Growing my Master’s Degree

By: Bill McLaren

Tupac Shakur made the following point at the end of a song that was released about six years after he was pronounced dead.

You see you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from the concrete had damaged petals
On the contrary
We would all celebrate its tenacity
We would all love its will to reach the sun
Well
We are the roses
This is the concrete
And these are my damaged petals
Don't ask me why
Thank god nigga
Ask me how

- Tupac Shakur: Momma’s Just A Little Girl, Better Days Disc 1, Nov. 2002

I think his intention was to ask people to consider how they view the world and evaluate the judgments they make based on those views. The three years I have spent earning a master’s degree have taught me a similar lesson. When I first saw the description of the degree I saw the rose, as I finish the process I realize that rose was nurtured from a concrete bed and made to blossom against all odds.

Dictionary.com gives this definition for a master’s degree, “An academic degree conferred by a college or university upon those who complete at least one year of prescribed study beyond the bachelor's degree.” Obviously most master’s programs do not use this definition and would laugh at someone who tried use it to justify their program as that of a “master.” The interesting part is that this simplified definition actually includes the most important piece, the identification of those who are eligible to become “masters.” If a person completes the requirements, they can be a “master,” plain and simple. This fact escaped me for almost two years, because I was asking “why,” when I should have been “reaching for the sun.”

Roots

The first step to becoming a master is to choose a program. Many institutions offer the opportunity and every program has advantages and disadvantages. I chose to earn a Master of Arts Educational Technology (MAET) because when I first read the description it suggested I would use several pieces of software that I was very interested to learn. It also suggested a schedule that seemed sensible. Three summers, each devoted to covering enough material so that at the end you had completed the requirements. These
turned out to be superficial reasons to choose this program, but it was the right decision none-the-less.

Our first three classes met between May 2003 and August 2003. Two of the three were dedicated to the roots of current, and emerging, technology instruction – Microsoft Office. Office is a powerful suite of programs that allows the user to process various types of information quickly and easily. Our work in CEP 810 and 811 was focused on Microsoft PowerPoint, specifically how to use it to create interactive presentations. These classes helped us build an understanding of how information can be delivered in a controlled manner. Our projects demonstrated that even if the presenter is not physically there to dictate the flow of information, the presentation employs methods that manage the user. My final piece reviews the parts of speech, includes a quiz for students, and asks them to practice descriptive writing (here is the hyperlink). The third class, CEP 812, was focused on how to implement technology in our classrooms. We considered everything from how to actually get the technology to how we would use it. This was excellent, since every person knows that schools have little money and technology is always expensive. These classes helped me understand the kind of thinking that would become the root structure for this degree.

Stem

As I mentioned, one thing that drew me to the CEP Master’s Program was the suggested time-line for completion. That time-line suddenly became something much different between Aug. 2003 and May 2004. During that time it was determined that the second set of classes should be delivered through a four week session that would begin mid-June 2004. CEP 800, 801, and 822 were destined to become a blur of Dreamweaver and educational theory. We reviewed the “who” and “how” of education; the methods used, and the reasons/thinking that drove those theories and theorists. We also began to critically evaluate some of the technology currently in use, judging it based on the theoretical roots we were discussing (here are my evaluations of MathBlaster and Visual Thesaurus).

Part of this intense month was also devoted to using the technology. We were introduced to Macromedia’s Dreamweaver and Apple’s iMovie, as well as Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Acrobat, and many other software titles. For me this was what I had been waiting for, but instead of spending three months, we had 28 days. As my dream became my nightmare, an unexpected side effect occurred, the group of students became a cohort. The first series of classes resulted in a few bonds, but this intense format for the second series truly created a sort of family. As a student this was not expected, yet I imagine it is part of what caused for the change in the “time-line.” The creators of MAET, must have realized the benefits of bonding the group, since they knew that the final series of classes could potentially include no human contact.

The final goal of the second series of classes was to apply all the theory to our classrooms. We designed the proposal for our “Action Research Project,” or our ARP. We spend our time teaching and working with the tools we have, but how often to we
reflect, with the intent to identify specific details? This was the essence of the ARP, identify something that is connected to our personal teaching environment and research it. I chose motivation, hoping to find out if one form of assessment motivates students more effectively than another. In the end, on the 28th day, we each had a collection of resources that were related to our topic and would help us as we worked through the research portion of the assignment, during the following school year.

This portion of the MAET program was very intense and did not leave very much time for us to think about our personal “big pictures.” It was hectic and exciting, frustrating and fulfilling, but overall exhausting. As it ended, I wearily discovered that the timeline had shifted yet again. My original joy at the prospect of only having classes in the summers was lost, but I was too tired to consider the implications.

**Flower**

The final stage of the CEP program filled the calendar from Sept. 2004 to July 2005. We had four classes to complete, CEP 816, 817, 849, and 807. CEP 816 was my first “online” class. We met in chatrooms and were assessed using the “track changes” feature that is included in Microsoft Word. The discussions focused on the theories and theorists from the previous summer and how their ideas were applied to specific curriculums and subject areas. The dynamic of online learning was an experience all to itself. Learning to communicate whole ideas and have another person understand them, without the benefit of verbal cues, gestures, body language, or any of the other techniques that we often employ to make our ideas clear, was far more difficult than I expected. This class is what actually caused me to begin to understand what Tupac meant when he said, “We would all celebrate its tenacity.” I often felt like we were reviewing old information and working with technology I was already familiar with, but I failed to see the picture from the correct angle. Tupac is saying that you can either see the flaws that exist, or you can see the value that is there despite those flaws. He understood that each person must decide what they see and how they will evaluate their situations.

As I began CEP 817 and 849, I was starting to understand that the perspective I had chosen was hindering my path to “mastery.” CEP 849 was dedicated to the research component of the ARP. We communicated with each other about our progress and offered criticism and ideas as the research was collected and analyzed. CEP 817 pushed us to consider philosophy and design. We applied our discussions about philosophy (educational and otherwise) to our task of redesigning an existing web site (here is the link to my site redesign). My head was swirling with the ideas about perspective and philosophy. Was I getting in my own way? Was my focus completely on problems instead of what was there despite the flaws? These realizations were having a powerful impact on me. I had begun to stir during CEP 816, but now I understood the full implication of this idea. I began to make changes, or at least try to see things from the other perspective. Like a growing flower, my MAET experience started to bloom.

This paper is the final piece to the final class necessary for my degree. CEP 807 is the “Capstone” course. We spent three months organizing and demonstrating the ideas and
tools we mastered over the last three years. Our work is showcased in web-based portfolios, but as with everything you only get a glimpse of the growth that many of us experienced. My portfolio is located here, but you will need to make visiting the site a habit because the cycle doesn’t end here. The greatest strength of the Internet is that access is virtually unlimited, which means that our opportunity to revise is endless. Therefore we can build and change our sites as necessary and as we like. CEP 807 offered me the chance to apply Tupac’s idea. CEP816 and 817 helped me understand it; here I have applied it. I stopped worrying about “damaged petals” and focused on the idea of “reach[ing] for the sun.”

Thanks – Bill McLaren