**MAKING CONNECTIONS**

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**MAKING CONNECTIONS**

Realizing the importance of continued professional growth and development, I embarked on my journey in the doctoral program as a way of enhancing my knowledge, skills, and understanding relative to curriculum and instruction. After sharing the advertisement from the Charleston Sunday Gazette-Mail in the spring of 2007 with the principal and assistant principal at school, we decided that this opportunity could provide the chance for us to connect as a leadership team while honing skills specific to our job responsibilities. Upon reviewing the information obtained from the informational meeting at Braxton County High School on May 29, 2007, Anita Stephenson and I decided to pursue this idea.

My first foray into doctoral education occurred in the early 90s with participation in some doctoral level leadership classes, but educational leadership was not my interest. Later, when Marshall University’s Graduate School of Education and Professional Development added the doctorate in curriculum and instruction, my interest was piqued but the timing was not right because of involvement in other professional pursuits, such as applying for National Board of Professional Teaching Standards certification and working with the West Virginia Middle Level Education Cadre and the West Virginia Differentiated Instruction Cadre. Finally, the doctoral cohort appeared to be the perfect match at the perfect time because it offered a program to earn a doctorate in education with curriculum and instruction as the major and leadership as the area of emphasis. This opportunity appeared as the next logical step after attaining National Board certification, and my professional life now requires me to be the best I can in terms of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development.

Looking back at the journey over the past three years, it is amazing how far I have come and the extent of personal and professional connections made with the faculty of Marshall University and peers in the cohort. Opportunities for collaboration, depth of understanding, scholarship, and research around which this paper have been organized would not have been available otherwise. Because of the strong, robust connections made up to this milestone of the journey, I look forward to continuing this path toward the dissertation stage.

# Collaboration

Not only must one create a culture of collaboration, one must model and practice collaboration while encouraging and nurturing empowerment, risk-taking, and growth of others (Slater, 2005). The designers of the cohort did that. Being a member of the cohort provided opportunities to collaborate with faculty and peers and learn lessons that will be beneficial in the dissertation stage of the journey. As a result of the collaborative experiences during class assignments, other collaborative experiences emerged, including co-authoring proposals and co-presenting, co-authoring articles, co-teaching a course, and co-developing a course with faculty and other doctoral students. These experiences taught the importance of collaborating with others to make a task more manageable and of higher quality.

A class assignment in Principles of Leadership led to collaborating with Dr. Teresa Eagle and Anita Stephenson on a paper about shared leadership and a proposal to present at the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration’s annual conference. This paper described the value of shared leadership and suggested how leadership studies programs could help facilitate the development of shared leadership by making connections between theory and practice. Presenting the research base supporting shared leadership and helping describe the shared leadership at our school, helped me connect the knowledge gained from coursework and my professional experience of being a member of a collaborative leadership team. Developing a collaborative leadership team with a common vision and complementary strengths is important because decision making is more accurate when entrusted to a diverse group (Reeves, 2006). It takes a team of committed people (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), incorporating new practices, sharing information and supporting each other (Speck, 1998) to meet the challenges of leadership in the 21st century because no single person possesses the knowledge, skills, and understanding to achieve the demands of leadership alone (Reeves, 2006).

Dr. Lisa Heaton, Allyson Goodman, and I co-authored a proposal and co-presented *Exploring Social Networking in Education* at the College Teaching and Learning Conference in Jacksonville, Florida on April 17, 2009, and *Using Social Networking to Learn, Teach, and Lead in the 21st Century* at the West Virginia Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development Annual Conference on November 19, 2009. These presentations explored ways to use social networks in education and how blogging can be used at the middle school and high school levels. These presentations connected information gleaned from the survey conducted in Survey Research in Education, from the qualitative study in Qualitative Research in Education, and from personal experience gained by blogging with sixth grade students about what they were reading. Combining information gained from mixed methods facilitated growth as a scholar and a researcher. Dr. Heaton taught how to use a wiki to collaborate on the development of a proposal and how using technology has evolved at the graduate level. After learning more about Windows Movie Maker in Technology and Curriculum, I had the skills to enhance this presentation beyond what originally had been prepared using Microsoft PowerPoint.

As a result of class assignments in Writing for Publication, I submitted “It’s All about the Students: Lessons from Lucas” to Kappa Delta Pi’s *The* *Record*. This paper described lessons learned from a former middle school student about the importance of getting to know students and making connections with them before trying to teach content. Although this paper was not accepted for publication, I learned a valuable lesson about perseverance and collaboration. Collaborating with a peer-editing group to make the paper the best it can be helped sustain me throughout this process as have the connections that have been made with my doctoral committee in drafting this paper. These connections will provide the help needed to draft a quality paper to articulate the findings of the dissertation research.

Working with Dr. Bobbi Nicholson in her Ethical Theories and Administrative Theories classes led to collaborating with her and other doctoral students on the paper “Perceptions of Teachers in Selected Schools Involved in the Globaloria Technology Initiative.” Globaloria is intended to enhance the 21st century skills of teachers while engaging students in the digital learning experiences they need to be successful in a global economy (<http://www.worldwideworkshop.org/programs/globaloria/globaloria-in-wv>). The purpose in writing this paper was to describe the perceptions of teachers at three schools in the Globaloria Technology project. After reading a draft that other students had begun with Dr. Nicholson’s comments, I then began the research portion by reading through the reports and the blogs submitted by teachers in the Globaloria project at a private Google site. Although the paper remains unfinished at this point, a slide presentation sharing the big ideas was presented by Dr. Nicholson at the Globaloria Board of Directors meeting on September 9, 2010.

After taking Survey Research in Education, I was presented with the opportunity to co-teach Educational Psychology with Brenda Tuckwiller. Facilitating this course coincided with taking Theories, Models, and Research of Teaching, so connections were made between the two courses. The purpose of this course was to examine how educational psychology is applied to teaching and learning. After previewing the course during the spring semester as Dr. Fred Pauley was teaching it, Brenda and I originally were going to divide the workload but soon found it beneficial to both engage in reading and evaluating all of the work because of the different perspectives each brought to the course. She brought her background as a nurse and her experience in higher education while I brought my experience from being an early childhood/elementary undergraduate who had spent a career in public K-12 education.

We quickly learned the importance of making early connections with course participants. Being patient with students who are taking their first online course and those who have special needs was important because adult learners need to be supported in order for them to finish an online course (Park & Hee Jun, 2009). Correcting misconceptions, such as clarifying how teachers can lose their jobs, explaining how instructional strategies can be modified, and correcting how test results should be used were important. The ability to correct misconceptions will help in the dissertation stage of this journey.

Dr. Heaton, Amy Cottle, Yvonne Skoretz, Ashley Stephens, Hannah Toney, Kristy Wood, and I collaborated to develop the online course Global 21: Strategies for the Classroom, which I facilitated during the fall of 2009. This opportunity evolved as a result of interest in 21st century skills. Beginning with a project-based learning approach, I designed the module on health and wellness. From the experience teaching this course, I learned the importance of working together to make sure a project flows when different people design parts as a well-designed, collaboratively inspired online learning environment provides a more meaningful learning experience for both the learner and the teacher (Sorensen & Nurchu, 2004). Although facilitating online learning was not new, learning the importance of the design aspects of the course was.

These collaborative experiences contributed to personal and professional growth in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and leadership while honing skills as a scholar and a researcher from the first class when Dr. Fran Simone began creating a culture of collaboration as we worked together to improve our writing to our last class where Dr. Heaton, Dr. Nicholson, and Dr. Michael Cunningham worked with us to design a research project that would be of value to others. Throughout the coursework, collaboration made the journey more manageable as we shared knowledge, skills, and understanding to complete assigned tasks. Because of these collaborative experiences, I look forward to collaborating with my doctoral committee in the dissertation stage of this journey to deepen my understanding of curriculum, instruction, leadership, and research.

# Depth of Understanding

In addition to the depth of understanding gained through collaborative experiences in co-presenting, co-authoring, co-teaching, and co-developing, I gained a deeper understanding about curriculum, instruction, leadership, and research due to participation in the program of study designed for the cohort. These opportunities facilitated my growth as a scholar and researcher.

## **Curriculum and** Instruction

After studying curriculum development and the work of many curriculum theorists as well as theories of teaching, my personal theory of curriculum defined me as a combination of a progressive (Dewey, 2002), a phenomenologist (Grumet, 1992), and a traditionalist (Dewey, 2002). Curriculum should be child-centered and focused on an individual’s experiences so students are allowed input. Instruction should be inviting and relevant to the student by connecting new learning to prior knowledge and experiences while actively engaging learners in inquiry-based experiences that emphasize understanding and in-depth investigation with a focus on 21st century skills. The mission of schools should be to teach students how to learn in hopes they apply their knowledge for the good of society without losing the joy of learning (Jeynes, 2008) as they are confronted with unpredictable situations in the real world .

The most significant lesson during this program was my realization of the importance of making connections between formal education, work experiences, and personal/professional interests (Jalongo, 2002). In order to create the child-centered curriculum focused on individual experiences envisioned in curriculum theory, a teacher must get to know the experiences and interests of each student as advocated by John Dewey (Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2009), whose theories are as relevant today as they were in the past century. Dewey believed the real world experiences of the child makes learning meaningful and worthwhile (Hewitt, 2006). He also believed students should engage in cooperative inquiry into social and academic problems that involve creative and critical thinking skills (Ediger, 1997) within classrooms organized as mini-democracies (Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2009).

Curriculum Development reinforced the importance of students connecting new learning with prior knowledge and experiences (Hewitt, 2006). Learning the importance of helping students uncover the connections within the curriculum as well as the connections they make to the curriculum (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2004) was important in Curriculum Theories and Theories, Models, and Research of Teaching classes. Because learning is about making connections among the past, the present, and the future, one must understand the connections students have with the knowledge they construct from their world in order to lead them to new possibilities (Brown, 1992).

Technology and Curriculum demonstrated how technology can make the curriculum more relevant to students (Coppola, 2004; Tapscott, 2009) and showed how to make connections between students’ formal education and their lived experiences by connecting the technology tools students use in their lives outside of school with the curriculum presented in schools. In order to accomplish this, connections must be made between their lives in school and their lives outside of school, which was also the major lesson learned from Multicultural Education. Making these connections enables teachers to learn more about the students’ cultures (Banks & Banks, 2010). Social and Political Determinants of Curriculum stressed the importance of looking at the entire PreK through doctoral level education system when exploring the connections between policy cycles and institutional trends, which are often ambiguous and complicated (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

The key lessons I learned were to make connections among formal education, lived experiences, and personal interests. While traveling on this journey, connections were made among what was learned in the course work discussed above, my role as curriculum facilitator in my professional life, and my interest in curriculum and instruction. Knowing the importance of making connections between theory and practice will help in conducting meaningful research during the dissertation stage.

## **Educational Leadership**

Based on the learning acquired in educational leadership classes, I define leadership as a reciprocal relationship of influence among participants who work collaboratively to construct and negotiate meaning, facilitate learning, and develop shared responsibility for the attainment of the shared purpose. Many opportunities to clarify exactly what those words mean have been provided. During Principles of Leadership I read a lot about leadership. During Administrative Theory I researched post-industrial leadership and the work of Joseph Rost. Rost (1991) supported this learning when citing leadership as a relationship of influence with leaders and followers influencing each other in an attempt to make change that reflects mutual purposes. Entering the program with strong ideas about the importance of teacher leadership, the coursework and collaborative experiences opened my eyes to the role the administrator plays in developing teacher leadership. As a leader one must acquire the knowledge, skills, and understanding necessary to collaborate successfully as the leader moves from being the sole decision maker to involving other stakeholders in decision making (Slater, 2005).

Adult and Continuing Education class provided an appreciation of the importance of creating a climate where people want to collaborate (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Institutional Advancement provided an awareness of the importance of advancing institutional goals by making connections with people to develop shared responsibility (Maxwell, 2003) while Politics in Education provided insight into the role political power structures play in the development of a reciprocal relationship of influence (Spring, 2005). Through class readings and discussions, Ethical Theories and Administrative Theory provided a deeper understanding of the importance of critical reading and critical thinking. Macedo’s (1993) “Literacy for Stupidification: The Pedagogy of Big Lies” aided in the depth of understanding because of its emphasis on critical reading and critical thinking. As Macedo indicated, without the ability to read critically, one is subject to manipulation because of an inability to see the whole truth as well as the reasons and links behind the truth.

Although all of these lessons were valuable in deepening my understanding of educational leadership and will be of value in the dissertation stage of this journey, the lesson that will be of most value is the one addressing the importance of critical reading and critical thinking. It will be essential to read and think critically during all aspects of the dissertation process: developing a problem statement, reviewing the literature, identifying methods, and interpreting findings.

## Research and Support

During the research and support phase of the doctoral journey, many valuable lessons were learned. I acquired a deeper understanding of the Institutional Review Board process, the qualitative research process, and how to develop and conduct a survey as well as input the data obtained into SPSS or PASW. These lessons will help in the dissertation stage of this journey.

Beginning with Survey Research Design in Education, I experienced the online Institutional Review Board process under Dr. Ron Childress’ guidance and the knowledge gained was immediately applied by helping a classmate through the Institutional Review Board process during Qualitative Research in Education. An opportunity for independent practice emerged when Dr. Cal Meyer, Kristy East, and I collaborated on developing and administering the Graduate School of Education and Professional Development Survey. The purpose of this survey was to collect data about the satisfaction level of graduate students with the bookstore, the Office of Graduate Records and Admissions, the library, and other student services at Marshall University’s Graduate School of Education and Professional Development.

Again, with guidance from Dr. Childress and Dr. Nega Debela, I learned the value of mixed methods. I experienced how qualitative research methods can be used to expand on quantitative data when doing the research projects for these classes. Although understanding the connections between the numbers and what they meant began in Dr. Edna Meisel’s Statistical Methods class, mixing qualitative and quantitative methods helped me develop a more complete understanding of the information.

In addition to learning how to develop and conduct a survey, Dr. Childress guided me through inputting data into SPSS from a remote location. Still needing to learn about which reports to run to get the information needed, Computer Analysis provided the information and additional practice inputting data into PASW, running different reports, and discussing what the data meant. These opportunities helped deepen my connections between the statistics and finding meaning.

Being able to navigate the online Institutional Review Board process, having knowledge of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and being able to input data into SPSS and PASW as well as analyze it will be valuable knowledge in the dissertation stage of this journey. As a result of the coursework and portfolio opportunities provided, the knowledge base and research skills have been developed to design and conduct an independent research project that will add to the current knowledge base. A problem grounded in a synthesis of the literature will be identified, such as investigating how often students are thinking critically about what they are reading. Appropriate research questions will be developed, and variables will be identified before determining whether the appropriate research design method will be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. Once the research is conducted the results will be interpreted and shared.

## Doctoral Seminars

The Doctoral Seminars each semester deepened my understanding of what to expect as a doctoral student progressing through the process. These seminars facilitated making connections with other doctoral students and faculty. During each doctoral seminar guidance was provided relative to where one was on the doctoral journey from choosing a chair to choosing the regalia for graduation. My participation on a panel that discussed delivering presentations during the Spring 2009 seminar provided the opportunity to share information and experiences with other doctoral students. Tina Lou Edwards and I manned a learning center that shared information about the portfolio paper during the Fall 2010 seminar when participants could choose the learning center where they felt they needed additional information on topics that would help them on their doctoral journey. The Spring 2011 seminar provided additional time to connect with my doctoral chair and committee.

The doctoral seminars contributed by providing the opportunity to make connections among curriculum, instruction, leadership, and research beyond those offered through course requirements as well as the opportunity to make connections with other students beyond those in the cohort. Realizing growth must continue I look forward to increasing my depth of understanding of curriculum, instruction, leadership, and research as I begin work on the dissertation.

# Scholarship

Although many lessons were gained from all of the aforementioned collaborative experiences and opportunities to deepen understanding, two courses that added most to my personal and professional growth include lessons learned through scholarship opportunities during Writing for Publication and Program Evaluation. I learned perseverance during Writing for Publication and the importance of evaluating programs during Program Evaluation.

The most valuable lesson, as I complete this reflection paper and begin the dissertation stage, is one of personal growth. The lesson of perseverance learned during Writing for Publication resonates personally because I had not been accustomed to spending so much time on one piece of writing. Spending time revising a manuscript over an extended period of time helped develop the skill of perseverance as did requiring that a manuscript be submitted for publication. One must be willing to persist in revisiting a manuscript again and again, so that the intended message is communicated clearly and concisely. By being required to submit a manuscript for publication, I learned to apply the skill of perseverance while navigating the publication process.

The lesson of most importance to professional growth came from Program Evaluation. During Program Evaluation, I developed a proposal to evaluate the mathematics program at Clay County Middle School because students with disabilities were not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) in mathematics. The purpose of the research was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the program as well as identify ways to improve the program’s effectiveness. In addition to learning how to use a logic model (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004) to frame the evaluation of a program, I learned how comprehensive program evaluations evaluate in terms of need, design, implementation, impact, and efficiency (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). As curriculum facilitator at Clay County Middle School, a school not making AYP, there is a constant bombardment of new programs promising to help schools improve student learning and make AYP. To evaluate each program well requires a great deal of time and effort. Because of the time factor, programs are not evaluated as often as they should be, but if one is interested in improving student learning, the time and personnel resources necessary for program evaluation must be allocated instead of pretending the same solutions will fix all schools.

Pursuing this degree strengthened personal and professional growth through learning the importance of perseverance and the importance of evaluating programs fully. I will carry these lessons with me into the dissertation stage of this journey.

# Research

I gained many lessons from research experiences. The first is that the researcher cannot control the study once that person is out of the setting. Another is the importance of connecting theory, prior knowledge, and practice while honoring what others contribute. A third is the importance of conducting research that will provide meaningful results to users of the information. These lessons will help in the dissertation stage of this journey.

During Research Design in Education, I proposed a study to examine the effects of teacher certification on student achievement in mathematics by comparing the achievement of a group of students whose teacher was certified with a group of students whose teacher was not certified. The idea was for the non-certified teacher to facilitate the use of a computer software program to deliver individualized instruction to students. I learned that a program is only as good as the teacher implementing it. I also learned that a researcher has no control over whether the teacher implements a program with fidelity to the model, which leads to the next lesson.

The next lesson I learned was the importance of connecting theory, prior knowledge, and practice while honoring what others contribute. Understanding the importance of this lesson became clearer in Adult Learning and Continuing Education. After studying an agency charged with connecting theory, professional development, teacher practice, and student learning, the lessons I learned should have been applied when designing the research project mentioned above. By connecting theory and practice as well as recognizing the knowledge, skills, and understanding the non-certified teacher could contribute I could have increased the likelihood that the research design would have been followed more closely.

I expanded on the importance of honoring what others can contribute to the research process, when collaborating with Dr. Meyer and Kristy East on developing and administering the Graduate School of Education and Professional Development Survey. Researching similar surveys administered at other institutions provided the background knowledge necessary to discuss what kinds of information would be most beneficial to the users of the information gathered through the survey. I interviewed a representative from the Office of Graduate Records and Admissions as part of the survey design process to identify the kinds of information that would be most beneficial to the admissions staff. This helped ensure that the data collected would yield meaningful results to the users of the information.

From these research experiences, I learned to appreciate the value and importance of the aforementioned lessons. Although a researcher cannot completely control a study, it is the job of the researcher to control as many of the factors as possible while conducting meaningful research. These lessons will help in the dissertation stage of this journey.

# Conclusions

In conclusion, the opportunities presented through this program have deepened my knowledge, understanding, and skills relative to curriculum, instruction, leadership, and research through engagement in scholarship and other academic pursuits in collaboration with the faculty at Marshall University’s Graduate School of Education and Professional Development and peers. After reflecting on the experiences afforded thus far by this program, the theme of making connections resonates with me because being part of the cohort afforded the opportunity to make connections with people from different walks of life. These connections began with the peer editing groups assigned during the first meeting of the first class. These strong, robust connections enabled a cohesive network of support that facilitated our learning as we attempted to grasp concepts and ideas presented in each class (Pilbeam & Denyer, 2009). Finding connections between the classes I took each term and classes taken previously, also facilitated my learning. The theme of making connections also resonates with both my personal curriculum theory and my personal learning theory.

Because writing the dissertation can be viewed as “constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge, connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting concepts, describing and re-describing our views of the world, as well as shaping, mis-shaping and reshaping ideas,” (Badley, 2009, p. 211), it is the logical next step for me in this journey of making connections.

Connections have been made with the knowledge, skills, and understandings in terms of content and research for me to move forward to the dissertation stage of this journey. Reflecting on the journey thus far has encouraged me to look to the future. With the belief that curriculum should be child-centered and focused on an individual’s experiences, I am concerned that current reading instruction is not inviting and relevant to the student and that person’s experiences, thus creating a generation of students who choose not to read for pleasure or to think critically about information presented. I am interested in studying the extent to which students are reading and thinking critically about what they read. With this deeper understanding and the connections made thus far, I am ready to proceed to the dissertation stage of this program thanks to each person who has contributed to my personal and professional growth as a scholar and a researcher.

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