MAED: A Trip Report

I have finally come to the end of my most recent journey, and, as an avid traveler, I have opted to write a trip report of my experiences and learning. I set out on this journey two and a half years ago, completing my master programme over the course of three spring, three summer and two fall semesters, making this journey, other than my BA Hons, the longest I have taken. I have completed classes whilst teaching full time and travelling the globe, taking face-to-face discussions at 2am both in the UK and in airport lounges in numerous countries and at least two continents, battled hurricanes and severe allergies all while completing essays and projects on every mode of transport possible. I am proud of my accomplishments, and even more proud to be able to share with others the content, learning and processes I have taken over this time.

To me, online study was a simple choice. I was 3500 miles away from "home", teaching on an island the size of a small town, with the closest university a two hour flight and 800 miles away. I knew I wanted to study and continue my formal learning and felt that I had the resources to be able to balance the commitment. While beginning my research I was struck by the prescribed nature of many masters degrees and stumbling across Michigan State was a breath of fresh air. I knew I wanted to expand my teaching knowledge but at the same time I wanted to be able to demonstrate that at this point in my career (with eight years of teaching experience) that I was interested in developing my leadership. From the outset I loved the fact that Michigan State gave me the opportunity to select my own path and, more importantly, that I could choose two concentrations in which to center my study, effectively achieving the best of both worlds.

However, I still had some reservations. Internet connections in Bermuda can be slow and unpredictable, and, being a music teacher, I could not commit myself to regular online meeting times due to rehearsals and concerts. Some of these fears were realised in my first class: *CEP 817, Learning Technology through Design*. I learnt quickly that I was now the student and not the teacher and struggled with studying after six years of not being in formal learning. I was challenged by the amount of reading, particularly academic journals and research, and found weekly deadlines and blog posts cumbersome and restrictive. My perfectionist nature at times resented sharing work in progress and I struggled with writing reflections and self-evaluation. I suddenly had a new-found empathy for students juggling their time with copious activities and found that studying my masters would be more of a balancing act than I had first realised. However my initial struggle and culture shock quickly dissipated. I began to look forward to receiving feedback based on unfinished work, realizing that this gave me an opportunity to revise and take on board criticism whilst in the planning stages. This particular class had wider impacts in my classroom and I saw my own reactions and behavior in my students when they were faced with similar challenges and, bearing this in mind, I began to look for more guidance from my students. What did they want to study? How did they want to study it? I asked students for feedback on lessons and resources I designed for them and listened to their point of view on the smallest of elements which I previously would have thought to be insignificant.

This engagement with my students evolved to become the biggest change in my pedagogy over the course of my MAED. Not only did students become an integral part of my own learning but my interest in their learning also shifted. Before beginning *CEP 816, Teaching & Learning and Literacy Across the Curriculum* I would have said I had a good understanding and hold on assessment, both in terms of formative and summative tasks and how technology could help in the evolution of these tasks in the classroom. However, through this class, I realised that I had

much more to learn. Paul Morsink challenged my ideas of literacy, asked me to think outside of the box on each activity and asked me to explore technology that I did not even know existed. More than this, he made me realise that in order to understand learning you must understand the process behind it.

Let me explain.

In the classroom I have always used self-evaluation with both formative and summative assessment. As a teacher of arts, students need informal feedback all the way through their process to a finished product in order to improve. It is not good enough to give feedback on their finished performance: students must have guidance throughout the rehearsal process. They need help with technique, interpretation, accuracy and much, much more. I understood that students all learn differently, but I had little interest in the intricacies of their learning processes and the decision making that they had taken in their learning. *CEP 816* helped me to realise that the most important part of my role is to understand how and why students are learning, and, more importantly, why certain things do not work. Learning opportunities in this class have shaped activities which are now a staple of my classroom. Students now write detailed blogs each lesson, explaining their thought processes, difficulties and strengths to me. Students give me their honest opinions on every lesson and activity and have an "open area" where they can tell me about any music or experience they have had in their own time. My goal is for students to see the link between music in their wider lives and the school curriculum and be able to connect the dots between the two. I feel blessed that I had the opportunity to follow this through into my second class with Paul; *CEP 813, Electronic Assessment*, through which we further explored assessment and I particularly focused on combining these worlds into electronic portfolios. Whilst this is very much still a work in progress I am excited by the future possibilities available in this area and am very grateful to my instructors for opening my eyes to the realm of possibilities here.

My interest in the area of student process and reflection has also inspired others in my work place. As a department the instrumental teachers in my current school have moved to implement a formal system of student self-evaluation and many of the principles studied in the above classes have been used to develop an internal assessment structure for practical examinations. The structure has partly been used to replace external practical music examinations, partly as a bridge to, and between, the formal levels for those students who require it. Many of our students and parents in my current institution are driven by "moving up through the grades", meaning that they lose sight of the joy of playing and developing wider musicianship skills. Through the implementation of the internal programme, the department has been able to place extra importance on skills which might have previously been overlooked, or, in some cases, developed stepping stones to success in one discrete area which is higher or lower than their other skill areas. I am proud to have been able help in spurring on these developments and am excited to see how the department will develop in this area.

Leading teacher learning, *EAD 824* was the most challenging and rewarding class I have taken over the course of my Master's, and I feel privileged to have been able to study with Nancy Colflesh on the final teaching of this class. From the outset of this intensive six week class I felt thrown in at the deep end. I received a crash course into APA style writing (one I had never used before) and our first assignment only one week in was a full review of my current institution based on professional development research. This was the first time I had taken the time not only

to explore strengths and weaknesses of a school, but also to explore the historical and cultural reasons as to why this was the case. The class profoundly impacted my future learning and promotion goals and features heavily in both my Goal Reflection and Future Learning Goals essays. Prior to this class my interest in the instruction of teaching had been centered on teacher training rather than professional development and life-long learning. Throughout the class I learnt the differences between these terms, explored the possibilities of Professional Learning Communities and the value of teacher led research. I was asked to provide workable solutions to real life educational problems and asked to really step inside problems of practice. The class gave me concrete skills and resources to use in the future and challenged me to explore this as a distinct area for possible career development. Through the interest this class generated I later went on to select the classes *EAD 860, Concept of Learning Society and EAD 864, Adult Career Development*, neither of which were initially included on my planning forms.

Through all classes I have expanded my knowledge and experience into digital learning. Before beginning the programme I would have said it was impossible (and perhaps even unnecessary) to move to a paperless classroom. However, over the last two years I have been shown how this is not only possible but of potential benefit to students. Classes have opened my eyes to the arguments against technology: the 24/7 world, difficulties with reading online and on screens, problems with multitasking, and the reliance on a digital world. This having been said, I have learnt that, in my mind, the benefits still outweigh the risks. I am still careful to ensure technology is implemented for the right reasons, and that the use of technology is used to strengthen and not replace traditional methods. I am an advocate of digital literacy and I can (and have) created a digital support network to challenge and engage my students while using the TPACK and SAMR models, none of which would have been possible without my experiences through my MAED.

This leads me to my final class of the masters, *ED 870, Capstone*. Upon initially reading the requirements for this compulsory class in the early days of my programme, I was skeptical of its value with regards to my learning. However, just as I have learned the value of self-reflection and the power of sharing draft work, I have come to understand the integral nature of this final stop in my Master's journey. I have relished in the ability to showcase my learning, explain my changes in thinking and demonstrate my processes. I have been able to bring together different parts of my world: my professional life, my personal life, my learning, my teaching, my travels and my experiences. My portfolio site is worth more to me than any certification. It is a site to share with my partner, family, friends and colleagues. To celebrate my achievements, to share with potential and current employers and, finally, an achievement I am immensely proud of.

Looking back, despite the challenges and difficulties (and there have been many) I couldn't be happier with my choice of institution or course. My journey has been one with highs and lows, and has seen me develop as a teacher, leader and person. I will certainly be looking to MSU in the future should I decide to plan my next journey of a lifetime, my PhD.