

Obstacles & Hills: Coming Out Stronger

*"Don't think of them as hills; think of them as 'mounds of opportunity.'"
-Unknown*

When I first began to think about taking graduate classes in 2013, I did so with hesitation and extreme caution. Many of my colleagues would gripe about having to give up entire weekends and travel across the state to attend monthly meetings for their graduate classes. I knew this kind of graduate program would not work for me. My life had very much been turned upside down and shaken down into ruins with the death of my husband. I was left with my job, our young son, and our home and it was solely up to me to rebuild from the rubble. I didn't have the luxury of going across the state for a weekend, even for a graduate class because child care was an issue. And the cost of tuition? A third year teacher doesn't make that much to begin with and I was now the only income to speak of for my household. But I was on a mission to reconstruct and, ultimately, redefine myself. Graduate school was an opportunity to take my first steps on this journey if I was willing to take the leap and make the necessary sacrifices.

Taking the first steps

Knowing that I couldn't make traditional classes, I looked for a well-known program that offered online courses. Most of my undergraduate work had been online or in hybrid classes, a mix of traditional seat time and online learning. I felt confident an online program would allow me the flexibility I needed to be successful while adjusting to my new life. I also wanted to be sure my graduate work was worthwhile and marketable, giving me an advantage in a very competitive educational workplace. Michigan State University's [Master's in Educational Technology \(MAET\)](#) seemed to fit the bill.

I began the program slowly, one class per semester, knocking off the three classes required for the Educational Technology Graduate Certificate. My first class was [CEP 810: Teaching for Understanding Using Technology](#). Not only did this class give me greater insight into technology integration in the classroom, but I also gained the confidence that I would be a single working mother and a graduate student. I studied and worked through my lunch breaks and after my son when to bed late into the night. He even popped into a few Google Chats with my professors and classmates.

As I finished the next two classes in the certificate program, I realized how much I enjoyed my work as a graduate student. I found educational technology to be instantly relevant in my professional world and I am naturally drawn towards technology. I knew a MAET degree could open doors for me in the future and make me a very marketable teacher in an area that was just beginning to look into technology millages and integration. Pragmatically, I chose to the MAET program, focusing on the [NP endorsement](#) to add to my teaching certificate. I didn't want to pigeonhole myself by focusing on a narrowly defined path. Technology is very broad and constantly being reinvented, redefined...and that is what I wanted for myself.

Opportunity Cost

Mounds of opportunities started to pop up, both professionally and personally. Each opportunity presented its own set of challenges and obstacles for me to overcome or barrel through. The elementary I was working in rolled out a 1:1 Technology Initiative with Chromebooks for every 5th-8th grade student. While my classroom was not directly involved, I closely studied and worked with the teachers on the frontlines of the implementation, knowing that the experience was invaluable. I became known as a go-to technology teacher and colleagues would seek me out for input or troubleshooting. I loved it. I felt like I had finally found my true calling in my professional world and I could clearly see the path I wanted to take.

When my former district was rolling out a new (and very overwhelming) math curriculum, we had a math coach who helped us implement it. I was one of the fortunate few to work with her during the first part of the school year. We spent planning time combing over the lesson plans, delegating which parts each of us would teach, how to best assess students formally and informally. That time was well spent. I grew as a math teacher and my students as mathematicians. I kept finding myself thinking, "This is what I want to do...be a technology coach...help teachers and students get over the technology hurdles!" Technology coaches were a fairly new position a few years ago, mainly limited to school districts with enough extra funds to provide the service.

Delving Deeper

As I continued through my MAET courses, I began to look at the knowledge and information I was receiving in two lights: as an educator and as a tech coach. Learning is always more meaningful when it can be applied to practice immediately, so I constantly brought my graduate skills into my classroom. I also looked at how I could use my MAET skills from a coaching position, to support other educators on their technology integration journey.

Looking back at my MAET classes, there were a few that really stood out to me as major 'hill' moments...times when my mindset was stretched and I was pushed outside of my comfort zone for the sake of learning: CEP 816; CEP 815; CEP 820.

CEP 816 Technology, Teaching, & Learning Across the Curriculum

One of my favorite classes (Shhh! Don't tell the other professors!), CEP 816 blending my students' learning with my own. My confidence in successfully integrating technology into a self-contained classroom had grown tenfold and I was able to highlight and share the lessons and curriculum I had designed with others. As a former self-contained teacher, integrating technology and other subjects across the curriculum was vital time management. If I didn't figure out how to teach social studies and reading or math and science at the same time while incorporating writing and technology...well, I wasn't going to get through the curriculum and my students would have gaping holes in their knowledge. Exploring open educational resources and ways to think about adapting technology to fit the needs of the learner were only two of the most impactful topics I learned about. Most importantly, I learned that a learner does not need to spend hours on end mastering a bit of technology which could become obsolete in a nanosecond. A learner needs to a mindset driven by their own learning needs and goals.

CEP 815 Technology & Leadership

Of any of the MAET classes, CEP 815 was the most challenging, mainly because of the many lenses it puts on education. I've never had the desire to become an educational administrator. I love teaching in the classroom and that is lost with administering a school. Often, the readings and responses in the class forced me to put myself in the shoes of a building administrator and take a look at the management side of education. I wrote hypothetical emails and memos to fictional staff outlining technology problems of practice and my proposed solutions. As uncomfortable as I was looking at education from a business perspective, it was a valuable insight into the world just outside my classroom door.

CEP 820 Teaching Students Online

This course by far contained the most immediately applicable tools and knowledge of any of my MAET graduate classes. I gained essential first hand knowledge of Course Management Systems (CMSs), also known as Learning Management Systems (LMSs). After exploring various CMS options, I created a short unit of study in Schoology. This was incredibly meaningful for me. I was able to apply this newfound knowledge to my teaching by developing a well-designed online classroom and curriculum that meets the needs of my students.

CEP 807 Proseminar in Educational Technology

As the capstone to the MAET degree, CEP 807 has been a series of intentional reflections on my journey as a MSU graduate student. I have looked back to my initial goals and dreams when I entered the program (as an unsure widow) to looking ahead to my goals and dreams after I graduate in May (as a new technology coach and teacher). I have combed over my past projects and papers, selecting the ones that epitomize my experiences in the MAET program and presented them in this online portfolio.

Emerging from the Fallout

Looking back at my life three years ago, it hardly seems possible for so much to have happened in those few years. I've landed a new position...my "dream job" as a technology coach closer to my new home. In just a few weeks, I will be running a second marathon in a little New England town (BOSTON!!!) and then I will cap off this amazing Spartan experience with my graduation. I can't even begin to describe the emotions I feel when I think of my son watching me get my diploma. All of this was possible, partly, because of my journey as a MAET student. The program helped me change and develop a growth mindset. Now, I think more innovatively, looking at problems from multiple angles, and process solutions in an entirely new way.

Of any lessons, projects, papers, theories, or practices I have learned and experienced, I want to be an example to my son of what it takes to adapt...to rebuild...to redefine oneself when facing adversity.