

Right Then & There

by Patrick Springer

There are two of them. Two distinct moments. Two separate events back in 2005. Two different instances that were only a few months apart. The feelings of these two moments you see, could be compared to that of a young child on who just received their first bicycle, or turning sweet sixteen and getting that “new” car and accompanying sense of freedom. The kind of moments that lead to conversations that begin with the phrase ‘guess what I did today?!’ Moments that you do not forget, and often bring a smile to your face.

It would be some time before I came to fully realize the impact of those events. I think of them from time to time, and the influence they collectively have had on my career. When looking back at them I would describe them as powerful, inspirational moments that have contributed to where I am today.

What were these two moments you ask? The first, and probably most influential, was my initial encounter with a SMART Board. Not one of the three schools where I was placed for pre-student teaching observation work contained one of these groundbreaking instruments, at least that I was able to find. In fact, the classrooms that I spend time in still had the old green or black chalkboards. Needless to say, I was fascinated when I got a chance to see this foreign technology up close and personal. During a few planning periods, I arranged to observe a teacher use it for a variety of lessons. The instructor was able to captivate his audience, creating an authentic learning environment, all from just one device. His students were enthusiastic and engaged anytime they were given the opportunity to use the SMART Board. Later in the school year, I was even able to use the device for a couple of lessons. From that point on, right then and there, I was drawn to integrating technology in the classroom.

Later that same school year while serving as a long term substitute, I was invited to attend the Southeast Michigan Handheld Computer Conference in Farmington, MI. This was a one day introduction to many different types of handheld computers and the sensors that could be utilized with them. As part of the workshop, the participants were able to carry out a variety of experiments as we explored the options and capabilities of the devices. Needless to say, I was impressed with the technology, and excited to begin deriving a plan to purchase some of the sampled equipment for my classroom.

I think the fact that when I had the opportunity to toy around with both of these technologies that were fairly new at the time, it was in a role that was comparable to being a student, and the feelings of excitement and curiosity grabbed ahold of me. Thus my desire and become a teacher that possesses the skills and knowhow to incorporate a wide range of technologies in the classroom was born. To this day, they have not let go. This wise, along with a desire to be the best teacher that I can be, and the recognition that technology’s role in education will most likely continue to increase, lead me to Michigan State University’s Master of Arts in

Educational Technology graduate program.

Throughout the journey of pursuing this degree, a number of classes and projects have had significant impacts on my learning. One of these projects, the TechQuest, came in CEP 812 Applying Educational Technology to Issues of Practice. The TechQuest project was an opportunity to identify a problem or issue in my own classroom, and create a technological based solution to correct it. The issue I selected revolved around teaching the metric system. Even though all of my high school students had experience with using the system, it still did not come easy for many of them. My technological-incorporating solution was to utilize cooperative learning teams and have each team create a media presentation summarizing what was learned. In addition to the staples of multi-media presentation options, I also explored VoiceThreads as an option. Making use of this interactive technology forced me to step out of my comfort zone and work with some technology that I had zero experience with.

As expected, there were frustrations along the way. But, like the butterfly that struggles to emerge from the chrysalis, going through this experience gave me a firsthand account of what it would be like as a student who was assigned this same task. Having that vantage point proved to be instrumental when using this assignment with my students. I was able to anticipate their troubles and put out the fires as they say before any raging infernos developed. From the Techquest project, I was exposed to a new technology and gained the confidence to bring this technology into the classroom to support meaningful learning. Having students teach other students (peer to peer learning) was a successful approach when I implemented this into my class.

Another important step along the way was CEP 815 Technology and Leadership. Having spent a lot of time participating in and coaching various athletics, I thought I had a good handle on what leadership was. My understanding at the time was that there were just three type of leaders: people that led by example, people that led with their voices, or a combination of the two. In this course, we read an article call "7 Transformations of Leadership" by David Rooke and William R. Torbet. I learned that my views on leadership were narrow, and perhaps just focused on the short-term or small picture. The ultimate leaders are the individuals who continue to grow and progress once they are in that leadership position, rather than just be content with their status. This idea fits with a phrase I came across while coaching a few years back: CANI, pronounced can I, which stands for Constant And Never-ending Improvement. It is imperative that I continue to evolve and adapt in all aspects of teaching, but especially within the world of educational technology.

Several assignments within the 815 course were intriguing to me. A couple of them involved creating Facebook and Twitter posts in Microsoft Word documents that represented various perspectives on learning, technology, and leadership. It was a great way to incorporate technology and social media ideals into a lesson, without actually using a computer. This would certainly help avoid having to deal with internet access issues and network filters that block the social media sites at my school. The limited character space really forced me to be creative and

carefully select how I could summarize an idea.

CEP 817 Learning Technology by Design, was an enjoyable and educational experience. It opened my eyes to all the different aspects of design and its prevalent role in education as well as our daily lives. I learned that the profound impact that design can have on the learning experience for those involved cannot be overlooked. This is important whether it is a class assignment that involves creating a Prezi, writing a story with just six words, or even designing the layout of one's classroom. In many cases, it is ultimately the design that determines if success (learning) is achieved or not. We've all heard the saying "don't sweat the small stuff". I walked away from this class with the feeling that the small stuff is pretty important. Taking an analytical approach when designing learning activities, objectives, laboratory exercises or just about anything else, the "small stuff" is certainly significant. We can all reflect on things that we have come across that were designed poorly, and as a result usually failed to live up to our standards or expectations, or even function properly at all. This is a pattern that nobody wants to see in the classroom. The solution is to pay attention to the details.

It's no secret that literacy has become one of the hottest topics in the field of education, and reflecting back on my days in grade school, the increased attention and awareness are long overdue. I am constantly stressing to my students the need to be lifelong learners and critical thinkers, regardless of their career choice. Life experiences have taught me that these qualities can only be attained through developing strong literacy skills. This was the main reason that I was excited to take TE 846 Accommodating Differences in Literacy Learners. For it was in this class that I was nearly inundated with a plethora of literacy resources and strategies for all types of learners. The timing was also perfect, as my school district began to organize specific strategies for incorporating literacy into each and every class. Many of us adopted Frayer's four square technique of committing a term to long term memory. The strategy consists of four parts: writing a short definition, creating a simple sketch, providing an example, and finally, conjuring up a non-example. An interesting strategy to say the least, as it applies to many different learning styles, and has been shown to be much more effective than making a list of terms followed by writing out the definition from the text. After using this method several times over the past school year, many students expressed to me that it was very helpful with the many difficult science terms that were encountered in their studies.

My case study for TE 846 revolved around the need for a new set of literacy skills as technology continues to alter the way and speed with which information is shared. This new skill set is specific to media and information literacy. I wanted to discover how learning was impacted by the use of lessons with significant technology compared to those delivered without. While this was a very small scale experiment, the results did indicate that the use of technology had a positive impact on student learning. Furthermore, it is predicted that the next generation of learners aren't going to be using too many textbooks. Their literacy skill set is going to need to include "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create information in a variety of media formats including print and non-print" (Considine, 2012). As a teacher, this is an area that is only going to grow more prevalent in our schools. Having taken this particular course, I feel prepared

to ensure that my students get acquainted with and have opportunities to practice their media literacy skills.

My journey through the MAET program has brought many lessons, readings, projects, and resources to me over the last several years. It hasn't always been easy, but facing these challenges has molded me into a better teacher. My building currently has just one SMART Board, and I used to be the lone teacher in that room. I switched classrooms a couple of years ago after my teaching assignments changed and I needed a larger laboratory space. While I no longer have access to the interactive whiteboard on a daily basis, our department has invested in a classroom set of Vernier LabQuest handheld data collection devices, and a host of accompanying sensors. With the knowledge that I have gained through the MAET program, I am confident and prepared to face the challenges of teaching the next generation of learners and leaders of tomorrow.

My hope is that with my extensive training, carefully crafted technological skills, scientific knowledge, and dedication to the art of teaching, I will provide that exact moment where a student realizes their passion for life. That exact moment, (or as in my case, two moments) that when they look back and think about it from a new perspective, they'll say it all started in Mr. Springer's class, right then and there.