A Journey through the Labyrinth of Doctoral Studies

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King Minos of Crete commissioned Daedalus, a gifted architect, to construct an intricate labyrinth. Its purpose was to house a beastly monster known as the Minotaur and it was a daunting challenge for anyone who dared to navigate through the mazelike passages. This story, a product of Greek mythology, has been passed down for thousands of years. The legend is a fitting analogy for understanding how I experienced the doctoral program. This essay will use the idea of a labyrinth to reflect on my portfolio projects, coursework, and educational leadership philosophy.

Daedalus was a popular character within Greek mythology and was revered for his keen intellect, ingenuity, and skilled craftsmanship. He was clearly the best person for the job of constructing the labyrinth. His qualities are mirrored by the faculty members who have constructed a challenging doctoral program because the requirements are daunting and rigorous – much like a labyrinth. Daedalus built his labyrinth in a way that made it possible, albeit unlikely, for someone to escape it. Theseus is the best known character to have escaped because he used a ball of thread to mark his way through the winding maze, always remaining mindful of where he was going and where he had been. The threads that mark my journey through the doctoral program are represented by collaboration, understanding, reflection, scholarship, communication, and research. My portfolio projects and coursework were opportunities to excel in each area while developing my educational leadership philosophy.

Portfolio Projects

Theseus made his way through the labyrinth with an aggressive attitude. He was looking for challenges and stood ready to confront them. Like Theseus, I aggressively sought portfolio projects during my first semester in the program. My first attempt at a portfolio project was to

partner with Brandon Nida, a doctoral student of archaeology at U.C. Berkeley, to write a manuscript on the history of Blair Mountain, WV. We conducted extensive research, visited historical sites, engaged in participatory archaeology, and our work was subsequently published as a book chapter in a reputable labor history series (Nida & Adkins, 2011). Reflecting on this experience has allowed me rethink some of my assumptions about how collaboration, research, and scholarship can occur over great distances. Brandon and I completed most of our project while living on opposite sides of the continent and this provided me with some insight into how distance education can be effective. I entered the program with a strong bias in favor of institutions that focus on face-to-face instruction. However, this collaborative endeavor allowed me to recognize that effective education can occur without the labyrinth-like constraints associated with brick and mortar institutions. I now remain open to teaching online courses in the future whereas I had previously thought such teaching was not reputable for educators.

I aggressively sought other portfolio opportunities and my second semester in the program was distinguished by collaborating with Dr. Calvin Meyer. We attended the Middle Level Teacher Symposium in Boone, NC in May of 2010. We presented separate research projects and provided mutual support. Dr. Calvin Meyer, Dr. Fran Simone, and Dr. Linda Spatig were mentors for my project called "Challenges Facing Public Education in Afghanistan: Examining the State of Middle Level Education." I prepared a lecture, manuscript, poster, and brochure for the conference and my manuscript was web-published in conference proceedings by the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education (Adkins, 2010). Looking back on this experience, I see it as a good example of effective communication through multiple media options. This activity would serve as a model for how to execute future portfolio activities.

My effort to build a portfolio continued as I coauthored a research-based manuscript with

Dr. Linda Spatig, Paula Flaherty, and Tracy Bradley during the fall semester of 2010. The

manuscript was prepared for the West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community Wellbeing

and served as an internal document. The title of our manuscript was "Getting It Together: A

Learning Model of Community Collaboration." This paper was submitted to the *Journal of*

Ethnographic and Qualitative Research on June 3, 2011. This project allowed me to connect the

qualitative research methods I had learned in class (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to practice. I

collaborated with the research team through a series of meetings and email communications. My

role was to examine extant data documents and write a section in the manuscript about the key

elements of the financial resources for the West Virginia Partnership to Promote Community

Wellbeing. My analysis followed Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) recommendation to look for

patterns, phrases, and words that stand out. Unlike my other portfolio activities, I did not know

anything about this subject prior to my involvement in the project. I was initially lost within my

own labyrinth of data but I kept looking for the types of patterns described by Bogdan and

Biklen (2007) until I began to view the data in a way that allowed me to describe successes,

challenges, and considerations for future practice.

I also coauthored a proposal for submission and co-presented a research project at the

23rd Annual Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference in Cedarville, Ohio with Dr.

Linda Spatig. Our presentation was given on June 4, 2011 at Cedarville University and the title

of our presentation was "Collaborative Learning and Engagement: A Learning Model of

Community Partnerships." I was tasked with discussing one part of a multi-component model.

Looking back, I remember extensively rehearsing for the verbal presentation. I was allocated a

specific amount of speaking time and it took a considerable amount of practice to stay within that

time. This experience is consistent with the adaptive nature of the contingency theory of

leadership because my response was framed by the requirements specific to that situation.

Fiedler (1967) noted that leadership is often a response to the conditions of a situation and his

model maintains that the nature of any leadership action stems from those contextual variables.

For the conference presentation, our variables consisted of a topic and an allotted time. Our

efforts were in line with Fiedler's (1967) theory to the extent that we reacted appropriately to the

variables because we were able to articulate our ideas within the allotted time. However, our

approach was also consistent with an important recommendation for educational leaders to

extend their influence (Danielson, 2007). In this sense, the act of going to the conference and

presenting our ideas was an act of leadership because it was an attempt to extend our influence

through a scholarly presentation.

I had the opportunity to return to Cedarville University the following year to participate

in a poster presentation for the 24th Annual Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference.

Dr. Spatig and I developed a poster presentation called "Public Education in Afghanistan: A

Case for Qualitative Research" and it occurred on June 2, 2012. The variables for this

presentation were different but, consistent with Fiedler (1967), they shaped the approach for how

we attempted to extend our influence. In this case, we were allocated poster space and a time slot

to discuss the poster with conference attendees. We had little control of the criteria for the

presentation but we maximized control of the way we created and discussed the poster. Thus, our

efforts and product were consistent with the contingencies set by the situation. This experience

also shaped the way I would organize such an event if given the opportunity. I was disappointed

in the short amount of time (a matter of minutes) the poster was allowed to stay on the wall. If I

am involved in organizing a conference, I will make an effort to allow the participants to keep

their posters on the wall for the duration of the conference as to allow maximum exposure.

One of the most challenging portfolio projects was to co-teach CI-677 (Writing for

Publication) with Dr. Fran Simone during the spring semester of 2012. This was a difficult task

because of the time-consuming nature of reading and responding to a number of student

manuscripts. However, this process was beneficial because it allowed me to sharpen my

analytical skills and gain hands-on experience with teaching in a higher education setting.

Moreover, the teaching experience was an important part of my journey because it allowed me to

contribute to enhancing the writing skills of a new group of doctoral students. They, too, were in

search of clues for how to navigate through the maze of doctoral studies and I did my best to

provide helpful advice and encouragement. When I reflect on my co-teaching experience, I

realize how much it is similar to the participant observation continuum described by Bogdan and

Biklen (2007). It was a challenge to determine exactly how much observing and commenting to

do. Teaching is similar to participant observation because teachers must observe and listen to

their students to determine how they are progressing with the coursework while at the same time

participating in discussions aimed at strengthening students' knowledge and skills. However, it

was a challenge to determine when to stop observing and start participating in discussions held

within the writing groups. Through trial and error, I eventually learned how to balance my

observations with feedback. My leadership was manifested by negotiating these factors in much

the same way Fiedler's (1967) theory recognizes leadership as a response to specific

opportunities. I observed the students and waited for the right opportunity to provide feedback.

My most broadly collaborative portfolio experience occurred during the summer of 2012 when I joined a paleontology research cohort under the supervision of Dr. Suzanne Strait. The group consisted of researchers from the Smithsonian Institute, Marshall University, the University of Florida, and the City University of New York. We worked together to locate, identify, and extract fossils in addition to attending a paleontology symposium at the Washakie County Museum in Wyoming. Joining this cohort provided me with an opportunity to see how the noted higher education institutions worked together to advance the state of scientific knowledge. I also gained insight into the changing nature of grant funding for such projects and the implication of that for future practice. Grant funding for paleontology fieldwork has diminished during the last decade and this has prompted greater collaboration between institutions. For example, my cohort stayed in the same camp, as opposed to establishing the traditionally separate camps for each institution, because only one institution had grant funding to cover in-camp expenses. Financial resources are becoming scarce and this has forced institutions to share funding. Moreover, the latest grants are awarded based on intellectual merit and the broader impacts of the proposed projects. The inclusion of broader impacts is a relatively new requirement for paleontology funding. Moreover, some of the new grants are requiring educational outreach components and these requirements can create opportunities for higher education professionals with backgrounds outside of the natural sciences to contribute their expertise to the grant-writing process.

Coursework

The coursework was a formidable obstacle for progression through the doctoral program. Like the legendary labyrinth, there were a myriad of possibilities and options. The process of

figuring out the best combination of courses to take was similar to one of Theseus' methods of finding his way through the labyrinth. He received some guidance from Daedalus, the labyrinth's creator. I leveraged the same type of guidance from doctoral faculty members and we worked together to chart my path through the program by establishing a program of study. I pursued coursework with an aggressive spirit commensurate with the ethos of Theseus and frequently maintained full-time enrollment. The doctoral faculty members have different styles of teaching and they focus on different content areas. The diversity of the pedagogy and the wide range of content forced me to adapt to the specific demands of each individual course. This adaptation is similar to the leadership approach for the contingency model of leadership because Fiedler (1967) noted that skilled leaders often modify their approach to fit the situation.

Area of Emphasis

Theseus was tasked with communicating to a specific audience through the use of black and white sails. He made arrangements for his ship to fly white sails as long as he remained alive and black sails to mourn his death. His father, King Aegeus, often stood atop a cliff and watched for the ship carrying Theseus to return. One day, King Aegeus noticed the ship approaching with black sails and, with a grief stricken heart, he jumped off the cliff. The sea became known as the Aegean Sea but the tragic part of this myth is that Theseus was alive. He simply forgot to communicate the message and used the wrong sails. This story highlights the importance of sending the right message at the right time.

Communication skills are important for educational leaders because they are expected to discuss a wide array of ideas with diverse audiences. These skills are often the hallmark of a successful professional. Since writing is a primary mode of discourse for higher education

leaders, especially via publication, three courses were selected to establish an area of emphasis in writing. They were CI-677 Writing for Publication, CI-551 Writing to Learn/Content Area, and HUMN-604 Expository Writing for Research. The unifying element across all three courses is the notion that every manuscript should be tailored to the intended audience and fit within a particular context. If an author fails to consider the audience then a manuscript may not have the intended effect. Each of the selected courses was taught by Dr. Fran Simone and they equipped me with the confidence, competence, and experience to engage in professional writing activities and successfully navigate through the doctoral program.

Reflecting on my area of emphasis, I now see writing as a way to practice leadership through extending my influence as recommended Danielson (2007). Writing is a leadership tool that I can use to influence and inform others and I will recommend this area of emphasis to new doctoral students because it has effectively prepared me for the upcoming task of writing a dissertation.

Challenging Coursework

I experienced challenging coursework at every turn and each course posed a new trial. Like the passages of a labyrinth, some courses overlapped and others went in opposite directions. I found the key to my academic survival was the ability to adapt to any given course, teaching style, or assignment. My approach to completing the coursework mirrored my approach to completing the portfolio activities because I adapted to the variables in a manner consistent with Fiedler's (1967) theory. My most memorable challenges are best described within the context of gaining competency in three categories: qualitative research methods, argument development, and content knowledge.

The journey leading to my competency with qualitative research methods took place in EDF-625 (Qualitative Research) and EDF-626 (Advanced Qualitative Research). The former course taught me how to become a practitioner of this research in general and the latter course refined those skills and allowed me to demonstrate competence through a research proposal for a study in Afghanistan. The readings by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), Patton (2002), and Maxwell (2005) provided me with a foundation to connect my coursework to actual practice. For example, I served as a participant observer for an afterschool program for kids while enrolled in the EDF-625 course. This allowed me to practice gaining access, establishing a rapport, balancing the participant/observer continuum, writing field notes, and interviewing participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Patton, 2002). I began to look more at how qualitative research projects were designed while in the EDF-626 course and wrote a research proposal to conduct a foreign ethnography. My proposal followed Maxwell's (2005) recommendation to conceptualize a study by putting the basic elements in a graphic format to better understand their relationships with each other and I gave special emphasis to my goals, conceptual framework, research questions, and validity. This exercise equipped me with the skills I will need to begin writing a prospectus. Theseus became stronger throughout his journey within the labyrinth because of the challenges he encountered. Likewise, I became stronger with qualitative research methods through the challenges associated with the coursework.

Dr. Dennis Anderson's courses also allowed me to practice qualitative methods because I frequently called administrators from all over the country and interviewed them via telephone and email to get information for research papers. One of the most memorable interviews was with a high profile reporter for the L.A. Times. This was one the first instances where I used Spradley's (1979) technique of demonstrating ethnographic ignorance during the interview

process. For example, I extensively researched the Los Angeles Community College District

prior to the interview but I pretended not to know much about district. This allowed the reporter

to establish herself as the expert during the interview and this may have allowed her to feel more

comfortable with sharing information. The common element linking my qualitative research

experiences is a spirit of mobility because many of the activities required me to reach out to

people living in areas different from where I live. Sometimes this required physical travel and

other times it required a technological connection. Theseus enjoyed the ability to travel and learn

from his experiences. I, too, was able to make connections with people in remote locations with

the use of technology and learn from knowledgeable sources.

Skills associated with advancing an argument were honed in LS-705 (Administration

Theory) and LS-707 (Ethical Theory). The ability to understand and articulate complex issues

was the crux of the courses. A Socratic teaching style, small group collaboration, and meticulous

attention to the foundations of any given proposition created a challenging environment to

advance arguments. I began to connect this style of pedagogy to servant leadership because the

professor was a leader and a servant at the same time. Indeed, these courses mirrored the style of

dialog found in Greek mythology. The nature of the courses created an environment in which

everyone could make or break a proposition. This teaching approach sharpened my ability to

argue and this skill is critically important for surviving in academia. Theseus was known as a

clever hero because he was able to interact with his friends and foes in a manner that established

his credibility. Likewise, I expect to establish and defend my credibility through the dissertation

process. When I reflect on the LS-705 and LS-707 courses, I recognize the value associated with

the Socratic teaching style and I plan to use that approach to the greatest extent possible when

serving as an educator in the future. This method has withstood the test of time and I see it as a

tool that can be leveraged to develop other people. One of the responsibilities of leadership is to develop others by creating a learning environment (Amey, 2005). The Socratic approach creates such an environment because it allows students to take an active role to develop ideas for themselves as opposed to students merely serving as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 2009). The banking concept of education has been criticized because knowledge flows in one direction, from teacher to student, without any substantial form of collaboration. Moreover, the banking concept reinforces traditional notions of authority by diminishing the social agency of the students while placing the authority of the teacher on a pedestal. The Socratic style of teaching, as demonstrated in LS-705 and LS-707, shatters the paradigm set by the banking concept. I now understand educational leadership as a form of intellectual liberation associated with servant leadership because skilled teachers can serve their students by encouraging them to take an active role in the creation of knowledge. Theseus was also a liberator who served others. He was motivated to overcome the labyrinth and rid society of the frightful Minotaur. He embodied the principles of servant leadership because he focused on promoting a sense of community and service to others (Greenleaf, 1977).

The content knowledge for competency as an administrator of higher education was enhanced by the challenges associated with LS-725 (Higher Education Finance), LS-745 (Higher Education Law), and other LS courses that dealt with administration. One of the unexpected outcomes for the LS-725 course was it gave me the confidence to calculate and file my own income tax return. This was a feat never before attempted and I remember thinking the Internal Revenue service paperwork was a breeze when compared to the final exam in the course. The noted courses were especially difficult because I did not have any prior experience with the course content. I felt much like Theseus when he was inside of the Labyrinth because everything

was foreign to him and a new challenge always loomed around every corner. Like Theseus, I was able to overcome the challenges by adapting to the situation and this type of adaptation is an integral part of Fiedler's (1967) model of contingency leadership.

Student Collaboration

Theseus did not face his obstacles alone because he received some help from his friends. For example, Princess Ariadne provided Theseus with the ball of thread that he used to find his way out of the labyrinth and she helped conceal the sword he would use to confront the Minotaur. Additionally, special advice was passed from Daedalus, the labyrinth's builder, to Theseus regarding the best strategy for navigating it. Theseus' collaboration with other people contributed greatly to his success. Likewise, the doctoral program offered many opportunities for collaboration with both faculty and students. I participated in four group projects that fulfilled requirements for coursework and each of the projects exemplifies effective peer collaboration.

First, I partnered with John Yaun to give a presentation for LS-710 (Principles of Leadership). Our assignment was to discuss the organizations that employed us and describe how they used vision and mission statements. Accordingly, Mr. Yaun based his part on residence services and I based my component on the military. We focused on the role of leadership for creating vision and mission statements and found they should be shared with a broad audience, designed to gain support, and used as a compass to guide the organization (Headquarters Department of the Army, 2006). Second, a group of students consisting of Marc Ellison, Shannon Cottrill, Kelli Kerbawy, and myself participated in a research project for LS-760 (Politics of Education). We examined the politics associated with community colleges splitting from traditional universities in West Virginia. We approached the issue by following the

recommendation by Kirst and Wirt (2009) to determine how the resources shifted, who would

benefit, and who would be disadvantaged. Third, I worked with Amy Blankenship to develop a

long-term university budget for LS-714 (Administration and Organization of Higher Education).

Our approach to creating the budget was in line with the leadership philosophy described by

Beekun and Badawi (1999) because we followed their recommendation to look beyond assumed

boundaries and develop solutions that few people could imagine. We found that creativity and

innovation are important leadership characteristics that can be useful when solving budget

problems. Fourth, I worked with Brian Eerenberg to examine the Los Angeles Community

College District for LS-616 (Higher Education Governance). Our study used media reports,

institutional webpages, scholarly articles, and personal interviews as sources of data. Our

strategy for understanding the data was to employ the methods outlined by Easton (1965) by

examine the financial inputs and outputs of the district to understand how the political systems

operated. We took the additional step of revising our manuscript and submitting to a peer

reviewed journal.

The noted instances of student collaboration share the common element of mutual

support. We depended on each other to accomplish specific tasks in much the same way Theseus

depended on Princess Ariadne's ball or thread and Daedalus' advice. The collaboration process

allowed us to overcome formidable challenges because we were able to collectively bring our

talents to the table to advance our projects. Reflecting on these experiences, I realize I have come

to view student collaboration as a form of transactional leadership. Bass (1960) viewed

leadership as something that involves mutually beneficial transactions among people. In the case

of student collaboration, we each used our own unique talents and sought to capitalize on each

other's skills. This approach is compatible with Fiedler's (1967) contingency theory of

leadership because he recognized that different approaches are needed within different situations. For example, I demonstrated transactional leadership by agreeing to a complete a series of tasks and my peers would respond in kind to produce our papers and presentations.

Educational Leadership Philosophy

The synthesis of my portfolio experiences and doctoral coursework has reshaped my thinking about educational leadership. I began the program as a military veteran who served as a leader in combat and I was interested in enhancing leadership skills that could be used within the context of future civilian employment. The doctoral program provided me a wide variety of leadership experiences in addition to the information about leadership theories studied within the courses.

Fiedler's (1967) contingency theory of leadership emerged throughout my portfolio activities, especially through the process of adapting to situations, and it has influenced how I perceive leadership. His theory maintains that effective leadership occurs when a person's leadership is tailored to fit the specific needs of a situation. For example, military leaders will be most effective during combat by using an authoritarian leadership approach whereas educators would be more effective when using a participatory or collaborative approach. The same person could be an effective leader in each situation if the leadership style was adjusted to the situation. Khan (2005) recognizes the need for this type of adaptation and refers to it as adaptive leadership and modern leadership theorists assert that adaptation is a fundamental element of effective leadership (Northouse, 2001; Heifetz, 1994). This type of adaptation requires a person to develop a keen awareness of situational variables and Easton's (1965) systems theory can provide a framework for building this kind of understanding. Systems theory seeks to understand political

systems, like a university environment, in terms of defined inputs and outputs. The inputs consist of support and demands while the outputs consist of decisions and actions (Easton, 1965). Educational leaders are often social actors positioned in the middle of this system and they must understand these factors and maintain the ability to adapt to the situation as needed (Kirst & Wirt, 2009).

A leader's ability to adapt to and understand his or her environment is an essential, but not sufficient, element of leadership because a moral orientation is also needed. One of the weaknesses of Fiedler's (1967) contingency theory of leadership is its moral neutrality. For example, an effective higher education administrator could manipulate situational variables and adjust tactics in true Machiavellian fashion to achieve any end. The tendency to pick apart the variables in any given situation and respond to them individually has value for educational leadership but it is best applied within the context of a moral orientation. Bogardus (1934) asserted that leaders should maintain loyalty to a principle. The philosophy advocated by Paulo Freire (2009) has provided me with a moral orientation for educational leadership. Freire (2009) examined power relationships, pedagogy, and praxis within the context of critical theory to advocate for fundamental changes to education systems worldwide. Freire sought to liberate people through education by shattering monopolies of information and sharing in the construction of knowledge. He was the embodiment of transformational leadership because he sought to make the world a better place by fusing the roles of leaders and followers in an effort to promote morality (Burns, 1979). His goals were laudable and I have adopted a similar approach by establishing intellectual liberation as an overarching goal for my own leadership efforts.

Many years ago, I donned a maroon beret and served as a paratrooper in the U.S. Army. The crest on my beret was distinguished by the Latin phrase "De Oppresso Liber" which translates to "liberate the oppressed." I have come full circle with my ethos because my experiences in the doctoral program have led me to adopt a philosophy commensurate with Paulo Freire (2009), as articulated in his seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I now see education as a form of liberation and educators as liberators.

The notion of coming full circle is an important aspect of humanity expressed within Greek mythology. Theseus also came full circle when overcoming the labyrinth because the entry and exit points were the same. In fact, the ancient Greek stone carvings of labyrinths depict them as circular mazes with the entry and exit positioned at the same place but only transversable through a difficult path. I too have overcome a difficult path by completing the portfolio projects and coursework but I have emerged from the process with a new educational leadership philosophy.

Conclusions

The challenges associated with pursuing doctoral work were formidable. They required me to adapt to a variety of situations in much the same way Theseus adapted to challenges within the labyrinth. My perseverance has allowed me to complete the coursework with high marks, excel in a broad range of portfolio experiences, and refine my own educational leadership philosophy. Theseus' experiences helped sharpen his skills and prepare him for the final task of confronting the Minotaur. The beast represented the most formidable challenge within the labyrinth and it was largely perceived as invincible. Conversely, the coursework and other experiences within the doctoral program have sharpened my intellectual abilities and prepared

me for the formidable task of completing a dissertation. Like Theseus, I stand prepared for the

task ahead. I am ready to move forward into doctoral candidacy and face my own Minotaur.

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