

# A Necessary Evil.....But Not So Bad

By David Crewes

Truth be told, I've been going to school for a long time. I started out at Michigan State University, but was not very serious. I ended up leaving after one year. This led to almost ten years of going to school part time and working full time. I attended three different colleges, moved 1000 miles away, and in the end, moved back to Traverse City to settle down with my family. Or so I thought. Teaching has always been in the back of my mind. I have always enjoyed helping people learn new material or assist with any type of difficult learning. Coaching diving for several years was the proverbial straw that made me decide to go back to school and become a teacher. I had finally come to grips with my dream of having my own classroom. So I went back to school for another three years and was ready to start teaching Science. After three more long years of substitute teaching, I was in the right place at the right time, and finally landed my dream job. The first year flew by and then it finally hit me; I have back to school. Again. It took me several months of weighing my options, searching the internet, and discussing the possibilities with my family, but I made the decision to attend MSU and earn my Master's Degree in Educational Technology (MAET). I had come full circle, in a matter of speaking. I wasn't really looking forward to going back to school, but in order to keep my dream job, I had to. At least I could finally become a true Spartan (Go Green!) after bleeding green and white all my life. I didn't really know what the specifics of my learning would be, I had an idea that it would undoubtedly be valuable. I learned from my previous place of employment that technology changes very fast, and that you have to keep current with those changes or you stand the chance of losing your edge. What I learned from the MAET Program is that teaching is no different. If a teacher wants to stay in the game, and strive to be an effective teacher in this technology infused world of ours, we need to use and understand the technology that makes classroom experiences rich and meaningful. This is the message that my "necessary evil" delivered to me along our journey together. And it turns out that it wasn't so evil after all. I never expected it to be so exciting, insightful and rewarding.

The first courses I took at MSU were CEP810, CEP811 and CEP812. These courses are offered as certificate courses and are a prerequisite for entering the MAET Program. The design of these classes is to make sure that the applicants of the MAET program are all on an even playing field with technology. They each explored different aspects of some of the tools that one would need for technology integration into the classroom.

These certificate classes proved to be a valuable refresher for me. They allowed me to utilize the newest versions of some old classics: Microsoft Office Suite. I was previously only familiar with the 2003 version of the software. When I decided to go back to school, again, I was able to upgrade to the 2007 version. What a difference. I'm grateful for the opportunity, because if I would have tried to figure them out on my own, it would have been a very unpleasant experience. Throughout the three classes, I created a multitude of Word and Excel documents, and a few different versions of PowerPoint presentations to be used in many different settings. I was able to explore the software on a much deeper level than I would have on my own. This turned out to be excellent practice. I don't think a day goes by that I don't use one of these tools in my own classroom.

I was able to explore many effective Web 2.0 tools in these classes as well. Some of these tools and applications I learned how to use were wikis, WebQuests, audio and video podcasts, blogs, RSS Feeds and website design. I was also able to utilize online resources such as MERLOT, and I also learned how to share and transfer files from the server at MSU via FTP software. All these things are slowly becoming integral in my classroom instruction. I would not have had the opportunity to learn about these tools without the assistance of my "necessary evil".

These certificate courses I would consider the nuts and bolts of the MAET program, so to speak. By mastering all these tools and the mechanics behind them, we are able to move onto the next level technology utilization: UDL principles. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) gives all individuals a chance to learn the curriculum by varying the goals, methods, materials, and assessments so learning can be customized and adjusted for individual needs. By using all the different tools at our disposal, my students have a greater chance for learning and comprehension. They don't have to rely on only one type of instruction. They have access to multiple means of representation, action, expression and engagement.

Recently, the state of Michigan has required that all educators must take a "Literacy" class. This can be done either during their coursework as they are obtaining their teaching certificate or as a part of an educator's continuing education requirement if they are not currently enrolled in a program. Since I had not taken the required class, I was allowed to count these credits toward my MAET degree. That class was TE846. This class allowed me to not only recognize those students who have difficulties with reading and writing, but also taught me several ways teach those students to become competent readers and writers. While this class proved to be just as much work as I expected it to be, I was thoroughly surprised at the value of the teaching I came away with. Much like the UDL principles discussed earlier, literacy comprehension is also directly related the application of varied methods of instruction. Some methods may not work for some people. This course taught some of the more common strategies of literacy comprehension in a High School setting. Some of those practices include recognizing root words, recognizing prefixes and suffixes, Question and Answer Relationships (QAR), CARES based curriculum intervention, Semantic Feature Analysis, Think/Read/Revise strategies and the use of concept maps. These are just some of the strategies that I was able to incorporate into my teaching last year alone. By being able to recognize those students with literacy difficulties, I can easily observe them in a classroom setting and determine which strategy might work best for them. This also fits well into the UDL strategies of teaching.

As for the rest of the courses I completed in the MAET program, they all seem to be much more involved in the reasons why we develop our learning environments in certain ways. I will call these the program classes. While the certificate classes taught me what to use, the program classes taught me to utilize those tools to their full potential. Sometimes we combined several of the tools together to achieve a final objective, and sometimes they allowed me to further investigate how learning with technology actually takes place. Overall, these courses taught me what strategies to use in order to teach in the most effective manner possible.

For example, many any of these program classes contained material on [TPACK](#). TPACK is more or less way identifying the key aspects of integrating technology into a teaching environment. It is based on identifying the many aspects of teacher knowledge and unifying them into a single system for technology instruction. I was first exposed to TPACK in CEP812, then again in CEP800, CEP806, and CEP815. To be honest, almost all of my classes taken through the MAET program refer or identify with some aspect of the TPACK method. Through these classes, I was able to identify the three main areas of TPACK: technology knowledge, pedagogy knowledge, and content knowledge. Then, through different investigations, I was able to understand how each type of knowledge can be combined and integrated until all three become unified and a positive technology based learning environment is established. The end result is that I now look at my teaching in a different way. I am constantly analyzing my lessons to see if they are consistent with the TPACK methodology. This has allowed me to change my presentation, my content and my tools to ultimately become a better educator.

Leadership roles have never been a difficult thing for me to master. While I prefer to take a supportive role in the many adventures I have encountered in my life, I have found that teaching is not very conducive to a supporting position. I particularly enjoyed the Leadership class offered in this program, CEP815. I was able to really dig inside myself and compare my apparent qualities, as well as my latent qualities, and compare them to some of the great

leaders of our time. This class allowed me to understand what makes a great leader and why some people are just born leaders. I think the most important thing a leader can do is to never stop learning. It does not matter if it is specific to your position in life or your cubicle at work. Learning is a lifelong process. The joy and satisfaction of enriching your own mind should be reward enough. It has always been apparent to me that not all people are born leaders. Often, leaders need to take the time to grow into their role. Throughout the entirety of this course, the definitions and qualities of good leaders were continually illustrated. By my definition, a successful leader respects their employees, leads by example, is humble, and understands the meaning of hard work. I believe in his book *Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve*, Jim Collins put it best. A true leader “Demonstrates unwavering resolve to do whatever must be done to produce the long-term results, no matter how difficult”.

Since this program is based on technology and technology integration, I knew when I began taking my classes that somewhere along the line I was going to have to be able to make my own website. This has always had a certain appeal to me. It turns out that in CEP820, and in one of my final courses, CEP807, I would have an opportunity to do that and much more.

In CEP820, one of the requirements of the class was to set up and use a CMS, or Content Management System. I used Haiku to set up my own online course system. This proved to be much harder than I anticipated. I still can't believe how much work goes into a true online course. Between creating video lectures, support material, online assessments and blogs, I felt like I was actually prepping for an additional class, and not using the CMS to support a course that was already in place. In the end my CMS turned out more like a hybrid class of using the online portion as support for the classroom material. It wasn't really until the end of the course that I realized my limitations with the online experience. It was a sobering experience and I tip my hat to all those who have successfully carried out a truly online environment.

CEP807 was different in that we could design our own electronic portfolio in the manner in which we chose, to some extent. This website is the end result of that opportunity. I thoroughly enjoyed the aspect of designing my own internet portfolio. I was able to plan how I wanted everything to appear, without any strict requirements. The colors, themes and layouts were all my own design, along with most of the material I have decided to share in my portfolio. I was even able to change some of the html code to tweak things just right. It turned out to be a relatively simple process to embed documents, audio tracks, videos and links directly into the website. All this I learned from the MAET program.

So now I have reached the end of my journey through this pseudo-required educational adventure. I look around to see if I can find that “necessary evil” that came along for the ride. He is nowhere to be found. I sent him packing many months ago when I realized that I still had a ton to learning to. This was necessary only in the terms that I had to take a few credits to fulfill some minor requirements, the rest I finished because in order to use what I had learned to its full extent, I needed more. I decided to see this through because of the wealth of knowledge that the MAET program opened my eyes to. If I *had* to take more classes, I wouldn't hesitate. I would look forward to learning something new and try to get the most I can out of the experience. Although for right now, I can take a breath and relax for about 7 seconds. I have things to do. I plan on sharing as much as I can with my colleagues, through my role in District Technology Committee. I can take everything I learned about making my classroom into a rich, multifaceted learning environment and share those experiences with my students and peers. With all that sharing, hey, we might even have a good time as we learn.