**Getting to Know: Dr. Anne Merrem**
Written by: Michelle Wooten (Ph.D. student in Educational Research)

*Dr. Anne Merrem received her doctorate in Human Performance from the University of Alabama in 2016 and is currently completing her final requirement for the Qualitative Research Certificate. She is Assistant Professor of Sport Management, Wellness, & Physical Education at the University of West Georgia.*

What first drew you into qualitative inquiry?
My professor for introductory qualitative research (BER 631), Sara Childers, was an amazing teacher with excellent arguments – she brought us closer to the art of inquiry in a way that was completely interesting to me.  Then, the intellectual stimulation I got out of BER 633 and also in Critical Race Theory made me think totally out of the box.  I thought, “I want to think like that – to have these completely alternative ways of looking at issues.”  It pushes me beyond my not so conscious and conscious boundaries.  For example, in my current project for an arts-based research course I realized, “I am just so stuck in words.”  To think of expressing something not in words – it’s really challenging me!  I like to be challenged.

Tell me more about how your theory and qualitative coursework influenced you.
The courses gave me an expanded perspective on factors influencing our views on the world, what I want to teach, and how I want to teach.  I don’t want to teach concepts as much as I want to teach creativity, consideration, and observation.

And so how did you describe that critical perspective when interviewing for your current position?
My research presentation was on my doctoral dissertation study.  I was able to report the critical aspect in my theoretical framework, Occupational Socialization, which explores how people arrive at their current perspectives, beliefs, and practices.  The critical question posed in this study was, what is authentic when we consider that core beliefs are influenced by external factors?  I was able to talk about these critical concerns within the realm of the dissertation without having to critique traditional qualitative research all together.

What do you mean by traditional qualitative research?
In my physical education and sports pedagogy courses, qualitative research is applied more as descriptive inquiry.  For example, as part of my data collection I wanted to include self-reflection, but it was taken out as a data source.  [laughs] So it became a very descriptive dissertation.  But being descriptive was actually helpful in that the whole dissertation became less complicated.  My questions became, what codes and themes do you find and do they hold up amongst the participants I studied?  For this to be my first really big research study I was happy for the somewhat increased simplicity.

Do you feel like you’re able to bring the elements you love – the critical approach – to your work with other students?
Yes.  It comes through in my discourse, in how I present concepts and content – it resonates and expresses who I am with regard to my thinking and perceptions.  I’m designing qualitative research right now – a mental fitness exploration with a student who is a basketball player.  I am going to take him to an aerial yoga class and film him [laughs], asking “what is mental fitness now?”

Describe some of the challenges of completing the qualitative research certificate.
I am paying full tuition so it is sometimes hard to consider the amount of money devoted to it.  My rationale for pursuing it is that one never knows what its utility will be in the future and I put so much into it I might as well get something out of it, including a sense of completion.  I’ve been in two classes – prior to the one I’m in now – that could have obtained me this research certificate.  I had to drop both because the work-load and type of thinking were too much and too different from the type of thinking required for my dissertation study that they ended up being distracting – even though I like the intellectual challenge.

Why else would we do this? [laughs]
Yes, why else would I do this?  [laughs]

Can you tell me how you sensed community in the qualitative research courses?
I sensed a lot of diversity of thought in the qualitative research courses as opposed to other courses I took.  In Dr. Kuntz’s classes, for example, there was a consistent struggle for understanding – which came from openness – including how we could put understanding back together differently – in ways we can’t imagine.  It makes me curious.

What about if you get frustrated with this struggle – do you ever get a sense of wanting to write it off because you don’t understand it?
I have heard persons say negative things about the type of learning they encounter in these courses.  I think that this is an avoidance of considering something that is different – like, if you don’t get it, you just put it down.  But instead of looking at something as better or worse, or acceptable or not acceptable, I challenge the negativity with, can you live with the idea that there are hard ways of expressing yourself outside of words, for example?  I think the qualitative coursework here is a diamond that more people should find – to have this kind of challenging, alternative space for graduate students in Alabama is amazing.