

## Learning to ask better questions

By the time I wrote my goal statement as part of the MAET application I submitted in May 2013, I had worked in several different professional contexts related to training and adult education: I had spent a few years recruiting and managing temporary employees for a staffing company, one year teaching adult English as a Second Language classes as an AmeriCorps volunteer, and four supporting the design and development of eLearning courses and web-based training games and simulations for the military. My varied experiences in teaching, instructional design, and quality assurance testing had led me to develop broad perspectives on working with adult learners in different learning situations. They had also introduced me to different instructional technologies including learning management systems; web-based, multimedia courses; and immersive learning games and simulations, as well as some of the affordances and limitations of implementing those technologies.

Ultimately, though, my experiences had raised more questions than they answered. When teaching, I wondered whether my students were really learning or retaining anything useful from my classes. Working in eLearning, I wondered about the soundness of our approaches and the quality and effectiveness of our products. If our approaches and products were lacking or flawed, I wanted to know how to identify those flaws and, more importantly, fix them. I wanted to learn more, and I recognized that I needed to in order to advance in my career in eLearning design and development.

In my application to the MAET, I described my goals as “deepening my knowledge of learning theories, methodologies, and educational technology.” I wanted to build solid foundational knowledge of educational psychology as well as an understanding of the various educational technologies currently in use and the frameworks, theories, systems, and approaches determining how, when, and why those technologies were used. Really, though, I was looking for answers to my questions about learning design. I wanted to know what elements defined good instructional design and how best to apply various technologies to various learning problems. Looking back, I think I expected to be given some kind of checklist or formula; I certainly didn’t expect the answers to be closer to “it depends” than something concrete and universal.

Through study in the MAET and Serious Game Design and Research programs, I *did* build the foundational knowledge that I was searching for, but I built it through practical application as much as through abstracted study. I practiced methods of user experience research and design, like those described in Leah Buley’s *The User Experience Team of One*, and applied frameworks, like TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge), to plan technology-based interventions. I came to understand the vital importance of *context* to any learning design: approaches and technologies that enhance learning for some learners may not work the same way for others in a different time or place. And even if they do, success may be due to different reasons than the first success. I realize now that any successful

learning design must be based on a solid understanding of the learners it is for and the environment in which they will experience the design--in fact, this grounding in learner experience may be more important than grounding in any particular learning theory or methodology.

Necessarily, my goals have changed, but not in dramatic ways. I started off on a general exploration of learning theories, instructional methods, and educational technologies, and have now narrowed my interests to those most pertinent to the learners and learning contexts I am working with. In particular, I focused my recent studies on technologies and methods of effectively teaching listening comprehension, with the goal of shaping myself into a more effective transcription trainer. I still aim to grow my skills as a technologist and instructional systems designer, and perhaps move on to coordinate or manage programs someday, but I have begun to think more carefully about the kinds of learning contexts I want to work in. I still have much more to learn, but I am beginning to ask better questions.