

Random Acts Make A Life:
The Story of a Control Freak Learning to Let Go
By Angela Engardio

On a cold and rainy July day in 2010 a random thought occurred to me – I should start a Masters Program. I had just finished my first year of teaching, which had been utterly exhausting but after a month of relaxing at the family cottage in Northern Michigan I had regained my mental strength. Then the cold wave and rain hit. For a week it was too cold to play on the boat or glacial lake and the rain kept me locked indoors. I had always known I would earn a Masters Degree one day (actually the goal is two) but I was undecided as to what and where I would study.

I had graduated from Michigan State University (MSU) in May 2008 and finished my teaching certificate in May 2009, earning 6 Graduate credits that could be applied to some of their educational Masters programs (TE 803 and TE 804). This combined with my love for MSU took me to their website first. Browsing it did not take me long to find the Masters in Educational Technology (MAET) page which gave me a sudden surge of energy and excitement. Working in the Fraser Public School District technology has been a driving force behind the curriculum, personnel, and strategic changes. Exploring the requirements for the MAET degree the connections and possibilities for improving my skills as a teacher, especially given focus on technology in my new district seemed like a perfect fit. The only problem: applications were due in 2 days!

I was never good at impromptu decision making or going with the flow. Even as a young girl I always liked my world organized and the feeling of control. Lists are a staple of my life – making sure everything is done in the proper time and way. My family and friends like to joke (one of those “jokes” that points out the truth) that I am a control freak. Lucky for me my family is accepting and my friends find it endearing. The MAET program though was not going to wait for my obsessive list making and research, if I wanted to start this program I would need to collect my references and write my essay immediately. So for the first time I took a deep breath and let a random act guide my next step.

The first course, aside from my two internship courses, I enrolled in for the MAET program was “Teaching for Understanding with Technology” (CEP 810) with Melissa White and Carrie Albin. During this course I was introduced to Twitter and Google Docs, both of which have become staples in my classroom and extra-curricular activities. I use Twitter as an online Professional Learning Community (PLC), researching ideas and best practices shared by fellow educators. Google Docs is of regular use as well, especially Google Forms. During CEP 810 a group project was assigned, the purpose was to create a Special Interest Presentation. As a group we decided to showcase the use of Google Forms, however we also utilized Google Doc to carry on discussions and outline our projects, Google Presentation to create the presentation. This project was intended for three-four individuals. However, my group of three quickly became two when one of the students decided to drop the course last minute. A test of my newly discovered ability to “go with the flow” my partner and I

carried on creating a thoughtful and valuable project. This was not the last time a group member would leave me in a lurch, but it was good practice in preparing me for the next time. During the course “Applying Educational Technology to Issues of Practice” (CEP 812) the class had an overall project carry-through called the Group Leadership Project. I was grouped with two other ladies and we decided to use the web tool Voki for our project. We had divided up our tasks equitably and my lists and prioritizing were in place, this was especially important because I was going on a family vacation for Thanksgiving and would be unavailable. The night before a major deadline, and a week before vacation, one of my group members emailed to say she was dropping the course. The professors decided to give my partner and I one additional day. Yikes! This was a true test of my ability to adapt and persevere. I am happy to say the project was a success, and something I am truly proud of now. Both of these course and group projects helped me far beyond my ability to complete the project – they made me a stronger and more flexible person. They pushed me to let go and trust in my ability to adjust and still accomplish my goals.

Controlling was not limited to making lists and prioritizing, it was also about perception. I have always been the type who is overly concerned about how I am viewed. Admitting my errors and seeking help were not strong suits. Which is why the course “Psychology of Learning in Schools and Other Settings” (CEP 800) presented a major challenge. The course was designed to address issues of students’ misconceptions within the classroom. In order to understand student misconceptions I conducted and recorded interviews with two different students at the start of a unit on the Age of Exploration in my World History class. Listening to my students struggle through answering what I had thought were simple questions was difficult, but then being expected to publish those results, that was unthinkable. I was extremely uncomfortable with the notion of sharing my problems in the classroom on a public forum. This “Student Interviews” audio file was something I wanted to keep and explore on my own, not with professors and fellow students who might judge. The other project for the course was dedicated to improving upon a lesson where students had previously struggled by re-examining my mode of delivering instruction and the psychological implications. Again, this required I assess and share my failures with a broad audience. I decided to work with my American History class and the topic of Civil Rights. My students struggled to understand the connections between the various Civil Rights movements and individuals, which became the focus of my lesson development. Throughout the CEP 800 course I was forced to evolve my teaching practice by addressing my failures and struggles. Admitting these issues to the public and myself was difficult, but I am now much more confident and willing to confess when I need help and seek support, knowing with help I can reach my pinnacle of success as a teacher.

Moving toward a more online and individualized learning climate the control over the classroom that was once held by the teacher is fading fast. Teachers have historically set the pace for their course, analyzing what units require more/less time based upon the anticipated level of difficulty for students. During the course “Teaching K12 Students Online” (CEP 820) I built a unit covering the Age of Exploration where this was no longer the case. At Fraser High School movements have been started to adapt our

teaching to a more personalized and student-driven focus with the use of Standards Based Learning (SBL). I decided to embrace the challenge by creating a SBL and self-paced unit during my CEP 820 course. This would allow me an opportunity to experiment and explore with support from my MSU professors. I used the website Blackboard to host the unit, which is the district supported Learning Management System. Throughout the course I was able to build lessons and assignments that would showcase student understanding and progress without them being physically in the classroom. I also started to see the understand the benefits and possibilities associated with allowing students to move at their own pace and selecting assignments that would best suit their learning needs. At the end of the course I had a fully prepared unit covering the Age of Exploration, students would be able to select their learning preferences and set their own pace. I was thrilled and comfortable with both concepts – monumental for a control freak.

When I started the MAET program I had one year of teaching under my belt in a district I had never heard of before. In the Spring of 2013, with 4 years of teaching at Fraser High School almost completed I signed up for “Technology and Leadership” (CEP 815). I had not given much thought to myself as a leader in the building or district up to this point. Several people had asked me about the MAET program and two joined based upon my recommendation, but I did not truly think much beyond MSU being a phenomenal school. Throughout the CEP 815 course I was encouraged to explore the various leadership styles and methods, not simply thinking of leaders as those who speak loudly and demand attention. As I wrote simple tweets using various leadership methods I had an epiphany. Fraser High School’s beloved Student Council Advisor was stepping down and I was being encouraged by several staff members to consider applying. The position of Student Council Advisor at Fraser High School is seen as a leader throughout the District and community – it demands a strong individual who others will follow. I had not applied because I had not considered myself this type of person. Writing those tweets I suddenly heard my own voice – a quiet but self-assured leader. Plus my ability to organize and my love for control would fit perfectly with the needs of a Student Council. The evening before applications were due I spoke with a close co-worker and we decided to apply together – as a team. The day applications were due we spoke with Dr. Lozne (the principal) and were offered the job. CEP 815 helped me gain confidence and see how I could use some of my control issues in a positive manner. It also resulted in another random thought, which led to a major career and life-changing decision.

As I reflect on all the ways my life has changed since that cold and rainy July day three years ago I am astonished and proud. Although lists are still commonplace throughout my classroom and home my progress through the MAET program has affected my life in far more numerous ways than my knowledge and skills with integrating technology in my classroom practices. I have evolved as a teacher, and a person. I am more flexible, willing to admit my failures, allowing others to dictate their own needs, and viewing myself as a leader. The random thought of earning my Masters resulted in life-changing experiences that will forever impact my future. The lesson I learned that was most important was to let go of some control and life will happen.