**Creating a Painting: A Reflection of My Journey to EdD Candidacy**

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The art of painting with acrylics is a talent that is developed through years of practice. The ability to turn a blank canvas, a few paint colors, and brushes into a beautiful work of art is not something that can be learned or taught without extensive trial and error. It is a hobby that is both frustrating and gratifying.

I picked up a paint brush for the first time in May 2012. I had just begun the EdD program at Marshall and wanted a hobby that would help relieve stress. My first painting was of a flower pot on a table. It was acceptable for a first attempt—at least you could tell what is was supposed to be. More importantly, it piqued my interest. I had created this painting without any guidance, what else could I create if I learned a few techniques?

Over the past two years, I have created a number of paintings. My artistic abilities have grown as I have learned and practiced. The same has been true in my doctoral program. With every semester of courses I completed, I became more competent as a student and more willing to try new experiences. Likewise, as I become more confident in my artistic abilities, I experimented with new techniques and increased my ability to transfer my imagination onto canvas. Over the previous eight semesters, I have developed a personal method for painting. Upon reflection, this method parallels my evolution through the doctoral program.

My method for painting consists of eight steps:

1. Prepare the foundation.
2. Block the background.
3. Underpaint and block the middle.
4. Add definition.
5. Paint the foreground.
6. Highlight and glaze the painting.
7. Incorporate the details.
8. Finalize and add accents.

These steps may appear completely linear, but they can be cyclical. At times, I will have to leave one step for another because a new idea has formed or a previously painted section does not look right.

When I first began painting, I thought I had to complete each step before moving onto the next. I also felt this way about my doctoral program. It was not until I grew experienced in both that I realized it was permitted and encouraged to go back, reassess, relearn, incorporate, and move on.

**Step One: Prepare the Foundation**

In painting, preparing the foundation means selecting the proper canvas, paints, and brushes. It also means learning enough about painting to select an appropriate subject, choose an appropriate palette, find the proper lighting, and being brave enough to try a new technique.

When I chose to apply to the doctoral program, my foundation had already been prepped. The edict in my family was that I had to obtain a bachelor’s degree or else. I never bothered to ask what the “or else” meant because I had wanted to go to college ever since I was nine-years-old, when I watched my Mother walk across the Ohio University convocation center stage to claim her bachelor’s degree. During the keynote address the speaker was awarded an honorary doctorate. I had whispered to my grandpa my confusion. How could a man who had no medical training receive a doctorate? My grandpa had quietly laughed and said the words that changed my world forever, “You can earn a doctorate in almost any field.” In this moment, I decided I wanted to go to college and become a doctor of something.

In 2003, I graduated with a bachelor’s in business administration. I did not have the drive or stamina to jump right into a master’s degree program, so I opted to take a year off and work. In 2004, I enrolled in the Professional MBA program at Ohio University. During the 22 month program I learned that I thrived in an academic environment. I graduated with my MBA in 2006 and wanted to find a doctoral program and start as soon as possible. However, I had also married and purchased a house in the same year; therefore, it was not financially feasible for me to continue with my education. Instead, I accepted a position with American Electric Power as a contract administrator. I missed the academic environment and wanted to obtain a doctorate, but the $50,000 annual salary I was making quickly squelched the desire.

From 2006 to 2010, I worked writing contracts, but I never felt fulfilled by my career choice. After many discussions with my husband and soul-searching, I resigned. I had faced a serious illness during this time that made me contemplate how important it was to enjoy life. We were in a better place financially, so I decided to accept a part-time instructor position at Central Ohio Technical College (COTC).

The very first course I taught was a post-secondary version of Introduction to Marketing. By the end of the ten-week quarter, I realized I loved teaching! The following quarter, I was asked to teach Introduction to Computers, in addition to the marketing course. Over the next year and a half, I taught several face-to-face courses in both post-secondary and higher education settings.

In 2011, my husband accepted a job in Charleston, West Virginia, and we relocated there. When I went to submit my resignation, COTC management laughed and told me I was not allowed to escape. Instead, they transitioned me to teaching all online courses. During the 2012 academic year, I taught marketing, management, introduction to computers, and team building online. From 2010 to 2012, I taught a total of 12 courses in both online and face-to-face formats. It was this experience that reignited my desire to achieve my doctorate, only now I knew I wanted a doctorate in education.

After arriving in Charleston, I started looking at doctoral programs offered in education. I talked to program coordinators from Marshall University, Ohio State University, and Ohio University. Even though Marshall University was the most convenient, I wanted to select the best program. This was going to take a few years to complete, and I wanted a worthwhile program that afforded me several types of learning opportunities. I applied for admission to Marshall University for the summer 2012 semester, and after a lengthy application process, was accepted. The foundation prepared, my doctoral journey was about to begin.

**Step Two: Block the Background**

The next step after preparing the foundation of a canvas is to block the background. When blocking the background, only the undertones and outlines of larger features are added. In seascapes, for example, a dark horizon line is added, some clouds are outlined, and waves are brushed in. No details are added at this time. Learning this step was very frustrating because I wanted to paint something and recognize it immediately. A blocked background will not resemble anything specific; it is just blending colors.

Blocking the background of my doctoral program was equally frustrating. I wanted to jump right in and learn how to make a difference in education. Instead, I had to learn what it meant to be a doctoral student.

My eyes were wide as I sat in *LS 703 Research Design*. Even though I was a graduate assistant, I was nervous to attend my first face-to-face doctoral course. Staring at the faces surrounding me, I knew I was not alone in my fear. “You’ll want to quit,” Dr. Cunningham warned us. “Not me!” I thought rebelliously. “I’ve wanted this for far too long!” I told myself with confidence.

During the first month of the doctoral program I learned many things about myself. I was a complete control freak. Between the Research Design and the Politics of Education courses, I felt like I had no control over anything, and I hated it! Research Design was a very structured course that was self-directed. I had to learn to let the research guide me; I could not force something out of nothing. Dr. Cunningham helped by reminding me every class that this was my journey and only I could see how to navigate though.

Dr. Yeager’s course was very structured and at the same time constantly changed directions. This approach to teaching was difficult for me as I am very much an organized, logical thinker. Additionally, coming from a business background, I had a hard time of just relaxing and enjoying the course.

By the end of the semester, I was an emotional wreck. My precariously stacked blocks were tumbling down around me! I felt like I had no control over this journey. This new world of education was confounding. I could not make sense out of what I saw. Much like blocking the background of a painting, I did not yet understand that this was a process. I was not supposed to understand everything yet; I had only just blocked the background.

**Step Three: Underpaint and Block the Middle**

The third step in my painting method is to underpaint and block the middle, and this is when the image begins to take shape. While things at this stage are still not completely clear, it is important to trust the process and believe that the end result will be a masterpiece.

The end of 2012 fall semester had left me questioning the doctoral journey; however, I held tight to the fact that many students had completed it before me. I felt woefully inadequate as a student, but I discovered several of my classmates felt the same way. I valued the opinion of these students and saw them as academic equals. If we all felt the same way, then perhaps this confusion was part of the process. I decided to let go of my misgivings and trust that the process would work.

My decision proved to be correct. Both the 2013 spring and summer semesters provided stability. During that spring I took *EDF 517 Statistics*, *LS 705 Administrative Theory*, and *ATE 714 Community and Technical College Curriculum Design*. Each of these courses strengthened my foundation. I am very comfortable with math, so the statistics course was my safe haven. Whenever I doubted my abilities, I could turn to this course for comfort. Administrative theory introduced the abstract ideas behind educational leadership; it was similar to business leadership, and that helped to integrate the new ideas with past knowledge. Curriculum design provided a foundation for teaching higher education courses. I had been a college instructor for over three years, but this course helped to bridge the gap between teaching and learning.

In the summer, I enrolled in *LS 747 Administration of Community Colleges*, *LS 745 Higher Education Law*, and *EDF 711 Survey Research*. These classes allowed me to see beyond the current point in my program and visualize the future. In the administration and law courses, we interacted with industry professionals, reviewed the current legal status of important issues, and learned what being a higher education leader entailed. For the first time, I was able to understand why the doctoral program was so intense. None of the information being taught was trivial; it would all be important at some point. Just like adding the underpaint and blocking the middle of a painting, the images had finally begun to emerge.

**Step Four: Add Definition**

When painting a landscape, there is always a period when I have an epiphany. This epiphany can be one of three things. First, I may realize that the painting is taking shape exactly as expected and continue. This rarely occurs. Second, I realize that the painting has taken on a life of its own. I accept the changes and alter the plan as necessary. This occurs most often. Third, I realize that the painting is not turning out as planned and no new idea has taken hold. In this case, I take a break or white-wash the canvas. This hardly ever occurs.

My epiphany typically occurs during the fourth step as I add definition to the painting. It is the definition that gives the painting life, spurring me to continue and finish the artwork. It is also at this stage that I experience a revival of the enjoyment that makes me want to paint.

This stage of my doctoral program occurred at the beginning of the fall 2013 semester. I was in the middle of an academically tough semester with *LS 707 Ethical Theories*, *LS 710 Principles of Leadership*, and *LS 725 Higher Education Finance*. For whatever reason, I had also agreed to be the chairperson of that year’s doctoral seminar and present a research project at the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration (SRCEA) annual conference.

Throughout this semester, I was challenged to truly understand the foundation of my core values in Dr. Nicholson’s ethical theories course. Our first assignment was eye opening, and asked us to explain where our moral values originated. Like most others in the course, I determined that my parents taught them to me. Wrong answer! It seemed that my core moral values were based in religion. I rebelled against this idea for half of the semester. I never considered myself a religious person, I do not even consider myself Christian—how could religion define my morals?

Somewhere between reading Aristotle and Nietzsche, I realized that despite my own preconceived notions, my morals were governed by the tenants of basic religion. Talk about a dramatic turn of events! I left each class meeting mentally fatigued. The walls of self-confidence I had built were beginning to crumble. I began to feel inadequate as a future educational practitioner; however, I fell back on my trust of the process. I knew Dr. Nicholson did not want to tear us down; she wanted to provide us with tools to create a stronger, more vibrant foundation.

Upon completing the course, I realized my foundation was strengthened. While the entire course contributed to my success, there were two specific experiences that remained with me. First, she taught us that we have a right to an opinion, but had better be able to support it with facts. Whenever we made a statement, she immediately began looking for holes. I learned to research every topic carefully, examining both sides. I learned to not argue with my heart, but with facts and figures. I learned how to look to primary sources for research, how to frame an argument, and how to debate. Even now, before I share an opinion I ask myself, “Could I defend this to Dr. Nicholson?” Sometime during all the talk about philosophy and morals, Dr. Nicholson helped me to become a researcher.

The second experience was reading *Allegory of the Cave* by Plato. I had never envisioned human beings as prisoners who can only see their own shadows in an underground den. Plato writes:

“…when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision…” (Plato, trans. n.d., 1).

This segment made me realize that education can be painful; the light from knowledge hurts our eyes. Furthermore, as a person becomes more educated, she has a responsibility to society. This education allows a person to understand situations better, to see beyond the shadows on the wall, and to have a desire to find the source. I wanted to become Dr. Hanna, but for the first time I realized what that actually meant.

My epiphany occurred when I reflected on the original doctoral program application process. I was required to write a reflection on why I wanted to join the program. The Marshall Doctoral Programs in Education brochure (2011) had said, “The mission of the Doctoral Program in Education is to prepare practitioners to be reflective, ethical educators and researchers who contribute to the field of education (p. 1).” I finally understood that being a doctor in the field of education was not about me. Becoming a doctor of education was not something to be jovial about; it was a serious lifetime commitment. It was about becoming a contributing member of an elite community of scholars that constructed arguments based on research and hard facts in an effort to better the field of education. It was at this point that I accepted the change and altered my journey. I stopped looking at myself as merely a student, and started viewing myself as a future practitioner.

**Step Five: Paint the Foreground**

I look forward to the fifth step because painting the foreground is my favorite part. I have laid the foundation, blocked the background, underpainted and blocked the middle, and added the details. If I am able to move onto the fifth step, then it also means I have had my painting epiphany, and I truly know how I want the foreground to look. This is one of the most fulfilling parts because the painting finally looks like a painting.

I began to piece together the foreground of my doctoral journey during the end of the 2013 fall semester. It was directly after I had the epiphany about what it meant to become a doctor of education. It makes sense that as I embraced the seriousness of the profession, I also accepted myself as a leader.

The first time I accepted the leadership mantle was as chairperson of the 2013 Doctoral Student/Faculty Seminar. This has been my most challenging and fulfilling leadership role to date. I had planned similar events in the past, but nothing of this magnitude.

I used the knowledge I had gained from past experience and courses, and set up the seminar committee with sub-chairpersons who would oversee the day-to-day planning. I was thankful for this decision when, in April 2013, I was admitted to the hospital. For two months I had limited involvement with the seminar planning; however, I had complete faith in my team.

Upon returning to active seminar duty, I discovered that the main session planning was mostly completed. There were several areas where I needed to step in and make decisions; however, the major tasks were covered. I had a moment of panic when it was announced that Edna Thomas and Cynthia Kolsun were retiring, and would not be active in the planning process. The moment I realized I had transitioned into a leader came when I informed the committee that, while our jobs would be more difficult, we would prevail. Even when I felt total panic, I presented myself as a calm and prepared leader. Inside I might be panicking, but I refused to let anyone else know.

On the day of the seminar, things did not go completely smoothly. We had issues with not enough food or coffee and several technological difficulties; however, the core part of the seminar went off without a hitch. I relied on my committee to handle the problems in their assigned areas as they arose, and I supported their decisions. After the seminar, I had several faculty and students tell me that the seminar was awesome. Dr. Eagle gave me a “job well done.” My favorite compliments came from the committee members who said, “We did a great job!”

After the seminar was completed, I refocused my efforts on the upcoming SRCEA presentation. I had been afforded the opportunity to join Dr. Cunningham’s West Virginia School Board Study and present the findings at the conference. The entire project was a massive learning experience. I was able to help design the survey, build the survey with Survey Monkey, analyze the quantitative and qualitative results, draft the proposal, share in writing the paper, and present at the conference. I learned how to conduct a research project from start to finish. In addition, we submitted our paper to the Southern Journal of Educational Administration. The editor of the journal returned our paper with suggested revisions. I worked with both Dr. Cunningham and Dr. Damron to make the revisions, and submitted the paper for publication.

This experience opened my eyes to the possibility that I was finally becoming an educational practitioner. For the first time, I had presented at a national conference and submitted a paper for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. These acts helped to solidify the idea that I was growing both personally and professionally.

These experiences also helped to shape my doctoral foreground. I was able to experience the types of activities that educational practitioners participate in and the preparation necessary to complete them. I had my first glimpse of the finished painting, and I loved it.

**Step Six: Highlight and Glaze the Painting**

Once the foreground of a painting is complete, it is time to begin the painstaking process of highlighting and glazing. This is when I “perfect” the painting by working on the details to make them stand out. This is by far the longest step, but it is very gratifying.

I am currently in this stage of my doctoral program, and have been since the end of the 2013 fall semester. Once the seminar and the SRCEA presentation were completed, I saw my coursework through a new set of eyes. Getting a taste of actual research and leadership only made me crave more. It was due to this craving that I threw myself into the rest of the *LS 710 Principles of Leadership* course.

Throughout the course we had already examined various leadership models. Many of the assignments required an analysis of model details and a written critique. By the last few weeks of the course, I realized that I did not subscribe to any single model. Instead, I preferred to merge three separate models into my own personal model of leadership.

Transformational Leadership is the foundation of my personal model. Hall, Johnson, Wysocki, and Kepner (2012) claim that to be a good leader, a person must have the knowledge and ability to help transform followers. This transformation does not happen through coercion or bribery, but occurs out of the followers desire to change (Hall et al., 2012). This desire is prodded along by a leader’s ability to influence and stimulate a follower’s intellect (Hall et al., 2012).

While transformational leadership is the foundation, it does have gaps. Sometimes despite a leader’s transformational efforts, a follower does not want to change or be inspired. When this occurs, the Transactional Leadership Model should be employed. Transactional leadership is the process of controlling, organizing, and short-term planning (Lai, 2011; Transactional Leadership Theory, n.d.). The idea is that the leader entices followers by offering something of value (Lai, 2011).

Finally, I believe that no personal leadership model is complete without acknowledging the importance of relationships. Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) considers how relationships between leaders/followers and followers/followers affect the working dynamics (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009; Truckenbrodt, 2000). In its simplest form, LMX argues that followers are destined to form subgroups and that these subgroups will alter a leader’s interaction with its members (Avolio, Walumbaw & Weber, 2009). These subgroups will fall into one of two categories: in-groups or out-groups; with in-groups becoming the trusted inner-circle (Lunenburg, 2010).

Transformational, transactional, and LMX theories complete my personal model of leadership. Together they provide me with a foundation to fall back on in any leadership situation. In addition, to my personal model of leadership, I was also asked to develop a metaphor of my leadership. This project morphed into a personal leadership crisis model that helps to put a leadership obstacle into perspective.

My crisis model uses the foundation of the Fujita-Pearson scale, also called the F-scale of tornados. The F-scale takes into account wind speed, level of damage, and damage type in its ratings. Similarly, when creating my Leadership Scale (L-scale), I took into account the amount of leadership oversight required to overcome an obstacle.

I have been asked by fellow students why I did not include Situational Leadership in my model; given that we are taught it is extremely important. I believe that the driving force behind the theory is a constant. No matter what leadership model we create for ourselves, we use different tactics depending on the situation. For this reason, I believe that Situational Leadership is implied within my theory because I specifically state that it incorporates various theories to tackle any situation.

Upon completion of the 2013 fall semester, I realized that I had some time built into my doctoral program to pursue additional professional experiences. I sought out a co-teaching experience and was able to help Dr. Edna Meisel teach EDF 517 during the 2014 spring semester. I had previous higher education teaching experience, but this was the first time I would be teaching graduate students.

Dr. Meisel made the experience very rewarding and enjoyable. I was able to develop rubrics for three of the assignments and apply them to students’ work. For the class’s final article assignment, I graded the work alone. During this time I had also accepted a part-time teaching assignment with the Adult and Technical Education Department at Marshall University, and I was able to compare these experiences. Several times, I discussed the differences with Dr. Meisel; I made recommendations for her course, and she made recommendations for mine. I felt more like colleagues exchanging ideas than a doctoral student completing an activity.

In addition, to the co-teaching experience, I also asked Dr. Cunningham if he would mentor me for another presentation at SRCEA. He agreed and asked me to come up with some possible topics. After reading some literature, I told him I wanted to conduct research on doctoral programs. I loved our portfolio requirement and felt that more programs should incorporate it in lieu or comprehensive exams. We brainstormed and settled on comparing doctor of education degrees with doctor of philosophy degrees (Ed.D. versus Ph.D. in education). I am currently conducting an abbreviated literature review and further narrowing the topic. It is my hope that I will be able to use this research as a starting point for my eventual dissertation topic.

**Step 7: Incorporate the Details & Step 8: Finalize and Add Accents**

Once the highlighting and glazing is complete on a painting, I must be patient and let it dry. Only when it is completely set can I incorporate the details before finalizing and adding the accents. Patience is something that I have learned while painting and while completing the doctoral program.

Over the past two and a half years, I have learned to be patient and enjoy the journey. The goal of painting may be a finished piece of artwork, but the process is what makes it worthwhile. Likewise, my goal may be to earn a doctorate, but the key is to enjoy the journey.

I have tried to expose myself to many different experiences and soak up every bit of knowledge. I have learned what it means to be a researcher and practitioner. I know that my paint is dry, and I am ready to incorporate the details by writing the prospectus. After that I will finalize and add accents by defending the dissertation. My time will be consumed—I accept this, I am ready for this. I will not rush through these last two steps, but will take my time to enjoy them. Once complete, I will stand back in awe of my masterpiece.

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