**Stepping Through the Open Doors**

**Kathy Ann Daniels McDilda**

*Never look at the doors closing behind you or you’ll miss the ones opening ahead. Unknown*

I picture life through my educational process as a maze, a succession of intertwining hallways lined with doors and windows. I see countless points of light I recognize as people, places and experiences that have equipped me for my next step, a dissertation. I look forward to the future opportunities that will be available because of conducting my research and completing my Ed.D. Reflecting on what I have learned, my challenges and successes and how I have grown will show that I am prepared to continue. The symbolism of the maze of open doors represents the results of persistent prayer, steps of faith, hard work, collaboration, challenge and affirmation from my chair, family support, and faculty encouragement. Each of these were baby steps or leaps in the journey. My electronic portfolio demonstrates the many experiences, and doors, I have walked through during my doctoral program. This portfolio is located on the following website: <https://kmcdilda.wixsite.com/mysite>

As I look back to 2009, a looming open door in the form of a Marshall University employee tuition waiver prompted me to enroll in CI 624 Advanced Instructional Strategies. I knew the class would improve my instruction and provide better opportunities for my students, but my purpose was to explore future coursework and possibly leading to a doctorate. This class led to another and another, a pathway through open doors. Dr. Ron Childers, my Master’s degree chair and LS 703 Research Design professor, challenged me to officially apply for the Doctorate program. The application process represented commitment to an academic and personal challenge like none I had ever pursued. I was ambivalent about the aspiration of the doctorate degree. What was the benefit at my age? Was the result worth the extreme effort and would the economic advantage offset the costs? I determined after hours of soul searching that acceptance in the MUGC doctoral program was the indication to continue the journey to the doctorate. The journey was no longer through one door, but through an individualized, proposed maze, through each assignment and each completed class. My course matrix (Artifact 1- Reflection), attached, shows the deliberate plan of my program.

*I never did anything alone. Whatever was accomplished in this country was accomplished collectively*. Golda Meir

**Collaboration**

 Learning is collaborative. Collaboration between teacher and student and also student and student are critical components. As I have stepped through my program, I have had the opportunity to share my path and collaborate with students and professors. In CI 677 Writing for Publication we used a writing workshop model. A small group of classmates worked together on the assignments for the semester. We read, proofread, critiqued and proposed changes. At first I was intimidated and reluctant to share my writing, but the workshop afforded the support and structure that gradually reduced the anxiety and built collegiality and trust between the group members. The quality of my writing improved because of the extensive writing, sharing and rewriting process. However, more importantly, I recognized that each process, assignment and collaborative effort within the program was a strategic step of preparation for the dissertation.

 I learned about higher education program design by collaborating with Dr. Meisel. As part of the ongoing process to develop an Elementary Math Specialist program (Artifact 2 – Collaboration), I researched and identified course readings and learning activities. The method of creating a new graduate program presented challenges. Acquiring approval for a new program required meeting an identified need within the K-12 system, attention to detail as outlined by the West Virginia Department of Education, and patience for navigating the ever changing policies of higher education. Participation in this project provided the valuable experience with research as well as collaboration as well as navigating the higher education labyrinth.

 Dr. Meisel and I collaborated on two courses CI 610, Secondary Education: Curriculum in the Modern Secondary School and CI 515 Integrated Methods and Materials: Secondary Education. My role in CI 610, an online course, was to facilitate students as they completed the weekly assignments. Students were to read the course materials and respond to prompts that measured understanding and comprehension of material. Dr. Meisel and I worked together to align our written responses to students and to standardize our scoring. Since this was one of my first experiences as an online instructor, collaboration was vital. I learned that the phrasing of my responses could either encourage or limit discussion and learned that teacher- student relationships are as necessary online as in a physical classroom. Dr. Meisel and I each worked with the same group of students throughout the semester, but talked often about individual progress. Our conversations resulted in more reliable, standard scoring practices. This experience helped to grow my confidence and expertise with Master level online courses and to bolster my professional knowledge base. The experience of collaborating alleviated some of the stress caused by the amount of the work and the decision-making concerning course expectations. Students benefitted from our different perspectives available from our co-teaching. Co-teaching provided a mentor and colleague, necessary supports, while learning to teach an online class.

 Co-teaching was also beneficial for me and students during CI 515 Integrated Methods and Materials: Secondary Education. Dr. Meisel and I shared the responsibility for instruction in this class. The class consisted of weekly face-to-face class meetings supported by online resources and course content. Since the class, (a required course in the MAT program), was large and various disciplines were represented, two professors provided the much needed individual instruction. As the instructors, our collective brain broadened the effect of the class because each of us brought strengths to this collaboration effort. Dr. Meisel brought her broad expertise with instruction at the university level and I offered relevant, current classroom experiences. We were able to establish a well-supported learning community for candidates. One of the most compelling effects on me was the value of co-teaching. I was better satisfied with the outcomes of the course because our joint planning and delivery resulted in a richer experience for the candidates.

 Working with CI 515 and CI 610 provided foundational knowledge for CIEC 715 Online Course Development and Delivery. During the course, members of the class created an online professional development course to prepare teachers to integrate new multimedia technologies into the classroom. The collaboration for this project entailed establishing course objectives, activities, and assessment protocols, while maintaining a common voice throughout. My work in this course again affirmed that collaboration and co-teaching can provide better learning opportunities. The process of working together on one large project required that each contributor follow well defined protocols. These protocols provided the cohesiveness between modules and learning activities. The course was later taught to teacher participants and I have attached a collection of journal entries (Artifact 3 – Collaboration) written during the course. The first time this course was taught, Dr. Heaton, our course professor, allowed us to read the participant reflections that described what they learned from the course and how they used the newly learned material with their students. The experience of developing an online course provided necessary experience with current instruction. Most higher education classes have, at the minimum, an online component for delivery of course material and a doctorate program is incomplete without training for the online platform.

 The goal for all my collaboration efforts as well as everything in my program is learning; learning about learning, about my world, about me. As I stepped through the doors opened by those merging onto my path, I gained direction and capabilities to continue to explore more open doors.

*In the Universe there are things that are known, and things that are unknown, and in between there are DOORS.* William Blake

**Scholarship**

 How are curriculum and instruction addressed in the classroom? How does the teacher affect the methodology and implementation? How does personal philosophy and experience impact teacher practice and student learning? How do administrative and legal expectations affect classroom experiences for both teacher and students? The responses to these questions expose my basic philosophy and personal principles. Prior to my classes in the MUGC Doctoral Program, the basic knowledge from my undergraduate and graduate degrees played a major role in determining my practice. I entered the classroom as a thirty-six-year-old mother with children who were successful in school, embedded in a learning environment aligned with my personal beliefs about instruction and curriculum. My experiences as a student and those of my daughters were valuable and served the purpose to prepare me for future educational and relevant life pursuits. However, the course work and additional investigation in my doctoral program developed my awareness of the variation of education praxes and confirmed my convictions that the teacher is the key to effective programs and instruction.

 Variation of educational praxes is evidenced by results of both national and global education studies. Artifact 4 – Scholarship is the paper describing the interview, responses and the assimilation of the experience completed for an assignment in CI 706 Multicultural and Diversity Issues. I interviewed a local teacher trained in Germany. Her insights about the German tripartite education system revealed the differences between Germany, a system that predetermines the career direction of students, compared to the open choice of the U.S. system. While the United States operates schools where students of all abilities attend the same school, Germany operates different schools for varying student abilities. According to Fuchs and Reuter (2004), research suggests that most German students are prepared for jobs, but adequate educational preparation for a successful and prosperous life is questionable. Glaesser (2008) suggests that education in the US or Germany does not provide a guaranteed path of improvement in socioeconomic status in either country. The criteria for determining the effectiveness of any school program is illusive. The prevailing responses of my interviewee was that German students were held to higher standards of academic excellence and responsibility. The opportunity of studying an international system and hearing the information of other course participants provided insight into curriculum and instruction issues from around the world. Student preparation and academic performance is the consistent concern and access for all children is a widespread need. A basic understanding of global educational practices provided a comprehensive context for curriculum and instruction.

Education studies reveal that teacher quality and preparedness are also consistent concerns. Research suggests that teachers are the ‘gatekeepers’ of the curriculum (Thornton, 1986). They influence the implementation of curricular programs as well as the perception of instructional successes. However, investigating the theories of Dewey, Vygotsky, Piaget, Jensen, Gardner, and the plethora of noted educational researchers, empowers the current educators and is necessary for deep understanding of how students learn. The affirmation is gained by realizing that personal theories and teaching methods are successful, not because of a fluke, but because they represent a deep seeded knowledge gained through study and practice. According to Marzano (2007), the science of teaching is necessary to continue to understand impactful practice as more information is uncovered about learning and the learner. He further states that research identifies strategies that have a high possibility of working, but there is no guarantee. Learning and teaching are human endeavors affected by numerous uncontrollable variables. The artful, successful teacher is the link of learning theories and teaching models. Marzano acknowledges the necessity of both the art and science of teaching. (Marzano, 2007) Through my practice I used strategies that I learned from workshops or observed from my colleagues. I knew they worked, but until my doctoral program classes I had little knowledge of the theoretical, research base. I have learned that the Inquiry Model is the foundation of my teaching philosophy. Offering students the chance to question and investigate in all disciplines helps them construct their own meaning and take ownership of their learning. However, students have to be taught how to question and how to investigate. Some is accomplished through collaborative efforts and others are individual attempts. Some of the best inquiry experiences result in Problem Based Learning that immerses learners in rich, relevant experiences. Inquiry serves as the model for understanding the Nature of Science, but it also helps the student understand the nature of learning and how learning occurs. I have developed an appreciation that Inquiry is cross-disciplinary and student inquiry leads to deeper learning and more complex questioning.

Through the collaboration and mutual respect within my doctoral program classes, I have learned that there is a shared concern for the education system and how students are expected to access and acquire information to learn. There are so many philosophies of how to improve the education system that curriculum and instruction are in a continuous revolving door. An assignment for CI 707 Curriculum Change (Artifact 5 – Scholarship) resonates because of the challenges faced in education. In Pre-K – 12, teachers on the front lines working with students are criticized and faulted as the cause of educational problems. However, are classroom teachers allowed a voice in choosing policy and programming? According to Burton and Frazier (2012), for change and improvement to occur 1) teachers need to be consulted to identify needs and solutions, 2) teachers should be given the appropriate tools for assessment, their data used as evidence, and their expertise valued, 3) teachers should be treated as professionals and given the appropriate respect, 4) teachers need long-term professional development, and 5) teachers need to be empowered. As Metz (2007) states, teachers are both targets and agents of change. Teachers are the keys to identifying the needs and providing the experiences for students to learn.

I appreciate the complexity of learning and the extreme responsibility of motivating students to learn. I have cultivated my passion for attempting to create an environment where students want to learn. I have refined my understanding of learning, one of the most compelling, significant measures of living. The learning never stops, doors open to deeper understanding.

Science reform and inquiry are both science topics that interest me because of how each affects science instruction and I have chosen to concentrate most of my personal study on science and science instruction related topics. The final paper for CI 707 Curriculum Change (Artifact 5 – Scholarship) demonstrates my understanding of science instructional change and the conundrum of implementing and supporting teachers through the change. My literature review for this paper aligned with observations from my professional practice and my study during the program. Professional development for classroom teachers is a key element for science reform. Strategies for professional development are supported by identified characteristics of effective professional development as mentioned previously.

In EDF 620, I created a mixed method study (Artifact 6 – Scholarship and Research) to review instructional materials. This project reveals the complexity of a research study and it also demonstrates my personal learning and scholarship. It is a compilation of many of the learning objectives of my program. As I completed this project, I knew it was a first draft, a beginning of a possible research that will enhance the current body of knowledge. I have attached the final report of the project (Artifact 7 – Scholarship and Research).

[*An education isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you know and what you don't.*](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/anatolefra101422.html)

[Anatole France](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/anatole_france.html)

**Research**

 EDF 625 Quantitative Research in Education was the first class that opened the door of research for me. During the class, we conducted small quantitative research assignments but the final class assignment was a self-selected project. I chose to collect and analyze the data collected from pre-service teachers participating in COMETS, an afterschool science program funded by the National Science Foundation. As a component of the assignment, I completed an IRB review including interview questions, participant permissions, and CITI training. Dr. Debela, EDF 625 professor, guided the process but also modeled collaboration necessary for a research project. I discovered that interviews and transcription are time-consuming but crucial for response accuracy when coding and aggregating the data. Having this course as early as I did in my journey allowed me to identify the need and value of research in my readings, my job, and my continued study. I also started to appreciate strength of qualitative research in education. The final project was later presented at a poster session for MA-ASTE regional conference. My first artifact for research, (Artifact 8 – Research), is a power point presentation of the project.

 Doors of research continued to open as I stepped into a parallel path of an evaluation certificate. First, I enrolled in EDF 711 Survey Research in Education. Throughout the class, we reviewed and prepared surveys. It appeared to be simple, but the process of development proved to be multifaceted. I learned that just as a good lesson should begin with the end in mind, a survey should do the same. The research question determines the survey questions and the survey questions should show a direct link back to the questions. As an element of the class assignments, I prepared a survey (Artifact 9 – Research) used by the WVSU Education Department to determine Teacher Disposition progression throughout the undergraduate preparation courses and experiences. The survey was approved by the department to be used as one of the key assessments for WVSU NCATE/CAEP accreditation.

I continued my work with the Teacher Disposition survey as part of EDF 679 Program Evaluation. This course finalized my coursework for an Evaluation Certificate completed along with my Ed.S. degree. For the course, I completed an evaluation of Teacher Disposition development in the WVSU Education Department. I reviewed the administration procedures, assimilated the available data and created a report. (Artifact 10 – Research) I discovered that program evaluation is a tedious process that requires significant communication with and cooperation from participants. I also realized that I am only a novice at research and evaluation. Since this survey is only one of the many WVSU program assessments, I recognized the complicated and arduous task of preparing for accreditation. The department continues to collect survey data as well as review and address the identified issues related to administration and survey validity. As an evaluator, I plan to further develop the skills necessary for leading a program evaluation and hone those skills during my doctoral research.

According to Hesse-Biber (2010), a well-implemented, balanced research study can provide a broad understanding of the study topic. The broad perspective is supported by an integration of qualitative and quantitative methods that supply a comprehensive representation of the studied topic. Learning about and completing research has been an essential component of my steps as a doctoral student. As grant coordinator of two National Science Foundation grants, COMETS, Communities Educating Tomorrow’s Scientists, and SCITALKS, Supporting Community Initiatives for TeAching, Learning, and Knowing Science, my interest and involvement in educational research intensified and allowed me to see intricacies of research study protocols. The body of knowledge informed by educational research supplies options that inform practices and lead to valid and reliable outcomes affecting student classroom experiences and learning.

[*What you get by achieving your goals is not as important as what you become by achieving your goals.*](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/henrydavid120890.html) [Henry David Thoreau](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/h/henry_david_thoreau.html)

**Reflection**

An open door and the courage to take the first of many steps have lead me to where I am now. I look forward and glimpse a future of opportunities; but for this moment I focus on the past. Reflecting on my steps, during the journey, has been an influential part of how I have grown and developed. As explained by Cornish and Jenkins (2012) “reflection is thus more than just thinking; it is a recursive intellectual process involving action (experience), reaction (reflection), more (experimental) action and more reflection.” Each subsequent experience is influenced by the combination of all the others. As I focus on the journey, I know more, but I realize that I know so little. The open door of reflection leads to more questions, but I have acquired new skills to answer the questions. I realize it is impossible to completely describe the effects on me and how I view my world. However, the steps through the open door have allowed me to share a journey with amazing people. To learn from them as well as learn with them.

 I presented the process and results of a qualitative research project (Artifact 11 - Scholarship) during a poster session at MA-ASTE (Mid-America Association of Science Teacher Educators) in Daniels, WV. I have presented numerous professional development sessions, local and national, but presenting research to other researchers was intimidating. I knew they were familiar with educational research topics and most knew about and were interested in the specific aspects of pre-service teacher perceptions. Their questions about the methodology of my study helped me understand research protocol, explicit areas for improvement and potential related research opportunities. I learned that feedback on research studies enhances the process of research as well as supports the authenticity of the findings. The poster session forum was a more non-threatening environment in preparation for the dissertation research and other presentations. This experience opened the door for future professional expectations as well as opportunities.

**Next Steps**

*The door to a balanced success swings wide open on the hinges of hope and encouragement.* Zig Ziglar

My steps through the open doors are unique, I have learned, I have questioned and I have worked. Understandings of curriculum and instruction, what students need to know and what students need to do to learn is guided by my increasing content knowledge and expanding pedagogical expertise. Ideologies serve as initial explanations for personal beliefs and practices but broaden and transform with time and professional growth, a future of open doors.

Reflecting on my steps during the journey has been an influential part of how I have grown and developed. Each subsequent experience is influenced by the combination of all the others.

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