Through a Wide-Angle Lens: Views of Curriculum Understanding from my Past, Present, and Future

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*We Teach Who We Are-* Parker Palmer

As I reflect on the doctoral program in curriculum and instruction, my coursework, collaborative activities, scholarship, and research can be described as a set of stories. They show the broadening of my vision not unlike the broader view possible with a wide-angle camera lens. My experiences and growth while in the doctoral program are exemplified in a quote from Parker Palmer (1998) from his book *The Courage to Teach* when he stated that, “we teach who we are*”* (p.2). This book was based on phenomenological theory and explored who we are as individuals in relation to our teaching and learning. The main idea is that we teach and learn about things that have personal meaning to us. The following paper will describe experiences that I had while in the doctoral program which have deepened my understanding of curriculum and instruction through coursework, collaboration, scholarship, and research. I will conclude this paper by arguing that I am ready to begin dissertation research.

My experiences while in the doctoral program in curriculum and instruction have continued to shape who I am. I brought a relatively narrow set of educational understandings to the program. The excerpt below, written in the summer (2012) as part of my “Personal Theory of Curriculum,” is the vehicle that I will use to describe this journey through the doctoral program:

A seasoned university college of education professor recently asked me how I liked the curriculum and instruction doctoral program, obviously wondering if my experiences had been similar to hers. It was the answer that I gave my colleague that [clarified] my thoughts . . . about my . . . experiences . . . learning about curriculum theory. This [theory] course solidified my understanding of curriculum. It helped me to reflect professionally and make connections [between] where I have been, where I am, and where I am headed, a phenomenological perspective indeed. This particular professor’s question provided the vehicle to understanding my journey through the doctoral program. I responded . . . on a blistering hot day in the parking lot, explaining that before the curriculum and instruction program I had looked at education through a very narrow lens, focusing in on learning everything that I thought would be beneficial for preparing pre- service special education teachers to work with students having exceptional learning needs. In retrospect, [I realize that I had been] naively thinking that I knew a great deal about curriculum (Lockwood, 2012).

My understanding of the historical, political, social, and cultural influences that affect curriculum has broadened as a result of the curriculum theory course and the curriculum and instruction program in general. More specifically, I now look at curriculum and instruction through the vision of a wide-angle lens, less narrowly focused in on my personal field. Although my journey as a life-long learner is far from complete, in many ways, I am at a crossroads in my understanding of curriculum and instruction.

According to Aoki, “An educated person enters the pedagogical relationship by acknowledging humbly the grace by which educator and educated are allowed to dwell in a present that embraces past experiences and is open to possibilities yet to be” (Aoki, 1990a, p.114). For me, the doctoral program has been an opportunity to pull together a combination of past and present experiences in teaching and learning. The following stories will illustrate this notion.

**Visions of Deepening Understanding: Knowledge of Curriculum and Instruction**

According to Douglis, the wide-angle lens is useful for “creating a richly layered sense of depth, while more detailed and emphatic in scale, yet still managing to retain enough background information to provide context” (Douglis, 2005, p.42). Each doctoral course added layers to my depth of understanding for the eventual wide- angle view of curriculum and instruction that I would come to have. I had previously viewed curriculum and instruction with less breadth and depth, mainly concentrating on issues related to special education and lacking knowledge of the broader sense of the effect that history, culture, politics, and society have on curriculum and instruction. Similar to the effect that the wide- angle lens has on increasing the depth of field to allow more areas to come into focus, this doctoral program and specifically the knowledge I have gained during coursework, has been the catalyst to the deepening of my understanding relative to core educational concepts.

**Qualitative Research (Fall 2009)**

My prior views of research were fairly narrow, but in EDF 625 *Qualitative Research,* Dr. Spatig introduced me to a type of research that was new to me, which immediately broadened and deepened my vision. I was intrigued at the onset of the course. This course changed my entire understanding of research, and I was instantly in awe of Dr. Spatig’s obvious passion for her discipline. I noticed that she was not only teaching the content, but living it through practical application. My previous research exposure had been limited to quantitative methods so the introduction to qualitative research was truly eye-opening. For example, Luttrell’s qualitative study of pregnant teenagers provided information about data collection strategies including interviews, skits, collages, and self-portraits. I was intrigued by these approaches and wanted to pursue all opportunities to learn more and quickly asked to be a part of the research team Dr. Spatig was working with at Kellogg Elementary School, in Huntington, West Virginia.

Prior to working with the team, I completed the EDF 625 course, an introduction to the field of qualitative research methods, including participant observations and in-depth interviewing, both identified as the best methods for ethnographers to use to collect data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As I engaged in these data collection strategies, my lens widened. Also, my feelings of interest heightened as I anticipated a good fit between the goals of qualitative research and my own innate right-brain curiosities. Michael Patton (2002) described qualitative data as a method of getting into someone else’s world so that we can understand.

I also investigated the characteristics of a credible ethnographer in EDF 625. Patton mentioned the importance of empathy in trying to connect with the research participants. I spent much of the semester considering the concept of empathy while trying to maintain neutrality and discussed this notion in the reflective responses developed in critiquing Luttrell’s study of pregnant teenage girls.

Another part of being a credible ethnographer is the ability to “give voice” to those who are being studied. In a reflective response to a reading in which Bogdan and Biklendiscussed the notion of “giving voice” to individuals who have not had a chance to tell about their lives, I noted that these stories could potentially lead to important social change. Qualitative research tells a story, and I would make a deeper connection to this concept in *Curriculum Theory.*

**Multicultural and Diversity Issues (Summer 2011)**

I realized in *Multicultural and Diversity Issues* with Dr. Beth Campbell in the summer of 2011 that my perceptions and experiences with diversity were similar to those of many students in the course. The lack of diversity was especially evident during class meetings as we held discussions sometimes with little depth. I am fortunate to have had opportunities to go to conferences and travel to other parts of the United States to expand my first-hand experiences with diversity. Even so, this course changed my thinking about diversity and the affect diversity has on people socially, emotionally, educationally, and culturally. I had previously only carefully considered how diversity affected students with exceptional learning needs.

One of the projects for this course was to conduct a qualitative research interview with someone from another country and compare their educational experiences with ours. I chose to interview Dr. Harold Blanco, an Associate Professor in the Marshall University College of Education, about his educational experiences growing up in Caracus, Venezuela. The final paper, “A Survivor’s Story: My Journey with Dr. Harold Blanco,”discussed major differences between his Latin American education and my school experiences in a rural elementary school in Milton, West Virginia. This course changed my ideas about the importance of teaching about diversity within the schools. This project also changed my awareness of the effect that the lack of curricular differentiation can have when ignored. This theme was noted in the educational experiences of Dr. Blanco. Again, based on these experiences, my vision of curriculum and instruction became broader and deeper.

**Writing for Publication (Spring 2012)**

Another course that was significant to my expanding knowledge was Dr. Lassiter’s *Writing for Publication.* I recall many of the doctoral students sharing their anxieties about having their writing “judged” in a class about writing, a thought that really had not crossed my mind before our dialogue. Dr. Lassiter used examples of his writing mishaps as examples of the growth that can occur in one’s writing over time. Based on readings from Zinsser (2006)and Jalongo (2002)*,* I gained practical writing tips and techniques useful for improving my writing style. I also gained new insights from this course through the peer-review process. Although having other doctoral students analyze my writing for its style was uncomfortable, my writing strengths and weaknesses were clarified. This course changed my thinking about writing because the feedback from peer editing forced me to edit my writing for clutter, a writing deficiency previously not considered.

**Curriculum Theory (Summer 2012)**

The final course of my curriculum and instruction doctoral coursework was *Curriculum Theory,* completed in the summer of 2012 from Dr. Karen McComas. The course was perceived by some, including myself, to be one of the most challenging of the doctoral program because of the course text *Understanding Curriculum* by Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman. In this course we examined a variety of readings that conceptualized curriculum historically and politically. Curriculum was also discussed as gendered, phenomenological, and poststructural text. This exploration of ideas was a catalyst to the widening of the lens through which I view curriculum. In other words, this course proved to be my “ah-ha” moment. The experience helped to confirm my overall personal curriculum theory and understand that my ideas about curriculum theory were consistent with aspects from the political, post- structural, but especially with phenomenological perspectives.

The study of phenomenology in particular resonated with me because phenomenology holds a natural connection to qualitative research. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (2008) described phenomenology as a “form of interpretive inquiry which focuses on human perception and experience, particularly on what many would characterize as the aesthetic qualities of human experience” (p. 405). I was able to use phenomenology to connect my personal views of curriculum with research and writing in teaching and learning.

I discussed the writing of phenomenologist Dwayne Huebner in the paper “Lines of Research.” I identified a connection between Huebner’s perceptions of language, his idea that teachers think in homogeneous rather than heterogeneous ways, and the fact that teachers are often discouraged to think in systems outside of what is “normal” (Lockwood, 2012). The insight gained about the phenomenological perspective on teaching and learning helped me to understand the differences between the experiences that one encounters with learning knowledge compared with teaching. Referring to Van Manen’s earlier work, Pinar et al. noted that pedagogy resides somewhere between content and process (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008).The relationships between content and process are examined during the lived experiences of teaching.

This course challenged me to connect my experiences in curriculum and instruction with history. Based on Huebner’s notion, I recognized that curriculum is influenced by events from history (Huebner, 1999). For example, during the 1970s and 1980s the hidden curriculum was noted as a covert way that the dominant class attempted to promote social stratification (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008). The marginalization of the groups that resisted the hidden curriculum would become significant themes in feminist and political research. This broadened my depth of understanding of curriculum and the history behind curriculum trends and changes over time. Curriculum theory would prove to be a life- changing course which would prepare me for a more holistic approach to making deeper connections between coursework and research.

**Vision of My Past Experiences: Collaboration**

According to *Merriam Webster’s On-line Dictionary,* the definition of a wide-angle lens is “having or covering an angle of view wider than the ordinary, used especially for lenses of shorter than normal focal length” (Retrieved from <http://merriam-webster,com>). My view of

collaborationwas broadened as a result of opportunities to collaborate with many doctoral faculty and students. I must admit that these collaborative experiences far exceeded my expectations. My prior understanding of curriculum, as seen through a narrow lens, was widened with each collaborative experience.

**Spatig**

During the summer of 2011, I collaborated with Dr. Spatig on research in affiliation with the June Harless Professional Development Schools. Our research focused on how middle schools teachers perceived and experienced professional learning communities (PLCs), especially in relation to teaching students with exceptional learning needs. I conducted participant observations and interviews during the collaborative project with four middle school science teachers at a rural school in Cabell County. My qualitative research skills were strengthened through regular meetings with Dr. Spatig in which we reviewed the interviews and discussed methods to use to probe for further details. I would often review the transcripts and consult the interviewees for refinement of the data, thus diminishing inaccuracy during coding and analysis.

The results of the research indicated three major themes: incentives were needed to expand teacher participation in the PLC; collaboration and sharing among teachers were enhanced by the PLC; and, students with exceptional learning needs showed improved curriculum comprehension and confidence as a result of the PLC-sponsored activities. I presented the results of our research at the 2012 West Virginia Professional Development Schools Conference on February 29, 2012 in Flatwoods, West Virginia. This additional experience with qualitative research methods strengthened my desire to pursue other research projects during my doctoral program.

**Angel**

In the fall of 2010, I co-taught CISP 420 *Survey of Exceptional Children* with Dr. Angel. Although Dr. Angel and I collaborate often, this was the first time we had directly co-taught a course. I have always viewed Dr. Angel as a mentor in the College of Education, observing and learning from him as a professor in class, as a colleague, but most especially as a friend. Sugimoto (2011) noted the critical importance of the value of collaboration between advisors and doctoral students, and that this experience can be one of the most valuable tools for learning from the perspective of a doctoral student.

During this collaboration I learned about the negotiation of teaching roles. My lens was widened as I experienced the negotiation that occurred between us as we discussed assignments and grading procedures. Although our personal philosophies of what pre-service students needed to get out of the special education course were similar, our grading methods were different. Dr. Angel preferred to leave the students’ assignments open-ended to allow for divergent thinking, whereas I wanted to create assignments and rubrics with the end already in mind, creating convergence of thinking. Dr. Angel eventually considered the use of rubrics as an assessment tool based on our collaboration. We also noted subtleties in the students’ receptions to having the two of us teaching simultaneously. My part of the course material delivery was based on my experiences with teaching strategies for diverse categories of exceptional learners, whereas Dr. Angel focused on the delivery of specific information related to characteristics of exceptional students. My teaching was impacted based on my increased attention to the use of media in the classroom to deliver information, the awareness of divergent grading methods, and also by the negotiation of our teaching roles and responsibilities.

**Vision of Past Experiences: Scholarship**

The first scholarship opportunity came as a request for a co-submission and co-presentation with Dr. Michael Sullivan, Special Education Professor in the Graduate School of Education and Professional Development. We submitted a proposal, *“*At-Risk Elementary Students: Tips for Changes in Collaboration from the Perspectives of the General Educator and Special Educator*”* to ACRES, (American Council on Rural Special Education), a national special education conference related to special educators and other professionals committed to the enhancement of services to students and individuals living in rural America. The proposal was accepted for presentation at the *31st*Annual National ACRES Conference on March 24-26, 2011 in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The proposal was based on a qualitative interview with Amy Maynard, third grade teacher of the year at Peyton Elementary in Huntington, West Virginia in Cabell County and the special education teacher with whom she collaborated. The interview focused on research-based collaborative activities which included PLC innovation zones, differentiated instruction using IPADS, Learning Festivals from COSI, and Mountain Math. These activities were aimed at improving instruction for at-risk students. We learned that the instructional methods used at this school were successful because of the significant amount of regular planning and collaboration that occurred between professionals. This presentation gave me confidence in my ability to present at a national conference successfully.

The second accomplishment related to scholarship was the submission for publication of a book review to the National Social Science Association for publication during Dr. Lassiter’s *Writing for Publication* course. After several revisions and conferences with Dr. Lassiter, I completed a book review on the textbook *Special Education in a Contemporary Society: An Introduction to Exceptionality.* I learned the importance of finding a journal that was the right audience for my book review. For the project I chose a six-hundred page special education textbook to review. In hindsight, choosing a smaller book to review would have been more practical. My book review will be published in one of the journal’s quarterly on-line publications during 2012-2013.

I am most proud of the opportunity for scholarship which arose in the most unlikely of places for me, technology. I am not part of the Net Generation; therefore, technology is an area in which I have worked to improve my skills. In the fall of 2011 a scholarshipopportunity came from an ethnographic interview I conducted for a course project in Dr. Heaton’s technology course CIEC 700. We were asked to interview someone who played video games and to compare their experiences with the descriptions of video games and learning found in James Paul Gee’s book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy.*

I chose the most obvious person for the qualitative interview, my husband. I had never understood his need to play video games, and I joked with him that he would not believe a doctoral course was focused around reading a book about playing video games, around one of *his* hobbies. I wrote a paper “The Benefits of Non-Traditional Learning for Diverse Learners: Exploring Gaming for Differentiated Instruction*”* comparing my interviewee’s perceptions of video games and learning with Gee’s principles of learning*.* A month after our assignments were submitted, Dr. Heaton contacted seven of us to see if we would be interested in submitting our papers for a cohesive symposium co-presentation for the June 2012 Educational Media National Conference in Denver, Colorado. We accepted the invitation and our co- presentation, the “Exploring the Application of Gaming and Gaming Principles in Education*”,*  was accepted. We presented in a two- hour session on June 27, 2012 and our individual papers were published in the on-line conference proceedings.

This scholarship activity changed my thinking about technology and video games because I began to consider the use of video games as a form of differentiated instruction for diverse learners. I shared the notion in the spring 2012 *Strategies and Methods of Mental Retardation* graduate course using an article review and class discussion to introduce the idea. Graduate students’ responses to the content of this activity were mixed and somewhat similar to the reactions that we experienced in the doctoral course when we initially considered the assignment. This scholarship activity deepened my understanding about how technology and video games can play a role in teaching and learning, especially for non-traditional learners. The project also allowed me to collaborate for the presentation with doctoral faculty and students with whom I continue to network. On a final note, Dr. Heaton was contacted recently by one of the professors in attendance the day of our symposium and he has asked to republish our papers in the *Journal of Applied Computing* for a piece that they are doing on “Exploring the Application of Gaming and Gaming Principles in Education*.”*

**Past, Present, and Future Visions: Research**

The use of the wide-angle lens has been described as giving “photographers the ability to control perspective to imply depth, stress content, and compare subjects in terms of scale, creating layers of meaning that express ideas” (Douglis, 2005, p.42). My understanding of curriculum and instruction was increased as a result of completing these projects. I feel confident that I have the skills to pursue an independent research project. In the final section of this reflective paper I will describe the survey created in the Boone County Research Project, and the present and future goals of the MIHOW research project. I will conclude this paper by arguing that I have the tools necessary to complete an independent research project required for completion of the terminal degree.

**Boone County Research Survey**

During the summer 2011, I collaborated with several other doctoral students and Dr. Childress on a collaborative project for the 2011 Boone County Reading/Language Arts Summer Institute. The project, “Increasing the Achievement in Reading/Language Arts Addressing the

Gender Gap for Middle Level Students through Improved Comprehension and Vocabulary Skills,”was an evaluation of the 2011 Boone County Reading/Language Arts Summer Institute.The institute was designed to provide teacher professional development to improve the proficiency level in reading of students in the middle level grades, as well as address the significant reading achievement gap between male and female students. The quantitative

survey we developed was designed to find out whether or not the professional development helped teachers improve their knowledge and skills related to the reading component strategies and to get teachers’ overall impressions of the institute. We revised the initial participant survey, analyzed the pre/post data from the summer institute, and used the results to formulate a list of recommendations. The results of the survey demonstrated that the

professional development was successful in increasing knowledge and the ability to use strategies in the classroom in both reading comprehension and vocabulary development.

This was one of the first times that I collaborated closely with several outstanding doctoral students including Melissa Rhodes, Margie Snyder, Shelly Ratliff, Amy Semonco, Rikki Lowe, and Anne Monterosso. Similar to my experiences during this project, Sugimoto (2011) noted that the positive effects of collaboration among doctoral students is far reaching, and increases the quality, quantity, and the likelihood to attain publication and funding through collaborative projects. This collaborative project changed my way of thinking about group projects. Previously I had been resistant to collaborating with such a large group, especially people that I did not know very well. The members in this group worked quickly to meet the impending deadline, with each member contributing to the project based on her expertise. This collaborative group was the start of a foundation of trust among doctoral students which would set the tone for other projects later in the doctoral program. I learned the importance that trust plays in the success of collaborative projects. More importantly, this project deepened my understanding of quantitative research and the methods necessary to develop a comprehensive research survey and use it in a practical situation.

**MIHOW Research Team**

In the late spring of 2012, Dr. Spatig invited doctoral students to participate in a qualitative research study of the West Virginia Maternal Infant Health Outreach (MIHOW) Program. The goal of the study is to understand how participating families and staff experience

and perceive this parent-to-parent intervention program that targets economically disadvantaged and geographically and socially isolated families. After a discussion with Dr. Spatig and Dr. Angel about how I might fit into this research project based on my background in special education and early intervention, I accepted the invitation. Our research team consists of Dr. Linda Spatig, Amy Carlson, a curriculum and instruction doctoral student, Bethany Wellman, a psychology student, and myself. According to Lei and Chuang (2009), collaboration is a far more effective method for obtaining data because it helps alleviate inequalities related to time and other resources. From May through September 2012, our team met ten times. Difficulty with participant access due to participants not answering their phones, not calling back, or just asking us not to call back, forced us to extend our data collection to the home visitors and moms in order to broaden our data set. At this time, our sample consists of seven moms and three home visitors.

This research project has strengthened my understanding of the intensity required for collaboration. I was not fully aware of the time necessary for a year-long team research project. We have utilized email to review each other’s transcripts prior to meetings, phone conversations to conduct interviews and discuss results, and continued conversations by email about our progress. The MIHOW research project has given me further experience with the qualitative research method of interviewing and especially with phone interviewing. This project has also given me confidence, knowledge, and skills necessary for completing the dissertation process.

The collaborative research team submitted a proposal to present the preliminary results of our MIHOW research study to the 2013 Appalachian Studies Association Conference to be held in Boone, North Carolina in March 2013. Once again, collaboration was essential to meeting the deadline for the proposal. Through a series of emails we collaboratively drafted a proposal, “One Size Almost Fits All: Connectedness and Learning in a Rural Mother/Infant Home Visitation Program*.”* The proposal is focused on how the participants and home visitors view the program and identifies three themes: the program’s simultaneous uniformity *and* customization; connectedness with community organizations, resources, and people; and how the moms and visitors are participating in reciprocal relationships which foster learning from one another. The proposal was accepted in November 2012.

**Conclusion**

*We Teach Who We Are-Parker Palmer*

I look forward to continuing the MIHOW research for my dissertation, to investigate the connections, if any, between the MIHOW Program and the need for early intervention services, or to investigate if there is a connection between the mothers and their participation in special education programs in elementary or secondary school. The reflection on my doctoral coursework, collaborative activities, scholarship, and research is connected to my past and present understandings of curriculum. My quote from the Curriculum Theory paper in summer 2012 explains my growth in understanding curriculum and instruction from a narrow to wide-angle lens: “I now look at curriculum with a lens that is less narrow in focus, but wide enough to focus in on understanding curriculum discoursescontextually”(Lockwood, 2012, p.14). With a broadened understanding of both curriculum and research, I now have the knowledge and skills necessary to complete independent dissertation scholarship. I have a deeper understanding of the holistic role that history had on curriculum and instruction. My lens is also wider based on my understanding of the various types of research methods and their use. Based on multiple collaborative experiences with doctoral students and faculty, my teaching and learning is further refined and polished. The accomplishment of the doctoral degree will enable me to further hone my skills as a professional in the field, to continue teaching in higher education, and engage in work that I deem personally meaningful.

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