Once a Challenge, Today an Achievement
by Karla Díaz

Today I am about to celebrate one of the biggest achievements of my life. Deciding to enroll to complete a Master of Arts in Educational Technology (MAET) was more than a professional challenge or goal. It was indeed a personal challenge. Why? I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. My first language is Spanish, and improving my English skills has been always an important goal in my life. When I decided to go for a master's degree, I was sure I needed a challenge and it came when I realized that the program I wanted in Puerto Rico was not what I really wanted. I was very picky when looking for a program; I wanted something different, something that offered me new and significant knowledge. I did not want a curriculum so simple that I could not develop the skills I had at that moment and provide me new ones. For that reason, I decided to research the program that I wanted in universities outside of Puerto Rico (online programs). Was I ready for that? At the time, I was very scared. I did not want my English skills to be an obstacle in my learning process and/or progress. I knew it was going to be hard, different, and mostly challenging. In that moment I knew that many tasks were going to take me more time to do than a fluent English speaker, for example written tasks. Nevertheless, that did not intimidate me. I decided to look ahead... to look at the prize not at the obstacles, to look at the final outcome not at the bumps in the road.

The process of selecting a competent university was not an easy task. As I mentioned, I was very picky and demanding. I wanted a university with high standards, accredited, and with an innovative, substantial and not too long program. I wanted to read the program's course descriptions and felt challenged and curious about what I was reading… you know, I did not want to feel that I knew about what I was reading. That said, you now know why I chose Michigan State University (MSU) as the university to start my Master of Arts in Educational Technology learning journey.

Since I started the first class at MSU, I started learning, learning, and learning. Moreover, I was proving my self along the way that I was capable of accomplishing my goals no matter how difficult the road would be for me to reach it. The feeling and desire about enrolling into a program that could develop my skills and provide new ones was totally satisfied. I definitely had what I wanted. Each class exceeded my expectations. Now that I look back, I feel grateful, joyful, and amazed. What seemed to be a challenge once, today becomes a huge and a marvelous achievement.

The first three courses I took, CEP 810: Teaching for Understanding with Technology, CEP 811: Adapting Innovative Technologies to Education, and CEP 812: Applying Educational Technology to Practice, were the base of this technological change in my mind. These three courses taught me how technology must be used with a purpose and not to use it just because. I

consider the course CEP 810 (Teaching for Understanding with Technology) a very important an essential one for my MAET journey. During this course, I was able to get to know and understand the integration of Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge (TPACK), (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) and its importance. Immediately, I understood the connection that should exist between technology, pedagogy, and the content. Although I started this class in summer (school vacations), my mind was thinking about new ways to purposefully implement technology in my classroom. The word *purpose* became a very important word for me when thinking about ways to implement technology in my classroom. Before starting my master's degree, I was very passionate about the use of technology and I knew it was great to use it in the classroom… well, my students were happy. Nevertheless, as I reflected in the content of each MAET class, I understood that many times I used technology just for the fun of it. When I realized that, I started changing the way of thinking regarding technology and its use. Understanding TPACK helped me realize that there were many things to be fixed in my classroom. Once I learned about TPACK, I felt the need of sharing this valuable and significant information with my coworkers. That opportunity came across in the course CEP 812, where I was asked to develop and implement a plan to address an issue of matter in my school. This project was called Wicked Project Plan. I took advantage of this opportunity to briefly introduce my coworkers to TPACK, since my project focused on providing teachers with technological tools to increase students' vocabulary skills.

Next, I took the course CEP 811 (Adapting Innovative Technologies to Education). This course nourished me with substantial information. I learned about Universal Design of Learning (UDL), which advices teachers to design a curriculum in which each student will gain knowledge. This curriculum will reduce learning barriers while providing multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement. Dedicating time to learn about the UDL helped me realized that most of the time we are planning lessons for the ideal student, forgetting that every person in our classroom is there to learn. I understood that teachers, including me, need to set goals that will be successfully achieved by our diverse students. During this course, I had the opportunity and hard task of evaluating a lesson plan according to the UDL Educator's Checklist. I found that I needed to fix my plans and adjust them to plans that could fit the needs of all of my students, because every student deserves the best education possible. Also, the course equipped me with many resources and ideas that served as an impulse to put into practice the TPACK theory that I previously learned. I was introduced to Web Quests and created a Stand Alone Instructional Resource project (StAIR). Every time I had the opportunity to create a project for any course, CEP 811 included, I decided to work something that I could use in my classroom immediately. That way I was granting an opportunity for me to see the learned skills and resources into practice, the results of it, and to add new technological resources to my teaching methods and content. For the StAIR project, I created a unit review based on the story The Farmer in the Hat, to review spelling, vocabulary words, soft c and g, reading comprehension skills. This experience helped and taught me the diverse of uses that we can find in programs like Microsoft

Power Point, which was the one I used.

Another course that was very meaningful for my teaching experiences was CEP 817 (Learning Technology Through Design). This course offered many important ideas, concepts, strategies, and tools with the purpose instructing teachers to become good designers. In this course, we discussed McCloud's Six Steps of design (Idea, Form, Idiom, Structure, Craft, and Surface). Since I always enjoy working with web design for personal and/ or professional use, these steps were very useful because now I am very conscious of many areas that you need to take into account when designing something. My last project for this course was a reflection on how this steps helped me to understand design. As I took that course, I was constantly reminding my self about the importance of applying everything that I learned during the course into my teaching. Since I enjoy working and helping coworkers, I definitely understood that the course was a great tool to help other teachers along the way to become good designers. That they understand, as I did, how this could change the way that they see their planning. Also, I created a website that was a great practice to applying McCloud's Six Steps. The website was created as a vehicle to teach first graders their phonics and grammar skills. In the process it was very important for me to be aware of the target audience to make it appealing for them. The process of creating this website was a great contribution to the creation of future web sites. After taking this class, I created various web sites for different purposes, such as academic, professional, and personal. Now, I teach Web Design as an elective course in high school. Although I do not teach McCloud's Six Steps, I am very emphatic in the importance and relevance of design when creating a web site.

One of the most challenging courses I took in this journey was CEP 822 (Approaches to Educational Research). During this course I learned so many things about the class and my self. The course was a very challenging one. The creation of my research proposal was very intense and at some points overwhelming, but I definitely learned and became better as time was passing by. My instructors became a substantial part of my learning process. Their feedback was very important for me in the process and having the opportunity to go back a fix things according to their suggestions was very significant during my learning process. Although at times I felt drained and stressed out (not knowing what to do or write), I was capable of completing my tasks and felt proud about the final outcome.

In conclusion, I can keep on talking about every single course since I learned many valuable things from each one. My overall experience in the MAET program has been amazing. I learned many lessons that taught me how to be a better teacher and how to provoke my students to be better as well. In this journey, I was able to understand different theories and how to apply them into my personal practice, strategies to engage students in their learning process, and how to understand students' process of understanding information. Also, I created meaningful projects that helped me put into practice the theories learned. Those projects were also a great opportunity

to develop great learning experiences in my classroom. Learning about social media as a useful tool for education was very surprising. I was able to understand how the use of social media in education can benefit educators and students as well. It was great to actually experience what I am saying. These opportunities helped me develop social, creative, research and leadership skills. With all the knowledge gained through this adventure, I was able to understand my role as a teacher in these technological times.

The most important thing I learned… understanding that technology is not something to take lightly in a classroom. Using technology in the classroom is more than using a device and having fun experiences. Technology must be used with a purpose and a vision. As a quote I found says, " It is not what technology does to us, it is what we do to technology. Get smart with technology, choose wisely and use it in a way that benefits both, you and those around you" (headspace.com). Technology is here and will stay, what we do with it is what matters. We can complain about it or love it, we can use it wisely or use it foolishly… the decision is in our hands! As Jacques Ellul said, " Modern technology has become a total phenomenon for civilization, the defining force of a new social order in which efficiency is no longer an option but a necessity imposed on all human activity." As I said, technology is here and that is a fact that I cannot deny. This means that I have a huge responsibility as a teacher nowadays. That said, I am happy and delighted with all the knowledge I gained throughout my MAET journey to face this technological challenge. I am satisfied and pleased on how every lesson learned helped me develop the leader in me to make a difference in the learning process of my students and colleagues.