PIECING TOGETHER A DREAM

A REFLECTION OF MY JOURNEY TOWARD A DOCTORAL DEGREE

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**Introduction**

I have always loved quilts. The colors, the intricate patterns, and the warmth all blend together to make a uniquely special heirloom. I have often thought of quilts as a metaphor for life. As we go through this world, we are piecing together experiences, knowledge, and skills to create the coverlet of our lives. The end product is a composite of all these little pieces and the result is much more than each individual segment. Aristotle noted this phenomenon in his work Metaphysica (translated, 1966), when he wrote “*The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.”* (10f-1045a). My journey through the process of earning an EdD has been very much like this. Each class, each paper, and each project has been pieced together to create something of value.

A quilt is not just a pretty blanket that keeps one warm; it also tells a story. The quilter decides on a theme and creates a narrative in fabric. I will be using the metaphor of creating a quiltto describe my journey through the doctoral program at Marshall University, with the various parts representing the different aspects of that pathway. Quilts are composed of pieced blocks that are layered with batting and a backing material that are then stitched together. The backing represents the innate abilities that I possess. The batting contains my life experiences and education up to the point that I entered the doctoral program. Finally the quilt top is made up of the courses that comprised my program of study. The next step in making a quilt is to connect the backing, batting, and quilt top with small, precise stitches; this process is called quilting. The quilting in my doctoral program is the cohort experience. Then a binding is applied to the raw edges of the quilt. The binding for this particular quilt is the Residency Assessment portfolio.

My quilttells the story of a dream in the process of being realized – the obtaining of the highest level of educational achievement in my chosen field – an EdD in Leadership Studies. This reflection paper will show the story of how my pursuit has helped me to grow as a scholar and has made me a better counselor to my students in the process.

I began this journey in the fall of 2007 as a neophyte to the field of education. My academic background was in psychology and counseling. At one time I began an education degree only to have it phased out before I completed a third of the program. I was unfamiliar with the field of pedagogy when I entered Marshall’s doctoral cohort, and was uncomfortable joining in discussions with my fellow classmates who were accomplished in the field. It was very much like being in a foreign country – I did not speak the language. As a counselor, I have been trained to listen twice as much as I speak. So I listened and absorbed my classmates’ knowledge, and I began to feel more comfortable talking about the concepts and theories we discussed. I began to find my voice. Perhaps this is the area of growth that has been the greatest in my journey to become a scholar.

**Background**

The bottom layer of a quilt is called the backing and is the foundation of the quilt. On my doctoral journey the backing represents the innate abilities and talents that I possess. Creativity, an insatiable curiosity, love of the written word, the ability to look at things in a uniquely different way, and my thirst for new knowledge are a few of these traits. These characteristics have formed the foundation for my pursuit of an EdD.

In my doctoral courses I was introduced to Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Pinar, et al, 1995). The concept of different learning styles fascinated me. I began to recognize the different strengths and abilities my students possess that had previously gone unnoticed. In the process, I became more aware of my own unique abilities and the ways that I learn best. I discovered that I am a visual/spatial and a mathematical/logical learner. I learn best by visualizing pictures in my head of what I hear and by finding patterns in the material I am studying.

Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1903) once said, “I like to have a thing suggested rather than told in full. When every detail is given, the mind rests satisfied and the imagination loses the desire to use its own wings” (p. 6). The faculty of Marshall University have epitomized this way of teaching. Throughout my program I became a very active participant in the instructional process. The professors who taught in our cohort have allowed and even encouraged us to use unique and interesting ways to present theories and concepts to our fellow classmates. As a result I have conducted an interview with Jerome Bruner, wrote a song, performed a dance, and created a floor puzzle, all in an attempt to convey information to students possessing various multiple intelligences.

I have shared this new knowledge and awareness with several teachers at my school and have convinced them to try new approaches in reaching disengaged students. Some of these strategies include allowing the auditory learner to record lectures, assigning projects for kinesthetic learners, and giving the choice of working in groups or individually for those who favor either interpersonal or intrapersonal learning. We have seen some promising results

When students come to me with failing grades I have been able to help them find their own unique ways of learning and have offered them some innovative strategies to improve their understanding and retention. For example, one student was having trouble memorizing words and their meanings for his weekly Honors English vocabulary test. Since he was a kinesthetic and mathematical/logical learner, I had him write the words on flash cards with the word’s meaning on the back of the card, and then make two sets of these cards. Writing the words and their meanings appealed to his kinesthetic learning style. I then had him play a matching game with the words and meanings which took advantage of his mathematical/logical style. These tests were no longer a struggle for him and his grades improved dramatically. Another student was identified as an auditory learner, so I suggested that he read passages from his textbook out loud when he was studying at home. At first he was reluctant, but soon discovered that his retention improved dramatically when he used this technique.

A major problem facing many schools in West Virginia is an unacceptably large number of students leaving high school without receiving their diplomas. Only 72% of high school students in our state end their public educational career with a diploma in four years (Alliance For Excellent Education, 2009). In spite of the best efforts on the part of administrators and counselors, this number does not decrease. In Dr. Michael Cunningham’s Survey Research in Education (EDF 711) course, I surveyed students who had dropped out of school to identify the major factors that led to their withdrawals. Not surprisingly, many said that they could not learn the way the subjects were taught. Perhaps if these students were allowed to identify their specific learning styles and were instructed in ways that addressed these styles, they may have stayed in school and completed their education.

**Education and Life Experiences**

The batting in a quilt is the filler that gives it not only fullness and warmth, but also texture and dimension. Much like the batting in a quilt*,* my educational journey and life experiences up to the point of admission to the doctoral program prepared me for the hard work of pursuing a terminal degree. Throughout my coursework, I have been drawn to the curriculum theory of Phenomenology, in particular the subtheory of Currere that describes the learning process as an individual journey. Currere is the active verb of curriculum indicating that learning is a very active process based on experience and self-learning (Carlson, 2005).

CI 703 Theories, Models, and Research of Teaching taught by Dr. Calvin Meyer, introduced me to the teaching theory of Cognitivism (Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2009). Learning can be observed and measured; however, cognitive theorists challenge one to look for the thought process behind what is observed. What is going on inside the learner’s head is of greater significance (Mengel, 1998).

I believe, as Cognitivists, that some rote memorization is important to form a foundation on which to build further learning. However, the emphasis should be on creative thinking and problem solving (Novak & Canas, 2008). This fits neatly with Global 21 learning skills set forth by the West Virginia Department of Education.

**Program of Study**

The quilt top is typically made up of blocks formed with precisely cut geometric shapes that fit intricately together to make a pattern. The admission process for the cohort program was demanding and required my best effort to meet the requirements. I successfully completed these tasks and was accepted into the program. This has been the highlight of my educational career. I was now ready to begin my quilt top.

Our program of study was set for us in advance, so we had little leeway in course selection. The curriculum was pieced together in an almost seamless manner that was ideal for our cohort. Each class joined together, building on material we had covered in previous classes to create a unique educational experience. Our first quilt block of this educational journey began with Dr. Frances Simone’s Writing for Publication (CI 677) coupled with Statistical Methods (EDF 517) taught by Dr. Edna Meisel. Writing for Publication (CI 677) helped me to “cut the fat” and “show rather than tell” my readers what I want them to see. I always thought that I wrote well, but this class taught me the difference between creative writing and scholarly writing. I believe that my writing is much improved as a result of this course.

These two basic courses formed the foundation for our future classes. We would be writing and producing publishable manuscripts in many of our classes and would be reading many peer reviewed articles that discussed the statistical significance of research.

The following semester we were introduced to Research Design (LS 703) taught by Dr. Teresa Eagle. I learned the basic ingredients of a dissertation, how to properly cite reference material, and how to design a research project. Survey Research in Education (EDF 711), taught by Dr. Michael Cunningham, showed me how to construct a valid survey instrument. We learned how to avoid common mistakes in developing our surveys, and how to conduct a field test before actually administering the survey to a sample population. This class was most helpful for the next class we undertook, Qualitative Research in Education (EDF 625).

We were introduced to qualitative study methods by Dr. Nega Debela. I was attracted to this type of research immediately. I liked the idea of conducting in-depth interviews and using observation as a way of collecting data. My project for the class was a study of the Distance Learning Lab (DLL) at Oak Hill High School from the teachers’ point of view. There are three teachers who routinely use the DLL to present curriculum to several campuses in Fayette County. I was interested in how these teachers perceived their delivery of material using this technology compared to that of a traditional classroom. I believe that the interviews provided me with greater depth of understanding compared to using a survey instrument only. I recognized how combining qualitative and quantitative data can make a study both much stronger and more relevant.

The next part of my educational journey was Dr. Sam Securro’s Computer Analysis (LS 776). We were given access to a copy of Predictive Analytics Software (PASW) program that allowed us to analyze sample data using t tests and Chi Square. This course helped me to understand much better how I would use the data I collect for my dissertation and also how to understand the data in journal articles that I read.

The next block in my educational quilt centers on a curriculum theme. The first piece in this pattern was a course taught by Dr. Michael Murphy entitled Curriculum Development (CI 701). I discovered the history of curriculum and was introduced to some of the important figures and events in its development.

Fitting neatly with this course was Curriculum Theories (CI 702) taught the following semester by Dr. Calvin Meyer. In this course we dug deeply into the various theories and theorists. This course was followed that summer by Dr. Calvin Meyer’s Theories, Models, and Research in Teaching (CI 703). In this class we were able to put into practice the theories we had previously studied. Class members were divided into groups, assigned a theory, and instructed to create a lesson using one of the models that related to our particular theory. We then taught that lesson to the rest of the class.

Classes dealing with leadership in education formed the next block. Institutional Advancement (LS 626), offered by Dr. Dennis Anderson, introduced us to the intricacies of locating and pursuing financial support for higher education institutions. Principles of Leadership (LS 710), taught by Dr. Powell Toth, described the different types of leadership styles along with the pros and cons associated with each. I discovered that I was a servant leader and began to understand why I accept certain leadership roles and reject others. The following qualities define a servant leader: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, foresight, growth, and building community. These are the same qualities important in my counseling career. Servant-leaders achieve results for their organizations by giving priority attention to the needs of their colleagues and those they serve (Spears, 2002). The next piece to this block was presented by Dr. Michael Galbraith in his Politics of Education (LS 760) course that provided an eye-opening look at the intrigue behind the scenes of higher education. We looked at the different types of leadership styles that mesh well with various types of institutions. In Dr. Barbara Nicholson’s Administrative Theory (LS 705) we revisited leadership styles and looked at the theories and theorists who gave rise to these styles. I discovered Ronald Heifitz and his theory of Adaptive Leadership. Basically he advises those who want to make real changes in an organization to give the work back to the people (Heifitz, 1994). Ralph Nader (1976) once said, “The function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers” (p. 6). According to Heifitz, a true leader knows how to motivate others to take the lead in transformation (Heifetz, 1994). This type of leadership style mirrored my own beliefs. Leadership should empower those who have the most at stake, not create dependency in them. I think of this often when I am cast into a leadership role, and I strive to create new leaders around me.

Completing my quiltis a block I call my eclectic square. It is composed of a mélange of classes covering varied topics that supported and added to the other courses in the program. One of these classes, Adult and Continuing Education (LS 647), taught by Dr. Louis Watts, was of special interest to me since we were introduced to principles that apply to each one of us as adult learners. I later used many of the concepts from this class in a Master’s level course I co-taught with Dr. Mary Harris-John. In Program Evaluation (CI 676), taught by Dr. Ron Childress, I came to understand what comprises a successful program and how to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs. Dr. Lisa Heaton gave us the opportunity to explore various types of technology and their educational applications in her Technology and Curriculum (CIEC 700) class. I have used some of these in my counseling practice. Most notably I have used Movie Maker, Audacity, and Delicious to create developmental guidance lessons for the students I serve. In Ethical Theories (LS 707) Dr. Barbara Nicholson provided us an opportunity to engage in some lively discussions about the topic of ethics. Public School Law (LS 740), under the instructorship of Dr. Mary Harris-John, was one of the most useful classes for my present position as a high school counselor. I began to understand why many of the policies and decisions are made in our school district. I have referred back to our textbook many times during the past two years to help clarify various issues in my current position.

**Cohort Experience**

All these layers of my life experience have been quilted together to shape me into a researcher and scholar ready to move on to the dissertation phase of my degree. The cohort experience has provided the stitches that have held this program together. I have never experienced such a close relationship with so many people. We began to bond over a very simple ritual – that of forming food groups that were responsible for providing Friday evening suppers and Saturday lunches. Rather than each of us going out into Flatwoods in small groups to eat, we stayed on campus and gathered around the “family table” talking about our lives – families, careers, and dreams.

The friendships that we formed have endured through the three and one-half years of class work and continue today. We have rejoiced in births, sorrowed in deaths of loved ones, celebrated birthdays, promotions, and new opportunities. We have collaborated both in class and out. I have shared work problems with my classmates and received valuable feedback. One time in particular I was having problems with one of my principals. I shared the difficulties with a group of my cohort members and they helped me to realize that the problem was one of miscommunication. I began to look at the issue in a different way, really tried to communicate, and things improved immensely. I believe these friendships will last a lifetime and I predict that our members will collaborate with one another on various projects well after we have completed our degrees.

**Residency Assessment Portfolio**

The binding on the quilt pulls the layers all together giving a polished look to the raw edges of the pieced and quilted blanket. The binding in my doctoral program has been the portfolio qualifying assessment pieces. Marshall University has replaced the traditional full-time residency requirement for a doctoral degree with the Residency Portfolio, allowing students to interact with faculty in scholarly and academic experiences. These activities fit into two categories: scholarship and other professional/academic pursuits. Scholarship includes co-authoring and co-presenting a paper or workshop at a national or regional conference with a faculty member, and/or co-writing a manuscript for submission to a peer reviewed journal collaboratively with a faculty member. The activities considered other professional/academic pursuits include co-teaching a course with a faculty member and collaborating with a faculty member in another activity. These experiences have taken the knowledge that I have gained and put them into practice.

**The following chart shows my experiences as they relate to the portfolio requirements:**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Portfolio Activity*** | ***Date(s)*** | ***Performed in Collaboration With*** | ***Description of Activity*** | ***Sample of Courses Supporting this Activity*** |
| **Co-Teaching** | Fall 2010 | Dr. Mary  Harris-John | Co-teaching  The School and the Community  LS 630 | Public School Law  LS 740  Politics of Education  LS 760  Administration Theory  LS705  Curriculum Development  CI 701 |
| **Panel Discussion** | Fall 2009 | Dr. Calvin Meyer | Participated in a panel to discuss *“*Teaching  Difficult Texts”  at Marshall University’s Fall Teaching Conference  Panel Members  Keith Butcher  Tracy Chenoweth  Sumeeta Patnaik  Jenny Santilli  Anita Stephenson  Hannah Toney  Mary Ann Triplett  Brenda Tuckwiller  Joycie Wawiye  John Whiteley  Kristy Wood  Christina Wright | Curriculum Development  CI 701  Curriculum Theories  CI 702  Theories, Models, and  Research of Teaching  CI 703  Adult and Continuing Education  LS 647 |
| **National Presentation** | February 15, 2010 | Dr. Calvin Meyer | ATE National Conference in Chicago 2010  Paper Presentation  “Establishing Broad Strokes of Collaboration Among Practicing Educators and Teacher Educators Within an Innovative Doctoral Cohort Approach” | Technology and Curriculum  CIEC 700  Adult and Continuing Education  LS 647  Writing for Publication  CI 677 |
| **Co-Authoring manuscripts for a peer reviewed journal** | Fall 2007  Fall 2009 | Dr. Frances Simone  Dr. Dennis Anderson | Manuscript submitted to ASCA School Counselor  “Stress and the Overachiever: How Counselors Can Assist High Achieving Students Set Realistic Goals”  Manuscript submitted to PTA Magazine (online)  “Young Philanthropists: Teaching Childrento Become Cheerful Givers” | Writing For Publication  CI 677  Institutional Advancement  LS 626 |
| **Doctoral Seminar Committee** | Fall 2010 | Tracy Chenoweth, Chair | Facilitated  “Middle School Issues and Solutions”  Prepared transcript of discussion | The School and the Community  LS 630  Public School Law  LS 740  Multicultural/Diversity Issues  CI 706 |

According to the Graduate School of Education and Professional Development website:

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. Program

faculty are committed to creating a community of scholars through

mentoring, engaging in collaborative research, and maintaining a focus

on sound educational practice (Graduate School of Education and

Professional Development).

I believe the activities that I have engaged in to meet the requirements for the portfolio have helped to create these characteristics in myself.

Becoming a Reflective and Ethical Educator

All of my coursework has helped to create in me the attributes of a reflective and ethical educator. Early on we were drilled in the proper way to cite all material that we include in our papers. I learned how to submit to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) the proposal of a study that would involve human subjects. The IRB ensures that all studies of this nature undertaken by Marshall University students adhere to acceptable ethical behavior.

When I volunteered to serve on the Doctoral Seminar planning committee, I was assigned the task of facilitating and recording the discussion that took place in the session on “MiddleSchool Issues and Solutions”*.* By listening to the questions and comments posed by the participants, I was able to reflect on the knowledge I have gained over the past three and one half years while involved in the doctoral program. I was able to tie all of this learning together and see how it applies to real life situations.

Mentoring

The cohort doctoral program offered by Marshall University gives students the experience of working closely with their professors in a collaborative relationship. We were given the opportunity to participate in academic activities with faculty members who acted as our mentors. This mentorship is a unique aspect of Marshall’s program that I did not find in other university doctoral programs that I researched.

Dr. Mary Harris-John allowed me to co-teach a Masters level class entitled The School and The Community (LS 630). This was a satisfying experience that helped to solidify my desire to teach in higher education. I was responsible for some sections of the instruction and was responding online to discussion postings by the students in the class. I have felt blessed throughout this program to be under the tutelage of some of the finest instructors on Marshall’s faculty. Working this closely with Dr. Harris-John provided me the opportunity to replicate the teaching methods of a caring instructor I aspire to be some day.

Dr. Calvin Meyer asked me to participate in a panel discussion for new Marshall University faculty in August 2009. The topic was “Teaching Difficult Texts”. My fellow panel members and I were given the opportunity to discuss the methods Dr. Meyer used to help us deal with a very difficult text about curriculum theories. He recognized from the onset of the class that many students would struggle with the language and depth of the material, and he offered suggestions and resources to assist us with our assignments. Once our paper was submitted he provided us with prompt feedback and allowed us to redo any section of the assignment to improve our grade.

When I was searching for a conference at which to make a presentation, Dr. Meyer took

me under his wing and helped me to prepare a paper to present at the 2010 Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) National Conference in Chicago. We worked closely in preparing this paper entitled “ Establishing Broad Strokes of Collaboration Among Practicing Educators andTeacher Educators Within an Innovative Doctoral Cohort Approach”*.* Without his support I

may not have had the confidence to make this presentation.

Engaging in Collaborative Research

Several of my courses required me to work collaboratively with faculty members. In my first course, Writing for Publication (CI 677), Dr. Frances Simone and I collaborated on an article about perfectionism and the gifted population, entitled *“Stress* *and the Overachiever: How Counselors Can Assist High Achieving Students Set Realistic Goals”.*  Although it was not accepted for publication, I enjoyed the experience of writing and re-writing this piece until Dr. Simone felt that it was ready for submission. Her guidance in preparing my manuscript was invaluable in future attempts at manuscript writing.

I was also required to submit a publishable manuscript for Dr. Dennis Anderson’s Institutional Advancement class. *“Young Philanthropists: Teaching Children to Become Cheerful Givers”* was submitted to PTA Magazine (online). Like my first attempt at being published, this article was not accepted, but I continued to learn the intricacies of writing for publication through this joint effort with Dr. Anderson.

I have engaged in other research activities for this program in and outside of the classroom. Curriculum Theories (CI 702) and Theories, Models, and Research of Teaching (CI 703) required extensive weekly research into various models for our assignments. These classes helped me to understand the depth and breadth of research I would have to engage in for a dissertation. They were also invaluable in learning proper citing techniques for the sources I used. In Survey Research in Education (EDF 711) I investigated the use of Career and Technical Education classes as a strategy for keeping at-risk students in school until they graduate. I did this by surveying Adult Basic Education students about their high school experience before withdrawing from school. When our county was considering a change from the 4 X 4 Block scheduling configuration to a traditional semester system, I created and conducted a survey of current students who had attended under both types of schedule. This information was aggregated and presented to our county’s Board of Education to help them with their decision.

I have enjoyed the qualitative research that I have engaged in very much. One such study involved interviewing some young ladies who were members of a German Baptist Church in Virginia. I learned much more about their religion and culture from this interview than I would have from other sources. Another research project involved the use of cell phones and Ipods in classroom instruction. An English teacher at Oak Hill High School routinely uses these technology items to teach writing and communication skills. Methods used for this project included interviews, a survey, and observation. I interviewed and surveyed our cohort for another study to determine why they chose the cohort delivery system compared to an on-campus program. Qualitative research techniques seem to offer a deeper understanding of the subject being studied. Although it is difficult to generalize to other populations using these techniques, I feel that the information gathered from qualitative research is invaluable in understanding a subject.

**The Next Step**

Quiltsare appreciated by different people in different ways. Some want to snuggle under them for warmth with their appeal increasing as the blanket becomes more worn and tattered. Others enjoy them most when they are hung on a wall, become a part of the room’s décor, and displayed for their beauty. Still others marvel at the workmanship of each tiny stitch and the masterly way that colors are combined. They like to keep them close by so that they can touch them and look at them often. I place myself somewhere between those who want to use their quilts completely up and those who want their quilts close at hand in order to admire the workmanship.

When I think about the reasons I chose to pursue this degree, I believe they mirror my purpose for owning and creating quilts. I want to use what I have learned, not simply hang my degree on the wall and take it down from time to time to look at and wipe off the dust. Recognizing the hard work and determination that has gone into reaching this milestone will also bring me great satisfaction.

Over the past three and one half years I have learned how to design a research study, how to generate a viable survey instrument, when to use different statistical tests to analyze data, as well as how to properly use qualitative techniques in a study. The courses in my program of study have required me to do extensive literature reviews and research and I have learned the intricacies of properly citing various resources. Preparing manuscripts for submission has taught me how to record and interpret data that I have collected, and to present this information in a format for others to read. I feel much more confident now to move on to the important task of writing a dissertation.

As I approach the dissertation phase of my program, I hope to engage in research that will be meaningful in my particular area of education. I have always been interested in the field of gifted education, particularly why some identified gifted students underachieve and/or fail classes. This is an area in which I would like to do further research. Some other areas of interest include the effect of stress and anxiety on student success, and the use of career and technical education as a dropout prevention tool.

Entering this phase of my doctoral program, I reflect on the learning that has taken place over the past three and one-half years. To this point, I have been an observer of the educational process. My duties as a high school counselor have allowed me to be a part of the academic world without being an active classroom participant. This doctoral program has thrust me squarely in the middle of this world. I can no longer be satisfied as a commentator, but must take an active role in the future of education. I am compelled to take part and initiate action research that will inform and improve the field.

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