



## FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

A Goal Reflection Essay by Cynthia Shidner

At the age of ten, I chose the career of teaching in order to follow in the footsteps of Ms. Chiyo Masuda, my extraordinary 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. At the age of forty, I wrote a goal statement for my first online educational technology course with Michigan State University in September 2009. To the best of my recollection, my statement included three goals:

- to create stronger connections with my students by teaching technology-enriched projects
- to better understand my sons' and my students' journeys into the "virtual world"
- to strengthen my professional credentials as a 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher

At this point in time, I was "fighting fire with fire" in my teaching career. Although the "fire" initially felt like a destructive force, I chose to envision it as a way to launch a new stage in my teaching career.

What events created this fire in 2009? In February 2009, after working for five years as a home school advisory teacher, I decided to resign from my advisory job. I wanted to teach and learn from students in a classroom setting on a daily basis. It was extremely difficult to make this decision to leave an innovative, highly successful school district--Chugach School District-- in order to return to a classroom job in my home community of Valdez. This transition to a classroom

position was much more challenging than I anticipated, yet it provided a chance to rise to a new level in my professional life.

### **Strengthening my professional credentials as a 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher**

In the spring and fall of 2009, I was turned down for three teaching jobs with the Valdez City School District, even though I was certified and highly qualified in all content areas for grades K-12 with twelve years of teaching experience. It was clear that I was facing a highly competitive local job market, and I needed to be on the cutting edge of my profession to order to prove my worth as a teacher. In November 2009, I was hired as a paraprofessional for Special Education students in Valdez, which gave me time in the evenings and weekends to work on my online Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) program with Michigan State University. I was able to process, synthesize and transform my views on classroom instruction when I attended the 2011 East Lansing Summer Cohort program taught by Professor Punya Mishra. Today, I am continuing this process of connecting my skills in technology, pedagogy and content knowledge (TPACK) to reach students in creative, innovative ways.

### **Understanding my sons' and my students' journeys into the "virtual world"**

At the start of my MAET program in 2009, my husband and I were troubled by our ten-and fourteen-year old sons' increasingly obsessive use of technology at home. I have always been a quick learner, but I felt like my sons were light years ahead of me in their ability to navigate in the virtual world. I recall that my youngest son and I were reading Epic by Conor Kostick, the first book in a thought-provoking trilogy about a dystopian world controlled by mandatory participation in a fantasy role-playing computer game. I wanted to learn more about research studies on the positive and negative impacts of 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies—including online gaming and social network sites-- on children, parents, students, and teachers. Are we destined to become like the spaceship passengers in the movie Wall-E, fixated on our screens while our health and personal relationships decline to a point of (almost) no return?

## **Creating stronger connections with my students by teaching technology-enriched projects**

During my four years of work to complete my master's degree online, I have met one goal and narrowed my focus on the other two. In January 2011, I was hired as the "gifted and talented" teacher for grades 1-12 in Valdez. This creative, open-ended job has provided opportunities for me to demonstrate and strengthen my credentials as a 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher. For the other two goals--to make stronger connections with my students by teaching technology-enriched projects and to better understand my sons' and my students' journeys into the "virtual world"—I have narrowed my focus and found ways to work on these ambitious goals. I spend time each week reading books and research summaries about the creative and destructive aspects of technologies such as online gaming and social network sites. I am now synthesizing my reading and research on my blog. In the classroom, I talk with my students and get their feedback on which technology-rich projects meet their needs, and which projects need to be revised. I collaborate with colleagues and share ideas about how to teach 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

I fought fire with fire by transforming a crisis in my professional life into an opportunity to devote time and resources to my growth as a teacher, mother, and citizen in our ever-changing, networked, technology-enriched world. I am a life-long learner, and plan to continue my growth by collaborating, experimenting, reading, synthesizing, and enjoying the creative potential of our networked world.