

Looking Back and Looking Forward from 2013

Looking Back and Looking Forward from 2013: A Personal Reflection

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## Looking Back

After finishing my first year of teaching, I was ready to take the teacher hat off for awhile and put on the student hat once again. I excitedly waited to suit up in my emerald Spartan gear and head to the campus of Michigan State University to be a student in the Masters of Arts in Education Technology (MAET) Summer Cohort 2013 Program. I had such an amazing experience in the previous summer's cohort program that I had high expectations to be blown out of Lake Michigan all over again. But then I remembered being slightly intimidated by *the* Punya Mishra when I first met him the previous summer. This was the man who directed the program, who was named one of the *ten most influential people in educational technology* and he developed the TPACK framework. Rather than focus on the intimidation factor, I decided to perceive this experience as the best type of Professional Development and soak in all his knowledge and expertise on the matter of technology integration in education.

I woke up at 6 AM on the morning of June 19 for the 9 AM class as I would be commuting 75 miles each way this summer rather than staying in Owen Hall like I had the previous summer. I could not justify leaving my new husband for two weeks while I stayed in a stifling small room with hardly any ventilation and funky smelling water. I pressed play on my book on tape and hit the road only to face my first obstacle - morning traffic. The traffic delayed me and I ended up arriving to class ten minutes after it had already started. My anxiety shot up because this was no way to begin the session. But as soon as I arrived, dove into the first project and reunited with MAET friends from last summer, I was reenergized and excited for the coming weeks.

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The first day of class immediately reminded me how knowledgeable Punya was about the topic of education technology and I eagerly awaited to be thrown into discussions and activities to submerge myself into this fountain of knowledge. I found myself constantly comparing it to “last summer,” when we were thrown into crazy QuickFires, numerous assignments, activities and tasks that pulled us in multiple directions all at the same time. While the hectic chaos elevated my anxiety, the class time slipped through and we were constantly busy with one thing or another. I didn’t feel that way this summer. I nervously and excitedly waited for the same type of chaos, but it never came.

Other than the occasional banter between the two groups *More Techie Than You* and *The Last LATH*, the group was much more subdued than last year. I was beginning to think that I came into this summer program with too high of expectations. I noticed my frustration growing as we talked about things that were not necessarily technology oriented. Trying to keep my engagement, I would ask questions but would be told to hold off on it because it would be covered later. After hearing the same response over and over, I resigned, pulled back, and decided that *later* would probably never come. As much as I loved psychology, which I also majored in, I couldn’t understand why we were spending so much time on it. I came into the summer ready to talk about technology, but here I was talking about Pavlov, Skinner, Kohlberg, Vygotsky and others. I tried to see the connection between psychology and technology, but couldn’t see it. In the midst of growing more and more frustrated internally, I concluded that I was going to make the most out of these classes. I was going to get back into my psychology brain and use this in preparation for the new psychology classes I would be teaching this upcoming school year.

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One reading in particular grabbed my interest and guided me back to where I needed to be. Reading Linda Levstik's *The Theory Behind Disciplined Inquiry* was a turning point for me. Her chapter was my "ah-ha" moment of insight about how much theory and practice need to be balanced in effective teaching and learning. I realized that I had been so caught up in trying to grasp at anything and everything that would aid in my teaching practices that I was blinded by the misconception that practical application alone would help me in my craft. My focus had been on practice and I momentarily disregarded theory, which is unlike me. I look to philosophy as well as practice and research to be a strong foundation for my teaching, but I became so hungry for practical application that I became distracted. Levstik's writing humbled me to reconstruct my thinking. She reminded me that "a teacher who understands the theory behind how students learn can more consistently develop effective plans."

As I began to delve into the material, I started to make a connection between understanding and disengagement. I realized that disengagement usually results in students doing bare minimum work. When I started to disengage, I just told myself to do whatever it takes to get through it, which is in essence bare minimum work. But doing bare minimum is not enough. Levstik called for "purposeful investigation" or a discipline of inquiry in order to arrive at understanding. Putting forth the bare minimum necessary is relying on rote knowledge, which Daniel T. Willingham discusses in Chapter 4 of his book *Why Don't Students Like School?* Rote knowledge blocks students from being able to dive into inquiry which yields deep knowledge. Watson and Konicek's article about "Teaching for Conceptual Change" demonstrates what the transformation from rote knowledge to deep knowledge looks like.

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Watson and Konicek supported their philosophy on education and learning by using Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which I buy into and practice. However, in reading about Deb O'Brien, the teacher in the article, I recognized that I wasn't allowing my students to explore much. If I wanted more from my students, didn't I need to expect more and let them explore their understanding? So often educators complain about students' lack of effort or ownership. I am guilty of it and reflecting on Watson and Konicek's article focusing on conceptual change, I realized that if learning and understanding were "under construction," then it made sense that the classroom change to be a work in progress as we guide our students to develop their understanding using their prior knowledge coupled with new knowledge.

### **Looking Forward**

As I look forward to my lifelong journey as an educator and learner, I want to narrow my focus on some key ideas, some of which I have been focusing on and others of which I would like to adopt or add. The key topics I want to focus on are as follows: literacy, conversational/experiential learning, capturing student engagement and igniting student creativity.

### **Literacy**

Literacy has been a focal point for me as well as my district. This emphasis came when I was researching on the most effective practices of a secondary English teacher. Many English educators focus on literature and not enough on literacy. My emphasis is on building literacy first. Over the years my focus has been on functional literacy, which is typically described as the type of reading and writing skills necessary in every day life. I look to accredited literacy experts such as Penny Kittle, Jim Burke, Kylene Beers, Robert Probst, Kelly Gallagher and Jeff Wilhelm

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to guide my students to develop as readers and writers. My goal for literacy is expanding students as readers and writers to be able to read any text put in front of them and piece together their understanding of the text. Students should be able to analyze, evaluate and create a demonstration of their understanding. The rise of technology has called for new areas of literacy such as technology literacy and media literacy.

Technology literacy looks at how well students are able to use technology responsibly and appropriately to communicate, solve problems and demonstrate knowledge through all that is available to them in the 21st century. My MAET experience led me to think about how I might raise digital citizens. These students have grown up with technology surrounding them, yet there is so much they don't know about how to use it. Technology literacy as an educator will challenge me to be mindful of integrating technology into my classroom so that it fits into the TPACK framework. While this may take more planning initially, I am confident that this is the only way to go and it will result in purposeful, cohesive learning opportunities for students.

### **Conversational & Experiential learning**

Learning is meant to be fun. I continue learning because it fuels me, but most of my students have not gotten to that point. To them, learning and school are tedious and pointless. Students need to experience learning by inquiring and developing their own thoughts. So many of my high school teachers told me everything they wanted to hear and regurgitation was what they were after. I want to focus on how to create a classroom where students are growing in understanding as they inquire about all that they know. I want students to discuss, share their thoughts, build on their prior knowledge or build new branches of knowledge. I want a

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classroom that demonstrates Vygotsky's Social Learning Theory where students develop and construct their understanding through interaction. David A. Kolb has provided research on experiential learning that is heavily influenced by John Dewey's philosophies and I plan on working towards creating knowledge through the transformation of experience, which then solidifies understanding.

### **Capturing Student Engagement**

Another important key topic for me is capturing student engagement and having them buy into their learning. While I may not be able to transform every student to love learning, I believe that I can engage every student. Penny Kittle speaks about conducting one-on-one reading and writing conferences with students to engage students in their reading and writing. These conferences last no longer than a couple of minutes, but provide a wealth of knowledge and insight on individual students. My goal is to be able to quickly and efficiently conduct these conferences, allowing me to interact and engage with every student. Conferences naturally build a level of accountability between student and teacher and let each student know that you care and that you are aware. Engagement also comes from giving students the option of choice and different ways to explore understanding. I have seen the significant differences conferences make firsthand and will put more work in this area.

### **Igniting Student Creativity**

The final key area I would like to develop in the next five years is igniting student creativity. One of the things we seem to forget is how important modeling is in teaching. While the culture and environment of my classroom is creative, the assignments and tasks are not

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always as creative. School does not have to be synonymous to mundane, although it seems to have that negative reputation. I need to exercise more creativity in front of my students so that they can explore and learn through creative mediums. One reason students give for hating English Language Arts is because all they ever do is read and write. While reading and writing are staples of the English classroom, couldn't there be more or couldn't we give them interesting things to read and write about? Not only does the cycle of reading and writing become tedious for them, but it also becomes tedious for the teacher who is forced to read the same paper over and over. My goal is to lead educators into a different teaching experiences where avenues of creative expression and understanding help promote teaching and learning. Creative tasks can help students develop higher order thinking or other critical thinking skills and it is a break from the cycle of reading and writing.

As I continue to develop as a highly effective educator, I will work to mentor my students and facilitate their learning in a student focused environment. I will teach to the individual and not to a test or anything else. Teaching individuals will naturally result in an increase in performance. Although individual conferences in reading and writing takes up much time, it is a valuable resource that I will continue to do. These conferences serves to help me understand where my students are in their learning and understanding. This is the data that takes me to the next step of what I need to do for my students. Without it I would never know if I was teaching them effectively based on their needs.

As a newbie in the circle of education, I have significantly depended on my personal learning network. I have joined networks such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MCTE), International Reading Association



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(IRA) and Michigan Reading Association (MRA). These organizations have been great sources research. The support I have received from these networks have been monumental. All these organizations hold conferences and events of which I have attended and even presented at. I would like to get more involved with the International Society of Technology in Education (ISTE) as well as the Michigan Association for Computer Users in Learning (MACUL) to keep up with what is going on with technology in education. I presented at the Michigan State University College of Education Technology Conference in 2012 and plan on presenting in the future as well. While the resources through professional associations are plenty, Twitter has been my most valuable resource. Twitter has directly connected me to researchers, teachers, authors and administrators from all around the world. It has been a remarkable research and search tool offering me leads and links and personal accounts. My personal learning network has grown mainly because of Twitter.

In the next couple of years, I would like to continue to develop as an educator of my content areas, as an implementor of technology, as a presenter of relevant research and practice as well as a leader of transformational learning. The continuation of my journey as a lifelong learner brings about new opportunities at every turn. I would eventually like to publish an article for an education journal about my content area and technology integration in education, or even a combination of the two. Looking back, I am reminded of the completely disengaged student I used to be. My personal transformation story is a testament that there is a learner in everyone. I can't believe how much learning fuels, ignites and drives me today. I am now a learner whose thirst for learning cannot be quenched. It is as though the more I learn, the thirstier I get. I feel like the little girl on the AT&T commercial who says, "More is better than less because...if there

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is more less stuff you might want some more...we want more, we want more, like you really like it and you want more.” With every taste of learning I get, I find myself asking for more. So, the perfect conclusion to my reflection is *what else do you have for me? I want more, I want more.*

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