

## ....and Now to Recap the Rest of My MSU Journey

The direction I took with my college education was not as I had originally planned. My desire was to get a degree in Engineering, find a good job, then get married and start a family. I didn't count on the beautiful brunette that changed all that during my junior year in college. But looking back I consider myself very fortunate: still happily married and with three fantastic children. Sometimes one's path to education doesn't work out as planned, but the key is to not give up in its pursuit. For my education goals, this then was simply a delay, not an end.



I was working in the Banking sector, and this would present me with many exciting opportunities. While most of my co-workers were satisfied with performing their daily job duties, I was

always looking for new challenges, and to work with new technologies. My managers recognized this passion and continually rewarded me by assigning me to cutting-edge development projects. In 1998, we were one of the very first banks in the country to offer [Online Banking](#); and I was onboard as a business analyst and software tester through the entire development and introduction of this “new” use of web technology. In 1999, I worked as a developer on an [Artificial Intelligence software](#) project that read and interpreted customer email requests and automatically responded to their needs.

By 2001, I'd been employed for seventeen years in the Banking industry, working mostly with business technology; software for Bank Tellers and New Account representatives, and their supporting computer systems. All new banking hardware (computers, printers, copiers) and business software had to be approved by myself or others on my team before they could be implemented to our banking branches. My daily tasks involved software programming and testing; hardware and software analysis, computer desktop support and technical writing. During this time I was continually working with existing and emerging technologies, interacting with great fellow employees and living the dream; I couldn't wait to get to work every day. But I also knew that should anything happen to change this, the Associates Degree I possessed would limit any opportunities to land a similarly rewarding position. It was time then to pursue Plan B, otherwise titled “Plan Brian's (Bachelor's) Degree.”

With my existing background and experiences, I decided to complete a bachelor's degree in Business Administration, and did so from Northwood University between 2001-2003. I followed a hybrid learning program, with a mixture of available in-class/instructor-led night and weekend courses, off-premise seminars and online classes with fellow students from around the country. I considered this as an optimal way to learn, developing friendships with instructors and a small group of students attending the Lansing satellite site, and using the Internet as a viable and enriched instructional medium. It was a very rewarding personal accomplishment; in fact I worked on a group project proposing a [high-end Michigan resort](#), and we did such a great job that three investors from Detroit wanted to come talk to us about making it happen in real life!

But a Bachelor's Degree also turned out to be wise investment professionally, as in 2006 my bank was acquired by [Bank of America](#). I and all the other technical people were informed that we'd only be needed through the conversion of our banking data and systems over to Bank of America. My final day was November 14, 2008. Twenty four years in Banking, and now it was time to locate a new job. It took nine months, but I ended up at [Michigan State University](#), my favorite University since I was a young boy -- and the school that I'd left prematurely in the 1980s. I'd come full circle.

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At MSU I'm responsible for coordinating various types of software testing, and authoring technical support documentation for MSU employees that use it. While I enjoy this work, the benefits they provide are also great. After a year of employment I qualified for tuition reimbursement, which would pay a portion of my Master's Degree. I was ready for the challenge and the potential rewards I could reap. It did not take much research for me to select the [Master of Arts in Educational Technology \(MAET\)](#) program. This degree was delivered in a hybrid format; all classes were available online, and there was also a summer cohort where three classes could be completed at one time. I very much enjoy the freedom that online classes provide, especially when trying to balance family school and sporting activities. It allowed me to work on my school assignments when it was most convenient for me to do so. Additionally, all course materials and a majority of the personal and group activities were web-based so I could efficiently read and then effectively perform class assignments.



Twenty years ago, new computer and software technologies were released at a slower and more deliberate pace; your only really viable options were Microsoft and Apple desktop computers, a couple of [operating systems](#), a few [web browsers](#) and several other types of “supporting” tools and applications. New versions of software were released every couple of years. The Internet was mainly used for email and simple searches via search engines. It was easy for me to stay informed of and manage the technology I was responsible for. Today there are multiple forms of computer technology; desktops, laptops, tablets, smartphones and other mobile devices. Many with their own unique operating system. There are tens of different web browsers, and thousands of types of software.

New versions of software are released much more frequently, as often as every six weeks. Communication protocols and their speed have multiplied many times. The Internet has exploded into much, much more than a source of email and simple searches, and is a common source for many software applications and services. Because of this upturn, it is physically impossible for a single person to stay on top of computer technology except for a small portion of it all. The MAET program provided me another avenue to learn about and use a variety of these newer technologies, as well as strengthen my instructional skills around the software support documentation that I am responsible for.

The first three classes (CEP810 - "Teaching for Understanding with Technology," CEP 811 - "Adapting Innovative Technologies in Education," and CEP 812 - "Applying Educational Technology to Issues of Practice") are required for all students, and after their successful completion students earn the Graduate Certificate in Educational Technology. These courses are each fabulous in that they introduce and integrate [Web 2.0](#) functionality and related technologies into both individual and collaborative assignments.

Through these courses I experienced different ways that students learn, the planning and integration of technologies that educators can use to aid in their [pedagogy](#), and the principles that provide an equal learning environment to all students, regardless of their background or if they possess barriers that affect their ability to learn. During this time I researched and then created a Personal Growth Plan and Technology Plan that as an instructor I can use to aid and guide me as I plan and carry out student instruction.

Collaborative group assignments were always engaging, and in CEP 812 my group was composed of teachers in both Saudi Arabia and Thailand. We used [Google Hangouts](#) which allowed us to see and hear each other and the work we were working on. How cool and awesome it was! Our diverse time zones made meeting at a convenient time difficult, but Sunday mornings generally worked for all of us. I used an online blog to keep track of my personal assignments and reflections, and used Google Docs and other open, cloud-based technologies to create, share, comment and submit our group assignments.

[TPACK](#) - a specific framework that integrates pedagogy, subject knowledge and an effective learning environment that is supported through the use of various technologies - was a main component of all three courses. If my MSU program had finished after these classes, I already had a solid understanding about integrating technology with instruction, and was capable to apply these skills in real educational scenarios; the courses were constructed and administered that well. As it turned out, these classes were providing the structure for later classes to build from, and I was eager to proceed.

Although I enjoyed all of my remaining MAET courses, three stand out as I look back at what I learned and the assignments that I completed:

- In CEP 820 ("Teaching Students Online") the main assignment was creating the start of a fictitious online class. We first reviewed several [Content Management Systems](#), the software that is used to create online classes. We selected a subject and then developed the beginnings of a class: outline, student assessment and grading, personal and collaborate group assignments and quizzes to check student's learning of each module. I selected US History with a Political Science "twist" where the students would select a 19th century president of their choice, and create an election campaign to get him elected [if he were alive] for 2016). Having a personal interest in working as an online teacher, this course's structure and instructor feedback was invaluable experience towards this goal possibly becoming a reality someday. I also learned that creating an online course from scratch, even when following a good outline of course and student activities, is something that takes many hours to assemble something worthy of presenting and supporting actual students.

- CEP 822 (“Approached to Educational Research”) was a class devoted to educational research. I learned how education is one of the “soft” sciences and how this impacts the validity of research methodologies, sampling the outcomes and analyzing the results. We had to provide a topic, the focus and rationale for performing the research, and back it up with a large number of published articles related to my topic. I initially thought it would be fairly simple and that I could do a majority of the research online, but ended up spending many hours in various MSU libraries reviewing hardcopies of educational books and periodicals. This was because while you can find research summaries online, most educational research requires special access or payment before you can view entire articles or books. The MSU librarians helped me a great deal as I researched for support on my topic on the use of narrative video presentations to supplement text-based technical instruction. I also enjoyed the group experiments where we created various methods for obtaining educational data: observation of activities, surveying users, and focus group discussions.
- CEP 815 was devoted to “Technology and Leadership.” During the first weeks of this course we examined how people are motivated to learn, examples of different leadership traits and personalities, and how leader can integrate technology into their business projects. As this course progressed we assumed the role of leader, and created different forms of communications to alert our direct reports on our upcoming technical initiatives. I found this class provided excellent perspectives that I could use to assess my managers and senior leaders traits and strengths, and how to best communicate my ideas to them (what to say and more importantly, what not to include). I found that I’d provided some expert presentations to audiences that didn’t need (or couldn’t understand) the material I was covering, as well as being unable to effectively communicate information when I had the correct audience before me. Because of this knowledge, I feel this course provided me the most applicable information related to my actual job.

Throughout my degree, each course had one or more assignments that allowed me as a student to select a topic or direction that directly applied to my current work assignments and duties at MSU. One area I was able to address was in technical communications. I provide technical documentation and instructions on how to use business software to MSU end users, including faculty, support teams, and students. These users are located across MSU’s campus and around the world, and they possess a large and varying range of technical skills and competencies, as well as preferred ways to learn new information. I’d already recognized that my text-based documents were not able to aid some end users, but wasn’t sure how to improve on the content. Through my MSU classes I learned about and used many forms of multimedia technologies, and from this started creating instructional screencasts (narrative videos in which I demonstrate the steps needed, using the actual software) and publishing them along with my text documentation. I’ve added questionnaires at the end of the screencasts, to solicit feedback from viewers on whether the multimedia content is helpful, and where improvements can be made.



I also work with MSU Help Desks to analyze the calls on software support, and use this information as I structure and create future screencasts and text-based instructional materials.

Another work example is that MSU has recently underwent restructuring and consolidation of multiple IT Services departments. My department consists of software development and support teams; these restructuring activities resulted in new teams being created with individuals from many different IT Services areas, with differing backgrounds and ways of doing business. There was no existing, high level plan for how these development teams should function and interact, so I have created this [software development life cycle framework diagram](#), and am working with Assistant Directors in our group to flesh out the final details and get it approved for use.

My team is also capturing essential [software testing](#) activities that we have experience in and documenting what is available and can be provided to other teams in our department that are developing software applications and services. Through the above examples we are working towards establishing common procedures and terminology across all our departments, while allowing each team the flexibility on how they complete their specific tasks. The overall goal is to provide high quality software and superior support to all MSU software users.

Actual business solutions such as these have provided a deeper connection to my course objectives, and provided competencies that I was either missing or lacking full mastery of; as well as promoting deep, long term knowledge and skills that I effectively use today and will continue to use into the future as both a user and provider of technology.

As I conclude this reflection, I want to answer a question that many people have asked me: why did I selected an Education degree, when I'm not a teacher? It's because regardless of who we are or what we do for a living, **we all function in the role of a teacher at times**. Providing instruction, guidance and mentoring to those that have incomplete (or no) previous information in an area or specific topic that we have knowledge and skills in. Through the MAET program I've learned to better understand the needs of people looking for answers; the capabilities of instructors; and how technology can overcome barriers to learning. I've built personal learning networks with instructors and peers that I can utilize to ask questions, obtain information based on other's experiences and skills, and analyze and select the best solutions. It has been an enjoyable and rewarding period in my life, and I look forward to the future.

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*Brian Jenks*  
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#### Image Sources

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