course in the program, CEP 810: *Teaching and Understanding with Technology*, my educational technology paradigm had begun to shift. I learned about *blogging*, *digital literacy*, and most importantly *Technological, Pedagogical, And Content Knowledge (TPACK)*. I expected this program to be about new technology devices and tools, but quickly found out that it is much much more about how you use the devices rather than the devices you possess. MAET is much bigger than the devices or apps. It is about the process of changing and improving education by better and more creative use of technology. Technology is a tool that has expanded the possibilities in education.

A future goal of mine is to use student blogging in the curriculum. While this was modeled in the program, I also researched the benefits and classroom uses with a group. It is an effective way to archive student work to display student growth over the course of a school year. It also is a tool for formatively assessing whether the students are grasping major content knowledge and properly engaging with the material. Lastly, it provides students with immense opportunities to share and collaborate with their peers. Some students that may experience shyness when presenting orally, can fully participate and display their successes through blogging.

I have already utilized certain aspects of this using googledocs and twitter. In one lesson, I had students type letters to their congressperson about an issue that they had researched and developed an opinion about. Rather than writing papers and sending them through the mail, students typed a GoogleDoc and tweeted their Congressperson a shareable link.

In the first three courses of the program, I had weekly assignments set up in three categories *explore*, *create*, and *share*. This instructional framework was explained throughout the courses while studying TPACK. Since taking the class, I have designed a few sub-units in my economics curriculum to replicate this process. This process creates a playful discovery based learning environment for students. These types of units take time to develop and always need adjusting, but give students opportunities to engage with the content.

Nothing has changed my teaching philosophy as much as TPACK.

Understanding that effectively teaching with technology must consider pedagogy and content knowledge is crucial. It is something that administrators sometimes fail to consider when pushing for more technology tools. Often times in professional development there will be a presentation from a math class using a specific technology tool to solve a problem and well-intentioned administrators will encourage (or sometimes mandate) that all subjects and grades begin to use this. The TPACK framework presents a different narrative. The TPACK framework would suggest using the best tool that meets the objective while considering best practices in pedagogy and best practices for the specific content knowledge. TPACK encourages members to collaboratively *explore* the tool and discover unique solutions to unique problems. I love TPACK because the framework is all-inclusive to technology. If a pencil is the best tool for the job given a certain task, than use a pencil, but leave open the opportunity for *play*. Sometimes during the *exploration* and discovery phase, tools are repurposed in creative ways.

During CEP 800: *Learning in School and Other Settings*, I was challenged about how people learn. We read excerpts from “*How People Learn*” by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking. In chapter two of this book, it explains how experts differ from novices in knowledge, approach, and inquiry. This shifted my thought process on the purpose of school. Many teachers focus

strongly on content specific knowledge and meeting standards to prepare students for a content knowledge test. This approach does little to teach students skills and digital literacy. Yet most of what is retained from school is not the content itself, but rather the skills and processes used in attaining required knowledge. With regard to this I now try to address a skill or digital literacy in my lesson plan objectives along with teaching the content. I want to teach my students to not only be expert economists, but also to be expert learners. I want to equip students with the technology skills and critical thinking skills to interrogate text, notice meaningful patterns and apply information to different settings. For example, I actively scaffold research skills and integrate different technology tools to get students used to exploring and mastering the “how to find” information. An example of this is a digital literacy lesson, I created and implemented during my CEP 810 course. [FOUND HERE.](#)

PROFESSIONALISM

Lastly, in terms of professional development, I have grown in leadership and willingness to collaborate. During CEP 815: *Technology and Leadership* I developed a [“Vision Statement”](#). This statement highlighted what I learned in the course and how I view the role of technology in education moving forward. Along with using the technology in the TPACK framework, now I also scrutinize why I am using the technology tool. Does it offer a more effective way of meeting the objective? Does it provide me with data that is helpful for student growth? Does it build deeper relationships with students to cultivate a better learning environment? These questions are important to consider when introducing a new technology. Not getting too tied up into the new technology, but focusing on the purpose of teaching and learning is vital to the best use of technology. With a clear understanding of leadership and a more developed theory of teaching and learning, I feel prepared to step into a leadership role at my school in the years to come.

In the spirit of leadership and professionalism, I have also matured in my willingness to collaborate and work with my colleagues at solving complex problems in education. In CEP 812: *Applying Educational Technologies to Issues of Practice*, I was forced to collaborate with a team to solve a problem. We were able to work together and produce a quality-learning model using information we had learned. Throughout that experience, I have been actively involved in collaborating with three of my colleagues at my school. Together we have talked about ways to effectively check for student understanding in engaging ways. I shared a technology tool that I use for this ([Quizizz](#)) to my small group and also in a department meeting. This tool feels like a fun game to students, but provides a formative assessment with individual student data at the conclusion.

Due to the success I had with collaboration during the MAET program, I am eager to continue working with others. I have shared my [classroom website](#) which I share videos, (student/parent friendly) lesson plans, and worksheet copies to my department as well. My website has solved some issues and provided a good resource to the students, but I have modified it many times due to feedback from my peers.

In reflection of the courses I have taken and the experiences in and out of the classroom throughout the MAET program, I am reminded of the process. In starting this process it is hard to not look at the long road ahead to completion, but now as I approach the “finish line”, I see that the road keeps going. What started with *one step* will not end with a *final step*. I will continue moving forward: growing, learning, and collaborating to improve my understanding of the learning process. Whether I continue as a classroom teacher, move into an administration role, government, or higher education, this program has prepared me for success. The skills I have attained, the projects I have completed, and the many collaborative experiences of this

program offer unique application to my career. I am equipped with a framework and mindset different from my peers. I am equipped to create meaningful learning experiences using technology and ready to share my successes with others. Working through the MAET program has profoundly changed my understanding of educational technology. I am proud of reaching this “finish line” and I am confident that this program has made me a better leader, educator, and lifelong learner.