Considering Incremental Change

I've always embraced change, and saw the Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) program as an opportunity to gain new perspectives and learn innovative strategies to adapt to the pace of transformation in the field of education. I thought the program would provide me with new understandings related to standards in education, inform me of relevant theory, and assist me in integrating new technology in the classroom. Throughout my studies, I've experienced personal and professional growth, spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on understandings and misunderstandings, and have realized many tangible benefits.

In my first semester in the MAET program, I took *Learning in School and other Settings* (CEP 800). The course shed light on many approaches to learning and directed my attention to the several influential historical and contemporary theories. Piaget, Vygotsky, and Skinner were covered along with many others. It was valuable for me, in that it opened my mind to several important perspectives. The influence of behaviorism and operant conditioning in schooling was of particular interest to me. Reflecting on the readings in the course, I gained new understandings of familiar elements such as bells, classrooms with similarly aged students in rows, and specific systems of reward and punishment. It became clearer to me, that from a historical perspective, many well-intentioned individuals have been designing places of learning to match the institutions that graduates occupy after completing study. It also became more apparent that the current education system I work in, may not necessarily be perfectly designed to encourage student centered, lifelong learning. I began to critically evaluate the influence of schools in America, as well as in China, where I have been working in public and private institutions. Through the lens of new theories, I came to see many accepted procedures, as often designed to maintain certain types of hierarchies, and reinforce control, rather than only foster ideal learning conditions.

I was introduced to the work of Sir Ken Robinson in my initial classes. His ideas were explored and considered relative to the times and conditions we find ourselves in. Robinson critiques institutions and admonishes his audience to question valued learning methods and systems. He addresses linear thinking and encourages customization in education rather than strictly standardized models. As I prepare students to study abroad in countries such as America and England, I often reflect on the influence of the education system In China. It is heavily-geared toward preparation for high-stakes standardized examinations such as the University Entrance Exam (Gao Kao), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), English Language Testing System (IELTS), and others. Less emphasis is placed on encouraging questioning, iteration, or creative thought, and instead focus is often on memorization of enormous amounts of information later to be recalled on demand in supervised halls sometimes containing thousands of students. In my lessons, it often seems I am making efforts to help students unlearn many approaches they've been habituated to. When I consider the learning theories and the wide variety of concepts I studied in the MAET program, perpetuating certain methods and approaches, feels in some ways more of a disservice than encouragement of constructive learning practices. I am bound by regulations and expectations of the institutions I work for, and while I must take into consideration all stakeholders along with their concerns, I do attempt to introduce incremental change, and believe it's exerting some positive influence.

Many of the projects in the MAET program addressed ill structured problems, which in turn, required critical thinking and alternative approaches. Rather than propose specific solutions to these

types of problems, instructors often offered many opposing perspectives and provided various avenues and possible methods. Several models were considered such as Understanding by Design [(UbD)](#) & Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge [(TPACK)](#). In the course *Learning Technology through Design* (CEP 817), the [Stanford Model of Design Thinking](#) was introduced, which outlined a five-step process of empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test. Using this method, I thought about ways I could apply it in the classroom, and my personal life. It was remarkable to me when I realized how much time was spent initiating and following through on solutions in schools and businesses, only to often return to the drawing board. The method provided me with new ideas on ways to save time and resources. While I had always understood the value of empathy on some level, I had not considered the practical implications related to educational settings in depth. I began to more fully relate to the daily experience of students, which led me to adjust my methods. I now think more about the influence of factors such as light in the room, having the windows open, and other elements of the learning environment. I think more about issues such as the pressure to fit, and the perspectives related to influencing attention. I make more effort to informally gather data, and realize that even though proposals may result in failure, each attempt has the potential to contribute to lasting solutions.

In *Adapting Innovative Tech to Education* (CEP 811), I was introduced to the [maker movement](#), maker spaces, and Project Based Learning [(PBL)](#). Exploring how educators around the world were reimagining and redesigning learning environments inspired me to consider my own classroom, the resources available to students, and how I could facilitate more creativity and exploration. In my personal situation, there was no need for special equipment like 3D printers or wrenches, and I had no plans to build bicycles with opposing handle bars. There was however, an understanding of the value of providing a more hands-on approach to language learning, and an intention to consider inventive ideas. I wanted students to be able to move around the classroom, and not feel restricted as much by their assigned desks. I designed a language assessment using the [Makey Makey](#) kit that allowed students to physically touch objects which provided instant feedback. I attempted to incorporate this into my curriculum. More than actual, significant physical changes to my classroom, I began to view learning in very different ways. The "[sage on the stage](#)" approach, and the directive to keep students fixed to the front of the room, focusing primarily on writing and reading began to seem out of touch, especially in relation to the sciences and other fields where educators can take advantage of their spaces and resources. It's not always practical to convert classrooms into areas where hands-on learning is an option on a daily basis, but it is important see that providing alternatives allows for new paths to understanding.

Throughout the MAET program, there was an emphasis placed on questioning, and several courses dealt with critiquing accepted standards and practices in depth with importance placed on asking the right questions, rather than focusing primarily on seeking right answers. Assessing research provided valuable insights on how studies, that may lead to policy, can be influenced by bias and other problematic approaches. Having a grasp of methods that researchers use enables me to better decipher how I should interpret all information I encounter. This assists me in several ways, not only related to schooling. I feel that I am now better prepared to consider news from new perspectives, evaluate articles on subjects I'm personally interested in, and also critique video material I incorporate into my info-diet. The availability of information and the ease of producing it, has made this an important skill for maintaining accurate perspectives on subjects related to professional and personal life. I thought that the material I encountered in the course, often provided negative commentary on educational

traditions and institutions. Reflecting on this critical approach, I came to realize that while wide range of problems were brought to my attention, there were also plenty of opportunities to consider solutions. The balance was important. Thinking about potential complications and how to address them, enabled me to adjust my personal approaches to dealing with obstacles more effectively. I think that I came away from the experience with a deeper understanding of issues within education systems, why they persist, and how to contribute to beneficial change.

Creativity was always a focal point in the MAET program. I had never considered myself a particularly creative person and thought creativity to primarily be in the domain of painters, musicians, writers and others who are conventionally thought of as artists. Through readings and reflection, I came to redefine who creative people are, what makes them creative, and how creativity can be expressed. Related to projects, I was encouraged to be creative and original whenever possible and find an original voice. I read "*Sparks of Genius: Thirteen Tools of Creative People"* in *Creativity in Teaching and Learning* (CEP 818) and found that it inspired me to reimagine ideas and integrate more creative approaches in my classroom and personal life. I now consider myself to be creative person and view others in this regard as well. Creativity and collaboration went hand in hand in my courses. In CEP 818, my classmates and I worked together to find novel solutions related to balancing our connected lives. In a project, we examined research on the topic, took various opinions into consideration, and attempted to organize our ideas using tools that enabled us to contribute asynchronously. When we did come together through videoconferencing, we bounced ideas off each other, challenged each other's approaches, and worked to provide a synthesis of our work. Being creative comes in many forms, and through this course, and others, I was able to redefine what the term means.

It's undeniable that with a myriad of sources to gather information from, it becomes more pertinent to convey ideas efficiently. The limited space found on platforms such as Twitter and other social media has changed not only the way people consume information but how it is expressed. Considering that I must communicate everything I want to say in a 140 characters or less, forces me pay closer attention to how I write and also take into account that my audience is accustomed to smaller, more potent doses of information. Throughout the program, I was continually revising my work to say more in less space. This extended beyond words and became the standard related to multi-media projects, and other types of interactive content such as infograpics. Aside from being better prepared to compose a message and broadcast it on social media, the benefit has flowed over into other areas of my life as well. When expressing ideas verbally, I strive to make my expressions more meaningful and eliminate unnecessary content. I've even consider the efficiency of my actions in a different light. I think these are important 21st skills.

While I've always welcomed changes and enjoy adjusting to unique challenges they bring, it seems that the pace at which educational institutions are transforming has presented an almost overwhelming array of questions to consider, and potential solutions to debate. Technological advancements along with various shifts in social values and conditions have created the need to demonstrate willingness to incorporate differing viewpoints related to solutions, as well as a need to be more responsive. There is pressure to learn about, and develop new methods to tackle familiar and unfamiliar problems. Through my studies in the MAET program, I feel that I'm more prepared to meet the demands of tasks I will likely face as an educator as I continue in my career. I think the program helped provide a foundation I can draw from. It assisted me in gaining better understandings related to various perspectives on learning, and by guiding my use of a wide selection of tools applicable to a range

of circumstances. Further, because many of the activities I was involved with, drew from, and have applications beyond the classroom, I think that I am more capable of approaching problems creatively and collaboratively with others outside the field of education. I more clearly see connections between different disciplines and understand how integrated approaches can potentially produce better outcomes when addressing complex problems. Tools will change, and conditions encountered will continue to require adjustment. However, I now feel I am better prepared to cope with instability and consider innovative approaches.