

Opening Doors

by Lisa Stringfellow

As the parent of two children with special needs, observing and looking for patterns has become a habit for me. My nine-year-old twins, a boy and girl, were born prematurely only 26 weeks into my pregnancy. They have overcome many challenges in their young lives, from heart surgeries and airway reconstructions, to home nursing and behavior therapy. We have gone through a lot as a family and they have surpassed medical expectations in so many ways. Still, providing continued support for their healthy growth and development is important to helping them achieve their maximum potential.

In observing them, I have begun to see some interesting parallels between them and me. They are curious. If something catches my daughter's interest, she goes in for a close-up examination and it's sometimes hard to break that focus. They are playful and creative. My son draws colorful pictures for me and build the most unusual structures with his Legos. We have other similar qualities, but it is while thinking about the challenging behaviors that I found an unexpected tool for looking at my own growth and development as I reflect on the completion of my master's program.

My son is on the autism spectrum and when looking at things he does, I always have to look beyond just the behavior. In ABA therapy, looking at the “abc's” of behavior is crucial to understanding and correcting negative behaviors or reinforcing positive ones. “A” is for antecedent or what happens before the behavior, “B” is for the observable behavior, and “C” is for the consequence. I was recently discussing with my son's caregivers one of his habits, slamming doors. The antecedent usually is he sees an open door, the behavior is he closes it, usually hard and loud, the consequence, though, isn't just what happens as a result (perhaps being told “no”) but also what he “gets” out of it. For him, I think there is a sensory element where he likes the feeling of pulling on the door. Knowing that, we can look at offering another way to give him that feeling (maybe playing Ring-Around-the-Rosie and spinning around). Rather than slamming doors, I see my MAED journey as a process of opening doors.

So what was the antecedent for me to open that first door? I had planned to get my master's degree from the time I first began teaching, but somehow year after year kept passing and I still had not started a degree program. Five years, ten years, fifteen years of teaching went by and then the opportunity finally arose. I had just completed a year as Interim Director of Middle School, a job that taught me a lot about educational leadership, and was ready to put my focus back on the classroom and investing in myself. Because of my family circumstances, I was interested in an online program for the flexibility it would give me. Most parents struggle with child care, but finding qualified special needs child care is an extra challenge and I felt an online program would minimize the need for me to deal with the effort and expense of that in order to attend classes. I narrowed my choices down to Lesley University's Masters in Educational Technology program and Michigan State's MAED. The deciding factor for me was the fact that I could have a dual concentration in literacy and technology, both passions of mine. I had served as middle school computer coordinator at one time and have always tried to integrate technology into my teaching. But throughout my career, I kept finding myself drawn back to the Language Arts classroom. Between meeting my needs for a flexible educational experience and allowing me to concentrate on my interests, I found myself opening my first door to becoming a better teacher.

Having identified the antecedent, now I looked at my behavior. I find the idea of opening doors to be a metaphor for many things, learning, awareness, recognition of opportunities. Throughout my MAED experience, many courses and instructors facilitated this process and, as a result, profoundly changed me as an educator and learner. I find it truly fortunate that I began the program with TE 831, *Teaching*

Subject Matter with Technology. It was a perfect starting point for me because it was a topic with which I felt comfortable and was excited to learn. I enjoyed all of my courses, but I think my outlook of the program would have been different if I had started with the foundational course in my very first semester rather than this one.

TE 831 strayed outside the typical bounds of MSU courses. Instead of using Angel as our course management system, Professor Byker used Wikispaces. I already had a Wikispaces account and had used it in my classes, but seeing how it could be used to teach a graduate level course opened my eyes to the flexibility of educational technology. One of the major assignments of the course was to create a digital story. I had heard a lot about digital stories but didn't know how to make one. I didn't have a lot of video editing experience, but I took the task on with enthusiasm. Coincidentally, in my effort to improve as an educator, I attended my first technology conference right before taking TE 831. I was excited about a session I attended entitled "Book Talks 2.0" in which two librarians talked about how they created book trailers to engage students in reading. With that prior experience, I knew immediately that I wanted to make a book trailer for the digital storytelling assignment. How many times can you say that a homework assignment changed your career? I can honestly say that this one did.

I created the digital story as a book trailer for Shadow Horse, a middle grade mystery. I uploaded that [video](#) to YouTube to share and an interesting thing happened. About two or three weeks later, our school librarian brought me a package including a card and an autographed book from the author Alison Hart. It read, to the "student" Lisa Stringfellow. After laughing about it and sharing it with my students, with whom I had already shared my book trailer, I contacted Ms. Hart and she began a dialogue with me and my students. We eventually Skyped with her and the following year she did a workshop at my school on suspense writing. Students became excited by the idea of book trailers and I eventually integrated them into a full unit in my class. Additionally, I had learned enough that I felt ready to share with other teachers and created a [wiki](#) of resources and a [blog](#) dedicated to discussing ways to use technology to foster reading. I have now presented professionally on book trailers several times and will again in a few weeks at a regional technology conference hosted by my school. Professor Byker inspired me to look at technology in new ways and encouraged me to share my experiences with others. I am certainly glad I picked that door to start my MAED journey.

Another door I opened was to the world of sharing my students' and my own work to showcase our learning. In CEP 813, *Electronic Portfolios for Teaching & Learning*, I built the skeleton of my online portfolio. The metacognitive effort required to put together the portfolio has helped me crystalize what is important to me as an educator. By answering questions like, "What is my teaching philosophy?" and "How does your classroom space foster learning opportunities?" I was able to put into words many things I had never articulated before. The result is a living document that gives viewers a sense of who I am as an individual and teacher, but is just as valuable for me as a tool for thinking. As I have learned in other courses, writing is thinking.

My interest in video and literature led me to TE 838, *Children's Literature in Films*. I thought movies were a great way to connect students to middle grade books and had begun collecting movie posters to display in my classroom. I am a lover of the Harry Potter series and have watched all of the films. When I saw that Professor Apol's syllabus for the course included reading and watching Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone as well as critical readings of Harry Potter, I was hooked. As an intensive six-week course, I found myself working harder than I had in any of my previous courses and was exposed to new ways of looking at film. My previous feelings when comparing a book and a film based on it was that the movie was "good" if it closely followed the text and "bad" if it strayed too far from the original. TE 838 made me dig deeper to my analysis and helped me come to new understandings. Rather than

expecting a film to be a slavish imitation of the literary work, I began to see film as its own text. Our discussion of media messages helped me see that each work had its own purpose and within the narrative structure, choices needed to be made to enable the story to be told according to that purpose. When thinking about movies that I had previously panned in this new light, I came to see value and creativity in the differences where before I saw none. In addition, the course inspired me to add units in my teaching on media literacy and [book and film comparisons](#). The opening of this door showed me that literature can come in many forms and part of understanding it is acquiring a knowledge of how the forms are constructed and can be deconstructed.

A final educational door I entered was the construction of my capstone portfolio for ED 870, the *Capstone Seminar*. Having taken CEP 813, I felt that I had a good start on my portfolio and there was a temptation to sit on my laurels and rely on the positive feedback I had received on my previous work. My learning experiences have taught me that there would be no value in that. Growth only comes through effort and challenge. Knowing that I was nearing the end of my formal education, I was determined to learn as much as I could and challenge myself to produce my best work. Again, the reflective process of looking through my educational history has taught me much. As I wrote my [Looking Back](#) essay, I was surprised to see how some of my goals have remained steady and others have changed to reflect the person I have become. I have learned to value the positive spirit of working in a supportive professional community and wish I had pursued my educational goals sooner.

The course has also reinforced for me that learning is not an event with a finite beginning and ending. Rather, it is a mindset. When I think about the qualities I mentioned that I share with my children, curiosity, playfulness, and creativity, I see areas where my MSU experience has pushed me to develop further. I also know they are qualities that I will continue to nurture through new learning activities. Connecting back to the analogy I used regarding my son and slamming doors, I find I have trouble closing doors, or turning down opportunities for learning. This summer alone, I have signed up for three workshops for educators teaching everything from [programming with Scratch](#) to [creating media to use in the classroom](#). Opening doors has become a habit, but unlike my son's behavior, it's a behavior that doesn't need to be corrected.

But what is the consequence of the behaviors I have engaged in over the past three years? The obvious observation is that I have become a more knowledgeable and skilled teacher. I certainly know more and can do more than I did before I started my MAED. But I think, again, the core of the consequence is not the visible result, but what I “got” from the experience. Why did I do all of the things I did? Certainly, no one told me I had to redesign my classroom curriculum to incorporate multiple literacies. No one asked me to make presentations to other educators about the lessons and activities I have developed. And definitely, no one has made me use part of my summer vacation to participate in MOOCs and other workshops. No, the consequence for me of my MAED experience is a love of learning. That is what I “got” from my coursework. I feel pleasure when I try something new or figure out a problem. I get excited when I find new educational websites or learn about opportunities to connect with other teachers and students.

In conclusion, although I am looking at positive rather than negative behaviors, the method of reflecting on my choices using the ABC model of behavior analysis is unexpectedly useful. The antecedent to beginning my degree program gave me the motivation and preparation needed to be successful. The behavior of working through new concepts and stretching myself to apply them to my teaching is related to the metaphor of doors. Each course helped me open more doors and more opportunities for learning, to the point that learning has become an ingrained behavior. And lastly, the reinforcer I have for all of these actions is the joy I feel in learning new things. It is something I hope I never stop doing.