

## SYNTHESIS ESSAY

### Let Me Build MY Mr. Potato Head

by David W. Raft

It was 1977. I sat on the floor of my bedroom looking at this brown oval shaped figure and wondered how do I make this the perfect specimen? I began to look at the different accessories that came with it and started to put my masterpiece together. It was the famous Mr. Potato Head toy; perhaps you had one too? It has been a special part of my life since my childhood. The concept of that toy has been the driving force of my career as I am continuously learning new skills, attempting to make the perfect "Mr. Potato Head Administrator"! Fast forward to 2010 and my decision to get my Specialist degree in Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University. Four boring semesters of the same old learning that I had acquired in my ten years as a building administrator. It hit me during one of my classes that I'm really not becoming a better administrator, I'm not adding better accessories to my Potato Head...it was time for a change. It was time to make myself a better leader. After some research, I found the MAET program offered at Michigan State University. My skills and leadership had found a focus that would allow me to continue to grow and become a better educational leader. My Mr. Potato Head was becoming a 21st century spud!

#### **What was most memorable for me...**

During the past two years I have learned so many new skills and have personally taken away so much valuable information that it is hard to narrow down to the just a few. Each of the courses were interconnected in some matter which made the learning more interesting. Before the start of the program my thought process was geared around learning all about technology; however, most of the subject matter revolved around educational theory and best practice within the

classroom, mixed with repurposing technology for better educational engagement within the classroom. Each class provided me with skills that I can use moving forward in my career as an educational leader. I have diversified my skills as an educator. Who really knows what could be next for me in my career?

My new Mr. Potato Head accessory kit began with CEP 810, 811 and 812. I embarked on a new journey intending to take three classes, get my technology certificate and be done! CEP 810-Teaching Understanding with Technology was my first online class...ever! I was skeptical and it took me a little bit to figure out how “Angel” worked, but once I did it became clear this was going to be good. This is also where I was first introduced to the [TPACK](#) framework developed by Punya Mishra and Matthew J. Koehler at Michigan State University. This was the first milestone in my journey; the moment I began to understand the value of what I was learning and how I could incorporate it into my leadership. This framework focuses on not just using technology, but rather to combine pedagogy, technology, and content knowledge when approaching lesson planning and designing quality instruction. Not only did I realize that the TPACK framework is sound practice for the classroom teacher, but from an administrative perspective it could be used to design engaging professional development for staff. During this time I put together my first [Technology Plan](#) for Saline Middle School. This plan included my goals and learning of the NETS - National Educational Technology Standards (something I had neglected to understand prior to taking this class). After this early experience in the MAET class CEP 810, it was clear that I was pursuing the right path to improve my skillset. Not only was I learning new things as it related to technology, I could also share these experiences with staff. This would ultimately make our students’ experiences in learning much more engaging, exciting and “real”. Simply put, my journey through the MAET program has been a rewarding experience

that has made me a better educator, better leader, and has allowed me to guide teachers to provide better educational experiences for students.

My journey continued with CEP 812: Apply Education Tech to Practice. This was one of my most valuable classes and actually helped me engage with the students directly. My work on the [Wicked Problem](#) let me explore learning from the student perspective. My focus was flipping the classroom and during this time I was able to work with two teachers as they developed lessons that they could use to “flip” their classrooms. It was great working with the teachers and the students as this was happening within the classroom. I also spent time developing my [Professional Learning Plan](#) which is another example of the valuable projects that CEP 812 had provided me. All of my experiences in the MAET classes have been valuable, but during this class I had been pushed to a higher level of thinking. Plus, I have had the chance to learn practical skills that will help me in my day-to-day work. I was introduced to the use of Google Hangouts as a venue of working with fellow classmates. In turn, I have used Google Hangouts in my daily work, such as meetings that otherwise would require me to leave the building. This was an experience that was well received by my colleagues as well. Another benefit that came from CEP 812 was my expanded use of Evernote. During the entire Wicked Problem, using Evernote as a tool rather than a checklist made the project more manageable. Being able to bounce between my computer, ipad and iphone with information at any given point helped me document my project at any moment.

During my third class of the MAET Certificate Program I found myself wanting to learn more. I wanted to complete the MAET program and become a much better leader, learning and bringing new skills that would be valuable as we worked to diversify and enhance our teaching and

learning philosophies. I cleared my schedule for the summer and jumped into the Summer Cohort consisting of CEP 800: Psychology of Learning in School and Other Settings and CEP 815: Technology and Leadership and CEP 822: CEP 822 - Approaches to Ed Research. While there were three classes during this time, two portions stick out specifically, CEP 800: Psychology of Learning in School and Other Settings and CEP 815: Technology and Leadership.

CEP 800 offered what I thought was most valuable with the course book, [Why Don't Students Like School?](#) This text taught me to evaluate why children do not enjoy school by analyzing statistical data about why children are not successful in the classroom. The author covers a variety of issues relating to how students learn and why they do not enjoy their schooling. I was intrigued because of my role as the building principal and one of my main goals at the middle school is focusing on the students and their ability to learn and have self confidence. This book just jumped at me, because I was that student! Now, 21 years later I am still going to school...but, I enjoy it. I am committed to finding ways to reach all students by tapping into their style of learning. The author of this book, Daniel Willingham, has many theories, of course, not all of these theories are effective for all learners. It is always the responsibility of the teacher to find a balance between their students and their delivery.

During CEP 815 the leadership portion of the cohort really stood out to me. Knowledge -vs- Understanding, now that is the question! This has made me realize that we as educators reel off facts and hammer home content that our students memorize for a short period of time. However, if we begin by knowing what we want our students to understand and the knowledge we want them to actually walk away with, then we are better preparing them for the real world. We must help students learn the concepts and the deeper meaning so that our students walk

away with a full understanding. As I reflect on how I lead, I have been critical of my leadership in this area. Sometimes I provide information to the staff, but really never plan out what understanding I want them to walk away with. For example, we had implemented a new evaluation tool this past year and looking back it didn't go very well. I presented what I felt they needed to know, but didn't actually think about what I wanted them to understand. I now realize why there was so much confusion and lack of understanding as to how we came up with our evaluation process and how teachers were being measured. Maybe a better plan could have been developed had we begun with the concept of understanding.

Closing:

I recently returned from the [ISTE \(International Society of Technology Education\)](#) Conference in Atlanta and I had an opportunity to sit in a couple of sessions with my MAET professors. What an experience! Some of what they were discussing were things I am already doing and I credit the MAET program for this knowledge, and this new skillset that I now bring to the table. I am much better today as an educator and as a leader than I was two years ago. Now, planning for the future is exciting and invigorating.

Society is changing and our classrooms need to change to reflect the new skills students will need as they enter adulthood. Traditional teaching is a thing of the past and technology is becoming the motivating element with our students today. Anytime we can integrate technology into the classroom we are redefining the way we learn. This is the rationale behind the new Next Generation Classrooms at Saline Middle School. Next Generation Classrooms are providing our teachers with the resources necessary to connect with all types of learners. The MAET program has helped me understand the importance of using TPACK as the driving force behind developing learning for our next generation classrooms. My experience with the MAET program has

provided me with new skills, new ideas, and new tools that make me a Next Generation Mr.  
Potato Head!