

EdTech and I

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How did I end up here? What choices did I make that lead me to pursue, experience, and achieve what has become of my career? I tend to be self-reflecting at times when I realize much time has passed. I think about what I have learned, how I have learned it, and how I have helped others gain knowledge through my learning. It is an incredible thing, seeing how much I have grown. Not only is it what I have done, where it has taken me, but also about those I have made an impact in. How do my interactions with them and their inquiry improve, change, or challenge their experiences in using technology. This leads me to look back at what role I once thought educational technology had in a school environment.

My initial awareness of educational technology was that it was something that you turned on in order for a teacher to teach. It was technology that was used to give students ways of carrying out learning activities. In 2007 I was offered a technologist position at a new high school. At this time I saw my role as a traditional IT support specialist. I set up networks, I maintained assets, and answered questions the end-users had. That was it, I saw myself as the one people went to when something did not work right, or when they were unsure of how to use it. My academic background had prepared me to think and act like an IT person. I was good at this. I could troubleshoot an issue, be resourceful when needing to find answers, and up to date on current practices in information systems and emerging technologies. My focus was on making sure that things ran, and that was it. This however, began to slowly change.

In an organization, especially a start-up or small business, members tend to wear various hats. The roles one portrays depend on the requirements imposed by the organization's needs. I too was required to change my hats from time to time. I was given a class. I was in charge of managing an online learning period, where students accessed class activities using Blackboard. I had never heard of this "Blackboard". Within this hour period, students sat, read, typed, and interacted with each other through a computer. They literally communicated with the person next to them though a discussion board. While profoundly wrong, now that I look back, at the time it was nothing out of the ordinary for me. I was in charge of setting up these computers, and now in charge of taking care of these students each period. I was 21 years old, and just excited to have a job with great hours. As the year progressed, I began to lose my excitement. I

had begun to lose some of my stamina and patience. I was not a teacher, so I had no training in managing a classroom, let alone 50 students at a time. Coupled with my tech support duties, I was having a hard time keeping up and being able to support students and teachers. At this point, my view of educational technology was not very clear or positive. My experiences in learning technology came as an adult when I went to college, but that was once I knew I wanted to learn to fix and maintain technology, not teach or watch someone else use it.

Something had to change. I began to wonder if this was the right route for my career. Unable to fully support my responsibilities, I needed to better understand how I could meet them. It was not the students' fault, it was not the teachers' fault, it was not necessarily my fault. What I lacked was understanding. Of course I know that now looking back. It is always 20/20 looking back right? Why were the online learning periods so hard for the students, and for the teachers to plan for? My view of my role began to shift, and the wheels began to turn. I needed to change the perception that all I did was fix things and monitor a class. So I stuck with it, I took a look at what was happening around me and began to pay attention to the environment. I had much more to offer, I had this knowledge of how technology works, I had practices and skills that worked well for me, but I needed to communicate and share with the teachers and students so that they had a better understanding. If I could do this, then they would be able to better prepare, teach and learn.

I began to dedicate more time into researching what educational technology was, what it meant and how it worked in other schools. I became aware of great success stories, and also tried to learn from those that were not successful implementations. In the time that followed I began to attend conferences, professional development sessions, and meetings with administration and teachers. With exposure to issues and ideas, I began to form a vision. As semesters passed and I had many opportunities to observe, assess, plan and implement technology initiatives at my work, I began to build my knowledge through these experiences. Each interaction with a student and a teacher allowed me to take a look into their perspectives and their needs. I was able to suggest ideas and changes that could provide an improvement to their practices and understanding of utilizing technology to their learning advantage. I was then offered the possibility of co-authoring a book focused on literacy and technology skills. *Literacy 2.0 Reading and Writing in 21st Century Classrooms* (Frey, Fisher & Gonzalez, 2010), gave me the opportunity to express my insight on the importance of the function over the tool. In this book, we covered topics such as the importance of teaching proper uses as well as ensuring

the purpose is present prior than the tool. Later, in CEP 815, I was able to further explore this ideal by thinking and planning from a missional standpoint instead of an instrumental focus.

After publishing the book, and doing some professional developments based on the book, I felt I needed more. If I wanted to make an impact in my immediate environment, I needed to dive into a program that would allow me to reach a deeper understanding behind education and technology's role. So my search began. I followed the trail of curiosity and purpose, and it lead me to the Master of Arts in Educational Technology program at Michigan State University. I had looked into other programs, but there was something about MSU. There was something about how MAET came across. I was captivated by the program's focus and interest in blending educational purpose, with facilitating technology. More so, it presented itself with as addressing an underlying psychological need to understand how and what learners and teachers need to succeed in implementing this blend. I had to be a part of this. It resonated with what I saw I lacked, and what I saw as an opportunity to implement what I knew. When I was accepted into the program I was excited to be embarking on a two-year journey that would enlighten and challenge me.

There are three experiences that have made an incredible impact in my exploration for understanding. The exposure to TPACK, the ideals explored in CEP 815, and projects in CEP891 have all been pivotal points in my journey. This grouping summarizes, for me, the ideal of good practice and strategies, and their implementation. By combining the understanding of context, the vision for success, and focus of a need, I am able to address and support the needs of my school system.

TPACK is all that lacked

During the initial three certificate courses (CEP 810, 811, and 812), I was introduced to TPACK. At first it was a brief introduction, but over the course of the entire program, TPACK spanned its reach across topics and projects. TPACK gave a description to what I had been practicing; it provided clear depiction of what I had been searching for. How do you approach technology when there is a clear need for a purpose first? TPACK is what I lacked. Once I began to research deeper into what TPACK had to offer, I found myself unable to get away from its idea. This is how any opportunity for implementing technology should be approached. Without this understanding of each blend between these knowledge areas, it becomes clear that there is no strong purpose for it to succeed. Since TPACK, I approach each interaction that might require technology, with the mindset that purpose and function are followed by context. I think about

who, what, and how. How does this teacher teach, what are their teaching strategies? What are they trying to teach, what are the content requirements? How should they facilitate this, what tool can best fit the context of the learning outcomes. This thinking became second nature to me, and TPACK provided a great platform to approach future projects with. It has become a part of my planning in current and future developments. It is almost a checks and balances system for any initiative I take part in.

Mission, not instrument

Almost perfectly aligned with TPACK, CEP 815 further expanded the importance of focus on function instead of the tool. In 815, I explored the successes and challenges in planning a sustainable technology initiative. Policies and procedures are in place to support the longevity of any initiative designed to make an impact. For any success to take place, it is important to understand both the successes and pitfalls of implementing technology, and the leadership it takes to define these. Concentrating on planning with a mission and not an instrument, allowed for much broader thinking. This was key in understanding that planning according to a tool or a specific resource, limited the vision and possible success of many technology initiatives. I use the leadership skills gained in 815 to approach the issues and challenges I face at my school. This past summer I began to develop a plan of attack for implementing a blended learning initiative at our high school. In the process of thinking, I put forth the vision of our school as a blended learning entity, and the tool we would use second. This allowed me to address administration with a mission of developing meaningful professional development plans, and approach the faculty with a strong offering centered around their pedagogy and strategic functionality.

Digital Literacy

One of the concerns in developing an online or blended learning program is the need to understand how our students interact with content online. At an increasing rate, our students are consuming tremendous amounts of content. In CEP 891, I had the chance to better understand how generations of students have experienced a shift in interacting with text and other content online. This course challenged me to think beyond technologies, and get into the mind of a learner. By studying the shifts from traditional literacies to modern interactions with content, I became aware of the importance to create projects that allowed students to engage with texts in multiple platforms, and in multiple forms. Understanding a reader was an incredible experience. The readings in this class drove me outside of my knowledge and gave me the chance to reach for new insights of what being literate in our modern world requires.

We're not in Kansas anymore.

The combination of these courses fueled my growth as a learner. Understanding the importance of efficient strategies and how dynamic the needs of education can be, helped develop my ability to better support my decisions and approaches. I can no longer resort to my initial views of what I once thought EdTech was. From rigorous readings that allowed me to understand education from the perspectives of experienced educators, to projects that gave me the opportunity to implement some innovating technologies that pushed my way of thinking what is possible to achieve by implementing them into lessons, I have a much greater understanding and appreciation for how technology, pedagogy, and content can be blended to better support educators and learners alike.