

I Think I Can, I Think I Can, I Know I Can

by Michelle R. Fairley

In order to maintain my teaching credentials, I am required to complete additional credit hours every five years. Since I already am certified and considered “highly qualified” in three subjects, I haven’t been able to teach the same subject for more than two years in a row. I have been placed wherever they needed a teacher, so I decided I didn’t want a math certification (my fourth), as that would likely mean changing subjects every year. Getting the masters degree in educational technology was an interest of mine and a subject I would enjoy teaching.

This masters degree was also appealing to me because it was completely online. I needed a program that would allow me to juggle my many responsibilities--work, home, and three small children with their extra curricular activities--and would provide a flexible study schedule without wasting time commuting to and from classes.

I have always been drawn to new “gadgets,” but, to be completely honest, I thought it would be easy for me to do this program because of my interest in and knowledge of technology. I found out very quickly that I didn’t know as much as I thought I did. But more about that under “coursework.”

The only drawback I have found with a program totally online is not having the connection with classmates that you would have in a traditional classroom. I noticed this the most when I participated in the graduation ceremony. I felt somewhat awkward not knowing anyone.

The positives have far outweighed the negatives, especially in my substantial growth as a teacher. The knowledge I have gained has allowed me to keep up with my students. They have grown up with technology and do not know the world without it. They are used to constant stimulation and instant gratification and become bored easily, especially when teaching is provided by “talking heads.” They learn best with varied instruction that incorporates different forms of technology (when appropriate). This masters program provided opportunities for me to experience teaching in a way that I would like to teach.

The most important reason I decided to pursue a masters degree, however, was because I needed to prove to myself that I was capable of completing a graduate program. School has always been a struggle for me because of having ADHD. It seemed as if classwork was easy for everyone else and that I had to spend at least twice as much time to learn the same things. The result was having a lack of confidence in my abilities. I found out that I am able to complete work at this level of study, and have actually maintained a 4.0 throughout the program.

COURSEWORK

As I mentioned before, I thought this masters program would be easy for me, as I am very interested in, have knowledge of, and have a lot of experience with technology. I am probably the teacher in the building who utilizes technological resources the most, and other teachers come to me for answers relating to the use and application of technology. Our district continues to implement new technology and I have had a SMART Board, document camera, and a

SMART Response System in my classroom for some time. Because of this, I tended to rate myself as “tech savvy” and even highly computer literate.

I don't intend to make light of my abilities, as I am certainly able to “play around” with programs and equipment and figure them out on my own. But it wasn't until this masters program, and **CEP 810-Teaching for Understanding with Technology** and **CEP 811-Adapting Innovative Technology in Education** in particular, that I realized I still had a lot to learn. You need to know that you don't know before you can learn.

I took both of these classes at the same time and immediately was confronted with a steep learning curve. I was required to create a blog and quickly learned I was quite the novice. I guess I expected myself to know what I was doing right away; and when this didn't happen, I became very frustrated. Not knowing the program as well as having to learn the jargon at the same time was difficult for me. After several hours of struggling, I realized that I needed to utilize the help screens of the program and take advantage of other resources like classmates and peers and YouTube video assistance. This realization helped me get past this hurdle and prepared me for the rest of the program.

I also learned that even though I had technology available when I taught, I was not using it to its full potential. I learned that there was so much freeware out there that could benefit me in teaching and realized that I could use that to take advantage of the equipment I have more fully. This lesson is one that I will share with my peers and students as they learn to incorporate technology into teaching and learning.

This reality check was important since technology is ever changing and there will be even more to experience as time moves on. I plan to continue to look for and try new things in order to utilize technology to the fullest for the benefit of both my students and myself.

In *CEP 891-Online Literacy and Reading-to-Learn in the Digital Age*, I came to understand the behavior of my middle-school students and realized how they processed what they read online. This was eye-opener for me, as previously I could not figure out why my students were having so many difficulties finding reliable information about a given research topic. They did not have a clue how to find reliable information and would, instead, choose whatever came up first in a search. It didn't matter to them whether it was truth or fiction; in fact, they often couldn't even determine that. They also have a hard time knowing what terms to use to conduct a search because they do not have the background knowledge or vocabulary that is necessary. I learned that, before I even assign a project requiring these skills, I need to take the time to show them how to search for information. The interactive lesson I created based on the WWWDOT process (see my Coursework Showcase page for more information) will be an excellent tool to accomplish this and a resource for my students in future projects.

Even though I have not yet completed *CEP 822-Approaches to Educational Research*, I have already had a significant realization about research and how it relates to the difficulties in making changes to teaching methodology. Research can be classified as hard or soft and social sciences are considered soft research. Educational topics are even softer and more difficult to study. This is due to the number of variables involved, making the research findings imprecise

and often skewed. Even if you study the same students in the same environment asking the exact same question, you will encounter variances due to the fact that you are studying humans who change constantly. For example, the students' health could be different from day to day, what happened in their home life the day or night before may have changed, whether the teacher is having a good day or not can change, the classroom environment will change when a new student is introduced to the classroom, etc.

Learning this explains why teaching philosophies and methodologies are constantly changing. Research data doesn't provide enough reliable information so that schools can count on it to make relevant changes. They simply do not know what to try when the current methods do not seem to be working. Teaching becomes an ongoing experiment that never stops.

What I have learned in these (and all of my) classes has made me a better teacher. This experience has encouraged me to continually evaluate my teaching and whether or not what I do in the classroom is best for the students.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

I have always believed it is important for teachers to understand and keep up with the interests of their students. For this reason, I read books that the students are reading, "try" to listen to their music, and appreciate their fashion. I find this helps me to make a better connection with my students because they see that I'm making an effort to understand them. They are then more likely to listen to what I have to say with an open mind.

In the same way, I believe it is important to keep up with my students with regard to current technology. I never found a lecture to be the most desirable way for me to learn, and I know students with any learning style benefit when they are able to interact with the content. It is important for teachers to create engaging instruction that incorporates higher-order thinking skills. This goal can be accomplished by using technology that is fun for the students. I have found that when students are having fun, they are more engaged in learning and make more of an effort to learn. They also have better retention because they are using multiple senses and intelligences.

In addition, because I am empathetic and adapt easily to multiple learning modalities, I tend to be assigned many students with special needs. My recent experiences have heightened my awareness of the need to think outside the box when teaching all students, but special needs students in particular. I believe incorporating technology in the classroom is an important aspect of learning and that technology is the means to reach most learners. I have learned that there are many technological resources that would benefit my students and help me more easily adapt assignments to the individual learner. In addition, exposure to technology is important in our school district due to the high population of at-risk students. Many students do not have technological resources at home and need to experience them so that they are not behind as they further their education and/or enter the workforce.

I have been consciously moving away from paper/pencil and poster board activities because there are so many free resources on the web that can be used to create interactive projects. For

example, students can use Glogster to create a book report that includes images, video, and links to other websites. This is like creating a digital poster to present their findings on a particular topic. They could also use SketchUp, for example, in Social Studies to create a 3D model of a civilization.

Learning can be more memorable and fun by utilizing the capabilities of SMART Board technology, e.g. creating SMART Board activities that incorporate videos, games, and music, and using the SMART Response System for questions/quizzes. These activities do not necessarily have to be developed by the teacher. Students learn by teaching, and they can create review games or lessons about certain topics themselves. Small groups can be assigned a portion of the lesson and then create an interactive activity to teach the rest of the class.

Basic introductory information or the need for repetition by some students can be addressed by the development of simple, interactive standalone computer activities. To meet this goal in my own classroom, I want to create more resources students can use to refresh their memory on the basics of a subject. For example, I want to create standalone resources to teach students about types of government, types of economies and other basic information we continually refer back to throughout the year. Some students retain this information more quickly and for a longer period of time. Others need more reinforcement. If that tool was available, my time is freed up to focus on more active learning instead of re-teaching basic concepts.

For students having specific learning challenges, technology can be used to help them share what they know. Paper and pencil does not work for every student. Due to having autism, one of my recent students, for example, struggled to organize his thoughts well enough to write them down. I suggested using technology to address this problem. Specifically, the program Audacity was used to record his free-flowing dialog which could then be graded as is or be used as a basis for him to develop something written. A student doesn't need to have a learning disability to benefit from this technology. Middle school students love to talk, so utilizing that skill without having to worry about putting their ideas into writing will allow them to be more creative. Their ideas and thoughts can be organized later in written form.

Even though I am a strong advocate for the use of technology in the classroom, I don't believe in using technology for the sake of saying I'm using technology. Our school district tends to push teachers to use technology, but they do not stress using it only when it's an appropriate forum to do so. In any subject, you have to spend the time on the required curriculum and you can't spend all of your time teaching students how to use technology tools. Whatever is taught should remain the focus; technology should be used to enhance that focus. I once heard it said that technology should be like a pencil sharpener on the wall--there as a tool to use but not the focus of the classroom. I do believe, however, technology plays an important part in education today. The use of technology in the classroom can make learning more interactive and exciting if used appropriately, which is exactly what today's learner needs.

LEADERSHIP PLANS

I am curious about life and I get bored easily if I'm not learning and trying new things. I know I learn best by jumping in and trying new technology rather than reading about it. If I

have additional questions, I ask others or search online for resources that demonstrate what a particular technology offers. I also learn from my students. Their lives have never been without technology and because each student has different interests and exposure to technology, I've found that I can usually find someone who has already tried something I'm looking at. Also, I don't automatically throw an idea away if it doesn't seem to work immediately. Instead, I sit back for a while and reflect and then decide if and how it can be used to engage students or help make my life as a teacher easier.

Since I began my teaching career, I have been the go-to person in my building with regard to technology. I enjoy combining my skills of organization and technology to help other teachers find easier ways to complete their many obligations and daily tasks. I have been able to utilize the knowledge I have gained from this masters program to excite some of my peers and encourage them to use it in their classrooms as well. I have shared most of this by demonstrating various tools to individuals when they have shared a problem they are trying to address.

It seems it would be more beneficial to share my knowledge with larger groups. I would like to do that by creating and presenting workshops at other schools through the Intermediate School District. I have also thought I would like to teach in the community college setting. The local community college has an education program and future teachers, especially, would benefit by learning about various technological resources before they decide on their lesson plans and class processes. They could use this knowledge and these skills to keep track of student accommodations (which is required by the State of Michigan), create tools to organize teaching materials, and to create interactive classroom activities with the students. A good example is to utilize an online tool called Live Binders to organize teaching resources and have access to them from anywhere at any time.

EDUCATION--LOOKING FORWARD

With regard to the use of technology for learning in the future, I have a major concern with the concept of K-12 schools where teaching is done exclusively online. My concern stems from my observation of middle-school students and their growing dependency on technology to communicate with each other. As this means of communication has increased, their ability to productively work in groups has diminished. I am a strong advocate for having students engage socially in a safe setting. The positive social interaction that takes place in the classroom develops a skill that is necessary in order for someone to be a valuable addition to the workplace and in society.

It is for this reason that, in the K-12 educational setting, it is vitally important to find a balance between the use of technology and face-to-face interaction. All or nothing (at either extreme) is an ineffective and dangerous path to follow.