Aftermath: Learning How to Learn Again

By Kate McCallum

As I sit to write this, I can hear my daughter gleefully quipping in the background. As I witness her learning just beginning, I can't help compare mine to hers. What will she become? **Have I myself become who I set out to be? How will she describe her mother?**

Upon completion of my Master of Arts Degree in Educational Technology this summer, I have now ended my 22nd year of being a learner. I had 12 years of elementary and secondary education, 4 undergraduate years at University, an internship/graduate work year, and 5 years of Master's graduate work. Needless to say, I am both tired and exhilarated at the same time.

My daughter was born in year 21 of 22. People used to always ask: How are you? How is pregnancy? How is motherhood? I feel a bit the same as I try and synthesize my education here and now. I admittedly relied on emojis to attempt to explain or answer people who asked… for my daughter it usually was some compilation of a super smiley face, a baby face with angel wings, a drooly tired face, a blushy face, or maybe some heart eyes.

If I were to translate finishing my formal education into emojis it might be something more like this:
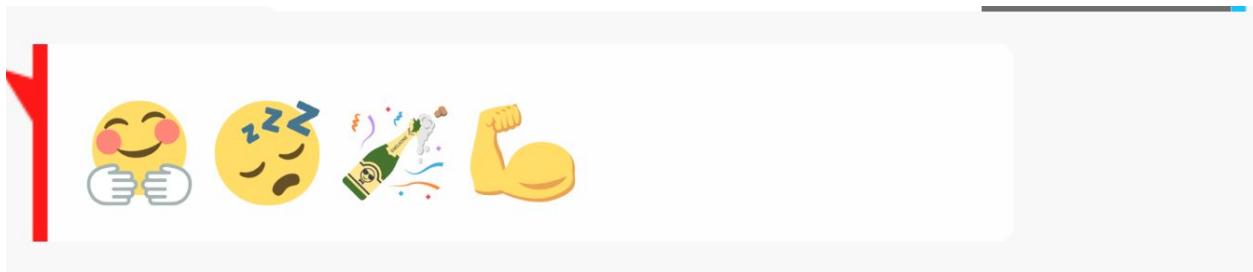
The interesting point here is that I am proud to say that I feel totally comfortable- if not MORE comfortable speaking in emoji. It speaks to both how far I have come in my educational journey and also the world in which my daughter will grow up and learn in.

Today is literally the first "world emoji day". This tech tool has grown so much that big companies like Apple are launching new and more emojis… if I were speaking in "new emoji", I might be able to more accurately describe my education to be like this:

 Master's Complete = Mind blown. In so many ways.

My initial role as learner did not include much reflection. Learning was a means to a degree and everyone my age was pushing to get a few more dollars and a few more credentials to earn a spot in a career. That's it. Get a job, get more money...move on.

Boy has that changed. What I didn't know then, was how the coursework, the profession, was going to transform me. It has chewed me up and spit me out a slightly different person. I think overall I had to learn again how to learn. I was made aware of how great learning can feel when it is engaging, passionate and meaningful.

My Master's work began in the summer hybrid sessions (these are a blend of face to face and online learning). **My first mind-blowing session consisted of three comprehensive classes**-- CEP 810, CEP 811, and CEP 812: Teaching for Understanding with Technology, Adapting Innovative Technologies to Education, and Applying Educational Technologies to Practice. Looking back, I really took away so much from the hybrid format. It developed me into an adaptable learner in multimodal environments. It pushed me out of my comfort zone to work in many group settings and I learned how to facilitate these things in a usable way for my own teaching career.

During this session, I first learned how to work with Wordpress as a content management system. Up until this point I had only spent time with a now outdated software, DreamWeaver during my undergrad classes. I was furiously soaking up the design because I was teaching my students how to run their own website for their school "newspaper" in the fall. I had always been interested in web and web design. I also worked with Twitter for the first time. I can honestly remember being irritated that we were being forced to use it. Although I knew some people were really liking it and using it...I had NO idea it was about to blow up to the phenomenon that it is. **We reflected on being learners, we played with the new technologies...got frustrated with some and ultimately put ourselves in our future students' (or childrens') shoes.** I remember coming to class with my shiny new iPad thinking it was going to be so great and that I had it all figured out. I failed our first assignment because I couldn't finish it on said iPad. Here I was with this great idea, but I didn't get the work turned in on time. I have never in my life been that learner- but the technology was not what I thought it was. I struggled to make it work how I wanted. For the first time, I could truly empathize with "*those*" students and "*those*" people. I was completely demotivated. The instructors were reassuring and I worked through it. The whole point was to immerse ourselves as learners again. I will never forget it. It transformed the way I approached my teaching. I began to make my lessons with these constraints in mind. I played up on the affordances of technologies, but I learned that both flexibility and empathy can also go a long way for a learner. And, that failure is a fascinating part of learning too. To end this session we tackled the complex networking side of technology and learned how to benefit from collaboration as educators. I formed a lasting connection with some classmates and developed ways to begin other professional learning networks. This laid the foundation of all my future years as a technology leader as it set me up to be confident to explore and communicate- two powerful skills I found priceless to have as a professional.

The next summer I came back to East Lansing to continue. After a year of utilizing my new skills, I was thirsty for more. **I remember feeling pretty tech savvy, yet humble when I began the year.** I was happy that I returned with some colleagues I had connected with in Year 1.

Ok, truth be told I felt pretty much like this to be back on campus:

via GIPHY

ME @ FIRST DAY MAET YEAR 2:
"He He He. YAAAAAAASSSSS!"

This second mind blowing session I was about to dive into **consisted of CEP 800, CEP 815, and CEP 822: Learning in School and Other Settings, Technology and Leadership, and Approaches to Educational Research.** In this "space" we were able to really put to practice the TPACK (Technology, Pedagogy, Content) model. It was intense. Each day consisted of several hours of impact. We studied research, shared new technology, discussed educational theory, and crafted several in-depth learning projects. **One major take away for me was how it felt to be a learner in a very tech-savvy, yet successfully organized class.** The course was set up with a Wordpress "home base" in which we returned to and even submitted to for class discussion and/or work. It was very different than say our Desire to Learn space or equivalent. It was the first time I had felt a deep connection with an online space as a learner. **I felt that this "space" truly enhanced my experience.** Little things like the categorization of content, the use of multimedia, and the clearly written expectations were inspiring to me as a learner. And, **as a professional I finally felt I knew what I wanted to accomplish in my on classroom.** After this, I took so many things to heart in my own web/lesson creations. **I began to notice the difference of having technology, pedagogy and content facilitate as separate components in a classroom versus as a synchronous unit.** From this I started to make my creations the later...**I wanted my students to learn how to learn in this enhanced way (like I did).**

I feel proud that I am beginning to actually achieve this in my career. If nothing else, this advanced degree has enabled me with the tools to do so.

With this course I developed my own learning site ukeeplearning.com. I incorporated the things that were so helpful to me as a learner: things like use of color to organize, multimedia, extended outreach/research, labels, ease of design, etc. I was gleeful the first time I piloted it in a writing unit for my students. **Actual high school students said to me " this is so well done, can we do this all the time"... to get those articulated words from a teenager alone was probably a highlight in my career.** I also expanded my learning network and appreciation for social tools as we developed a webinar that tackled the complex trickery of copyright in education. Besides just learning about copyright, my group utilized many many technologies for this project, especially Google Tools like Hangouts and Google Docs. I had known that these existed, but I believe this truly was the first time I had used them as a student, and honestly I now I often use these features daily within my own classroom and it has been a leadership component I can share within my building as a professional. Ultimately the tools allowed us to collaborate easily in real time and then face to fave (virtually) with experts. To me it showed that social media is more than just Facebook and Twitter, that professionals can really utilize the tools as well. It felt like I had a connection with the business-world and I knew that these skills would also prove very useful for students in their career paths.

By the end of the session I had completed some extremely creative and tech-savvy work, I had new modes of research and pedagogy under my belt, and I had the inspiration I think I really needed to continue and finish out the program (and to take into my own classroom).

Finally, one of my favorite courses that truly impacted my mindset was CEP 817: Learning Technology Through Design. As described in the course syllabus, *"At its core, CEP 817 is a course about design. Design as a process. Design as it relates to education and the world around us... "*

This course revolved around the five phases of design thinking that are part of the Stanford Model of Design Thinking:
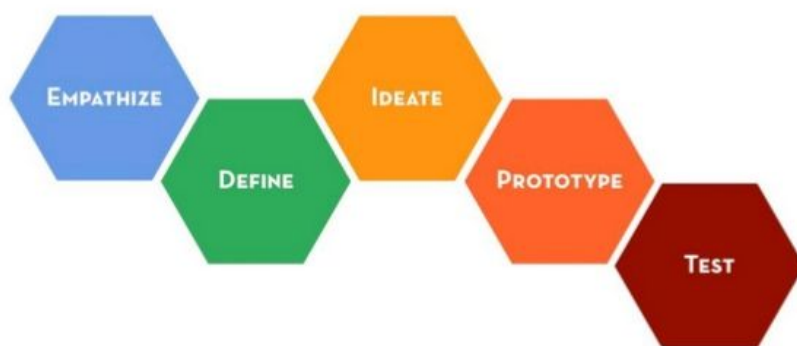
This course was so important to me because it validated what I had been experiencing as a learner all along...that **good design really makes a difference in the experience of a learner and that it is so important because experience is vital to enhancing learning overall**. The best way I can describe good design is in words such as ART, BEAUTY, SYMBIOSIS...all of these things are difficult to explain

, but are rather "known when seen", and certainly subjective. For example, when my classroom technology, content and pedagogy are in sync, I have happy, motivated students. I can "feel" the energy in my class and their responses to my lessons and their own learning. I have also "felt" this as a learner throughout my Master's program. The course however was able to give me an articulated process to describe how this is achieved. Probably one of my most comprehensive projects was the one formulated within this course where I researched a problem of practice. I focused on feedback in the English classroom. Mainly, I really appreciated the step-by-step approach to design and I felt that I could really use the material from the Stanford School into my own philosophies as an educator. Furthermore, I felt that this is the type of planing I would want my own daughter's teachers to undertake...one that actually includes EMPATHY and EXPLORATION. **I found overall a renewed sense that good design incorporates what it means to be human after all...which for me brought everything full circle in my education, and fittingly this was one of my last courses in my degree program.**

And so it goes...it only took me about 11 years after my undergraduate days to complete my advanced degree.

Am I the person that I set out to be? The answer is no. I am much more.

I think that this long journey has helped me become so aware and adept of the struggles and affordances that learners face. I have been through my own failures and successes throughout the long journey and I can now honestly see the value in both, but also the drawbacks. **Through such, I believe I am a better educator and ultimately a better human. If nothing else, I am (and I think that my children can also be) proud of that.**