Running On Fumes: How I Was Able to Refill My Tank
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The very first day students walked into my classroom during my first year of teaching was like a dream come true. It would be fair to say I was more excited and nervous than I had been as a student myself. "Finally, a class of my own!" I thought. I was more than ready to share my love for reading, writing, and learning with each and every seventh and eighth grader that strolled through my door. I could not wait to know their names, discover their interests, and find ways to help them reach their fullest potential. Honestly, I was ready to change the world one middle-schooler at a time! However cliche as it sounds, I couldn't wait to start making a difference. My teacher-tank was reading "full" and I was ready for the journey!

Like most young teachers, my excitement and optimism powered me through dealing with challenging parents, adapting to school politics, and reaching students who refused to let me in. I was on a mission to be the best teacher I could be, and I devoted my efforts to overcoming any obstacles in my way. Looking back on my first few years of teaching, I remember mostly happy, successful moments in which I built strong relationships with students who prided themselves on being apathetic and shut off. Not only that, but my school district became a one-to-one school with MacBook computers my second year of teaching and I couldn't wait to transition my teaching methods to 21st Century skills! At that time, it felt like I had hit the professional jackpot. This love and enthusiasm for teaching, learning, and technology really started my journey as an educator off on the right path.

As most paths do, though, mine began to shift from smooth and easy to rough and bumpy. Soon, changes in statewide education and administrative pressure to produce nearly impossible results began to wear on me and the other teachers in my school. Stress and pessimism began to outweigh my passion and excitement. Sadly, each day became at school became more of a tiresome chore. Even

the students could sense the shift. How is it that in only my third year of teaching I had lost my drive to make learning fun, to reach students who seemed unreachable? My creativity and out-of-the-box lessons for reading and writing (subjects students seemed to detest) began to wane. I wasn't just frustrated with my school environment, but I was angry at myself. How could I let myself lose focus and stop trying to make school the best place to be? Where had my resolve to make learning relevant and fun disappeared to? One day, I began making a list of other jobs I could feasibly apply for; at this point I knew I had lost my way. Somewhere along my journey, I had began to run out of gas and was functioning solely on the fumes of my once idealistic-teacher tank.

In order to refuel my tank, I knew I had to make a change. I wanted to be that enthusiastic and innovative educator once again. But how? I started to think back to some of my happiest moments in education, and so many of them centered around when I was a student. If I could find personal joy in educational settings again, then surely I could translate that positivity to my classroom and my students. And so began my journey to a Master's Degree in Educational Technology.

One of the very first classes I took in the MAET program helped stir that excitement I once felt all of the time. CEP 810, Teaching for Understanding with Technology, gave me an opportunity to really assess what I loved to teach. One of the best parts of this course was the ability to seek out others in my Personal Learning Network who shared the same passions. I had to be excited about my subject areas again because others were depending on me to do just that. In a project completed with a group of other middle school teachers, I had the opportunity to seek out iPad applications for teaching and learning 21st Century literacy skills. Our focus was centered heavily around reading, writing, and creative thinking and problem solving. Because there was such a significant push to teach these skills with high success rates in my school, this project helped me rethink how I was incorporating literacy learning in my classes. My specific work with apps for writing became somewhat of a life saver. The majority of my eighth grade

language arts students detested writing and any such related skill during the time I was taking this class. Thankfully, a few of the applications I discovered allowed me to weave writing into my classes without an instant mutiny. Our work for this project was published on a wiki page we created, and the creative juices started to flow. I envisioned various ways in which seventh and eighth graders could use such a collaborative tool. Additionally, this class helped me realize how many different education-related professionals I knew and could connect with. It was reassuring and inspiring to find so many who openly shared their triumphs, engaging lessons, and even their challenges so similar to mine. When I was asked to create a visual representation of my Personal Learning Network (PLN), it occurred to me I was not tapping into the numerous available sources of teacher fuel as much as I should have been. As this class progressed and then came to an end, I was able to see light again. There were specific ways in which I could begin to find optimism for myself and my students once again.

Once the sparks of hope began to fly, it was only a matter of time until I really got my groove back. The most beneficial and professionally rewarding class I completed was CEP 812, Applying Educational Technology to Problems of Practice. The focus of this course could not have been better timed. Problems of practice? Why yes, I had those (and still do)! There were so many education-related issues, many days I left school feeling overwhelmed and defeated. The "Wicked Problem" assignments of this class helped me find inspiration in my students. When my classes began writing through a technology-rich medium and for a more worldly audience, I finally felt like I was making a difference once again. Much of my efforts for this course went into finding ways to make writing more relevant and engaging to my eighth graders. By combining my passion for technology and writing, I was able to bring blogging to my students. Each week students used Blogger to post about topics meaningful and interesting to them. The moments when they said, "Miss Kappler, can I write more than the required amount?" and "Someone real commented on my blog! What do I do?" were the days when I felt my excitement, optimism, and energy for teaching return. Students who typically struggled to write a single

paragraph were willingly posting lengthy blog posts more than once a week! Their confidence and my passion ignited. Not only did this course help to restore my drive for teaching students, but it was in this class I began to understand I had the capability to be a teacher-leader in my school and district. Since one of the final projects for CEP 812 required us to create a Flipped Professional Development session for other teachers, I found a new avenue worth pursuing. I collaborated with a three other MAET students in order to create a convenient and practical video for learning about the basics of Google Documents. During the creation of this video, I discovered an affinity for teaching other teachers. I further realized my forward-thinking and enthusiasm for technology mattered, and it would eventually serve me and others well. As before, my confidence rose and I found myself enjoying opportunities to teach once again.

As I kept progressing through the master's program, I found even more work to be excited about. The growing eagerness I felt transpired into professional possibilities while taking CEP 802, Teaching K-12 Students Online. However, the success and increased drive I experienced from previous classes differed from the development of personal and professional growth I felt while planning and creating an entire online course. So many students, middle-schoolers especially, have learned to dislike reading, writing, and discussing in the classroom. They see it as a chore, it seems irrelevant to their everyday lives, and literacy lessons often lack student choice. The idea of creating an entire course dedicated to conducting literature circles through technology made the idea of reading, writing, and discussing new again. While the skills were mostly the same, the medium in which the content was learned was entirely more modern. Using Haiku LMS as the course host, students could once again get excited about literature! Additionally, the creation of this course from start to finish played into my personal strengths and my secret nerdy obsession with organization. Secretly, I love planning literacy lessons, setting up procedures, and finding new technologies to incorporate with literacy learning. It was a proud moment when my course's vision was complete from beginning to end. And while I did not use Literature Circles Online in it's entirety with my students, I did incorporate many portions of the work into my in-class

literature circles unit. Observing the students heightened engagement and hearing their excited voices as they progressed through their novels brought back my excitement and love for teaching literacy once again.

Finally, the very last course I needed to complete in order to earn my master's degree helped top off the tank. In the process of creating my Capstone Portfolio for CEP 807, I realized over and over how many exciting technology-rich ideas I could use to better my students' learning, to share with my colleagues, and to further my own personal and professional journey. The most encouraging and beneficial part of the online portfolio was the showcase of major projects and assignments I had completed. Once that page of my website was done, I looked back with a sense of pride and accomplishment. I thought to myself, "Wow! I've really done a lot." There, staring me right in the face, was proof I had not lost my passion for teaching and learning. I had not fallen into a creative rut. Here were numerous ways in which I had crafted engaging, relevant, 21st Century literacy lessons that could easily be used in my classroom right away. In many ways, looking at this page represents more than just the work I've done. Each time I revisit this page, I relive my challenges, the joys from implementing many of the projects, and my excitement to try new tools. This course as a whole has been an excellent reminder of how I can combine my knowledge of literacy education with new technologies to make a difference and reach those students who are often left behind. So much of my passion, my optimism, and the love of education as a whole came rushing back while refining and reflecting on all of the work I have done on this journey.

As I near the end of this path in the MAET program, I no longer see a dead end. I am no longer running on fumes. Instead, I have many new paths to choose from and plenty of gas to travel them. The decision to complete my master's degree was one of the best I could have made for myself personally and professionally. I am afraid to consider what would have happened had I not taken part in this

educational experience. Most definitely, I would have hit "empty." In essence, completing my master's

degree helped return me to the first-year-I'm-going-to-make-a-difference state of mind. Most days I find

myself energized and excited to go to work. I embrace the opportunity to show middle school students

how important and fun literacy can be. I cannot wait to collaborate with other educators and share what I

have learned about the potential benefits of incorporating technology in education. Most of all, I know I

can continue my personal and professional journey with a full tank of gas.