Finding Answers

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Growing up as a young child, I was always that one student asking questions in class. I wanted to find out the answer to everything and needed to know the meaning behind why my answers were correct. I was obsessed with reading, to the point where I read in the line while waiting for the bus, on the bus, and walking to my house from the bus stop. This love for new information only continued as I grew older and went to college. Flash forward to student teaching in my senior year of college, I walked into a classroom thinking I had the answers. I pictured a classroom full of students ready to learn who felt the same way that I had about school. As a special education major, I should've known better, but you always want to picture that perfect school setting. I soon found out that I didn't have all of the answers, not even half of the answers.

Students today now have more access to information than ever through the internet. The answers are at their fingertips twenty-four seven and constantly being updated with new information. I feel that access has dampened the excitement for learning which I once felt in school. For students with special needs or learned helplessness, I wanted to light that fire again and engage them in my classroom. This is no easy task. After two years of teaching, testing new lessons, reflecting, altering ideas, and learning from my mistakes, I realized I still didn't have the answers. I could connect and build strong relationships, which helped me reach some of my students, but I was still missing a few others. What could I do to *inspire them*? How could I engage them to *want to learn*? I considered that going back to school might be a step in the right direction, so I started to inquire about various programs. A few of my fellow Spartan coworkers mentioned the Masters in Educational Technology (MAET) from Michigan State University and I did some research. I was accepted into the program, with hopes of finding ways to deepen student learning through technology. I had several specific goals that I wanted to accomplish as well. The results and skills that I acquired were more than I had anticipated.

Many of my courses in the MAET program challenged my thinking and teaching practices, especially CEP 812, Applying Educational Technology to Issues of Practice. In this course, we explored controversial issues in education through wicked problems. These are problems that

appear to have no solution because of all of the different factors and groups of people that play a role in them. My colleagues and I focused on finding a solution to the problem: Can failure be as powerful a learning mode as success? We conducted research by reaching out to our professional learning network (PLN) through an online survey and Twitter poll. Our communities included teachers from private and public schools. When we sifted through the responses we realized that people had different definitions of failure. We saw that a majority of educators felt that failure had a negative connotation, but felt that we learn from our failures. In collaboration with my colleagues we discussed how this view may stem from society and the pressure placed on students to do well. This information was critical in guiding us towards a possible solution.

We decided that the perception of failure needs to change inside and outside of the classroom. Our best solution included creating safe environments for students to practice failing forward. In order to redefine failure, teachers need to embrace it as part of their classroom culture. This solution had a strong impact on myself as an educator and coach. I realized that I needed to use language that supported this idea of learning from failure. With my students and players, many are scared of trying new things because they are so afraid of failure. I do not want them to limit themselves and give up before even starting something. I want them to experience the beauty of pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone and succeeding. They need to feel that amazing sense of accomplishment of struggling, learning, changing, and working through something until you find success.

I make an effort to integrate failure as a learning mode into my classroom to prepare my high schoolers for challenges that they may face in the future. My population of students need to learn how to advocate for themselves and utilize resources in order to be successful. With my online tools, class website with resources, and the re-do and re-take policy, students can start to build these lifelong skills. They are important in helping them not only to embrace failure, but to persevere through obstacles. I created two decorations to support this idea in my classroom and serve as daily reminders of how we can learn from failure. One is a "**F**AIL: **F**irst **A**ttempt **I**n **L**earning" poster and the other is a stepping stone that reads, "mistakes are the stepping stones to success." I want to influence my students to believe in this philosophy in every way that I can. This course gave me knowledge to strengthen the way that I support my students and feel comfortable with failure myself.

Another course that positively impacted me was CEP 815, Technology and Leadership. I took this course overseas in Galway, Ireland. I learned about educational leadership and how to continue learning through a world of rapid technological change. My colleagues and I planned, facilitated, and presented at an international technology conference. I was challenged to step into a leadership role and provide successful professional development strategies. I gained confidence through my presentation at this conference as well as another during the Michigan State's College of Education Technology Conference **(COETC)**.

The leadership skills that these experiences gave me have followed me back to my district. I demonstrated my abilities in working with some of my more experienced colleagues who need help with technology. I am proud of myself that even as a young teacher, I can be a resource for them when they need assistance. I strive to exemplify the main focus of this program and how we can all work together to make education great for our students. A healthy balance of technology is key in making the learning meaningful for our students. I will continue to be a technology leader helping my coworkers in developing successful websites, lessons, and learning experiences for our students.

Beyond gaining experience presenting at conferences in CEP 815, my partner and I learned about some great forms of adaptive and assistive technology. As a special education teacher, I was excited to give these tools a shot with my students. I have taught my students how to use resources such as, Google Read and Write and Online Math Manipulatives, to help support their learning. They understand what areas they struggle in and what tools might help them. These are the first steps in advocating for their needs and becoming independent learners. I have witnessed their number of missing assignments decrease and their self-confidence increase. It is amazing to see them feel proud of their work and learn how to be successful in the general education classroom. Through our staff's "Genius Hour" I have been researching more assistive technologies available for my students to use. I look forward to finding more technology tools and utilizing new resources for them to succeed in the future.

Another impactful course that I completed was CEP 820: Teaching Students Online. I had some experience in web design from my undergraduate study and experiences with online classes myself; however, I had never tried to create an online course for my students. Through

experimenting with different tools, programs, and reading about different course designs, I learned that online learning is complex and there are many things to consider. The knowledge I gathered from my research was something that I decided to share with my colleagues at work. Most have class websites and did not consider the factors that we covered in the course. Even small organizational design choices can make a huge difference in a reader's ability to navigate their website. I decided to use Weebly to create an online hybrid unit with flipped lessons for my geometry students. I chose a trigonometry topic that many of my students have struggled with in the past.

I challenged myself to incorporate different viewpoints and present the content in new creative ways. My goal was to reach more students and excite them about trigonometry. This was no easy task. With that said, when I used this online unit last year with my students, they responded well. The students enjoyed the different multimedia, videos, and my connections to sports. Having the website with resources to reference throughout the unit was helpful to them as well. The beauty of online learning is that students can work at their own pace. With the range of abilities in my co-taught settings, this is critical. Students can replay, reread, or revisit resources on the site whenever they need to. I plan on continuing to build upon the lessons that I have created as students are engaged and pushed to think deeply about the content. The way in which I incorporate material and design the lessons re-opens the door to creativity in my math classes. It supports the idea that there is no one right answer. Students can explain their answer in ways that make sense to them through utilizing technology.

As I look back on my MAET journey through this capstone course, I am proud of all of the experiences, skills, and knowledge that I have gained. I pushed myself out of my comfort zone to meet new people and have developed some great relationships that I will continue in the future. The hybrid in combination with online learning and overseas learning created a unique combination of opportunities to expand my PLN. I know these resources as well as my MAET family will be with me with any challenges I may face in the future.

This program has shown me that education has truly been revolutionized from what it was like when I was in elementary school. It is not enough to just have the right answer or memorize facts. Students need to be able to collaborate and use what they have learned in meaningful ways. MAET taught me that utilizing technology in a classroom is more than just using the

technology to use it. We can engage our students, but also be innovative in the learning experiences that we create with it. Even though I have accomplished many of my goals, I look forward to attaining new goals in the future. I am passionate about educational technology and excited to continue leading others within my school community.

This program has inspired me and I know that I can develop the same excitement for learning that I once felt. By encouraging students to learn from failure, leading with technology, and finding a balance of technology within my lessons, I can engage students to deepen their understanding of topics I am teaching. I have gained confidence in my ability to reach out and lead others in finding success within their classrooms through the continual use of technology. Looking back on my hectic 18-month journey through this program, I am reminded of one thing- the learning never ends. I will always be looking for answers and discovering new ways to light the fire of learning within my students.