Personal Reflection
Pam Losinski
Summer Cohort 2007 (CEP 800/801/822)

Thinking back to the past six weeks I am amazed at how much I have learned. Between the class discussions, readings, and online research I have been able to explore learning ideologies more in depth and discover new computer programs. Because of this I was also able to reevaluate my own teaching philosophies. I have learned a great deal of why teaching with technology is so important. Not only do I want to use technology to reach the digital natives, I also want to incorporate technology as another perspective to digital immigrants. For the natives, I need to use technology to be on their terms, to accommodate their learning styles. The immigrants need to be introduced to new technology to stay competitive in future endeavors. Most importantly, however, I want to use technology in my classroom to enhance understanding. We spent a great deal time in the face-to-face sessions discussing two learning theories. Behaviorism relies on classical condition through positive or negative reinforcement. Congitivism is a theory that proposes using what a learner already knows to teach new information. I am more likely to lean toward cognitive methods, but must accommodate my teaching style to reward, literally, students who are more apt to follow behaviorism. As I come to the end of my personal reflection it seems fitting to discuss the long tail of learning, which is just one more principle I now have a little more insight on thanks to the summer cohort of CEP 800, 801, and 822.

Lee S. Shulman offers ideas in his article What is learning and what does it look like when it doesn’t go well? that he calls the “epidemiology of mislearning”. His study offers three conditions of learning: amnesia, fantasia, and inertia. Amnesia is the process of learning and forgetting. This is very common and Shulman implies that teachers should strongly consider how information is being taught to students so that it is not as easily
Forgotten. Fantasia is a condition I see frequently at the middle school level. Students are maturing and begin to feel an overwhelming sense of self-confidence. They believe so strongly that they fully understand that they are in a state of fantasia, an illusion of truth. I will address this sense of rightness in further detail in the next paragraph. It’s no surprise that students often fall into a state of fantasia. The final condition Shulman identifies is inertia. I believe teachers are often to blame for this condition in their students. Inertia occurs when knowledge exists without understanding. The learner may know an answer, but cannot explain or apply it. The video research projects we completed in class fully supports the ideals behind each of these learning conditions. Children and adults were interviewed with various questions, ranging from the branches of government to environmental processes. The interviewees were either very honest about not knowing the answers, very confident in incorrect or skewed beliefs, or could answer questions with no reasons or support.

Karen Worth believes children have difficulty not overgeneralizing. They’ve inquired and found examples to support a theory, then stumble across counter-examples but don’t want to believe the original theory may not be true. It is hard for them to think that they may have been wrong. I believe this type of belief and the cognitive view link together nicely. Since the cognitive idea is that learning comes from the inside out and the learner must use what she already knows for understanding to occur, it makes sense that the learner struggles when she discovers she may have been wrong in her original thoughts. Howard Gardner supports this in his book *Changing Minds*, when he notes that “children think about the world in ways that are fundamentally different from those exhibited by adults.” It seems that adults have enough experience to understand that
things aren’t always as they seem. Teachers need to take the inherent senses children seem to have into consideration when designing lessons. If there are twenty students in a classroom, there could be twenty different perspectives regarding a single topic. Teachers need to build from what motivates and intrigues the students to make them feel successful (intrinsic motivation). As Gardner points out, learners learn in order to feel good, beautiful, and truthful.

Judith Rich Harris’ argues that parents don’t matter as much as they would like to think. She argues that children learn most of their knowledge from their peers, a smaller amount from their genetic make up, and little to none from their parents. I tend to think this belief is a bit extreme, and as a parent myself hope I can contribute positively in some way other than just the genes I offer. However, I can also see where her argument comes from. When I was younger, I definitely behaved differently with my parents than I did with my peers. My friends were very influential regarding the decisions I made. Luckily, most of the influences and decisions were good ones. I still made good choices while around my parents, but they were much different, more reserved. As Gardner notes in *The Disciplined Mind* “people are better able to chart their life course and make life decisions when they know how others have dealt with pressures and dilemmas.” Gardner probably meant this for historical events, but I suppose the same could hold true for peer groups. If a child watches a friend deal with a situation, whether it is good or bad, the child will consider the incident when making future decisions. At the same time the child may disregard the “been there done that” wisdom an adult tries to provide thinking the adult just doesn’t know how it is to be a child in this day and age.
A question posed in class on June 27, 2007 was “are people flexible thinkers when it comes to technology?” I believe this is a great question, but the best answer I can give is “it depends”. I suppose flexibility depends on the type of learner, whether she is typically flexible in her thinking or if she normally follows a particular method. Flexibility also depends on availability. Honestly, in our school district currently teachers are able to offer very little flexibility in regards to technology. In return students are not learning to become flexible thinkers. As the district progresses toward meeting more of the Michigan Educational Technology Standards and teachers gain more access to different technology tools, I feel we (teachers) will learn flexibility. When this happens, students will most likely adapt easily and follow the path toward flexibility.

Also on June 27, 2007, the class discussed the four critical impulses of children and how technology can be classified to teach to these impulses. A teacher should always consider why she wants to use technology in lesson planning. The goal isn’t just to use it; the students probably use technology outside of school for a variety of purposes. Technology should be integrated into a lesson to increase communication with a larger audience than what is available face to face. It should be incorporated to stimulate personal expression and construct meaning. Technology should be used to enhance inquiry by expanding the amount of resources available.

The face-to-face sessions were incredibly useful to me as Punya, Ken, and Kim introduced several new programs and technology tools I had never used before. Dreamweaver software is much more practical and user friendly than the software I had used previously. Creating templates and style sheets allow consistency throughout my website, something I had not been successful with in the past. I really enjoyed playing
with the possibilities Flash offers, and have designed my own family logo that is proudly displayed on my website. CMap Tools is a great way for students to collaborate and brainstorm from the convenience of individual computers. The program allows all students to contribute and see the contributions of others in real-time. The wikis each group worked on was a fantastic method to gather a great deal of information in a painless effort. Research projects could be started this way. Once the students collaborate to brainstorm each student to go in his/her own direction.

While I hadn’t intended to purchase a laptop computer, I am glad the structure of the class demanded it. In the past I have always used Windows, but received an immense amount of feedback from friends and classmates urging me to purchase a Mac. I will admit I was a bit overwhelmed at first. Not only was I learning a new operating system, I was also learning new programs and tackling the requirements from the class. Now, I thoroughly enjoy my computer, especially the fact that it is a laptop.

The diagram from Punya’s Power Point on June 28, 2007 regarding curricular priorities really made me think. As a teacher I face an astounding number of requirements pulling me in all directions and am expected to neatly present all of the information to my students in an engaging and self-fulfilling way. For the first time since I began my teaching career, I actually stopped to consider the fact that it’s not always possible. I had always known it, but never fully wanted to admit it. Now I understand that I can determine what parts of the curriculum are simply worth being familiar with, what is important to know and do, and most importantly, what needs to be understood. The final part, the enduring understandings, is where I should devote more of my time. Obviously all topics are important, but the diagram helped me realize that it is more important to
teach students to be good learners rather than have a wealth of knowledge. Good learners will be able to apply what they already know to new situations. They will be able to uncover new understandings.

As Feynman notes people (teachers) rarely consider how other people (students) think. He refers to a counting example where most people visualized the numbers as they counted. Some thought about them as a long trail of numbers stretching as far as the counting continued. Others pictured the numbers in sets, counting the numbers set by set. A teacher must consider all methods in order to successfully reach all students. Backward Design by McTighe & Wiggins allows teacher to truly understand goals of units and decide whether lessons are meaningful or just covering stuff. I learned that the lesson plan format of backward design is one that I like, and plan to create my lessons on from this point forward. I used it in my student teaching experiences, but did so then because it was a class requirement. Now that I have a couple of years of teaching behind me, I truly see the benefits of backward design. As I create the lesson plan I am uncovering new knowledge and information of my own. This is a great way to prepare for helping the students uncover their own new understanding.

Finally, I come to the long tail. Vilifredo Pareto offers the concept called the 80/20 principle. He suggests that 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. He based the principle on instances that proved there was no need to put forth equal effort (50/50) on all parts of a task when far less effort would actually accomplish most of the task. The problem of the long tail in teaching comes when a group of students each have individual concerns, rather than most of them having the same concern. Teachers must consider how to reach the long tail of individual questions. As Punya, Ken, and Kim did in class,
teachers could break students into groups to learn a variety of topics. They were actually able to disperse three teachers among the group. A classroom teacher, however, could ask for student volunteers to help. This would allow students with more understanding to teach students with less understanding. As the student teachers worked, the classroom teacher would be able to wander adding small points of interest at each station.

Although several topics were covered in this class, both in conversation and the readings, I believe they all provide good points in some way. Each of the theories and philosophers we discussed have a different perspective on learning and how children understand. This makes sense because all children learn differently. They all have unique senses of what understanding is and how it comes about. This set of classes, along with the Educational Technology certificate courses, has provided ideas and examples of practical methods toward teaching to these learning differences. While the classes are themed around technology I have learned that technology must be used wisely. The goal is to use technology because it makes the most sense for the given situation. As schools experience more and more restrictions due to financial binds, teachers can look toward technology to close the gap. The Internet provides so many opportunities to communicate that would simply not be possible otherwise. With technology students are able to express their own creativity which, as cognitive theorists would argue, is the key to understanding. Regardless of how technology is incorporated, or which theory I support the most, it is very obvious that my goal as an educator is to provide students with the best learning environment possible. Since this will be different for all learners, I would say I have a tough road ahead of me. By completing the Master of Arts in Educational
Technology program through Michigan State University I believe the road will be a little less bumpy.

