

## Synthesis Essay

As an educator, I always had a strong desire to work with technology. I felt that technology would eventually be the solution to all of mankind's crucial problems by paving the way for a better future. I wanted to be a part of that movement, that solution, in any way that I could. Engaging students through technology and focusing on technology literacy was a focal point for me as a professional. In order to equip my students with the skills necessary to succeed, while simultaneously promoting positive change in an already rapidly advancing 21st century, integrating technology into my curriculum was essential. Through this continuous endeavor, I felt that I would be doing my part to promote a better future for my students, my state, and in a small, but effective way, our world.

The first teaching job I ever took was at FlexTech High School in Novi as a Social Studies teacher. The school was centered around providing project-based learning to students through the utilization of makerspace education and digital technology. I appreciated the integration of technology into education and felt as though I found a place to expand and hone my craft. However, as the year went on, I noticed a trend of chronic absenteeism in some students. As I delved deeper into the curriculum, it became apparent how difficult it would be to advance my students in the essential skills and content we were covering. As a result, I began to experiment with providing all instruction through a digital format that could be readily accessed from any location.. This online approach to content delivery provided a medium to reach struggling students, and streamlined my own role in the classroom to focus primarily on supporting students in a flipped classroom environment. Eventually, I was offered a position at Northville Public Schools as the district's Online Learning Coordinator. This position inspired me to enter the Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) program through Michigan State University. While I was confident in my ability to teach my own

courses in an online format, it was now my job to evaluate the quality of digital instruction and online assessments for over a hundred courses across multiple platforms. I sought to become highly trained and skilled in educational technology to be successful in my new position. Within the first semester of becoming an Online Learning Coordinator, I was registered for my first class in the MAET program.

## **Promoting Relevancy and Self-Direction**

CEP 810 was the first, and one of the most influential, courses I took while in the MAET program. It opened my eyes to the potential of student-directed inquiry through various digital platforms. When most people think of online courses, they think of “sit and click,” or , passively watching, reading, and responding through multiple-choice answers. CEP 810 however, encouraged me to adopt a constructivist approach to online education. The course was self-directed and guided by my own goals and aspirations; it made the course feel relevant since most of the learning was not “delivered” to me, but created by me.

The Networked Learning Project was a semester-long project that introduced me to both vital professional content and pedagogy-changing implementation. For this project, I learned how to script in Google Sheets. Since I was in a position that required me to analyze massive amounts of data and detect trends, learning how to write scripts for Google Sheets was a pertinent skill that needed development. Furthermore, I was able to code my Google Classroom quiz in a way that allowed me to easily spot-check short response questions, consequently saving myself time in the long run. Due to the skills developed in this course, I will be able to effectively and efficiently sort through various types of data throughout my professional career.

Not only did I further develop data analysis skills through CEP 810, but I also expanded my professional practice and viewpoints. While studying Dr. Mishra’s research on

educational technology, I was inspired by his concept of, “there is no such thing as an educational technology.” Since completing this course, I stopped looking for “educational technologies” to implement into digital classrooms, and instead began thinking of how I can repurpose technology I already have access to. For example, Minecraft was originally designed to be a children’s game, but educators have since repurposed it to serve as an educational tool. Essentially, it allows students to build, create, and manipulate their ideas into the program. In addition, I developed an “innovation over integration” approach to implementing technology in an innovative way that will allow my students to pursue and meet their goals, instead of simply inserting technology to replace a preexisting tool.

Overall, CEP 810 illustrated all of the possibilities that an online course can offer in terms of students taking ownership of their own learning. One of the biggest challenges for an online course is keeping students engaged and maintaining their attention. After all, online courses do not have the charisma or behavior management of a teacher in the classroom. A remedy for this issue exists with the implementation of more engaging digital projects involving interactive technology. Networked learning and the utilization of other relevant “educational technologies” will draw students into the curriculum. It is essential that we incorporate this form of learning in the classroom, as most students are already taking advantage of this technique outside of school. Inspired by CEP 810, I have made it a goal to continuously engage in networked learning and learn from peers, professionals, and various online communities. The mindset that the potential to learn and improve one’s self is only a Google search away has driven me to take on the philosophy of a lifelong learner. Since taking CEP 810, I consistently connect to those around me in hopes to further develop valuable skills that benefit me as both a professional and as an individual.

# Tackling The Issues of Online Learning

CEP 812 was the class that first got me interested in breaking down and reanalyzing the instructional design of online courses through pressing questions. As educators, how could we improve upon the current trends in online learning? How could we make it more engaging? More efficient? Reach more people? Provide more high demand skills that may be unattainable with the current status quo? CEP 812 pushed me to take a new and innovative perspective on designing quality online courses.

As an Online Learning Coordinator, I worked largely with overseeing and providing direction to my school district's online education program. After taking the position, I had become quickly disenchanted with the notion of leaving the quality of online education in the hands of for-profit companies. The shortcuts taken in many of the online course designs left much to be desired in terms of quality and engagement. It left a feeling that online learning was simply being used as a way to provide a cheap alternative education or an easy path to graduation. The concept of online learning felt misused and under utilized.

CEP 812 allowed me to target a relevant professional topic regarding the urgency around the failing design model of online fact-based education. I was able to further explore the idea of online courses working *with* technology to promote student growth rather than competing against it by constantly updating multiple-choice answer keys.

The central issue of online learning revolves around creating an online experience that is hands-on, engaging, connected, and relevant in an online setting. Online courses lack the charisma and classroom management of an in-seat classroom. As a result, student success is dependent on being self-motivated. CEP 812 allowed me to explore my personal insight and observations from my professional experience with online learning. I used the following question as the focal point of my course research: As educators,

how can we create an online learning experience that will engage students through multimodal, relevant, and differentiated content?

I came up with the following focus questions to help guide my research:

1. How can we make online learning promote and teach 21st century skills to our students?
2. How can we use online learning to help students solve real world issues in their own lives?
3. How do we develop online content/curriculum to engage and motivate students in an online setting?

Although educational technology is beneficial to student progress, there are many aspects of online education that can be improved. Through online education, you can deliver content, skills, and resources to any part of the world in an instant. You can train and provide opportunities to the most remote and impoverished regions of the nation. Massive amounts of information, ideas, and content can be reused, shared, and remixed. The existing model simply needs to be redefined and expanded to be more student-centered. Kids are always changing, technology is always advancing, and a solution to a current problem will always be temporary. There will always be room for improvement, just as there will always be complex issues within the realm of education.

## **Experimenting With Instructional Design**

If CEP 820 has taught me anything, it is that there are correct and incorrect ways to implement online education. While in CEP 820, I was able to refine my instructional design techniques and implement some innovative concepts into an online experimental course. The main design theme of this course was to create assessments that were compatible with 21st century learning theory and technology. In order to accomplish

this, I had to form assessments around question-based learning. Assessments and thought-provoking questions cannot expect simple fact-based responses, therefore online assessments must foster analysis of content and deeper thinking. The alternative is responses which can easily be retrieved from a search engine and do not take much critical thinking to produce. Students must construct their own learning by integrating the content with personal opinions, reflections, assessments, and interests.

CEP 820 allowed me to experiment a great deal with a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) style of content delivery and assessment design. My course research focused on the implementation of assessments that were constructive and required students to self-assess for many of their formative assessments. I utilized example responses to provide immediate feedback through self-assessments and created a highly scalable version of a secondary course. The design concepts I learned while building my experimental course greatly influenced my digital pedagogy. Most importantly, CEP 820 encouraged me to reexamine how online content can engage students through assessment design, and a more proactive approach to skill development.

## **Moving Forward**

Overall, the Master of Arts in Educational Technology program had a dynamic impact on how I view online education. I examined everything from content delivery, assessments, and engagement, to cost-effectiveness and data point analysis. Having the ability to experience high quality online education as a student, but also implementing theory to practice has had a profound affect on my role as an educator. The current state of online learning in secondary education can be improved upon, and the MAET program has illustrated the potential of online education. Utilizing what I've learned from this program, I will continue to push for initiatives and fundamental changes to the delivery and assessment of online content.

The MAET program not only supplied me with hard skills to tackle the tough issues within my profession, but a series of soft skills as well. The program has changed my overall mindset in terms of self-improvement and lifelong learning. Prior to becoming an MAET student, I had entirely fixated on the learning experience of my students. I had temporarily lost sight of expanding upon my own learning and growth. Through this program, I have rediscovered the what it means to be a student. I learned that in order to improve my own practice and better the learning experience of my students, I too need to keep a student mindset and pursue growth. Because of this change in mentality, I am not only contributing more to my professional community through newly learned ideas, but I feel as though I have improved myself as an individual.