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Finding a New Pattern: My Program Reflection

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# THE PURPOSE: INTRODUCTION

I have always cherished being nurtured by strong Appalachian women and so quilting quickly became something I enjoyed. My grandmother taught me how to choose the fabric, plan the pattern, continue through the sewing, and relish in the binding process that signified the end of the project. Grandma always started with a purpose and a direction. She did not make quilts to simply make them; she made them for something or someone. Her decisions were precise and her intent was true. With only ten years of public school experience upon entering the doctoral program, I often equate my decision to begin the doctoral program and the entire experience of working through it as making a complicated quilt.

My purpose was to continue my learning and my intent was to finish. Much like working through a complicated paper-pieced quilt pattern, the opportunity to work through the doctoral program both challenged and inspired me. I developed a new passion and purpose for my profession through learning about myself, and discovering how hard one needs to push through difficulty to discover the answers to new and challenging questions.

Revealing the lessons learned through the doctoral program, this paper will focus on how my understanding of curriculum, teaching, and learning evolved, my reflections on perspectives and ideas concerning theory, technology, and program elements, as well as my experiences in discovering real scholarship. A list of artifacts such as class presentations with peers, class research assignments using the IRB process, work with various faculty members, and documents reflecting my personal curriculum and learning theories can be found at the end of this paper in Appendix A. Such artifacts will provide the evidence to demonstrate that I am now ready to be admitted to candidacy and begin the dissertation. Using the analogy of the intricate quilting process, the threads of my doctoral program experience work together to provide the foundation needed to begin the final section of the doctoral quilt.

# THE FABRIC: COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING

One of my favorite phrases used by my Dad when I was growing up was we need to “come to an understanding.” Usually this meant a painful learning process for me as a kid. Normally, his saying meant that I needed to listen and digest information that would be given and, usually, change my way of thinking. He also expected me to do something with this newly gained knowledge. This is how I have come to view my doctoral program and my experience as a doctoral student.

My first major lesson surfaced in Dr. Meyer’s class and focused on the need for developing a deeper understanding of learning theory. The entire class was a personal struggle. Having a basic understanding of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences and how those learning styles should contribute to a teacher’s thinking about instruction (Gardner, 1998), I had not truly reflected on my own learning process. My understanding of learning and how students’ learning is influenced by instructional techniques was minimal. A traditional teacher, I told students “what they need to know and how to learn it” (Blackwell, P. J, 2003).

As the semester progressed, my understanding of constructivism and behaviorism increased along with the concern that my secondary classroom had been adequately organized and that I taught using the traditional behaviorist perspective. My classroom was active and included engaging activities that provided students with opportunities to contribute, however, I had not truly considered how best to teach “all” students.

The culminating activity in the Learning Theories class produced a conference presentation with two of my doctoral program peers. (**APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT C**) While preparing for the presentation, I began to understand that my personal learning theory was, in fact, a combination of several learning theories. While the project’s focus was Humanism and I believed in the basic Humanistic idea that the entire student should be celebrated and integration of subject matter should occur within instructional activities, as a secondary teacher, my classroom may not have appeared Humanistic (Ediger, M, 2006).

My classroom radiated a warm atmosphere that nurtured the entire child without the elementary bulletin boards and warm, fuzzy knickknacks, and my teaching focused on integrating all sorts of subject matter. Although revealing a touch of Humanism, I soon realized that this was not sufficient. My personal learning theory that grew from my rich understanding of the theories presented during the course helped me classify myself as a Constructivist and a bit of a Humanist. Humanists believe that teachers are not the “focal point in the classroom,” and that students should have “considerable input” in the classroom and the larger school (Blackwell, 2003, p. 362). Uncomfortable with being the “sage on the stage,” my classroom was collaborative with students having choices in how they would demonstrate mastery of the learning targets.

Constructivism aligns with my theory of learning through the use of cooperative learning groups and deconstruction of knowledge, especially in the science investigations conducted by students in my classroom (Duhaney & Duhaney, 2000). As a result of my understanding of learning theory, and through the collaboration with my peers, I developed a deeper understanding about learning and my practice as an educator. (**APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT D)**

Learning to communicate as a researcher is another key concept and skill I have developed through my doctoral studies. Working with three other students in Dr. Childress’s Survey Research course, we created a pre and post math professional development survey for teachers in a summer program. Students also built an individual survey that could be used in our professional positions. My survey was focused on evaluating the Cabell County mentoring and induction program for new secondary teachers.

Dr. Childress taught us how to always keep the audience in mind when developing a survey. He challenged us to use the best and most appropriate words, to be parallel in our writing, and how to create an appropriate survey scale. After a few weeks of peer review and revisions, I was able to finalize the survey and administer it to the new teachers at the beginning of the school year. The survey results were used to develop a school-wide new teacher induction and mentoring program. With the help of my school’s leadership team, not only did the survey make a difference in the lives of the new teachers, but also created a collaborative relationship between the veteran and new teachers in the school. (**APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT E)**

Learning the survey construction process taught me valuable lessons on considering what my question(s) is/are and who my audience is as well as how to attempt different choices of words to get at the real meaning of the survey elements. The survey development process was painful at times because I was hooked on every word written. The experience taught me to focus and be patient. As a result, I believe I am better prepared to seek answers to real questions in a manner that is uncomplicated and precise.

Understanding the basics of research was a real stretch for me. Although familiar with action research as a classroom teacher and building administrator, my background in research was limited. Having a science background, I understood quantitative research and felt comfortable interpreting numbers, but when it came to asking questions in a personal interview, my skills were inadequate.

Through my coursework and related projects, such as completing a qualitative study in both multicultural and qualitative courses, I began to understand that research is a series of decisions about asking the right questions. We worked through the IRB process and the challenges that arise when applying the scientific method in educational settings. (**APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT F**) I would discover difficulties in controlling certain variables, and sometimes confounding variables were a given, and that precise measurement would be difficult. (**APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT G**)

My subject for the qualitative study was my 22 year old niece who was battling Stage 4 Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, yet, she felt that God would heal her. I understood that in order to get the information needed about her ideas regarding faith-healing, I had to distance myself from her emotionally and become a researcher in search of an answer to a set of questions. During the process, I learned I was not good at taking field notes because of my interest in the story. (**APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT H**) I asked too many follow-up questions to record answers. Second, sticking to the script was challenging. I simply wanted to know too much and most of it did not relate to the questions I sought to be answered.

As a result of the collaborative projects in the doctoral program, I have acquired a deeper understanding of research and the skills needed to conduct purposeful research. I have gained a deeper understanding of learning theory in classroom instruction and developed a personal learning theory. Communication skills learned as a survey researcher and an interviewer have become critical elements of my research skill set. Having the experience with the IRB process and working with my chair on a survey has prepared me to begin considering what type of study I will undertake. I fully expect that these project experiences and the skills gained in the process be invaluable to me in the dissertation process.

# THE PATTERN: REFLECTING ON PURPOSE

Reflection has always been easy for me. As a child, I would often maintain a journal and my thoughts and feelings about daily events. I would often find myself returning to old journals to view and reflect on changes through the years. However, reflecting on my own learning and professional practice was a new experience. Maybe it was a result of the assignments from professors such as Dr. Meyer, Dr. McComas, and Dr. Simone as they required reflections on our reading, writing, or the writings of peers. **(APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT I)** The result is that I have now become a more reflective thinker both personally and professionally.

Working with Dr. Meisel and Dr. Meyer on two projects caused me to think more deeply about on my understanding of instruction and education as a profession. Dr. Meisel afforded me the opportunity to work with her to revise an assignment in a course for inservice teachers she had been teaching. My task was to review the assignment and determine where we could best integrate information about 21st Century instructional skills. The creation of the new assignment afforded me the opportunity to use my understanding of “I Can” statements and how those statements help teachers break down content standards into what students need to know, understand, and do in the classroom. **(APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT J)** This experience stretched my capacity to build a rigorous lesson that would influence how students would be taught. Dr. Meisel’s mentoring of my work led me to trust that I had professional knowledge worthy of sharing with teacher candidates.

Dr. Meyer and I worked collaboratively on a conference presentation that detailed West Virginia’s transition to 21st Century Instructional Practices. My contribution was to provide insight for a group of public and higher education educators on how these practices were going to influence and change classroom instruction. Presenting with Dr. Meyer increased my confidence in interacting with higher education faculty on a topic with which I had direct daily experience. The process of writing a proposal and paper, and creating the presentation for a national conference, produced skills that I have used several times additional during my program. Working with Dr. Meyer on the conference presentation provided a different type of reflection experience as higher education experts listened to and critiqued my personal reflections. **(APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT K)** In contrast, the project with Dr. Meisel anonymously influenced a teacher candidate’s course assignment.

CIEC 700 was one of my biggest challenges. Despite using technology regularly and using computers since my parents purchased our first Commodore 64, communicating using digital media was a skill yet to be mastered. I gained blogging skills and have enhanced my ability to use presentation software. **(APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT L)** These newly learned skills have enhanced not only various projects in my doctoral classes, but also were used in presentations at national conferences and in with my school leadership teams as we focused on continuous school improvement. My digital presentation skills are now polished and professional. Also, the readings such as Don Tapscott’s *Growing Up Digital: The Rise* *of the Net Generation* (1999), provided me with a solid understanding of the role digital media plays in the lives of today’s students as well as what the future may hold for such media to influence student achievement. **(APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT M)** As a school improvement specialist, I can discern between using digital media for the sake of just using it, and effectively using digital media as an instructional tool.

Being able to evaluate the use of digital media and having conversations about its use with classroom teachers has fostered many rich interactions about appropriate use of technology. Using the deeper understandings gained in my coursework and collaborating with faculty members, I have learned to reflect on my professional practice and create products that enriched graduate coursework and provided new insight into current administrative practices related to the Common Core State Standards. Being a reflective thinker has led me to ask questions of others causing the same response from them. As a result, I see practice in my schools improving, both collectively and on a classroom-by-classroom basis.

# THE SEWING: DISCOVERING REAL SCHOLARSHIP

The doctoral program also changed my personal definition of scholarship. Entering the program, my concept of scholarship was that it was something reflected in a 4.0 GPA or with some kind of award for doing something well, not necessarily the deep meaning that I have now come to know. Ralph Waldo Emerson once stated, “Scholarship is to be created not by compulsion, but by awakening a pure interest in knowledge.” Scholarship is not simply gaining a deeper understanding of a subject, but being able to show that deeper, richer understanding in a way that informs the profession. My conference presentation with Dr. Childress provides evidence of my pure interest in knowledge and growing scholarship. (**APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT N)**

The collaboration with Dr. Childress challenged me to delve into an area that would immediately influence my professional practice. This project focused on how the new Next Generation Common Core State Standards in West Virginia would change classroom instruction with an active instructional administrator overseeing the implementation. The overarching challenges of the standards will drive teacher’s selection of classroom materials, especially in English/Language Arts, as well as the way they will teach mathematics (Lee, 2011).

I researched the nuances in the objectives and compared and contrasted those with the current West Virginia Content Standards and Objectives. I then reviewed what the adopting states were proposing as far as professional development and discovered that principals were not targeted for professional development (Gerwetz, 2011). Although West Virginia was an early adopter, the pace of professional development and implementation was very slow. From my professional practice, I understaood that good instructional leadership and the effective implementation of standards includes principal training, I then worked with Dr. Childress to develop key ideas on processes principals could use to ease the transition to the new Common Core State Standards while providing continuous support to teachers. **(APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT N)**

This project provided the opportunity to learn more about a timely issue and allowed me to reflect on my practice, reading, and training on effective leadership. Working in collaboration with Dr. Childress helped me focus on the real question that needed to be answered and how to fine-tune recommendations that could be easily implemented by school administrators.

Another area of growth in scholarship came during Dr. Simone’s Writing for Publication. Hearing her say to us “cut the fat” has had a lasting impact. Having taught English in secondary schools, I thought I could write. I soon learned nothing was further from the truth. She trained me to have an eye for wordiness, how to edit, edit, and edit some more to get to the heart of the thought. My assignment was to write a perspective paper on the 6th and 9th grade transition programs in my middle and high school. Initially a multi-paragraphed paper, the final product was an outline of recommendations, which will be submitted for publication. **(APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT O)** As I move to the dissertation, I will be more attuned to having a clear focus and choosing just the right words.

My last major course experience, Curriculum Theories, was in the summer of 2012. The text for the course *Understanding Curriculum* (Pinar et al, 2008) was most difficult. Questioning my ability to finish the course while struggling to read and understand the text, I pushed forward trying to string together at least enough understanding to write a summary. Having an experience with such difficulty in comprehending a text helped me reflect on my own learning process. I also learned a very valuable lesson in motivation. In my dissertation research, I will encounter many challenges, but I now have some experiences that have taught me to seek help and trust my learning process.

Through the summer I worked on a paper referred to as a “line of research” on the author/professor Patricia Lather. **(APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT P)** I marveled at her ideas on teaching and how she was interested in action research, knowing that she would continue to evolve and change as a learner and a teacher, and as an individual (Lather, 1991). Lather’s writings provided many parallels to my profession. Her work challenged me to look at my professional practice and question the validity of my theory of curriculum or if I was just “playing” at teaching. Although I was trained as a teacher and loved my students, it was painful to realize that though I was poised to influence curriculum in my position, I did not have a real grasp on curriculum. This research project provided the foundation for the development of a personal theory of curriculum.

After studying Lather and identifying with the poststructuralists and political and phenomenological theorists, I unearthed a shocking revelation that my personal theory of curriculum was a combination of all three. I realized that labeling people on the basis of gender was a way of domination (Pinar et al, 2008) and that in choosing curriculum and instructional strategies I believed all students should have a voice. This research brought all the threads together for me. **(APPENDIX A, EXHIBIT Q)** This journey continues and those views will certainly continue to evolve and change.

Struggling through a course in the doctoral program provided a lesson in resiliency that continues to be valuable. Not only did the struggle teach me to push myself personally, but the struggle also pushed me academically. I now realize that during any future research study there will be days that I will need to resolve to just push through. Quitting will not be an option. Furthermore, understanding where I fall on the continuum of curriculum theory has influenced the way I work with my schools on continuous improvement. With the switch to the Common Core State Standards, I have been able to share resources and have discussions about instructional materials and strategies with classroom teachers. These discussions have challenged the teachers to consider identifying their personal theory of curriculum and describe how their practice reflects their beliefs.

# THE BINDING: CONCLUDING THE PROCESS

Perhaps the most fulfilling part of the doctoral process is still ahead of me. Much like the binding off of the frayed edges of a quilt, the dissertation process completes the doctoral program. The foundation or fabric of the doctoral program was the rich understanding of the curriculum and transferring that deep understanding into practice. The knowledge and understanding gained about learning and curriculum theory helped me create my own theories. The process of evaluating and validating beliefs about learning and curriculum was challenging, however, finding my own theories has made me a better educator. In my work as a school improvement specialist, my conversations with teachers and administrators about curriculum and learning have risen to a level of complexity never imagined. Some educators in my schools are asking questions and reflecting on their instructional practices and beliefs about learning as a result of my conversations.

Developing a process for reflection is another benefit of the doctoral program. Reflection represents the pattern of the program because it is uniquely formed out of the fabric or the deep understanding gained in my studies. Working with Dr. Childress and Dr. Meisel pushed me to use my professional experience, along with current research, and reflect on how to use this new found understanding to create a desired outcome. In both experiences, products were created that would inform educators, students, and teachers. The questions both professors led me to define caused me to reflect on new research and personal beliefs. I learned how to write and rewrite my question until it had a laser focus. Finally, I learned that the research process is much more than walking through the traditional scientific method much like the traditional methods of teaching and choosing curriculum are equally archaic.

The threads of understanding and reflection were sewn together for me during the opportunities that helped me define real scholarship. Preparing and presenting a conference presentation to higher education students and professors allowed me to discuss my ideas concerning instructional leadership. Dr. Childress worked with me on thinking critically outside-of-the-box to give principals succinct ways to implement the Common Core State Standards in their schools. I put the research and reflection into practice, created a product, then was prepared on how to conduct a presentation in a setting of higher institution professors. Both a scary and thrilling experience, I was asked questions and even given ideas on how to further develop the problem as a possible dissertation topic. Not only were they informed, but they were educating me by asking different and deeper questions. Most importantly, perhaps, I learned to trust my own research and my own ideas, yet be moldable enough to consider others’ questions as possible ways to continue my project.

Through the collaboration with my peers and doctoral faculty, I have learned to value others opinions and question how beliefs compare or contrast. I am evolving as Patti Lather (1991) so aptly suggested, and it is through the rich collaboration with others that I can become more informed but yet provide my own voice. As a school improvement specialist, I have become more outspoken for students and teachers and can use the research process to determine answers to questions. I am now ready to complete a research study that will influence my profession in a way that will inform students, teachers, and administrators. In doing so, the binding of my doctoral program quilt will be complete.

# NEXT STEPS

As a result of working with Dr. Childress on the project to determine how/if principals are being prepared in West Virginia to help lead their schools in implementing the Common Core State Standards, I have continued gathering articles and other resources concerning the topic. Since I have had public school administrative experience in both middle and high school settings in West Virginia, I have a good understanding of what professional development opportunities exist for principals in the state. I also have an interest in instructional leadership and working with teachers on classroom strategies that improve student learning. Gaining insight into how principals can plan for the full implementation of the Common Core Standards remains a personal interest for further study.

In gathering the research I have already noticed that principals in West Virginia have been given a slight introduction in some areas of the state on the shifts of the Common Core Standards, however, no specific training has been provided on how principals can help implement the curriculum shift in their schools nor how to support teachers in their endeavors to help students work toward growth in the Common Core State Standards. For these reasons, I would like to further investigate specifically what the content of the professional development given to principals entailed and also give principals the opportunity to provide their perspective on how they were supported to help drive the curriculum changes in their schools. Given my doctoral program experience thus far, I believe I can work with Dr. Childress and my committee to study this timely topic and possibly offer suggestions for professional development that will enhance principal effectiveness with fully implementing the Common Core State Standards in West Virginia schools.

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# APPENDIX A

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| **EXHIBIT** |  |
| A Portfolio Paper and Presentation |  |
| B Program Documents |  |
| C Co-Presentation ATE 2011 |  |
| D Personal Teaching/Learning Theory | (CI 703) |
| E Teacher Survey Project | (EDF 711) |
| F IRB Process Documents |  |
| G Qualitative Research Project | (EDF 625) |
| H Multicultural Research Project | (CI 706) |
| I Class Assignment Reflections | (CI 677) |
| J Assignment 3 | (CI 623) |
| K Co-Presentation ATE 2010 | (CI 703) |
| L Digital Movie Slides | (CIEC 700) |
| M Digital Divide Research Paper | (CIEC 700) |
| N Co-Presentation SCREA 2011 | (EDF 679) |
| O Article for Publication Assignment | (CI 677) |
| P Line of Research | (CI 702) |
| Q Personal Curriculum Theory | (CI 702) |