**Getting to Know: Dr. Austin Pickup**

An interview with Michelle Wooten (Ph.D. Student in Educational Research)

*Dr. Austin Pickup received his doctorate in Education Research Methodologies from the University of Alabama in 2014. He is currently a Visiting Professor of Education at Aurora University in Aurora, Illinois. Below is an excerpt from Michelle's interview with Austin.*

Michelle [M]: What drew you into the educational research program at UA?
Austin [A]: It kinda happened.  I was in the Master’s program and finishing my certification in Secondary Education in 2010.  I had a job in the Graduate School and was just finishing up my student teaching.  I was going to graduate in the summer and was looking for a high school teaching job and the job market was pretty slim.  I heard from others that a lot of people weren’t getting jobs.  Then my supervisor from the Graduate School called and said, “If you want to pursue the doctoral program you can come back and work for us, we’ll fund you.”  So I started looking for doctoral programs specifically in education, because that was my area of interest.  I looked through the Secondary Education and Educational Research programs.  Educational Research sparked my interest and so I set up a meeting with Dr. Houser and spoke with him about it.  Through doing some research I thought it would be a good idea, but I didn’t necessarily – I don’t know how many people really are – saying they really want to pursue something specifically in educational research.

M:  Yeah.  That’s good to hear.  For me, Educational Research was interesting because it’s different from the other areas – you can choose whatever you want to study but you’re still learning the methods more rigorously.  I don’t know if that also came up for you, like you still got to pursue what you wanted but…
A:    I remember talking to Dr. Houser and asking ‘what exactly do we mean by research methodology and what does it entail?’ because I came from a history background and research for me meant doing historical research – going to libraries, looking at primary and secondary sources.  So he walked me through differences between qualitative and quantitative.  And I think probably based on the stuff that he said about qualitative – even though he had more of – I think – a quantitative, counseling background – it sparked my interest, ‘Oh that sounds interesting, I might want to dig into that more.’

M:  What eventually drew you to the qualitative end of the spectrum?
A:   Well, I think it speaks to the connections I alluded to earlier, but the first qualitative class I had with Dr. Childers – the arguments we were able to have, the type of reading, how it is so interdisciplinary and pulling from all these traditions and philosophy, sociology to anthropology to whatever – that was into the wheelhouse of my academic interest.  Much more so than the quantitative research.  Even though I feel like I still enjoyed the quantitative coursework and learned from it.  And too, having a broad understanding of research from both traditions is helpful and reinforces and makes better your understanding of what you eventually have an expertise in.  But in terms of taking the specialization in qualitative inquiry, it was just much more into my academic interests and too, pulling from my social sciences background.

M:  How would you describe your involvement in the program?
A:   The first half I was just more concerned with getting a feel of things.  I think that anyone who starts a doctoral program is a little bit apprehensive kind of thinking, ‘how is this going to go?  Am I going to be able to handle it?’  So definitely the first year I was trying to get a feel for things, how would it be.  And the second year I was thinking more about professional things.  And then the last half, yeah, in the lab I had more of a leadership role helping other students.  And then trying to present either what I was working on or things I was thinking through at conferences.

M:  So after doc students finish their coursework, what suggestions do you have for staying on pace and getting through?
A:   I talk about this to my students up here a lot.  It’s much more typical conversation up here because we’re on a condensed program – the thought is different because they are practitioners doing this to get an Ed.D.  At Alabama it’s more of a traditional, academic PhD.  But still I tell my students that if they want to have a strong dissertation and do good work then you can’t put a premium on reading – you need to do as much reading and gain as much knowledge as you can.  And obviously you get that in coursework.  But too, I remember the coursework being more of, here’s an introduction to some topics and here’s some stuff you may not know or thought about.  So maybe that sparks your interest.  Then you go out and read more and learn more about it, like what you start doing with comps.  But for me, I passed my comprehensive exams on Christmas break, and then I tried to break it down by semester:  if I wanted to graduate the next spring then I thought about how I needed to defend that semester, which means I needed to do data collection in the fall which means I would need to finish the proposal by the summer.  My thought was that first semester where I had time to myself, I’m going to go out and learn as much as I can – continue to read and read more of the topic.  So that’s what I would do – lose yourself in the library.  I would spend tons of time in the library.  Because I lived near to campus so for people that live around, do that.  If you don’t live near than utilize online resources.  See it as a process and take it step by step rather than being overwhelmed with feeling like you have to do everything at once.  And so kind of getting lost in the reading was the best way to do that.  Because once I had done that and felt confident about my topic, I felt like everything else was much clearer.

M:  So when did you start turning your attention to the job search and what did you do?
A:   I’d say I started turning my attention – specifically toward what jobs were available, probably mostly in the fall, because that’s typically when the jobs start to open for the next year.  The first job I applied for, their deadline was pretty early – in October for the next fall.  So I probably started thinking about that in the fall which would have been when I was doing data collection.  I had a bit of an advantage because I worked in the lab, so I had time to focus on my own work and look things up.  I looked at postings through conference affiliated list-servs where jobs were posted.  I looked at those and if there was anything advertised:  Chronicle of Higher Education posts stuff, also.  Keeping up with those and sometimes simplistic things like googling things or using indeed.com.  I found a few jobs on those that I didn’t find posted elsewhere.  And then otherwise, having a really good relationship with your chair and other faculty members will be really helpful so Aaron helped me out a lot with thinking through what things to do, thinking about a job and places to look.  John Dantzler was also helpful.  Then being associated with professional organizations is helpful to know about what jobs are out there.

Then once you’ve done that, there’s the process of just rolling up your sleeves and getting to work because it is somewhat of a long process.  I remember thinking and hoping that I could write a cover letter to one institution or have one CV or resume to one institution and maybe just make some slight adjustments for each job.  Unfortunately each job can be somewhat different.  I applied for many research positions – some were straight qualitative, some were more generically educational research, and a few were a little bit out of field but I thought, maybe I could apply for them because they ask for PhDs in certain areas or maybe related fields.  So because of that you do have to spend a lot of time crafting your cover letter to the specific objectives they list.  So it can be a painstaking process but you have to roll up your sleeves and get to work, which is what I did.

M:  How did your time at UA influence what you do know, especially in terms of skills and content?  Do you see it come out or did you have to learn a whole new set of stuff for what you’re doing now?
A:   Some of both, I would say, because Aurora’s a lot different.  I have to tailor what I do differently because I don’t teach in an Educational Research program.  I teach in an Ed.D program in different strands that are in Administration and Curriculum & Instruction and Higher Education.  So we have research courses and I teach those courses.  But as opposed to me where my whole degree was about research, we were always talking about research, here it’s basically courses that people were utilizing to complete the dissertation for the most part: to become an administrator or curriculum director, something like that.  Because of what I do, I have to tailor to that process, which has been difficult because it means I can’t dive as deeply into my background and too – I tell this to my students sometimes – the things that I am interested in are more philosophical and theoretically based.  And often there’s not quite as much time to dig into that. So I do have to tailor those things to the objectives and the nature of the program, but still I would say that everything I do is still informed if not directly from my program at Alabama.  All the conversations I am having with students are coming from that background, from the people I’ve read.  And sometimes I come back and self-critique, ‘Hmm, what did I talk about in class, what are the things I’m talking about?”  Then I go back to things I learned or read about at Alabama and think, “Hmm, I am forgetting that aspect.  I’m leaving out part of the story.”  So then I think about how I can work it back in to feel like I’m being true to what I learned and what I believe about research.  So yes, you have to tailor it to the program, but I would say that everything I do is in some way informed, if not directly, from everything I learned at Alabama.