

Marshall University
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The Journey

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The Journey

Just as the sea moves in upon itself, feeding life, and information continuously into the flow and depth of its own creations, educational leaders and participants must reinvent themselves through continuous reflection on the experiences, beliefs, and values that give daily interpretations and meaning to their lives in schools. (Lambert, 1995, p. 197)

As I stop to record the meaning of my journey so that others can elicit a small picture of my experiences, I am humbled that my experiences could provide meaning to others. As a child born and raised in Southern West Virginia, I remember that friendly reminder that you don't brag on yourself. It isn't polite. Through my studies these reminders have given me freedom to understand my background and to grasp the beauty of the cultural heritage that surrounded me. Nelson Mandela quoted a wonderful poem in his Inaugural speech in 1994 which inspired me to share my own success.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us....Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. (Mandela, 1994)

This paper shares some glimpses into connections between my experiences as a doctoral student and my professional growth and development. The paper illustrates

personal growth, scholarship, and professional growth and development through reflection on my experiences. Mary Doll wrote, “Like a thief at the gates, the unconscious slips through the cracks of conscious control” (Pinar, 2000, p. 518). Journal writing allows for the understanding of self through the process of knowledge construction. Meath-Lang (1986) provides two arguments for using dialogue journals in teaching and learning. She suggests that the process allows students to use a greater variety of language functions and encourages them to assume responsibility for control of communication in their own voice (Pinar). As a result, I have also included writings from my journal to illustrate my understanding of self and construction of knowledge.

Personal Growth

What did I learn? I know that a continued quest for knowledge must include critical thinking and problem solving. Phenomenological inquiry focuses on human perception and experiences while recognizing the importance of the individual (Pinar, 2000). My phenomenological inquiry looks at my perception of the experiences that I have had and turns these perceptions into a critical evaluation of my learning. Great meanings for life can be found in story telling and in movies with reflection. The Matrix provided me a favorite line, “You can never see past the choices you do not understand.” Lifelong learning allows us to continue to see past what we do not understand. The more I know; the more I know that I don’t know. The processes of lifelong learning with gratitude and self assessment are described in this section.

Being a lifelong learner in the 21st Century requires active awareness and engagement of the learner in the community (Crick, 2005). Elliot W. Eisner wrote a descriptive statement to remind educators of the importance of autobiography and biography in

curriculum theory and understanding. “All experience is the product of both the features of the world and the biography of the individual. Our experience is influenced by our past as it interacts with our present” (Pinar, 2000, p. 515). My first teaching experience was a summer filled with teaching Red Cross swimming lessons to a wide range of students from youngsters to young adults. The little ones would follow me around the pool everyday and I always had the patience for each one. My love of teaching began and I followed that dream through college and my profession. My love of teaching was nourished and validated through this process. My deeper understanding of teaching as a service and an opportunity to give to others is treasure for my personal growth. Phenomenological theory suggests that the world must be accounted for by the experiences of human beings. Maxine Greene suggests that human consciousness moves people toward the world not away from it. Society must be presented through the processes of perceiving, judging, believing, remembering, and imagining (Pinar, 2000). This theory embraces society as we live and provides processes to change the way we live. The processes of self-understanding, reflection, and practical competence are used to promote understanding. Louise Berman provided words of wisdom to help me reflect on my own lifelong learning with gratitude. “Persons whose lives are embedded in gratitude for the gift of life and its possibilities can use conversation to share insights acquired in solitude, to transcend the mundane and humdrum and to become more caring human beings”(Pinar, 2000, p. 433). My journey has enhanced my gratitude for the other learners in the community in my quest for lifelong learning.

Patience and passion seem to keep me going. Crick (2005) states that the development of lifelong learning demands an attention to learn and the capacity to be

responsible for one's own learning (Crick, 2005). I have a passion for learning and a patience to make the plan and work the plan as responsibility for my own learning. This was my motto through the entire journey. Make the plan! Work the plan! These separate excerpts from my journal share my dedication to my motto and my intention to learn.

Fall 2004 *“Well, I have a serious motto that is keeping me going. Make the plan! Work the plan!”*

Fall 2004 *“I can't allow this inconvenience to ruin the plan that I have developed.”*

Fall 2004 *“I must admit my plan was disrupted.”*

Fall 2004 *“My shoes are filled with concrete and my mind is spinning. How can I do it all? Don't dwell on it all at once. Break it into chunks, day by day!”*

Organization, planning, constant assessment, and dedication to the plan allowed me to take the responsibility for my own learning and the development of my self-awareness to finish this part of the journey.

Self assessment and an enlightened understanding of multiple perspectives allowed me to look at myself differently. “Culturally responsive classrooms specifically acknowledge the presence of culturally diverse students and the need for these students to find relevant connections among themselves and with the subject matter and the tasks teachers ask them to perform” (Montgomery, 2001, p. 4). I never realized that I had accepted the stereotypical image portrayed of West Virginians' in my personal identity until this journey. I had just accepted the fact that other people, professionals, and states thought West Virginians' were not as good as they were and that you constantly had to prove yourself. That message still permeates many parts of the state and many of our children let this stereotype paralyze them. It sounds so simple and yet it is so important to

the growth and development of our children. This image stifles your courage to accept challenging opportunities. This personal revelation also helps me look at the feelings of other people in dealing with the stereotype label that may have been attached to them as they grew and developed. I have a better appreciation for others and a commitment to provide “meaningful, engaged learning for all students, regardless of their race, gender, ethnic heritage, or cultural background” (Shaw, 1997).

Lifelong learning with gratitude and self assessment are processes that made an impact on my journey. Of course, the processes of reflection, critical thinking and problem solving allowed me to determine these processes for elaboration.

Scholarship

Co-authoring a paper for submission for an International Conference with Dr. Lisa Heaton, Kim Sigman, and Michael Murphy was a wonderful learning experience.

“Relationships are the product of good management, good organization, proper accountability,...and a positive affection between pupil and teacher which enables each to give the other the space and consideration which nourishes mutual growth towards personal awareness” (Crick, 2005, p. 363). This section provides a look at my reflections on the process and some excerpts from my journal.

December 2004 *“I must say that I am flattered to work with such great folks! They will make me look good too! The camaraderie through this process has been phenomenal. A learning community has formed and I must play my part as well.”*

Keith Carreiro (1999) suggests that phenomenological framework in schools would include learning environments which intrinsically motivate students. This does not mean the rigor is removed from the lessons in schools, but that the climate of trust is

established. The school must hinge upon the realization that everyone is together for a shared journey of exploration. Constructive deliberation between students and teachers may occur in schools with this climate (Carreiro, 1999). These schools are “places where meaning is constructed through social interaction of people within the setting” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1994, p. 23). As I continued to develop trust and share my responsibilities with the group, the value of my motto in my continued growth and intention for learning was evident. Make the plan! Work the plan!

William Doll (Pinar) suggests that the schools will focus on dialoguing, negotiating, and interacting. These ideas will allow the school to focus on the process involved in schooling as opposed to the products in schooling and promote the negotiating with self and others. Schools will focus on playfulness allowing students to make meaning. Playfulness will allow dialogue, interpretation, and interaction. Participation allows students to make meaning through exploration in a nonhostile and nonthreatening environment (Pinar, 2000). The importance of dialoguing cannot be emphasized enough when working as a collaborative group. We met with Dr. Heaton and we talked about all of the requirements for the proposal as well as what each of us could bring to the table as an area of expertise. I have always believed in synergy but this group really illustrated the power possible. We made some decisions and agreed to communicate via the Internet. We emailed our work back and forth building a brief paper on multimedia from multiple perspectives. We had expert guidance and we revised, revised, and revised. I think we revised some more. Alas, we had a paper ready for submission for an International conference.

Collaboration is such a powerful process. The resulting product is much more dynamic when it comes from multiple perspectives. The membership in a community also brings a huge responsibility to the other members of the team and should not be taken lightly. For an individual to become a member of the community, the individual must understand the voice from within. Voice is discovered by trying to communicate meaning to someone else. "Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process...Voice suggests relationships: the individual's relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the individual's relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process" (Pinar, 2000, p. 525). Our group listened to the voice of all members of the community. My concern for the voices of the others is illustrated in my journal.

December 2004 *"We had all worked so hard to get the paper together with Dr. Heaton to submit for the proposal. Edit, edit, edit, and more edit. But alas, the paper was ready to submit. I must confess that I really stressed about being the one actually submitting the proposal after reading screen after screen about proposals not being accepted because of some small infraction of twenty million pages of submission rules up to and including the color of shirt of the person submitting the project!"*

This process included research by each member of the group to support the perspective illustrated in the paper. I found a new appreciation for the quality journal articles that I have read in the past. The work involved in producing a high quality product cannot be underestimated. I would not hesitate to collaborate on another paper as a result of this experience. I found the collaboration made the paper stronger with greater appeal to a reader.

Professional and Academic Pursuits

The first step to constructing a curriculum cannot be to decide what tidy package of facts a school will pass on to its students. Rather a school must decide the direction in which the course of events will flow-the place where, if the journey goes well, the students should emerge ready for another. (Cushman, 1996, ¶ 9)

Absorbing the words of wisdom from Cushman (1996), I wanted to look at course design in much the same way. I wanted students to emerge ready for the next journey and ready to move to another level. This section shares my experience of designing courses and teaching one of the courses through reflection and excerpts from my journal writing.

The process of designing an online course was not one that I had experienced before this opportunity. Dr. Heaton offered the opportunity to develop the course with me as a member of a team. I was excited and ready to begin. Dr. Heaton, Kim Sigman, and I met to talk about the design and we accepted the challenge. We would work alone and return to talk, review our work, and edit our product. This process continued with the guidance and vision from Dr. Heaton while Kim and I found our areas of greatest enjoyment in the project. I loved the design of the assignments and Kim loved the design of the web format. We all found areas of enjoyment and it made the project fun.

As I looked at the content in the course, I would wonder what I could design so that I would know the level of student understanding. High quality online courses are designed to require the engagement of students through analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Quality on the Line, 2000). Remembering the importance of inquiry, critical reflection, high expectations, connectedness, cooperative learning, communication, flexibility, problem solving, integration of content areas, meaningful purpose, choice, learning communities,

authentic assessment, and authentic meaningful experiences, I designed assignments that would illustrate these beliefs. I am a firm believer in modeling the ideas you are teaching. Constructivists create learning environments that are student-centered, student-directed, collaborative, supported by authentic tasks and based on the ideas of situated cognition. These learning environments must involve enhancing communication, real-world examples, reflective thinking, multiple perspectives, and modeling with mentoring relationships to guide learning (Karagiorgi, 2005).

December 2004 *“I must keep the vision going, thoughtful planning, and keep the big picture and the end result in mind. However, you can’t dwell on the whole plan at once. It is overwhelming to look at the enormity of the project that I have undertaken. So I simply keep breaking it into well organized chunks, multi-tasking several projects at once, and never allowing free time to be my goal. I must plan to accomplish something everyday no matter how small because those small steps lead to an entire journey. So I remind myself constantly, work the plan. Frustration, defeat, and negativity are not allowed. Hurdles keep popping up but I remind myself: make the plan, work the plan.”*

I would design ideas and Kim would make them look spectacular in the web format. We would all meet to review, edit, and enhance what we had. It looked so much different on the big screen as we read every word for content, understanding, and value to the course. This experience makes you realize that understanding it yourself does not make it clear to the reader. Such a large product needed many eyes to assure the quality of the product. Since learning is social and knowledge evolves in human relationships, schools must be safe places where experiences can be shared. The school recognizes students as philosopher, as visionary, and as self-in-process (Wickersham, n.d.). I learned the value

of the quality control issue as we shared the development process that we used. When we finally thought the product was ready, Dr. Heaton had two other students test the course. I was anxious to see if we had been successful in our product. The process continued until we met with the field testers and made the suggested corrections from them.

The process highlighted the need for quality control in developing online courses. Since the delivery is not face to face, it is vitally important to have input from multiple sources for clarity in understanding. Collaboration is a beautiful word for describing the experience I had with this group. It was non-threatening and allowed each person to share ideas with personal regard from every member of this group. I would be naive to think all collaborative groups work like this but I have nothing but gratitude for this group.

January 27, 2005 *“Whoa! I certainly felt good when I read the section on design about working as a team. Dr. Heaton, Kim Sigman, and I made an awesome team. I hope the others felt that way as well. When we would meet, we worked to make the best product possible without any power struggles. It was incredible.”*

My next opportunity was to teach the course that we had designed with Dr. Heaton as my mentor. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) suggests that faculty members should be assisted when beginning online instruction and mentored during the progression of the online course (Quality on the Line, 2000). I was delighted and anxious to see if our design would really accomplish what we wanted. I was in constant contact with Dr. Heaton during the semester to gain advice and guidance in the new online format of teaching. This provides a great insight for me concerning a mentor for new online teachers. By definition a mentor guides and supports which a new online teacher really needs.

As a teacher, I like to think of the learner as a whole person and working toward self-actualization. Doll (Pinar, 2000) explains that teaching will occur within the interaction of order and chaos, closure and openness, form and freedom. He suggests that teaching must use a curriculum which is rich, recursive, relational, and rigorous. The teacher must create layers of meaning to allow disequilibrium to stimulate learning in the student. The teacher must promote dialogue, interpretations, hypothesis generation and proving, and pattern recognition. The process of reflection is necessary to explore and make meaning (Pinar). Learning is an active process where the learner constructs new ideas and concepts using logic, reflection, intuition, intellect, feelings, concepts and experiences, ideas and meaning, as well as head, heart, and soul.

January 27, 2005 *“My thoughts are whirling around about teaching this online class. Know thyself! That comment in life is also one of the first tips in teaching online groups. I think that I do know my philosophy in teaching and that I have strong beliefs in the constructivist philosophy.”*

I always want to think of myself as a member of a learning community.

An educated person, first and foremost, understands that one’s way of knowing, thinking, and doing flow from who one is. Such a person knows that an authentic person is more than a mere individual, an island unto himself or herself, but a being-in-relation with others and hence is, at the core, an ethical being. (Pinar, 2000, p. 428)

January 27, 2005 *“I even think that I read that we are all learners. Speaking of which, I am certainly a learner as far as mastering the environment of Vista in the instructor’s view. Everyday I learn something. Time management is the key for me. Today I found the*

submission screen from the dropbox. I did not notice an icon that I had files located there already but received a question from a student about her submission. I am trying to learn how to manage the online environment with the demands of being emotional guardian, encourager, and promoter of the learning community as well as provide feedback to learners about their assignments while reading and responding to all discussions and mail. Who said it was easier to teach online? I didn't say that!"

Emotional guardian and encourager are jobs that I consider very important. Using and providing multiple views for learners provides a rich learning environment and encourages multiple learning styles and multiple representations of knowledge (Kafai & Resnik, 1996).

February 3, 2005 *"I have had a couple of students express concern about the online format. I am trying to be encouraging to them. I told one student not to worry that we were in the endeavor together. I also think it is important for the instructor to encourage students to share experiences to reveal multiple perspectives and make discussions richer because the instructor does not know everything. I also believe that continued reminders of my availability to answer any questions would clear up any misunderstandings about requirements."*

April 7, 2005 *"I have found that I want to teach this again. I have read so many wonderful ideas and have gained the perspectives of teachers in pre K to high school on using the Internet. The teachers adapt the ideas and provide their perspectives. This has been very impressive."*

The opportunity to teach this class also provided me the opportunity to grow in my content area through the interaction with so many students online. The teachers and

students are learners together. Inviting one's consciousness and awareness to the field of learning is necessary for potential to flourish. The teacher must create an enjoyable and caring experience of learning (Carreiro, 1999). We are all learners.

As I think of this first online teaching experience, I value the design team, my mentor, my experience, and the students from the course. I studied the online course evaluations to improve the quality of the course as well as my own work. Continuous improvement through self assessment is a must in the teaching and learning process. My favorite personal comment from a student confirmed many of my beliefs about encouragement and high expectations. "Dixie Billheimer was an awesome, very responsible teacher. She responded to assignments with meaningful comments, and was compassionate when I goofed up. I really appreciated the ability to correct assignments..." (Exit Survey Results).

As I come to the end of this journey and prepare for my next journey, I must say that I am ready. My experience as a doctoral student spiraled through my experience as a professional in my job. Aoki (1984) suggests that reflection must probe deeper than language to the motives and assumptions. "Reflection is not only oriented toward making conscious the unconscious by discovering underlying assumptions and intentions, but it is also oriented toward the implication for action guided by the newly gained consciousness and critical knowing"(Pinar, 2000, p.426). I am ready for a new journey as a result of my newly gained consciousness and critical knowing. I also must proclaim my gratitude for your expert guidance in my journey and my appreciation for your continued support.

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