

“THE ART OF AWAKENING JOY... through INQUIRY, COMMUNICATION,
CONSTRUCTION AND EXPRESSION...”

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and
knowledge.”

Albert Einstein, German-born theoretical physicist and winner of Nobel Prize, 1921

As a teacher, it is my primary goal to embody the qualities I value in my classroom: enthusiasm, compassion, creativity and wide-ranging curiosity. I chose to become a teacher so that I could stay in “learning mode” for the rest of my life. Wonderful teachers played major roles in my education--teachers who knew how to awaken this sense of joy in creative expression and active pursuit of knowledge.

Over the last four years, I have found enough time, energy, motivation and resources to pursue my Master of Arts degree in educational technology at Michigan State University. I chose this master’s program because our life-long family friend, Patrick Dickson, is a professor of educational psychology at MSU. I admired the humor, intelligence and creativity that he expressed in his work, so I knew that the MSU program would be a good fit for my educational philosophy. Successful teaching is built on a foundation of strong relationships with colleagues, students, parents, and community members. As I continue my educational journey beyond graduation at MSU, I will continue to seek advice and inspiration from friends like Patrick and Robin Dickson as well as other colleagues I met in my MAET program.

This essay is an opportunity to synthesize my four years of coursework and highlight the learning experiences that gave me additional confidence and skills. I am currently working as a gifted/talented teacher with 2nd through 12th grade students in Valdez, Alaska. To benefit my students, I am constantly in search of innovative learning opportunities, such as creating open-ended projects and challenges for LEGO robotics students to complete in collaborative groups. I devote time and energy to seeking grant money to fund learning outside of the classroom,

including a project to create a documentary film about our middle school in partnership with a local filmmaking crew and community members.

My pedagogical goals are based on the “four impulses of the child” described by John Dewey in 1943: inquiry, communication, construction and expression. These “four impulses” create a natural framework for a discussion of the “big picture” ideas from my coursework at MSU.

Focus on Inquiry: questioning our pre-conceived ideas and working on challenging problems.

“If you don’t make mistakes, you’re not working on hard enough problems.” Frank Wilczek, American theoretical physicist, mathematician and Nobel laureate

Questioning our pre-conceived ideas: With Professor Mishra and my fellow teachers during the 2011 Summer Intensive at MSU, I focused on questioning my pre-conceived ideas and finding creative ways to tackle challenging projects. This intensive two-week long summer seminar with three concurrent courses (CEP 800, 815 and 822) was based on a series of projects that investigated how people learn concepts and express their understanding. Professor Mishra and our teaching assistants, Brandon Blickenberg and Kristen Kereluik, masterfully guided our group to develop a strong foundation of trust with our teachers and each other. With this bedrock trust in place, we were able to take the risks inherent in inquiry-based learning. By questioning our assumptions and pre-conceived ideas, we created opportunities for new understandings and metacognitive reflections. Professor Mishra’s open-ended assignments with clearly defined goals allowed our cooperative groups to be successful while we ventured outside of our comfort zone.

One of the compelling experiences in CEP 800, 815 and 822 was our research project on “understanding understanding.” The intriguing subject matter for these projects ranged from the accurate shape of raindrops, effective ways to “sober up”, optimal exercises to burn belly fat, and the “taste bud map” of the tongue. My

cooperative group--the Google Earthlings—did our research on misunderstandings related to rote memorization of geographical knowledge. This project was designed to create “aha” moments, allowing us to understand how misconceptions are created as we acquire knowledge, such as perceiving the “teardrop” shape of raindrops on windowpanes and mistakenly applying that shape to falling raindrops. Since 2011, I have helped students to question their thinking about the “mythological history” of the First Thanksgiving with [this excellent website](#) designed by Plimoth Plantation.

Outside of these examples of questioning pre-conceived ideas, I valued Professor Mishra’s use of curriculum design questions posed by Grant Wiggins & Jay McTighe in their book, Understanding by Design. In their [“backward design” model](#), there are three stages of questions: “What goals/standards are worthy of understanding?”; “What type of performances could be the evidence of this understanding?” and “What type of learning experiences and pedagogical methods will allow students to successfully understand these goals/standards?”

Working on challenging problems: During the two-week summer intensive at MSU, our learning experiences were fast-paced, creative and fun. For example, we brainstormed opposing concepts in our reading, such as structure vs. flexibility, tradition vs. innovation, collaborative vs. independent work, then used props and the pixlr photo editing site to creatively represent these dynamic opposites in the same photo. The video and photo-editing projects assigned for CEP 800, 815 and 822 increased my level of comfort and confidence with these creative uses of technology. Since the summer of 2011, I have successfully designed a semester-long iMovie elective course for middle school students, helped students to enter their videos in contests, and launched a collaborative documentary film project. I was able to stretch outside of my comfort zone with these projects because I knew that I could trouble-shoot and guide students as they took risks in their learning process.

Professor Mishra created a wonderful balance between the solid foundation of the [TPACK: Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge](#) framework as a way to

support the risk-taking required by the inquiry learning approach. Instead of using technology tools to re-package the "same old" lecture-style teaching, we found ways to question and revise our pedagogical approach to meaningful content using exciting, well-designed projects.

Inquiry learning allows the learner to question and evaluate pre-conceived notions before synthesizing and applying new information. The "backward design" process uses the inquiry process to prioritize content and develop creative projects to convey students' understanding.

Focus on Communication: working with "screen-agers", providing valuable feedback, and communicating in "sticky" ways...

"Teaching is listening; learning is talking." Deborah Meier, teacher, principal, writer and public advocate

Working with "screen-agers": As a teacher and parent of teenagers, I find the label "screen-ager" to be uncomfortably accurate. For this age group, screen-based communication is a vitally important way to connect with their peers while using the physical screen to shut out their parents and teachers. The challenge is to redesign a two-way process of communication with this age group, using technology tools to increase the flow of ideas between adults and teens.

At the same time that I was designing my online mythology course for CEP 820, I was teaching this course "face-to-face" with high school students. In our small high school, only six students were enrolled in this mythology course. These students were highly motivated by the material, yet I found it challenging to engage them in thoughtful discussions in class about the myths and cultures we studied. As I developed the online version of this course, I could see how some students would flourish in a virtual discussion environment, which was aligned with their "facebooking" and "texting" mode of communication. The question is how to develop connections between small groups of students and their instructor in an

online course so that all participants will trust each other and feel motivated to converse thoughtfully. By researching online design in CEP 820, I learned that there are many aspects of successful communication in online courses, such as building rapport, engaging in thoughtful discussions online, and providing individualized performance feedback to students.

Providing valuable feedback: One of the most thought-provoking books I have read about the importance of performance feedback is Reality is Broken by Jane McGonigal. In the context of online gaming, gamers are constantly receiving just-in-time guidance and specific feedback about their performance in the game. With this level of support, gamers are able to take on new challenges and experiment with different approaches, knowing that they will receive instant feedback on their performance. A teacher in a typical classroom, especially one with unmotivated students, will find it difficult to provide this level of specific, just-in-time guidance for each student. In the chat feature of massively multiplayer games, the gaming video channels and the wiki sites devoted to “cheats” and strategies, gamers are able to tap into another valuable source of performance feedback—peer feedback. In the nine online courses I completed for the MSU MAET program, I experienced a range of peer and instructor feedback. Overall, I found that the peer feedback was most valuable when we were organized into four-person cooperative groups and encouraged to share humorous anecdotes and personal stories at the beginning of the course. Text can be an effective way to communicate, but video introductions can be even more valuable in building rapport with instructors and fellow students. In CEP 882, *The Nature and Design of Compelling Experiences*, I connected with my instructor and assistant instructor through their frequent, informational videos. I completed five video projects for this course, which received detailed feedback from my instructors as well as from my peers. I integrated video projects and frequent opportunities for instructor and peer feedback in the online mythology course I designed for CEP 820.

Communicating in “sticky” ways: This concept of “sticky” comes from Chip and Dan Heath’s book, Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die. After studying the common traits of ideas that “stick” in peoples’ minds, the Heath brothers decided that these ideas were simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, and used the power of stories. This book is an excellent guide for students who are writing in classrooms, for online courses, to secure scholarship funding or for any other purposes. Writing is only one form of communication; this book can guide students as they communicate in many different forms, such as verbally, in videos, and in graphic design. In Professor Wong’s course (CEP 882), we analyzed the nature of compelling experiences in different fields of design. My video project about the artist Chris Jordan focused on the ways that his artwork translated mind-numbing statistics, such as the number of prisoners incarcerated in the USA, into simple, unexpected, concrete, credible and emotional images.

Focus on Construction: creating a multi-faceted learner identity and constructing knowledge across the emotional, physical and cognitive domains
“We can teach from experience, but we cannot teach experience”—Sasha Azevedo, American actress and athlete

Creating a multi-faceted learner identity: One of the most provocative and interesting questions I ever heard a teacher ask is, “why isn’t our school as fun as Disneyland?” It is an odd question, especially coming from a British educator Richard Gerver, yet this question completely transformed the Grange Primary school in Derbyshire, England. <http://www.grangeton.com/grangeton.html> Richard Gerver redesigned the school so that students could spend part of each day as an essential member of a student-run town, Grangeton. In their town, students could construct multi-faceted learner identities, such as video producer, restaurant manager, museum curator, or Mayor. These hands-on, concrete learning experiences mediated by the students’ peers and teachers became the foundation for new learning opportunities and intellectual challenges. Students were able to

take pride in their work, since this work was an integral part of the healthy functioning of their town.

Why aren't more students given this opportunity to experiment with different learner identities? Why don't teachers connect classroom projects to authentic audiences and real-world needs, so that students feel like their daily work is meaningful and necessary? I hope that educators will find ways around bureaucratic and philosophical barriers so that more schools can move in this direction. One of my teaching friends is in the process of establishing a charter middle school, the Anchorage STReAM Academy, where "science, technology, research, engineering, arts and math are taught the way Mother Nature intended." In this school, 6th-8th grade students will work in collaboration with local scientists on research projects. Their academic subjects will be integrated into these ongoing research projects. Students will be actively contributing to their local community—writing newspaper articles, analyzing scientific data, creating presentations for policy makers—while learning Common Core standards and 21st century skills. They will be constructing knowledge across the emotional, physical, and cognitive domains by participating in field research with mentor scientists and by sharing the results of these experiences with their peers and policy makers. I hope that the Anchorage STReAM Academy will be one of many schools where students can actively construct their own educational experiences. If students continue to be passive recipients of meaningless lessons and poorly designed projects, they will conclude that "reality is broken" and devote their intellectual energies to well-designed, challenging online games instead.

Focus on Expression: how we share ideas, values and emotions in the "web 2.0 world" of multiple social networking sites

"Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." John Dewey, American philosopher, psychologist and educational reform advocate

While studying the "nature and design of compelling experiences" in Professor Wong's course (CEP 882), I was writing blog entries that, for the first time, I wanted to share with a larger audience. All too often in classrooms today, students are

turning in papers and projects that will only be viewed and scored by their teachers. In our “socially networked world”, these students know that they could be “publishing” their work and receiving meaningful feedback from an audience of friends, peers and family. One of my priorities next year is to join the quadblogging community with a classroom of students. As described in the British newspaper, the Guardian, in October 2011: “The new kid on the blog in student media—for any age group—is Quadblogging. Four schools or colleges agree to take turns to read and comment on each other’s blogs...It’s simple, really. And it might motivate your budding authors to write more, knowing that their website is due to see a spike in readership in a week’s time.” I believe that all students have a desire to express themselves in a safe, respectful environment. Some students prefer a very limited audience while others wish to share their ideas with the world around them. As part of my Dream IT project for Professor Mishra’s courses (CEP 800, 815 and 822), I envisioned using the site Youth Voices with Sophomore English students. I had met one of the teachers instrumental to the creation of this site, Chris Sloan, and I knew that I could trust the integrity of this site, since it was created by a group of National Writing Project teachers. I was confident that the students would reach a new relationship with their writing if they could share it with their peers on Youth Voices. Instead, after securing permission from my administrator and from the families of most of my students, our attempts to use this site were thwarted by the school’s inflexible filter on social networking sites and the attitude of the school IT department. Our IT department and filter system have both changed since then, but I am no longer teaching Sophomore English. I plan to try with the quadblogging site, then attempt to use Youth Voices with a new group of students. Conditions are always changing, so I can pick up where I left off and try to realize my Dream IT project.

For my MSU Master of Arts degree in educational technology, I learned to guide students to creatively express themselves in blog entries, video projects, open-ended engineering projects with LEGO robotics, photo editing projects, and other digital presentations that can be shared with a meaningful audience. Most importantly, over the last four years, I have experienced the joys of learning by

activating my natural impulses towards inquiry, communication, construction and expression.