The Tour de Ed.D.

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**Introduction**

One of my favorite activities is riding my bicycle. It is my passion and when I ride I feel a sense of freedom like none other. It is my time alone, a time to view the world with all of my senses. Riding is not always easy – there are crashes caused by pebbles on the blacktop, dogs that grab and pull my pant legs, and drivers that do not pay attention. I have had coffee thrown on me, been shot at with water guns, and I have blown out a tire or two along the way. Simply put, there are a great number of hazards that need to be avoided while riding, but good riders make adjustments. As an extension of my passion, I love to watch cycling races. Every year during the month of July I am parked in front of the television for hours at a time watching the bike race of all bike races: The Tour de France. Cycling is as important to me as my educational development which is why this analogy of the “tour” best explains my doctoral pursuit.

**Stage One - The Time Trial**

*Each year as a tradition the Tour de France begins with a time trial. This is stage one of the race which is usually on flat ground winding though the city streets of Paris, Italy or Spain. This particular time trial is crucial and gives riders who are the fastest, the sleekest and the most intelligent a great advantage over all of the other 100 + riders in the race.*

My time trial was the opening process of my doctoral studies. I will never forget that sunny day at Braxton County High School in which I interviewed and tested via the Miller Analogies Test (MAT) for my entry into the doctoral cohort program. I was extremely nervous but there were friendly faces all around. Dr. Teresa Eagle was sitting on a chair at the entrance and greeted me with such enthusiasm that my confidence was suddenly lifted. I also noticed Dr. Mary Harris-John and a couple other professors that I had during my Leadership Studies, Masters level courses. As the day progressed I tested, I interviewed, and I met other potential cohort members. I felt good, I felt confident, and I felt that I was precisely in the right place. Four weeks later, however, I realized that I did not score high enough on the MAT and I was devastated, to say the least. Failure was simply not part of the plan; as a matter of fact it was never a consideration. I wanted to obtain my doctorate and I wanted to do it at Marshall University: end of story.

My only option was to retake the test but this time I would have to study. I spent days reading materials that would prepare me and when I got the results from the second testing session I found that my scores were not just better, they were much better. Just like my workouts prepared me for my cycling trips, my efforts to improve my achievement level had paid off. In that simple instant I realized that my doctoral studies would be the challenge that I had been looking for and it was time for me to get ready for this race.

**Stage Two - The Chase**

*Stage Two begins the chase – the chase is a chance for the fastest riders to drive themselves and their team ahead of the pack in an attempt to put minutes between themselves and the leader of Stage One.*

Braxton County Middle School would become our host facility, but it would prove to be a rather uncomfortable location at first. We had no tables, chairs, technology equipment or Internet. The school administration put us in a very small room that was used for “in-school” detention each day. The school desks were very small, many of them were broken, and there were not enough of them to give everyone a seat. Some cohort members brought their own chairs, some simply collected chairs from other locations, while others sat or leaned against window ledges or wall heaters.

Convinced that building level administration had no idea of what we needed, as a group we decided to ask for a better location to have class. Our new home became a second floor science lab that had plenty of big tables, room for our food (which the cohort became famous for), and a pull-down screen that our instructors needed for visual presentations. Little did we know it at the time but the cohort was “developing a doctoral identity” (Harrison, 2010, p. 17). This simple act of assembly established an unbreakable bond of unity among the “Braxton County Cohort” peer support members. We were more than a group of individuals striving for the same goal; we were family and family members look after one another.

At the time I was working for the Marion County School system and part of my job was to conduct technology workshops across the state which required me to have my own audio/visual and network equipment. I quickly assumed the duties of bringing all of the equipment to each session, setting it up, getting Internet access ready (via a wireless connection) and assisting cohort members and professors with their technology questions. Professors no longer needed to lug this type of equipment around and we were ready for any type of presentation that students could muster; my cohort peers were appreciative and I was proud to be of assistance. Much later my duties would grow to include meeting new faculty at the school, giving them a tour of the facility, assisting them with setup, acting as a liaison between MU and the building level administration, and ensuring the facility was locked up at the close of each session. I enjoyed helping Dr. Eagle and Edna Thomas coordinate all of the activities. The added responsibility was gratifying.

By the end of the first year the Braxton Cohort had become a cohesive unit. We began to secure chair and committee members. We also began to learn more about each other and most importantly, we became friends. This collaboration with my peers and my professors led to a presentation opportunity in Charleston, West Virginia for the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration (SRCEA). The focal point of the conference was, “Leading and Learning in the 21st Century.” I worked with fellow cohort member Traci L. Knight, and Marshall University Professor, Dr. Teresa Eagle to put together a presentation and paper entitled, “Technology Integration: A Top Down Approach.” To my excitement our submission was accepted and we presented at the Embassy Suites in Charleston, West Virginia on October 24, 2008.

Throughout my career I have conducted numerous educational workshops and presented at both national and state level conferences, but this experience was unique. My co-presenters and I were offering the audience our ideas related to a top-down approach to technology integration, beginning with central office administration. We stressed the idea that, “Superintendents working in concert with local school boards and central office administration should be informed leaders capable of tapping into technology to strengthen teaching, learning, and school governance” (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 14). The audience members provided excellent feedback and asked several questions regarding our theory to which I could relate personal experiences involving numerous attempts at technology implementation. I was honored to present my ideas to such a distinguished group as the room was full of doctoral students and professors from other schools, as well as cohort students and other MU faculty and students. During the question and answer session that followed our presentation, I found that the audience had given us some wonderful ideas that needed to be incorporated into the presentation which would only strengthen our position. The audience had helped to further educate my own understanding. Upon realizing this I had one of my first “AHA” moments.

**Stage Three - Arenberg, The Challenge**

*Arenberg Porte du Hainaut (Arenberg for short) is the nastiest trek of the Tour de France. It is a cobblestone pathway with large gaps between the rocks that really tests the best of the cycling world. The course is wrought with tales of punctured tires, bent rims, horrific crashes and shuddering vibrations to arms and legs at any speed.*

My Arenberg happened during year two of the doctoral cohort. It was a time of great loss combined with great gain. By the beginning of year two we lost three cohort members and picked up two new members. There were times when each of us looked around the room and wondered who might depart next. Life began to creep into the picture and the stresses of coursework, cohort travel and time away from family started to become apparent. In the midst of everything I decided to make a major career move and go to work for the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE). Faced with the possibility of a RIF (reduction in force) from Marion County Schools, I had to act fast and find a new job. I left Marion County in April 2008 and started at the WVDE Office of Institutional Education Programs (OIEP) in May.

The new job also meant that I had to find a place to live in Charleston because the commute to work was simply too far from Elkins. Suddenly I began to feel the gaps in the cobblestone and I knew that at any time the vibrations of school and work and home could produce a crash. I waited… but no crash came. Actually I found myself recharged and full of new energy. The move to Charleston made it much easier to get to the MU South Charleston campus and I began spending more time there.

My new leadership position put me in charge of providing professional development and other resources as needed to 41 institutional schools throughout West Virginia. I began relying heavily on my leadership and curriculum courses and started to draw relevance from every assignment. I was responsible for making state level decisions and others were looking to me for leadership and support. I can remember saying to myself, “Hey, this leadership stuff is paying off” but I knew that I had to “get it right” so I turned to my coursework for answers.

One of the first questions that I had to answer was, “What kind of leader am I?” An assignment entitled, “Personal Best Leadership Experience” which I completed in LS 710 Principals of Leadership, under the direction of Dr. Powell Toth, would prove to be an invaluable project and ultimately answer my question. Dr. Toth had asked each student to identify and define the elements important to their personal definition of leadership. I chose three:

1. Interpersonal element - which means the relationship to others, i.e., creating positive relationships with the persons that you are leading.

2. Influence element - the power to affect others, but not using this power in a negative way. Influence should never be harmful to others; it should lead to the uplifting of others.

3. Goal element - the end or result that one strives to attain.

I noted that, “A good leader understands each of these elements and can apply them to situations as they arise. A good leader is also not afraid to get her hands dirty; she can jump in and perform the tasks of others within the group.”

Dr. Toth had instructed us to identify a particular “personal best” leadership situation and reflect on the following categories: opportunities and challenges, destinations, involvement, encouragement, character experience and leadership lessons. Each category had questions to assist in drawing out the importance of the leadership situation and the impact that it had on us personally. My analysis was that I focus my attention on human nature and the needs of others, thus I tend to resemble the characteristics that are present in the Servant Leadership style. A quote that I chose to best represent my belief in the Servant Leadership style was, "We must be silent before we can listen. We must listen before we can learn. We must learn before we can prepare. We must prepare before we can serve. We must serve before we can lead" (Ward, 1999, p.11). Now that I knew more about “how” I would lead the next thing I needed to decide was “what” needed to be done.

**Stage Four - Mt. Ventoux, Turbulent Times**

*Mt. Ventoux (Ventoux means windy), an isolated mountain located in the Alps, has been labeled one of the most difficult climbs in cycling history. Riders that reach this pinnacle unscathed have an opportunity to build a substantial time gap from the peloton.*

During Dr. Michael Cunningham’s EDF 711 Survey Research in Education course I designed several practical surveys which related to assessing the needs of professional development opportunities. I was able to take the knowledge gleaned from all of the sample surveys we produced and use it to design my own professional staff development survey tool which ultimately assisted in the planning of the 2009 and 2010 OIEP Annual Professional Staff Development Conferences. The 2009 OIEP conference was the first time in the organization’s existence in which all administration, faculty, and staff members from each area of specialty, Adult, Juvenile and Regional Jail facilities, would be assembled in one place to obtain their professional staff development trainings. The conference was mandatory and the attendance was just over 310 people. The survey that I developed for OIEP addressed four key areas: curriculum support, technology tools, continuing education requirements and administrative functions. In addition, I wanted to collect constructive feedback on previous conference events relating to session needs and interest levels. I felt that it was important to provide a mixture of mandatory and interest specific sessions during the conference.

To finalize the event, I also provided participants with a follow-up survey which would be used to effectively plan for the 2010 OIEP Professional Staff Development Conference. To my delight the survey results indicated that the 2009 OIEP conference was one of the most successful and enjoyable conferences that any of the participants had *ever* attended. I have to thank Dr. Cunningham and EDF 711 because without this course and his direction, I would not have been able to collect the information needed to pull off such an incredible conference.

Upon completing CI 702 Curriculum Theories and CI 703 Theories, Models, and Research of Teaching under the direction of Dr. Calvin Meyer, a wonderful new collegial opportunity presented itself. Dr. Meyer asked a few cohort students to join him in a panel discussion which was to be held on the Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia campus. The topic of the panel discussion was “Teaching to a Difficult Textbook” and related directly to a book written by William Pinar et al., entitled, *Understanding Curriculum*. The panel discussion was for new faculty and it provided them with an opportunity to ask questions and enter into discussions (with us) regarding the coursework of CI 702 and CI 703 as well as the now infamous text by Pinar.

When Dr. Meyer asked me to be a panel member I was honored. I really came to respect the way he presented his course material and had also been using the theory discussion notes I had been taking to assist me in planning for the OIEP Professional Staff Development Conferences mentioned earlier. I specifically focused on the concepts relating to how adult populations learn best, since that was the population that I was serving in my current role of Coordinator with OIEP. Authors like Ron and Susan Zemke were quick to point out that, “Adults need to be able to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep - and use - the new information” (Zemke, R. & Zemke, S., 1984, p.5).

At the same time I was learning more about my own learning style which provided perspective as I designed the conference professional development schedule. I realized that I am a visual learner but I have some Traditional Theory tendencies. I also came to understand the importance of the educational environment as it relates to session structure and duration and as Ron Zemke noted, “The learning environment must be physically and psychologically comfortable; long lectures, periods of interminable sitting and the absence of practice opportunities rate high on the irritation scale” (Innovation Abstracts, 1984, p.11).

On a personal level I wanted to be a panel member to show my appreciation to Dr. Meyer for providing me with my newfound knowledge of curricula. On a professional level this was my first invitation to be a panel member and I knew it would be a learning opportunity. I had no idea what to expect or even how a panel discussion was arranged and moderated. This discussion forum allowed me to provide information related to the course content and the demonstration of knowledge via the hands-on practical learning techniques used by Dr. Meyer during live class meetings. The experience also allowed me to take note of the panel discussion process which I would use to plan my own upcoming panel discussion featured at the OIEP conference.

The icing on the cake came in the form of a follow-up letter from Dr. Meyer thanking me for my participation. The letter stated, “I was sincerely complimented and humbled by the many kind comments directed toward me. Most importantly, I was proud of the representation you gave our university.” As I read his letter I reflected on the joys and the difficulties that I had encountered during Dr. Meyer’s coursework and I could not help feeling that I had won this stage of the race.

**Stage Five - Cambria, Tending to Wounds**

*Cambria is a traditional stage of the Tour without major difficulties for riders. The stage is very short and rather flat but is introduced so that cyclists have time to tend their wounds; it is meant to be a time of rest.*

My Cambria came in the form of a wonderful new project given to me by Dr. Cunningham. He contacted me and asked me if I would be interested in designing an Orientation Module for the Leadership Studies Post-Master's Principal Preparation Program via an online platform. Once again I was honored to be contacted and thrilled to have a chance to work directly with Dr. Cunningham on this project. He provided me with administrative and developmental access to the MU Blackboard site. With my technology background, I knew this would be a project that I would enjoy and provide me a chance to work on a web platform with which I had very little experience.

In order to get the project started I planned a meeting with Dr. Cunningham in an effort to get his vision of what the module should look like. His ideas, along with the information that needed to be presented would give me a great starting point. Next I needed to make myself familiar with the Blackboard web format. I had used a similar, much less detailed, version of Blackboard several years earlier but to my great surprise this Blackboard format was very user friendly and it did not take long before I was able to manipulate the site with no difficulty. As I developed portions of the module I would contact Dr. Cunningham to ensure that I was on the right track; going back and forth via email over a two month period making corrections, adding material, taking out parts that did not fit, etc. When I finished the last portion of the project I uploaded the material for Dr. Cunningham’s review. Not only did he like the work that I did, but he liked the fact that I finished the project well ahead of schedule.

I was also very busy at work assembling resources for my OIEP administrators, teachers and support staff. I wanted to provide them with a “one-stop-shop” of resources that were timely and relevant to the programs supported by OIEP. My technology background allowed me to have access to the WVDE/OIEP Web server which gave me an opportunity to design Web-ready resources and upload them for easy access. The site that I developed was the OIEP Online File Cabinet, taken from a similar site which was developed by the WVDE Office of Assessment. I scheduled a meeting with the WVDE Assessment Office and asked them if I might “copy” their idea and add a similar page to my OIEP site. I explained that I wanted to provide resources that were relevant and appropriate to the administrators, teachers and support staff within an Institutional Education setting. They agreed and realized that this population of professionals and service personnel had been overlooked in the past and that my idea was a sound one.

Once again I was able to turn to my MU coursework for ideas; it was during this new website development stage that I was enrolled in CIEC 700 Technology and Curriculum under the direction of Dr. Lisa Heaton. Technology is something with which I am very comfortable and as such technology trainings with educators seem second nature to me. This project however, was much different. I needed to assess the needs of three very large categories of employees (school administrators, teachers, and support personnel), assemble the resources that were requested, required and/or deemed necessary by upper level administration, and provide those resources in an easy, user friendly, web environment. I had to ensure that the materials were without copyright infringement, were a product of research-based methods, and were approved by the WVDE for publication on its main website.

I remember feeling a little overwhelmed but very happy to be in CIEC 700 and learning and re-learning some wonderful technology applications that would provide just what I needed. An idea that I had been pondering became crystal clear during one particular assignment in which we had to create a brief informational video using the computer program Microsoft Movie Maker. During the production of our “mini” movie, we were to include voice-over via a separate computer program entitled Audacity. The final product would be an informational movie/video with our voices guiding the presentation.

This was another major “AHA” moment for I knew exactly what I wanted to do for my OIEP administrators, teachers and staff members. I began to research a variety of computer programs that would capture screen shots, website images, pictures, etc., and that would allow me to narrate the applications I wanted to present in a step-by-step tutorial format. It was genius and everyone loved it! Individuals reported back to me that they felt the narration and the step-by-step screenshots took all of the guesswork out of it. They felt more comfortable with the technology applications in general (which is exactly what we discussed in class). Many individuals within OIEP expressed their gratitude for my work and indicated that this was the first time that they felt someone at WVDE cared specifically about them, what they did, and the population of students that they served.

I had no idea what impact this project would have; other OIEP administrators, professionals and support personnel began requesting information and submitting ideas which could be shared. Wow, what I had done? Suddenly I could hear the words of Dr. Barbara Nicholson during LS 707 Ethical Theories, “As doctoral students and later on doctors, you have a responsibility…” This experience provided me with a greater understanding of her statement: I was giving back. With the wind at my back and a smile on my face I was ready for the next climb.

**Stage Six - King of the Mountains**

*The King of the Mountains classification in the Tour de France is a secondary classification within the overall competition in which cyclists receive points for reaching a mountain top first. The leader of the King of the Mountains is easily identifiable by the red and white polka dot jersey that they wear during the race.*

By the third year of the doctoral process I was wearing my polka dots with pride. Things were going well and I could begin to see some light at the end of the tunnel. This was also the year in which I would chair the 2010 Fall Doctoral Seminar. I had been a contributing member of the Seminar Committee for two semesters and had served as the co-chair with Beth Pauley for one semester. Now it was time to run the show. Planning began shortly after the completion of the Spring 2010 Doctoral Seminar; as a matter of fact, we had our first team meeting two weeks after the March 13th session. My new team was assembled and we began meeting on a very regular basis: monthly, then bi-weekly, then every Wednesday at 3:30 p.m. (we all laughed and called it our Wednesday night Bible study).

The title for the fall seminar was “Solutions to Today’s Educational Crisis,” with a subtitle question, “Is Education Under Attack?” My committee members and I wanted to address the seemingly increased hostility that education at all levels is currently facing. Some of these battles were coming from federal and state policy, other battles were coming from the current state of the economy, and still other battles were between higher education and secondary education. We deduced that the time was right to ask our fellow doctoral students and faculty members for their opinions on related topics.

The work involved in planning a conference, no matter how big or small, is extensive; however, I had a slight advantage. While employed in Marion County I was involved in planning the annual, county-wide technology integration conference for k-12 teachers which was funded by three consecutive Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) grant awards. These events had an average attendance rate of 350 people, with two meals served each day and distribution of professional development and technology tools. While working for OIEP I planned and managed three state OIEP Professional Development conferences as previously mentioned, each with an average attendance of 310. The OIEP conferences were each three day conferences, with three meals per day and entertainment.

Now I was planning a one-day event with a potential attendance level of 150 people, with one meal being served (lunch) along with morning snacks and coffee. The difference was that this would be a professional development session for my peers alongside my professors. Once again, I wanted to get this one right and at the same time I wanted my fellow cohort members to be heavily involved. We had been attending the seminar meetings for three years and since graduation seemed to be getting a little closer, I wanted each member to have a memorable experience before we began to head out in our different directions. I am not sure why, but for some reason I felt this seminar might be our last collective meeting as a group and I wanted to do something special for them. All but one of the cohort members participated in the event. Some actually conducted mini sessions, others served as facilitators, and still others assumed the duties of food and prize coordination.

The MU 2010 Fall Doctoral Seminar proved to be an overall success providing students with an assortment of professional development sessions, collegial and collaborative activities as well as time to network with peers and MU faculty. My committee and I experimented with different breakout session platforms. We used a traditional approach in which students were assigned to sessions based on their individual progress within the doctoral process; we also used a progressive approach in which students were able to select, based on their interest levels, sessions that they felt they needed more time to explore. Completely aware of my own learning preference, I wanted to provide the participants with a variety of learning platforms. The traditional approach better suited Sequential and Global learning styles, while the portfolio presentation stations provided Active and Reflective learners an opportunity to explore on their own.

As with any conference or professional development session, it is very important to reflect on the process and analyze satisfaction surveys completed by attendees. This provides wonderful insight into what needs to be changed and/or tweaked with regard to scheduling, staffing, catering, registration, etc. One of the biggest challenges of the Fall Doctoral Seminar was its attendance level; for some reason the attendance was at an all-time low. Study of the survey made available to exiting participants at the conclusion of the seminar indicated two major areas of concern. The first was the fact that students did not understand the need to have two sessions per year. The second was the potential limitation of sessions relevant to all groups. This information was provided for the committee planning the 2011 Spring Doctoral Seminar in March.

It was an honor to be a member of the MU Doctoral Seminar Planning Committee for three years and even more of an honor to serve as Seminar Chair. I am a member of a select group of students and have had an opportunity to lead this event. I proudly pass my torch to the next Doctoral Seminar Committee Chair and I hope that her experience is as wonderful. As I stepped away from the podium I realized that I was ready for the yellow jersey.

**Stage Seven - Maillot Jaune, The Yellow Jersey Conclusion**

*The winner of the Tour de France is decided by totaling the time each rider takes on the daily stages. The rider with the lowest overall time at the end of each stage receives a ceremonial yellow bicycling jersey and the right to start the next stage. The rider to receive the yellow jersey after the last stage in Paris is the overall winner of the Tour.*

In this time of great reflection I have come to realize that I am already wearing my own yellow jersey and I am fast approaching the final stages of this race to the Ed.D. There have been difficulties along the way, but like any good rider, I have made my adjustments. As I write this reflection I am reminded that I have changed jobs for the third time during my doctoral process. I now assume a greater leadership role and along with it a greater sense of duty. I went from being responsible for 22 schools in Marion County to being responsible for 41 OIEP schools, and now that number is over 100. I am the Global 21 Assessment Coordinator for the Office of Career and Technical Accountability and Support (CTE), a job that I interviewed for at 1:00 p.m. and accepted at 3.00 p.m. the same day. I know for a fact one of the major reasons that I got the job is because of the educational qualifications which I acquired from Marshall University.

On a personal level I am not the same individual that showed up for potential admission to the Braxton County Cohort three + years ago. My attitude has changed; I no longer feel that I have to do it all – and I am willing to look to others for their input and expertise. Collaboration is something that I enjoy very much and I tend to listen more than ever before. I am also not as naive – I look at things a little more critically and I put a lot more thought into my actions. Some would say I am not as “bubbly.” – although I do not think that is a bad thing. There were times when I might have been too enthusiastic. Now I might be just a little more reserved simply because I am constantly evaluating situations as they arise.

Finally, I value my time and my family even more than before. When you spend as much time as we have away from family, friends and life events you really begin to assess the costs. I have missed birthdays, dinners, field trips, ball games, vacation time, trips for work, weddings, funerals, other professional opportunities, etc., all in the name of the doctoral chase, but when I defend this portfolio successfully and make it to my dissertation defense, the words Dr. Tracy L. Chenoweth will clear the slate. I simply cannot wait!

It has been my personal goal to obtain my doctorate at Marshall University and with pride I wear the green and white. Sometimes I think back and I laugh at the wise words spoken by Dr. Eagle at one of the opening class sessions way back in semester one (*some exaggeration may be included for effect*):

“Welcome to the Marshall University Doctoral Cohort, during this process don’t get divorced, don’t get married, don’t worry, you will gain weight, don’t buy a gym membership, don’t move, don’t buy a new home, don’t change jobs, don’t take on additional responsibility, don’t have a baby, don’t plan for grandchildren, don’t join any time consuming organizations, don’t volunteer to be president of anything, don’t coach any sports, don’t buy tickets to a show, don’t plan on class being cancelled because of weather, don’t plan on skipping class, don’t plan on using any sick days, don’t plan on getting out early, don’t plan on good weather every class session…” Personally I have broken several of the rules that she established at the start of this process and yet this has been one of the most enjoyable races of my life. Some might say it was the best advice that I *never* took. Thank you all!

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