Me, Now:

Becoming a Reflexive Educator

Joshua M. Cooper

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Dr. Elizabeth Campbell

Dr. Eric Lassiter

Dr. Lori Howard

Dr. Douglas Sturgeon

College of Education and Professional Development

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I didn’t want to be a teacher. I wanted to be a baseball player, a glassman, an actor, even a nurse, anything but a teacher. It’s not that I hated school, I just wasn’t interested in standing in the front of a class lecturing. When I went to the University of Rio Grande, I enrolled in the nursing program, got really sick and had to drop out. A friend suggested that I enroll in an education class and that’s how I stumbled into education. I still had reservations about becoming a teacher until the spring of 2006 when I took a trip to Asheville Elementary in Ashville, NC. My assignment was to get 20 hours of field experience in a culturally diverse elementary. In the four days I was there I logged more than 30 hours. I spent most of my in-school time acting as a teacher’s aide and reading to students. The hours that really ignited my passion for teaching were the ones I spent after school in the latchkey program. I spent all of my time doing homework and reading with one student. He sat in the back corner of the library by himself, struggling to read the story that was assigned for homework. I’ll never forget his surprise when I asked if we could do his homework together. He smiled, agreed and we spent the next few days reading, laughing, and creating memories that would forever change my view of education. In that moment I became a teacher. I loved it and I was addicted to that amazing feeling that comes from making a student smile, making them feel important or just letting them know that someone cares about them. By doing these things for my students I began to feel important.

In 2009 I completed my B.S. in Middle School Math and Science. I liked my field but I have always been drawn to students with special needs. When I was a senior my best friend, Jason, was involved in a life shattering accident that left him confined to a wheel chair. I wanted to help but I had no idea what to do. Looking back, that’s why I chose nursing for my initial major. I thought that helping someone else might make up for my inability to help him, but it wasn’t meant to be. I was constantly reprimanded for being too friendly with my patients and their families. I was told that I wasn’t helping anyone by building relationships with the patients. If I remained distant emotions wouldn’t effect patient care. My instructors felt that empathy would affect my objectivity, but I didn’t view patients as objects. I couldn’t work in a field where relationships are frowned upon. I needed to get to know people. When I enrolled in the School of Education at URG I didn’t know that Intervention was an option: I chose Math and Science because it was familiar. As I progressed through the program I learned more about students with disabilities and their needs. The more familiar I became with students’ needs, accommodations and instructional strategies the more comfortable I was working with students with special needs. Becoming comfortable with special needs students made me want to work with them more frequently, until it was all I wanted to do. I wanted to change my major to Intervention but I was so close to graduation it wasn’t practical. Dr. Sturgeon advised me to stay the course and then pursue a Master’s in Intervention. I was disappointed. I felt best when I was working with exceptional children and I did my best work with them. I was engaged and so were they. I hated the idea of waiting to do work that I loved.

My first year at Southeastern High School wasn’t ideal. I didn’t have a classroom. I was based in a computer lab but I taught each class in whatever room was available. I would have to carry two or three classes worth of work with me at a time in my backpack. I felt like a mangy transient drifter pretending to be a teacher. I taught seven different classes on top of large caseload of juniors and seniors. The best part of my time in the high school was working with my friend Val. Val had been my senior English teacher and very supportive. She helped me with lessons, accommodations and gave me supplies when I needed them. But what meant the most to me was the way she treated me like an equal. Many of the teachers acted like I was still in high school. I would propose an idea and they would pat me on the head, tell me I was a good boy and walk away. Val wasn’t like that. We shared ideas and discussed how to make them better. She asked me for advice and made me feel important.

In 2013 I started to lose interest in my job, not in the kids but in all the mandatory volunteering that comes with teaching in a small school. I didn’t want to coach, I didn’t want to announce every sporting event and I didn’t want to work the long jump pit at track meets. I wanted to teach and do it well. I wanted my students to be successful. My MA had provided me with the knowledge and skills to be an effective intervention specialist but I wanted to be a great one. I wanted to be the teacher students could count on for life, like Val. I could provide any student with accommodations that would help them graduate but I didn’t feel like I was making those deep connections that lasted a life time. I didn’t know if it was my age, lack of experience or lack of knowledge that was holding me back but I was determined to fix it. I wanted to be able to correct all of the faults in our special education program and I wanted people to take me seriously when I made a suggestion. I just wanted more.

I began searching for graduate programs that offered a doctorate in education. I wanted relationships with educated people. I began searching the internet for doctoral programs within a 150 mile radius. I looked at Ohio State and Ohio University but I couldn’t enroll in those programs and continue teaching at SE. OU’s classes started at 3:30 and I would never make it in time. My search ended with Marshall. The program was only two hours away and classes were in the evening so I would be able to teach while in school. I convinced Val to apply with me. She and I had always talked about going back to school.

The first time we went to the graduate campus was to take the MAT. We were pretty competitive so we wagered lunch on our scores. The room where we were tested was literally a broom closet. There was one computer and one chair; we had to take turns. Val went first. When she came out an hour later her face was flushed. She had clearly put too much pressure on herself, as she often does, and wasn’t satisfied with her performance. I reassured her that she would be fine and walked into the testing closet. I had an hour to complete the test, so I set to work. At the 30 minute mark the fire alarm in the library went off. I was ushered out of the building with everyone else. The test administrator apologized and informed me that my time was still running and that I would be allowed to reschedule for free if I didn’t get the score I needed. With the all clear given and nothing to lose, I ran into the test closet and worked as quickly as possible. When we received our scores Val was annoyed to find that I had beaten her, but relieved that we both met the benchmark for admission.

**Coursework**

I enrolled in my first classes in the spring of 2013: Social and Political Determinants of Curriculum (CI 704) and Sociology of American Schools (EDF 665). Val and I scheduled our classes together so that we could share a ride. On the first day of class Val and I ran out the door at 3:00 pm, jumped in the car and headed south. When we arrived on campus we were late. After finding the right building and room, Val and I snuck in and sat near the back of the room. We had to sit at separate tables. I took a seat by Angie, a local teacher. She sat in the back at a table by herself. She acknowledged me with a quick “Sup dude?” It was nice to be greeted casually. In my mind every doc student was an uptight, uber professional. Meeting Angie made me feel better about my chances of fitting in. We listened to the tail end of a presentation about IRBs, chairs and research. Val was a mess. She was taking notes and looking lost. I had no idea what was going on either but I didn’t let on. After class, Val was freaking out. We stopped for dinner at TGI Fridays and we both needed a drink. I was finally able to talk her off the ledge and, with food in our bellies, we headed home.

Over the course of that semester I settled into being a student again. I enjoyed the course work in EDF 665. I learned about student equality, politics in education, charter school, the art of instruction and the difficulties young teachers face in urban and rural America. But I enjoyed CI 704 much more. There is something about a class meeting that just can’t be replicated online. I can’t tell you a single person that I shared an online course with. I learned the course material but I didn’t really learn anything from my classmates. It is very easy to be distracted when online. In physical class meetings you focus on the person you are talking to, on that one conversation. Angie, Val and I had several conversations about our work, the curriculum and different instructional methods that worked for use. Our expertise was in different areas and we were able to provide each other with fresh ideas. Dr. Debela was helpful in our integration into the doctoral program. He was patient and worked with our schedule. We caught the train several times on Jefferson Rd. Val would freak out and rattle off some nonsense about being kicked out of the program. She would jump out of the car and race walk to class. I was a little less worried. Each time we would walk in and Dr. Debela would greet us with a smile and motion for us to sit down. He had every right to be upset, classes started at 4:30, but instead chose to make us feel welcome. I wondered if my students felt the same way when they entered my classroom.

I thrived on the interaction with my classmates, especially Val and Angie. Angie was our first friend in the program. We would discuss how to deal with real issues in our schools, not parking for a basketball tournament. I found what was missing from my daily school life, confirmation that teaching wasn’t something people did just so they could coach sports. What felt best was knowing that Val and I weren’t the only two people who wanted more from education. My final paper, *Native Education: A Critical Review of Policy Changes in American Indian Education*, discussed the impact that Native American culture and Bureau of Indian Affairs had on the education of students on reservations. With the semester over and a lot of confidence, I scheduled three classes for the summer semester.

Three was too much. I struggled to keep up with course work and responsibilities to the family business. I took two online courses, Grant Proposal Writing for Non-profit Agencies (ATE 689) and Educational Psychology (EDF 619), and one traditional course, Multicultural/Diversity Issues (CI 706). I really struggled in ATE 689. I wanted to write a grant for a local charity, The Aaron Reed Memorial Fund (ARMF). My professor informed me that I needed to find another non-profit because the scope of the organization limited my ability to fulfill all of the class requirements. I was pissed. How could he tell me that this organization, named for a close friend who was killed in Iraq, wasn’t good enough for the class requirements? I decided to do it any way. I planned on getting the money and rubbing his nose in it. My final project for the course [(ARMF Grant Proposal, available online)](http://thejmcoopersite.weebly.com/scholarship.html) wasn’t very good. He was right, the scope was far too focused. I was asking a national company to contribute thousands of dollars to an organization that provided scholarships to one school in one community, a community that the company wasn’t even a part of. I let my emotions rule my actions. I ended the semester with a C and I earned it. I submitted a proposal without detailed budgets and documentation, I wouldn’t have accepted a proposal like that. As I reflect back on the project, I realize that he wasn’t trying to insult me or the ARMF. He wanted me to succeed and was trying to provide me with an easier path by encouraging me to select a more established NPO. I decided then to stop being so stubborn. The only thing I was proving with my rebellion was that I wasn’t ready to have Ed. D. behind my name, not yet.

I did have some success in EDF 619 and CI 706. EDF 619 was easy. I was familiar with the content and the blackboard modules were well organized. Woolfolk’s *Educational Psychology* (2013) reintroduced Vygotsky, Pavlov, Bandura and Piaget. In the *Differences between Behaviorist and Cognitive Perspectives of Learning* ([available online](http://thejmcoopersite.weebly.com/depth-of-understanding.html)) I discussed the importance of positive and negative reinforcements. I also provided analysis on how to incorporate cognitive ideals into the classroom, like project-based learning. Project based learning allows teachers to engage students in several of Gardner’s multiple intelligences and provides them with the opportunity to participate in social learning by encouraging collaboration. I liked the reading and evaluation of classroom scenarios but I was missing that face to face experience that I loved in CI 704. I got that in CI 706. Val and I really flourished in Dr. Debela’s class. We were two of the few educators in there and everyone seemed to value our opinion on the issues. Val would present arguments from the general education. and college prep perspective and I would throw in my two cents (ok, maybe a dollar’s worth) from the Special Ed. side. We were captivated by the responses from the administrators. Discipline and structure were cornerstones of their positions but they were also aware of the needs of their students and focused on improving the student experience without sacrificing structure. This made me reflect on my classroom, and to wonder if I was focusing too heavily on structure and not enough on creating memorable learning experiences. I realized that teachers and administrators share the same goal, student success. Building relationships with administrators that I didn’t report to revealed that they aren’t the flesh eating monsters that my union reps made them out to be. The school administrators I met in my classes provided me with some valuable tips on how to promote inquiry in classrooms while maintaining discipline. We left class every day, anticipating the day when we could work for someone like them.

I entered fall semester with a new intensity, excited to start class. Research Design (LS 703) was a blast. The text, Creswell’s *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* covered qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies. I learned about introductions, proper literature reviews, purpose statements, research questions and hypotheses. The most beneficial project was the dissertation analysis ([available online](http://thejmcoopersite.weebly.com/scholarship.html)). I chose a dissertation titled *Secondary Education Teachers’ Perceptions Related to Their Knowledge and Effectiveness of Accommodations for Students with Disabilities*. The study investigates the level of special education training acquired by general education teachers in a North Central Texas school district. What concerned me was that the “experts” who analyzed the study were not experts at all, they were students. The researcher also failed to discuss the special education model that the schools employed. This information would impact the analysis of the data in a major way. It was also very, very boring. The writing was sterile and there were no characters that I could relate to. Hell, there were no characters at all, unless you count Teacher A. I knew then that I didn’t want to do a survey for my dissertation. I wanted to do a project that people would want to read and maybe even publish. I wanted to tell a story that people could connect with. Although the dissertation wasn’t overly impressive I was inspired to begin thinking about possible topics and finding a chair. Dr. Childress provided invaluable guidance. He advised me to wait to find a chair until I found someone that I connected with.

I took the spring semester off to coach softball. What a mistake. Getting back into the swing of things was really hard, but the following summer opened my eyes to the type of instructor I wanted to be. I took two classes, Curriculum Development (CI 701) and Curriculum Theories (CI 702). The course content was similar but the structure was very different. CI 701 was a traditional grad level class. The discussions were formal, the reading was intense and the expectations for writing were specific and rigid. Then there was CI 702. The course was just as rigorous as CI 701 but Dr. Beth Campbell created an environment of organized chaos that I craved. The reading was intriguing, the assignments were fun and the discussions were invigorating. I was free to express my thoughts in a number of ways. I loved going to class and hashing out ideas with my friends. Val and Angie were both in the class. We also met a new friend, Harley. Harley was the first guy that I met in the program that was my age. As a rule there aren’t many 28 year old males in the doc program. Harley quickly integrated into our group and became an active participant in our small group discussions. We would discuss course material, instructional strategies and our ideas about our upcoming projects. The group would provide honest feedback without being hurtful. Sharing work with others is a very intimate experience and we all understood that. I knew that my work would be better after I shared it with the group. I trusted them to analyze the thoughts in my work, that’s where the true vulnerability is. Grammatical errors were embarrassing but the thought of flawed logic was devastating. I knew that if there was an error they would find it and help me correct it without making me feel insignificant.

We read several selections from *The Curriculum Studies Reader*. The first selections included the works of Franklin Bobbitt, Maria Montessori, Jane Adams, and George S. Counts but there was a strong connection between John Dewey’s *My Pedagogic Creed* and Beth’s teaching style. “I believe that the school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends” (Dewey, 1929). Dewey’s words were put into action as each week a group of students would lead a discussion about a different educational theory and Beth would join in our discussions as an equal participant. That is when I started noticing the shift in classroom dynamic. We were being challenged to guide our own learning through conversation. Noticing this change made me feel responsible for my own learning. I wanted to do that for my students but I didn’t know exactly how. I began with my students at Shawnee State. I worked with them to create a class syllabus and then allowing them to direct classroom instructions. The results were great but we would veer off topic and I would have to redirect them often. I needed more practice before implementing a student centered approach in my high school classes. My principal resisted any teaching method that wasn’t a lecture and I wanted to polish my methods before I attempted it.

Throughout the course I analyzed various theories and was encouraged to develop my own, The Cooper Curriculum (available online). The curriculum model that I developed is rooted in the learner-centered ideology. The Cooper Curriculum incorporates five key pillars into classroom instruction: engaging students, explicit skill instruction, student reflection, student control, and collaboration. The goal is to cultivate autonomy, self-responsibility, and a critical consciousness in students (Lewis, 2006). By becoming more self-aware, students are able to develop a sense of self-efficacy that allows them to make informed and responsible decisions on classroom matters. Allowing students to develop these skills prepares them for the transition from high school to adult life. I based my curriculum model on my experiences in CI 702 and at Shawnee and shared my ideas in my final project, a video titled Cooking up Curriculum with Chef Bubby (available online).

In the fall of 2014 I took two courses with Beth, Higher Education Curriculum (CI 705) and Curriculum Change (CI 707). That semester Beth agreed to be my chair. I was nervous about asking her. I had been turned down by Dr. Childress, who was no longer accepting students, and I didn’t want to be shot down again. I must have asked Val a hundred times if she thought Beth would agree. She would smile, say yes and tell me that Beth would be crazy not to take me. It was like applying for the program all over again. When I finally asked Beth she agreed. I must have looked ridiculous, smiling from ear to ear, but I felt important. I had a chair and we were going to conquer the world. In CI 705, I learned about how higher education curriculum is developed. Beth encouraged me to focus on something that interested me so I chose teacher prep. I read several articles on the development of curriculum in teacher prep. My final project, Teacher Prep? The Successes and Shortcomings of Teacher Preparation Programs (available online) discussed the differences in the goals of teacher prep programs and the needs of first year teachers in the field. This was my first stab at autoethnography, a research practice that utilizes the description and analysis of personal experiences in order to understand a cultural experience (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Even though it was rough, I was really proud of it. It was gritty and honest. That’s the most difficult part of autoethnography, the honesty. I discussed how I felt that my undergrad program focused too heavily on instructional methods and not enough on school logistics. I had no idea how to effectively manage my time and all the responsibilities that come with being a teacher. I was unaware of countless struggles students from low SES families face. Even the smallest tasks, like where to eat lunch, were tough. The teacher’s lounge was a hateful place. Teachers would gossip about students, administrators and each other. I finally decided to eat lunch in my classroom, alone, away from the infectious negativity that consistently ruined my day. If I ever do get to work in a teacher prep program, I hope that I will be able to prepare my students for all the challenges they will face in the school and in life.

In CI 707, Curriculum Change, I analyzed Tyack and Cuban’s *Tinkering Towards Utopia*. This text discussed current and historical trends in education and their cyclical nature. The text also brings to light the contradictory nature of social and parental expectations of education. In my final paper I discussed the impact that CAEP had on the teacher prep program and the University of Rio Grande. The unification of NCATE and TEAC into CAEP provided teacher prep programs with singular standards in hopes to streamline the accreditation process. In turn, this provided a more uniform teacher prep landscape across the country. *CAEP’s Influence of Educator Preparation Programs: University of Rio Grande* can be found online.

In the spring of 2015, I enrolled in Writing for Publication (CI 677) and Statistical Methods (EDF 517). Val had decided to take a third class even though I had warned against it. She was so focused on finishing that she wasn’t going to listen to anyone who wanted to slow her down. CI 677 was a lot of fun. The Zinsser text, *On Writing Well,* encouraged me to cut the crap, write in my voice and for my audience. Beth led the class but she had two co-teachers, Harley and Susan. Harley and I had become good friends and I knew Susan from some classes we had taken together. I was excited to work with Harley. I didn’t know what to expect from Susan. She was quiet in class and seemed to be really focused on completing the program. Susan lead my writing group and she was wonderful. She was an inspiring writer and a thoughtful evaluator. Her critiques of my work always went beyond mechanics. In my experience most critiques came back with red marks highlighting spelling, grammar and citation errors and left me wondering if they even read my story at all. Not Susan, she didn’t even focus on grammar. She would discuss plot ideas and how important it was for me to develop my own voice. I began to write for myself. I didn’t worry about how others would react to my writing, I just wrote. The most difficult part of writing for yourself is actually sharing it with someone. There is a vulnerability that comes with sharing your writing with someone else and Susan read and responded to my work in the most compassionate way. The development of my writing voice increased my confidence in my ability to write a respectable autoethnography. I started to feel comfortable with the method and began to consider it as an option for a dissertation.

The encouragement that Susan provided gave me the confidence to tackle a larger project. For my final project Beth and I worked on a book review for the Review of Higher Education. Our review of *Civic Pedagogies in Higher Education: Teaching for Democracy in Europe, Canada and the USA* was my first attempt at collaboration on a professional level. Our work was published in the summer 2015 of *The Review of Higher Education* and can be found in my online portfolio. The project was my first professional collaboration. It felt like I was working beside Beth instead of with her. We could not meet to discuss the project in person and had to complete the project via email. She would read and critique my work but it felt like she was too busy to discuss my thoughts. I wanted to feel the same level of comfort as I did with Val, Harley, Susan and Angie but I didn’t. What was most confusing was that she was my chair. I expected to be a priority. I felt insignificant. She did her best to lead from afar but I would learned more if we had been able to work together in person. This changed the way I helped students in my classroom. I made it a point to drop what I was doing and give them my full attention when they needed help, they were important to me and I wanted them to know it. Even negative experiences can have positive outcomes.

For many of my classmates, EDF 517 was a nightmare. I don’t know what it is about educators but they hate numbers and resent just about everyone who doesn’t. I don’t mind numbers at all – in fact I love math – and so the class was frustrating at times. Dr. Meisel was a wonderful instructor but the pacing was so slow. I was a really bad student, I was bored and disinterested. I would finish my assignments in no time and try and find something to keep me occupied. This drove Val crazy, she was struggling with the concepts and there I sat reading. My classmates noticed too and started to make comments. After lots of reading, gaming and tutoring Val when I could, we both finished the course with A’s. I really began to understand how students felt when they were in a classroom that wasn’t challenging and I started planning extension activities for each class, just in case. In the beginning my extension activities were just worksheets, a continuation of the day’s lesson. Today the include webquests, logic puzzels, inquiry based learning assignments and adaptive software that progresses in difficulty as students master concepts. My students’ favorite is mobymax.com. The software begins with a placement test and then assigns lessons that address students’ areas of weakness. As a reward for completing a lesson students are awarded game time through the software. This gives my students the opportunity to learn at their own pace, interact with technology and have a little fun along the way.

The summer semester was a tough one. I felt that I had grown in the spring, especially in my descriptive writing but my courses required that I move back to a more traditional approach. Survey Research in Education (EDF 711) was a great refresher in research methods. Dr. Childress also introduces some new methods covered in the text, *How to Conduct Surveys: A Step by Step Guide*. Each week, we focused on one the five parts of a survey; questions and responses, sampling and design, data processing and analysis, pilot testing and response rate. The course concluded with a group project that required our group to design, conduct and analyze a survey. *Life in School for Advanced Graduate Students: A Survey Assessment of Multiple Challenges and Stressors* can be found online. Learning to properly conduct surveys is a useful skill and many dissertations are based on survey research, but I was beginning to fall in love with qualitative research. I loved the writing involved and the way it allowed me to connect with people and tell their stories.

Issues in Special Education (CISP 627) was difficult. The course was held at Pierpont CTC, 200 miles from my house. I was used to driving a long way for class but this was twice what I was used to. Class started at 10:00 a.m. so I left the house at 6:00 a.m. I got lost on the first day. I parked at a Family Dollar and called Dr. Howard and Beth until I got some clarification on the location and was late. I hate being late and what made it worse was that I walked in by myself. Val didn’t take the class so I had to bear the embarrassment alone. The course material was fantastic. Dr. Howard provided hands on experiences and opportunities to collaborate with other students. What I wasn’t prepared for was the classroom dynamic of a Master’s level course. I am not saying that I was above it, far from it. I struggled to adapt in the first couple weeks to the writing style and the work load. It all turned around when I starting looking at the class as a learning experience. Instead of focusing on the material and the work I began to focus on the way Dr. Howard instructed a large group of graduate students. She was very good at engaging all of her students. With this new outlook the coursework became more enjoyable and I really enjoyed the class. The most memorable lesson was when she provided several pieces of assistive technology and allowed the class to try each piece. We were provided with a short questionnaire that guided each group’s discussion. When CISP 627 was over I was a better intervention specialist and I understood what I would take to teach at the graduate level.

In the fall of 2015 I enrolled in Technology in the Curriculum (CIEC 700) and Qualitative Research (EDF 625). Val and I were reunited in CIEC 700. The course was taught by Dr. Heaton. The attitudes of the students in class varied greatly. There were a few of us who were excited about new technology, a couple that were terrified of it and some more who really didn’t care either way. Dr. Heaton was an expert at engaging everyone in the class. The most impressive thing that Dr. Heaton did was create an environment that students of all abilities could thrive in. We all participated without fearing failure and because of that many of us were able to really thrive. My final paper, *Makerspaces and Students with Disabilities* (available online), focused on the need for educators to make makerspaces that are accessible to students of all ability levels. Makerspaces have the potential to ignite a student’s creativity and engage them in the use of science and mathematics for real world applications. Students with disabilities deserve the same opportunities. With simple accommodations like audio, picture and magnified instructions, students with disabilities can begin accessing makerspaces on a more equal playing field.

In EDF 625 I found something that engage my creativity. The qualitative research process excited me. I loved taking field notes (even though they were terrible to start), doing interviews and writing autoethnographies. Beth made the process easier by breaking it down into several journal entries. The course texts were well written and easy to read. Beth and I started to develop a relationship similar to the one I shared with Val, Harley and Angie. She began counting on me to provide insight on topics discussed in class and to keep the discussions going if they started to stall. I could tell that she valued my opinion because when I spoke she actively listened. She strengthened our bond by letting me know when I wasn’t holding up my end of the bargain. If I was slacking on my reading she could tell and she would let me know. She was challenging me to be more and I felt significant. I especially enjoyed Ellis and Bochner’s piece on autoethnography. I admired their honesty and the way they could write in an informal tone that sounded so professional. My favorite project of the semester was interview that I did with Jamie Sibole, the MH teacher at Waverly High School. What I like most about qualitative research is that it provides the opportunity for reflection and analysis beyond numbers. It allows the researcher to openly discuss the importance of environment, experience and emotion. It values the relationships that were frowned upon in my nursing program. It is messy and exhilarating. It celebrates the human experience instead of sterilizing it. It is research that can make me a better person by allowing me to reflect on my experiences with others and analyze our relationships: good people make good teachers. My final project, *Research Another Way: An Autoethnographic Look at an Ed. D. Student’s Journey through Qualitative Research for the First Time*, was my second attempt at autoethnography. Through autoethnography I discussed the scaffolded approach Beth took to introducing qualitative methods and the way it eased my transition into the world of qualitative research.

The spring of 2016 I enrolled in Theories, Models and Research of Teaching (CI 703) and Advanced Qualitative Research (EDF 626). In CI 703, Dr. Childress reinforced the importance of the most prevalent theories in education. I studied the personal model of teaching, social learning theory, behavioral model of teaching and the information processing family of teaching models. I studied the families and wrote about each, in-depth. I felt a strong connection with the personal model of teaching. I appreciated that it’s root were in humanism and client centered care. It is important to develop a knowledge of content and self. I also found merit in the benefits of the social family of teaching methods. Allowing students to work in groups can help them develop social skills while learning necessary content material. For my final project, I presented informational processing family with three classmates*.*  *The Information Processing Family* presentation can be found online. We didn’t get to pick our topic and I was a little disappointed when we were assigned the information processing family. In the end it was a blessing. I had to research a teaching style that I didn’t use in my classroom often and I discovered inductive thinking. Inductive thinking reverses lessons by giving students raw data and asking them to make connections on their own. This encourages a deeper understanding and stimulate intellectual development.

My favorite course of the semester was EDF 626. I knew I was nearing the end of my coursework and I needed to start thinking about a dissertation. I knew that it would be a qualitative study but I wasn’t sure of the method or topic. Beth and I worked closely to explore some options. After reading *Doing Ethnography Today,* I was really excited about ethnography and the idea of my research resembling a story more than a report. Campbell and Lassiter (2015, p.5) described ethnography as “a relationship-based intersubjective practice that demands honest and rigorous appraisals of our own assumptions and ethnocentrisms as we learn about those of our ethnographic collaborators through co-experience and shared dialogue”. I was instantly drawn to the idea of focusing my research on relationships, experiences, and conversations. I read about the various forms ethnography could take and began to focus on autoethnographies and collaborative ethnographies.

In *Field Notes Style Reflection* ([available online](http://thejmcoopersite.weebly.com/course-work.html)), I discussed my growth as a note taker. Field notes are not easy. I struggled to focus on things that our text thought was important because I was so focused on the relationships in the environments I was observing. I trudged along, writing boring field notes until Dr. Campbell informed me that field notes were for my benefit and I needed to record what was important to me. After that I began to enjoy field notes and even go back and read them. The following is an excerpt of field notes taken during a class with Beth. I took the opportunity to practice field notes during class periods in order to improve my skills. I am glad that I did, I was able to record a class discussion on a possible change in the program that my classmates and I didn’t agree with. The following excerpt is from that night.

“Tonight we discussed a change in the program, fully online. A push from the top. They chase dollars from a doctoral program funded by teachers… not many to go around. This mission of this program isn’t (or shouldn’t) be to make money. This program is the teachers of teachers. The mission of this program should be to prepare the future leaders of our field. The merit of this program is the hidden curriculum. It is in the skills we develop during interactions with other educated individuals, observing some of the world’s best professors, meeting role models (both student and faculty), being pushed into my own zone of proximal development and having supports there to pull me back in when I’ve gone too far. Without these meetings there would be nothing for me to loyal to in this program. This isn’t just a degree, it’s a part of me, and I will fight to keep that part of me. This discussion ruined my night. I am devastated to think of how something I love so much could be taken from me and there is nothing I can do.” –Fieldnotes excerpt, 1/28/16.

As part of the course requirements I performed an interview with a classmate. It is amazing how much you can learn about people in an interview if they are comfortable with the interviewer. From the start I was comfortable interviewing people. I was interested in their stories and I made sure they knew that. My interviews became fluid conversations. I tried not to limit my interviews by focusing only on the prepared questions. This led to longer interviews but they were full of rich content that I wouldn’t have accessed without being flexible but sometimes I would lose focus on my goals. When I finally noticed this was happening, I would refocus but the interview would lose a lot of momentum and flow. My first interviews were choppy. As I gained more experience my interviews were smoother. I was more focused on the topic and found the proper balance between conversation and interview. In *The Skenny* ([available online](http://thejmcoopersite.weebly.com/course-work.html)), I interviewed Kenny Bond. We had a few classes together but I had never taken the time to get to know him. Kenny and I spent a class period discussing shared experiences and stories, taking notes and enjoying the interview process. I was disappointed that I had waited so long to get to know someone who was so interesting. I decided to be more engaging with my classmates. I was so comfortable inside my circle of friends that I had missed out on numerous relationships with my classmates. That interview resulted in a great paper, a new friendship and a fresh outlook.

For my final project I decided to write a paper and present it at the International Congress for Qualitative Inquiry. *Research Another Way: An Autoethnographic Look at an Ed. D. Student’s Journey through Qualitative Research* ([available online](http://thejmcoopersite.weebly.com/course-work.html)), tells the story of four characters; the Skeptic, the Serene, the Sparked and the Sage. Each character represented a different attitude towards qualitative research at the beginning of the project. I interviewed each character individually. I interviewed the skeptic first. We met at a small coffee shop, ordered a cup and began talking about his story. We spent over an hour on what was supposed to be a twenty minute interview. I followed the same process for the other characters and got the same results, long conversations about how their views on qualitative research had evolved.

I was scheduled present the paper with as part of panel chaired by Beth when I ruptured my Achilles tendon. The injury occurred on May 2nd and I was in surgery on May 5th. I was devastated. I was about to waste a brilliant opportunity to gain experience in the qualitative field because of one false step. Things didn’t look good that first week. I was in a tremendous amount of pain. When I did get my pain under control, I was a drooling idiot that couldn’t handle his pain meds. Beth and my wife, Serena, encouraged me to give presenting a shot and make the drive to Champaign, Illinois for the conference. God bless Serena, she loaded me into the back seat of her Jeep and drove the full 6 hours to Champaign. I was the world’s worst passenger. I slept the majority of the way and when I was awake, I complained about how uncomfortable I was. When we arrived at the hotel, Serena surprised me with a wheel chair she had borrowed from a friend. She pushed me all over campus that weekend and when she wasn’t pushing me, Beth did. I didn’t expect that a chair would ever do something like that, but Beth and I had developed a relationship that was much more than the sterile student/chair relationship I had envisioned at the beginning of the program. Our panel was a success and we spend the rest of the time enjoying the presentations of our peers. It amazes me how much I was able to gain from what I expected to be a miserable experience.

In the fall of 2016, my final semester of coursework, I enrolled in Special Topics: Autoethnography (CI 780) and Problem Report (EDF 679). At this point in my coursework I was growing weary and frustrated. Val, Harley and Angie had all completed their portfolios and were well into their dissertations. Our group messages would explode with updates and pleasantries every time someone would hit a benchmark. Each conversation would end with one of them asking where I was. I hated that question, because the answer was hard to accept. I was treading water and I didn’t know how to get going again. CI 780, Beth and I worked together to create a detailed resource list for the course. The first text I read was *The ICQI and the Rise of Autoethnography: Solidarity Through Community* by Bochner & Ellis. I found this article intriguing because I had just presented at ICQI and was beginning to understand the discipline. Bochner & Ellis (2016) discuss the impact that Heider and Hayano on the field by challenging the ideas of tradition scientific research. They continue through their history as autoethnographers. The most impressive part of the article was their commitment to telling the history of autoethnography through autoethnography.

I also read *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* by Bochner and Ellis (2016). In chapter 1 Carolyn Ellis shared a story about being called a schizophrenic by Norman Denzin. Instead of being upset she refocused her efforts into writing about her experiences in a way that spoke to others about their experiences. Bochner and Ellis (2016) described autoethnography as focusing outward on the social aspects of their experience followed by focusing inward on that is moved by cultural interpretations. This resonated with me. Autoethnography is as much about the reader as it is about the writer. It allows the reader to make connections to another’s experiences and reaffirms their own. Beth and I discussed how autoethnography also shapes and deepens a researcher’s understanding. Bochner and Ellis then discussed the importance of storytelling in autoethnography and living the writing life. They provided guidelines to help aspiring ethnographers become more comfortable with the form. They discuss ethical challenges and ethnographic alternatives before wrapping up with truth. Autoethnography without truth is just a story. The connections and analysis that accompany it are worthless exercises if the story is embellished or fabricated. With Bochner and Elllis’ writing tips in hand, I felt ready to tackle my portfolio.

This exercise has been the most difficult to date because it signals the end of something that I have truly loved. During my coursework I was served a couple slices of humble pie and enjoyed numerous successes. Most importantly I developed strong relationships with great people. It is very scary, moving onto the next stage of the program. The face to face meetings are over and all I am left with is an independent study that will determine if I deserve the title of Ed. D. During my first doctoral seminar I was told that without support I would not finish this program. I disagreed. I was a smart ass 27 year old, ready to conquer the world. As the program progressed and things became more difficult I realized that even though I may be able to succeed on my own, it wouldn’t be nearly as enjoyable as suffering with my friends. Harley and Angie supplied countless laughs and unconditional encouragement. Beth understood when to build me up and when to kick me in the pants. She challenged me to be celebrate my individuality and find my voice. Above all there was Val. When I asked her to start this program with me I had no idea how much I would need her. In times of crisis, pain and celebration she was there, advising me as best she could. She didn’t claim to be an expert but her advice was genuine. She was the first to show me that being a teacher should be more than delivering content to the masses, it should be about caring. I won’t face my next challenge alone. This program has changed the way I interact in the classroom, in public and at home. I am more reflexive now. I wasn’t expecting that, but sometimes the unintended lessons we learn carry the most weight. The relationships that I developed at Marshall have had a ripple effect through my life. I am more patient at home and in the classroom. I work with my students to determine the source of frustration before disciplining an outburst. I look to ensure my students success by building strong relationships through communication and compassion. I gained knowledge and skills that will enable me to succeed in any venture but I have developed relationships that have guided to a better understanding what teaching really is; caring.

I started this program with several goals; earn my Ed. D. by 30, have a paper published, write a dissertation that would impact others and teach in higher ed. Here I sit at 31 just finishing my coursework and the one paper that was published was a book review. When I set those goals I had no idea how much work I needed to do to get to this stage. I don’t want you to think that I’m disappointed; I’m damn proud of what I’ve done and what I’ve learned. In class we discussed the hidden curriculum of schools and how important it is to student success. It wasn’t until I began reflecting on my time in this program that I noticed the hidden curriculum of a doctoral program. Much of this was not discussed in class but was communicated through the examples of my faculty and peers. Through observation I was able to learn how to navigate a graduate campus and how conduct myself professionally without sacrificing the compassion that makes me unique. I learned how to conduct a graduate class in an engaging way and trust students to guide their own education. I am more thoughtful, analytic, reflexive, descriptive, confident and compassionate because of this program. I wouldn’t have developed those traits in an online program, they come from face to face interaction with individuals that share those attributes and care about each other’s success. Marshall’s commitment to traditional classroom meetings has made me a better educator. What we have here is special. It provides a place for teachers and administrators to expand their understandings of education without the undue pressure we feel in our schools today. It is a safe place to experiment with ideas, share opinions and build relationships. It is a culture of care.

My dissertation will reflect my experiences in the C&I program. I plan on reading Nell Noddings, Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, Mary Rose O’Reilley and Tony Adams. I need to learn more about care in the classroom and ethnography. I am becoming more comfortable with each exercise in autoethnography, but I am open to any form of ethnography as long as it focuses on teacher/student relationships. I have a student teacher now and we are journaling about the experience. I hope to be able to turn these journals into a qualitative piece that can serve as a guide for future teacher/ student teacher relationships. This may not be the dissertation topic that I choose but it can’t hurt to collect data.

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