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Synthesis Essay

A Search for Something Great

As an educator, there is nothing better than seeing your students get excited about learning. I was able to experience this firsthand when I engaged my students in a project-based learning unit developed by Dr. Nell Duke. I was exposed to her series of Information in Action units and textbook at a conference, and decided to give it a try with my students. Students were given an opportunity to learn about the importance of exercise, and challenged to persuade senior citizens to exercise.

My students eagerly raised their hands to contribute to a class letter that we wrote to a local senior center. We drew pictures of our favorite ways to exercise, and mailed them alongside our letter. Over the next few months, my students researched the benefits of exercise, studied graphs, and composed persuasive pamphlets. My class helped me plan a field trip to the local senior center where students shared their pamphlets and engaged the residents in a student-led exercise class. The room was filled with smiles and laughter across multiple generations as you can see in the video above! When I viewed the pamphlets my students created, I realized it was some of the best writing my students had ever done. I knew that I needed more guidance and support to make this kind of learning possible in my classroom.

About one month later, I applied for the Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) program at Michigan State University. I needed to learn how to create more meaningful learning experiences for my students. I wrote the following goal in my application essay: **I seek not only to implement technology into my classroom, but also to change the way I perceive and understand education.** While I understood the

importance of using technology to enhance instruction, I also knew that I wanted to learn about teaching practices to make learning relevant, engaging, and purposeful for my students.

My learning throughout this program allowed me to understand that educational technology is so much more than using devices and new applications. When challenging ourselves to learn in new ways, both teachers and students are bound to experience failures. I learned how experiencing failures can actually ignite learning in positive ways. Through my graduate studies, I learned the importance of putting students at the center of learning by allowing them to ask questions, explore their passions, and present their findings in unique ways. Finally, I learned that the importance of using educational research as a guide when implementing new teaching practices. When rethinking the ways in which we engage students in learning, we must also find a balance with researched-based best practices.

Learning From Failures

When we think about questioning in the classroom, an image often comes to mind that involves the teacher asking questions and students providing correct responses. When taking CEP 812, we read a book called *A More Beautiful Question* by Warren Berger. Berger challenged his readers to think about the importance of questioning and theorized an educational system that allows students to ask questions, rather than just the teacher. Berger also suggested that questioning can be used to solve “wicked” or highly complex problems. In this class, I collaborated with a group to solve a wicked problem. We studied how failures can be used as a learning mode, and started to understand our problem by asking questions. We considered why students and teachers alike are afraid to

fail, and don't see any benefits to experiencing failures. Next, we conducted research, developed surveys, analyzed our results, and proposed a solution. We suggested that explicit teaching around growth mindset and grit could help students and teachers become less afraid of failure, and begin to embrace failures as part of the learning process. This project allowed me to explore the idea of failure, how it is perceived, and find ways to use failures to support learning.

The idea of experiencing failure arose again when I took CEP 810. We were asked to learn a new skill of our choice using only online discussion forums and YouTube videos. I decided that I would learn how to knit a winter headband. Little did I know, this task would be far more daunting and frustrating than I anticipated. I found myself experiencing many failures. Sloppy stitches and repeated mistakes could ruin my entire headband, causing me to start over. After many failed attempts and moments of frustration, I found that I was able to identify my mistakes and errors. I soon discovered videos that showed me how to fix these mistakes, and move forward. I began to realize that making a mistake actually allowed me to gain a better understanding of the correct way to stitch. If I knew the results of my errors, I could understand what I needed to change. In this project, learning occurred through experiencing failures, and repeated practice. I had to develop problem-solving skills and build perseverance to be successful.

During both of these projects, I thought a lot about myself as a teacher and my students. I discovered the importance of asking questions while also accepting and analyzing failures to be key steps in learning and problem solving. It is not only important to teach students the value of failures, but teachers as well. Teachers must ask themselves reflective questions throughout the year, and embrace failures to foster

learning. Students can also be taught ask questions, search for answers, and experience failures to ignite their learning. I often find myself taking preventive measures so my students don't experience failure. I give them all the directions, or get frustrated when students don't learn something the first time. These courses changed my mindset around failure. Instead of telling students all the answers, we must allow failures to happen and celebrate the learning that occurs.

Putting Students at the Center

Not only did my mindset around failure change, but I now have a different image of education as a whole. I often think back to my own experiences as a student. We experienced learning through explicit instruction, worksheets, timed tests, and workbooks. While I still see value in my time as a student, I now understand that education doesn't have to look like that. As teachers, we must be flexible in our thinking about how we engage students in learning. Instead of putting teachers at the center of learning, students can direct their learning. When I think of my graduate studies, I think about the choices we were given when completing assignments. We had choices about how to present our learning, and even chose our own learning topics. For example, in CEP 811 we were asked to identify an area of our professional lives we would like to improve by implementing a digital tool. I explored how I could use a tool called Edmodo to organize content for guided reading groups and maintain a weekly schedule for me and my students. We were allowed to identify our own problems, and also explore a variety of digital tools. Instead of our instructors giving us explicit directions and parameters, we were given the freedom to explore and make important choices for our learning.

We were also had ownership over our learning when we were given opportunities to be creative in CEP 811. We were again given choices when selecting a “maker” tool that allowed us to enhance our teaching practices. I chose a Makey Makey kit, which uses alligator clips and a Makey Makey board to make everyday items interactive. I was asked to collect materials that I could “repurpose” and use alongside my Makey Makey kit. This assignment challenged me in new ways. While I was given guidelines and requirements, I also had creative freedom. This was a new feeling as a learner, and allowed me to think deeply about what I wanted to create. I relied on online tutorials and examples to create an interactive number line using my repurposed materials, the Makey Makey kit, and Scratch. Through this process, I learned how to use new tools and through exploration and online resources. I was also given an opportunity to be creative, which allowed me to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Again, I couldn't help but think of my students when I completed this work. I realized the value of putting students at the center of their learning and giving them choices. My instructors in CEP 811 provided me with learning goals, guidance, and assignment parameters, but also allowed for student choice and creative freedom. This balance is so important for my future students. I often think that educators have a vision of what education should be based on past experiences or their own schooling. I often hear others say things like, “Well this is always how we've taught this” or “This is how I learned in school.” While reflecting on past experiences is valuable, it is also important that teachers are flexible in their thinking and alter their educational practices as student needs evolve and change.

All About Balance

While it is important to change our educational practices to meet student needs, it is also important to balance new ideas with research-based best practices. Integrating technology into instruction can make learning engaging and meaningful for students. With the help of technology, students have access to a vast amount of tools and information. At the same time, devices are not the center of educational technology. I think this is a common misconception. When browsing resources commonly used by teachers like Pinterest, educational technology is often closely linked to apps and devices. For example, when typing “educational technology” into the Pinterest search bar I find resources like this one titled, [“27 Apps That Have Transformed My Teaching and Their Learning.”](#) While some of these digital tools are great, this sends the message that educational technology is about using the newest apps in the classroom. Through my learning, I have found that educational technology is about so much more. Learning about the TPACK (Technological, Pedagogical, And Content Knowledge) framework in CEP 810 allowed me to see that educational technology is about merging technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge to create meaningful learning experiences for students. We must consider how each of these elements overlap when planning and implementing instruction that places value on technology to enhance instruction and learning.

Educational technology opens up lots of opportunities for educators and their students. We hear and learn about new teaching practices like project-based learning, Maker Education, inquiry-based teaching, flipped lessons, passion projects, and more. It is easy for educators to become overwhelmed and feel as if they are falling behind. I think it is

important to always keep in mind research-based best practices when rethinking education practices. In TE 847, we read *Best Practices in Literacy Instruction*, which outlined research-based best teaching practices for literacy instruction. These concepts are essential to keep in mind when make changes to our instruction. In this class, we practiced identifying student needs, and addressing these needs with individualized best practices. No matter what the context, this skill is essential for teachers to have. As teachers, it is easy to get carried away and attempt to try every new teaching practice we learn about. Instead, we must be thoughtful and intentional about our decisions and balance innovative teaching tools with research-based best practices.

From Student to Teacher

When I think back to why I applied to this program last year, I feel as though I have a better understanding of my students and what they need. I learned new ways to engage them in learning to make school a place where learning is fun, engaging, and purposeful. My experience as a graduate student allowed me to see what I appreciate as a learner. I see the importance of experiencing failures to enhance and ignite learning. I also value choice and opportunities to be creative. I then thought about my learning from the perspective of a teacher. I thought about my students, and how I can create learning experiences that allow for creativity, choice, and meaningful use of digital tools. I also considered ways I can balance research-based best practices with innovative teaching methods to help students develop higher-level thinking skills. The learning I experienced as a graduate student allowed me to see education from the perspective of a student. I see what I value, and what I hope to give my students.