

**Female Adult Learners' Return to Post-Secondary:  
The Impact of Motion, Emotion and Connection on  
Students' Transformative Learning**

**by**

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## Abstract

This study examined the lived experience of seven adult female learners as they (re)engaged with post-secondary education at the mid-sized university in western Canada. Using phenomenological hermeneutics, particularly as it is interpreted by Max van Manen, the researcher aimed to elicit from the participants the essential themes of their experience. The goal was to better understand and appreciate how adult female learners construct the transformative and connective qualities of this journey.

As post-secondary institutions in Canada are grappling with declining enrolments within the traditional student demographic, many are actively discussing the multi-faceted concepts of student engagement, support and persistence. This study focused on adult learners, a demographic that is growing at Canadian institutions and one that will become more critical as the traditional 18-25 age group shrinks as a proportion of post-secondary enrollment. The study provided an opportunity for students to express themselves in their own words over a 13 week period and permitted an in-depth examination of how they constructed their learning experiences and self-knowledge. Using van Manen's approach to phenomenological hermeneutics, the current study emphasized the interpretive analysis of actual life texts, writing as research and the development of pedagogical competence. Through purposeful sampling techniques, seven participants were recruited who were between the ages of 27 and 57 years and enrolled in a university preparation English course. Phenomenological hermeneutical analysis, both structural analysis and meaning unit coding, was then applied to the weekly journals created by the participants. The results produced ten themes, which were further refined into three main themes of motion, emotion and connection. The implications of these findings were discussed for students and educators, with strategies for supporting the transformative learning experiences of female adult students within post-secondary settings.

**Keywords:** Phenomenological hermeneutics; pedagogical competence; lived experience; adult female learners; transformative learning; connected knowing; reflective learning

*To the 7 women who participated in this study,  
and to all women who return to education to  
rediscover where they belong.*

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## List of Acronyms

ABE	Adult Basic Education
AVED	Advanced Education
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BSW	Bachelor of Social Work
COPE	Career Opportunities and Personal Growth
DSD	Department of Student Development
HUMS	Human Service Worker
MAVED	Ministry of Advanced Education
TRU	Thompson River University

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction: Is There Something I Can't See?

### 1.1. The Importance of Curiosity

All good research starts with curiosity. I believe that good research feeds and sustains that thirst for knowledge and encourages further curiosity. My journey through this doctorate program, my experience as a learner, researcher and writer, has confirmed these beliefs. Most importantly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, this experience has created an even bolder curiosity.

The real curiosity driving my research is something that crosses my mind every day I am in the classroom. I watch my students' faces carefully when I teach and wonder about what exactly are they experiencing. I can see on their faces expressions that suggest amusement, joy, confusion, inquisitiveness, discomfort and even panic. I wonder how this experience is constructed. I want to know if there is more than one can see on the surface and what I can do as an educator to enhance their learning experience.

This ongoing curiosity about the lived experience of my students is, in part, the result of my own experiences as a post-secondary student. When I was an undergraduate student, I, like many others, was largely motivated by the measurable achievement of grades. But even though the high grades came, something was always missing. I never felt that my professors really knew me; they never truly got to know what my story was and what personal triumphs I was achieving toward becoming a more self-actualized learner. Even though I knew I was transforming myself, and changing my view on the world and finding a voice to express who I was as a person, there was not necessarily a discrete place for discussing these perspectives in the academe. We never documented or even discussed that we were *experiencing learning* and how that goal

was related to the more easily measurable gains and achievements of our educational experience. No examination of our lived experience occurred. Rather than reflecting on our experiences and integrating our learning with our lives, we just had to race to study for the next midterm.

Now that I teach undergraduate writing classes, I strive to create an environment where grades, deadlines and testing are secondary to personal development, including the building of confidence and social connectedness. I want to create a space where students are able to actively reflect on their experience of learning. Writing plays a role here, as it is an opportunity to explore one's passions, convictions and evolution into a more self-actualized being. Through the textual expression of self, a person can work toward congruency between thoughts and actions, and find voice. This emphasis on the personal has been largely influenced by the high numbers of adult female learners in my courses. My sense is that these learners truly desire the opportunity to explore and assert their place in the world. They are also focussed on integrating their learning into their lives and on creating connections to others.

My practice, therefore, has been largely shaped, and continues to be shaped, by the adult female learners I teach in my classes. These are individuals who care very much about extracting as much as possible from their educational journey. These are also individuals who, if given the opportunity, embrace the chance to examine their academic progress in the context of their life experiences. These are also individuals who fear - yet value - the writing process in ways that suggest a deeply held belief that writing is important, both in one's academic life, but also in one's personal life. These reactions also strongly suggest that these students value learning and want to learn, and that they hope to be able to identify what changes are occurring within themselves. And it has become evident to me that there is an opportunity to use writing as a way of examining the lived experience of the adult female learner's return to post-secondary education. To facilitate this process, I am using personal journaling as a core component of the current study.

Many of the canonical ideals that might be applied to learning, and specifically adult learning, including the theories of Dewey (1933, 1938), Knowles (1970, 1998), and Mezirow (1990, 1991) appear increasingly difficult to reconcile with the status quo of

post-secondary education. The never ending scramble to recruit students to fill seats in classes and increasing class size does not, on first examination, foster an environment conducive to quiet reflection and a meaningful integration of cognitive and affective learning. There does not seem to be a place to discuss the emotions constitutive of learning and even an acknowledgement of integrative learning. However, this is precisely why I am curious about the lived experience of my students. The work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule (1986), Cranton (2006) and van Manen (1990, 1995, 2007) strongly suggest that reflecting on experience is potentially transformative, and that this is constitutive of integrative learning. I would argue at a time when post-secondary institutions are actively increasing student recruitment and retention efforts the examination of such ideas has never been more important. The pressure on post-secondary institutions to recruit students provides both the context and the impetus to study the lived experience of our students and in particular adult female learners. An additional incentive for the current study is that fact that females are now the majority in Canadian universities. In 2001, 58% of post-secondary students in Canada were female (Frenette & Zeman, 2007) and in 2006, 60% of post-secondary students between the ages of 25-29 were female (Statistics Canada, 2006). All of this points to the value of the current study.

The daily experience of being in the classroom with adult female learners and observing how they negotiate the practice of being a learner and writer led me to wonder what would be revealed through an examination of the lived experience of our students. Subsequent reading around the study of lived experience led me to Max van Manen's (1990, 1995, 2007) concept of *pedagogical competence*. van Manen defines pedagogical competence as a moving toward the lived experience of both ourselves and others to better observe and question how we position ourselves to a phenomenon and a critical philosophy of action to develop "situational perceptiveness, discernment and depthful understanding" (van Manen, 1990, p. 156). I have spent time reflecting on what "depthful" might mean, and have come to believe that the key to this "depthful" understanding involves *connecting to one's self*, and *others* and *the future* that these parties share. I feel that it involves an element of empathy and caring.

I would define pedagogical competence as engaging in a new experience with an *active* appreciation of each experience's complexity and an *active* willingness to see and critically reflect on one's own and others' perspectives. This constructivist stance allows for a fuller, richer understanding of the human experience and the potential to live with more sensitivity and tact. It is more than living with thoughtfulness or sympathy. It is living with empathy and the genuine attempt to believe in another's perspective. It is about making connections. One of my study's goals is to deepen my understanding of the experience of transformational learning, so that I can better support its practice in my classroom. In doing so, I am developing pedagogical competence.

Pedagogical competence linked to my study in another way. I believe that transformative learning involves the development of pedagogical competence or becoming "more thoughtfully or attentively aware of aspects of human life which hitherto were merely glossed over or taken for granted" (p.154) and the acting in a more informed and sensitive manner. The strategy used to uncover the insights of my research participants is personal journaling, which has the potential to document and support reflection and transformative learning. The act of writing and reflecting allowed the participants to enlarge their perspective on their experiences. They became more closely connected to their experiences and better able to move forward with van Manen's (1990) "pedagogical tact" (p.154). I believe the building of this capacity, the building of pedagogical competence, is critical to transformative learning.

My study aimed to link Van Manen's (1990) ideas to transformative and connected knowing theories. This includes Mezirow (1991, 2000) theory of transformational learning which also emphasizes dynamic meaning making through reflection on and interpretation of experience. Mezirow (2000) claims this makes our habits of mind "more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and options that will prove more true or justified (p. 8). van Manen (1990) also links to the theories of connected and relational learning (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Hayes & Flannery, 2000), which emphasize listening to others, sharing and believing others' viewpoints. These theories resonated with my interest in reflective practice and provided the philosophical foundations of the current study. I wish to better connect to the experience of being in our classrooms, and believe an inquiry into the lived experience of our students is integral to this goal. They are an

inseparable component of the experience of teaching and are instrumental in the development of an experiential teaching style.

## **1.2. Overview of the Research Problem**

Research focused on the experience of adult learners is important to me for three reasons, which I would categorize as professional and personal. The first reason is that as a percentage of total post-secondary enrollment in Canada, adult learners are increasing and yet research into this demographic has not kept pace (Andres, 2004; Thompson Rivers University [TRU], 2011a). The second reason is that there is a paucity of qualitative research that investigates the experience of adults returning to post-secondary, as revealed in their own words (Andres, 2004; MacFadgen, 2007). Quantitative data simply do not tell us what is occurring on a daily or even weekly basis. Thirdly, observations of adult learners in my own classroom suggest that the reasons for adult learners' persistence and their learning process are even more complicated than past assumptions indicate. When actively working with adult learners it is conventional focus on goal setting, retention and degree completion; however, the work of Belenky et al. (1986), Floyd (2003), Kuh (2005), and MacFadgen (2007) adds another dimension, that is the need to explore the affective and social dimensions of adult learners' lived experience. My teaching experience leads me to believe that these aspects are critical components of learning and also, that there are other, not yet revealed aspects as well. All of these factors, plus the increasing number of adult female learners in our classrooms, point to the importance of this study.

Research suggests that adult learners come to or return to post-secondary education for a variety of reasons (Mezirow, 1990; Miritello, 1996; Murphy & Roopchand, 2003; Ruddock & Worrall, 1997; Toynton, 2005). For many, beginning post-secondary at 18 was not an appealing option, or even an option at all for a variety of economic or social reasons; family, career, or other responsibilities took priority. Consequently, the reasons to re-engage with education are diverse. Many adults require training, retraining or cross-training to maintain or change careers. In my experience, these external motivations are inevitably linked to more intrinsic and personal needs and motivations, as these life-changing, even sometimes traumatic, events require a reframing of one's



identity. Consequently, many adult learners may return for personal growth, whether that is overtly acknowledged or not. What emerges from the literature is that since adult learners are in a different stage of their journey through life, they have needs that differ from traditional students, simply because they are motivated differently and face different life challenges (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Myers & de Broucker, 2006). They view learning differently than those considered by most to be traditional university students.

Adult learners need to cope with the adult responsibilities that they carry, working through the problems presented to them as part of the responsibilities of that adult status; therefore, supportive learning environments where learners identify valuable learning as the knowledge or skills they need for themselves, their family and their work are necessary (Kasworm, 2003; MacFadgen, 2007; MacKeracher, 2004). Post-secondary educators are critical in the development of such spaces that can facilitate this process and therefore a better understanding of adult learners' motivation and learning process is important for all stakeholders.

I am interested in reflective learning, as opposed to more conventional conceptions of learning. It is probably true that reflective learning is a very personal experience and therefore only the individual can really know and evaluate whether it has occurred. As such, it is challenge to apply conventional evaluation models to reflective practice. However, one significant way both encourage and document reflective learning and transformation is through personal writing. I believe that reflective writing should be better integrated into learning at the post-secondary level.

Educational theorists define learning differently. For example, Dewey (1933) claims learning is appreciating the living present and using it as an agent for future decisions (p. 12). Mezirow (1990) argues that it is the constant conversation between a person and the context they exist in, past, present, and future (p. 10). Belenky et al. (1986) suggest a model of midwifery for learning; knowledge is something already possessed by the learner and through reflection the learner is given back or realizes what was hers all along (p. 217). The constant here is change.

I am beginning to believe that learning is an engaging process that involves recognizing when there is a disconnect between what obstacles one has to overcome,

and the tools provided by experience to overcome these obstacles. This might be dialogical in nature, as one works to prevail over obstacles through self-reflective expression, designing in incremental steps strategies for overcoming hurdles, therefore leading to what Mezirow (1978) termed *perspective transformation* (p. 105). This is when a learner makes “a conscious recognition of the difference between [one’s] old viewpoint and the new one and makes a decision to appropriate the newer perspective as being of more value” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 105). Accordingly, learning is thought of as generation of new strategies to overcome experienced obstacles, cognitive or otherwise, and putting them into practice, testing these new strategies and using an ongoing process of refinement (Mezirow, 1978, p. 105). This would suggest that learning is a continuous cycle.

What I hoped to add to the adult learning literature is a study that explored the potential and voice of the learners themselves through the journaling of their lived experience. I believe that existing models of adult education are valuable but they have the potential to oversimplify the experience, which includes many interacting variables. If learning, however it is defined, is a process (and I believe most researchers in this field would agree that it is) then by definition, it is not static. In my teaching experience learners perceive their experiences to include positive steps, discouragement, victories and defeats. My sense is that this is a potentially volatile experience, filled with emotion. I see learners as researchers, moving forward or backward as they experiment with new ways of overcoming obstacles and redefine goals through a process of reflection and reframing of learning goals. All of these are constitutive of the process of learning, and acknowledge that learning is an intensely personal experience. One significant way to understand and put meaning to such an experience is to have the learners themselves document their experience.

In this study, the use of reflective journal writing allowed the complex, multi-layered and generative qualities of students’ experiences to be illuminated. I believe journaling is an important way to entering into experience, both one’s own and that of others. I also believe it can be used to both document and support transformational learning. Valuing the voices of adult learners in this way is a first step in learning what it means to be an adult learner, and the analysis of personal journals offered a rich source of data for exploring what obstacles they experienced. I hoped to better understand

strategies, both self-directed and teacher guided, used by my learners to meet challenges. I was curious to discover how they use and refine these learning strategies on an ongoing basis. The result is more reflective and responsive practice in the classroom for all, or what van Manen (1990, 1995, 2007) termed pedagogical competence and a deepening understanding of ourselves.

For this study of adult female learners, I drew on both the philosophy of van Manen, and theories of transformational learning, including but not limited to Mezirow's work in the area. My experience as a writing teacher led to me to believe that the writing classroom provided a unique and important location to explore van Manen's pedagogical competence and Mezirow's approach to perspective transformation. One reason writing class is a unique location relates to Mezirow's emphasis on content, process and premise reflection (Mezirow et al, 2010, p. 7). Content reflection occurs, for example, in grammar and style instruction (Why do I punctuate the sentence this way?) and process reflection occurs with the creation of texts (How can I make this essay more persuasive?). These two levels of reflection are almost inevitable in a writing class but because both of these types of activities have so much to do with the writer herself and self-expression, I believe that premise reflection ((Why is writing this important to me? And why do I care so much?) is possible. I, like Cranton (2006), find these distinctions increasingly useful in my classroom practice, since "content and process reflection may lead to the transformation of a specific belief, but it is premise reflection that engages learners in seeing themselves and the world in a different way" (p.35).

To gain access to the lived experience of the study's participants, I asked participants to document, in the form of a weekly journal, their experience of returning to post-secondary education. This choice was the result of the careful consideration of several factors, detailed in this study's third chapter (Method of Inquiry). In summary, both my immersion in the teaching of writing and deep valuing of the practice of writing - as well as van Manen's (2002) assertion that "writing is not just externalizing internal knowledge, rather it is the very act of making contact with the things of our world" (p. 237) - have led to the use of journaling to access to the students' lived experience, and perhaps even enhance their reflective learning. Elbow (1973), Hiemstra (2001), Kerka (1996), and McCrindle and Christensen (1995), among others, have explored personal writing as part of reflective learning. Kerka (1996) speaks of how several themes in adult

learning, including “coming to voice, developing the capacity for critical reflection and making meaning are reflected in the way journals can be used in adult education” (p. 2). Cranton (2006) notes that she has “long encouraged journal writing, and in recent years [has] encouraged artistic projects of all kinds...there is no doubt that these are transformative for [her] students” (p.68). Schneider (1994) notes that journal entries, although constructed through the lens of the writer’s current emotional state while writing, may be the best way to document lived experience, akin to natural speech, potentially flowing without self-consciousness, self-criticism or inhibition. I would add that even evidence of the writer’s current emotional state is part of their lived experience, and therefore part of the learning process under investigation. The outcome, the documentation of perspective transformation within each of the participants, can then be used to enact change, in the form of new support systems at the individual, classroom, or even institutional level.

### **1.3. The Research Questions**

This study is in response to a national trend: many institutions in Canada are grappling with declining enrolments within the traditional student demographic and as a result, are actively discussing the multi-faceted concepts of student engagement, success and persistence. Increasingly this discussion is focussed on the recruitment and retention of non-traditional students. At the institution under examination, Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, B.C., faculty are frequently surveyed on various aspects of student engagement, classroom practice, and faculty student interactions. This is an attempt to identify institutional strengths and to support those strengths to improve the educational opportunities for students. There are also similar data gathering processes underway with the student population, in an effort to gauge the experience of students, both domestic and international. What is missing from these institutional initiatives is a more refined focus on adult learners, defined by the institution under investigation as those over 21 years of age (Thompson Rivers University, 2000). This is a demographic that is growing at Canadian institutions (Andres, 2004; MacFadgen, 2007; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999,) and one that will become more critical as the traditional 18 to 25 age group shrinks as a proportion of post-secondary enrollment. What is also missing is the opportunity for students to express themselves in their own words over a longer, more

significant period of time, in this case a 13 week semester, and the opportunity to engage in reflective practices that will help them integrate and build on their lived experience. Surveys are often simply a snapshot of a single moment in time and often only require the participant to plot their experiences on Likert scales of one to five. What is needed to more fully understand the lived experience of our students, and in the case of this study, adult female learners returning to post-secondary education, is a more intense opportunity that allows participants to express what they are experiencing over time. This approach aims to add to our understanding of student centered, problem based learning that is responsive to students' needs, and that leads to the development of more effective teaching and learning strategies. Underpinning this study is my ongoing curiosity about what students are experiencing in my classroom and my belief that there is much being experienced that cannot immediately be seen. The result is three research questions:

- What will the participants reveal as the most meaningful aspects, or themes, of their learning experience?
- Can these themes be translated into support that can maximize the adult female learners' experience?
- What does an educational practitioner and researcher have to learn from the lived experience of adult female learners, studying at her institution?

## **1.4. Methods**

To explore these questions, I proposed conducting a qualitative inquiry at Thompson Rivers University, informed by phenomenological hermeneutics as interpreted by van Manen. TRU is a mid-sized Canadian post-secondary institution with a significant proportion of adult learners in University Preparation courses as well as semester and yearlong certificate programs, many of which ladder into academic courses. Qualitative research is defined in this study as "involving an interpretive, naturalistic setting approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 17). I am not aiming for universal or generalizable truths. In contrast I will

explore the lived experience of the study's participants, the aim of which is an evocative description of their return to post-secondary education.

Participants were recruited from the English 0600 classroom, as housed in Thompson Rivers University's Department of Student Development and detailed more fully in this study's third chapter (Method of Inquiry). This is part of the University Preparation program, an academic upgrading program aimed at preparing traditional and non-traditional adults for post-secondary education study. This course, which is the equivalent of grade twelve English, was chosen as a research site because it is a common re-entry point for adult learners at this institution and because it is a course which focuses on writing skills. As this course is usually taken immediately prior to beginning full time academic studies, it provides access to students at the start of their post-secondary journey. Data collection was in the form of weekly journals, prompted by a single question: what are you experiencing in class this week? This general question was purposely selected to prevent directing the students to focus on any single aspect of the class. I didn't want students to feel as though I was more or less interested in a specific component of the experience. I also didn't want to prevent the students from discussing how their life outside the classroom was integrated into their experience. The aim was to extract and document the entire lived experience of the participants as they move through the course.

My intent was to capture the lived experience of the study's participants in their own words, through their own writing. Using an approach informed by van Manen's phenomenological hermeneutics, the participants' journals underwent a process of description and reduction into smaller meaningful units so that the essences or themes of the experience emerged. van Manen (1990) describes this as the transforming of:

lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

van Manen (1990) states one undertakes such endeavor as a way of understanding the world, or just a single aspect of the world, that is meaningful and evocative to that researcher (p. 150). One must "raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon

and construct textual interpretations” (van Manen, 1990, p. 1) to engage in the ongoing questioning of actions in order to act in a better way in the future, with more mindfulness and respect. van Manen (1990) claims by examining how we experience the world, and specifically here the experience of learning, one can actually be more intentionally and fully part of the experience (p. 181).

## 1.5. Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are used in this study.

- **Adult learners:** definitions vary slightly from institution from institution, often including an emphasis on age: Bean & Metzner (1985) define an adult learner as a student 24 or older who typically does not live in a campus residence but instead commutes (p. 489). Myers & Broucker (2006) define an adult learner as someone obtaining a second chance education later in life because they did not graduate from high-school with their peers or they did not enter post-secondary education in their youth (p. 33). The adult learner can also be defined beyond the concept of age as someone with “life roles and circumstances that typically include financial obligations, family responsibilities, work and community commitments, flexible enrolment status and varied educational goals and intentions” (MacFadgen, 2007, p. 7). **Note that the institution under examination defines adult learners as those over 21 (Thompson Rivers University, 2000) and this age was used in the Letter of Recruitment (See Appendix A); however purposeful sampling resulted in research participants ranging between the age of 27-57.**
- **Andragogy:** a term used extensively Malcolm Knowles (1968) meaning the art and science of helping adults learn, as opposed to pedagogy, the art and science of helping children learn; andragogy was based on five assumptions about adult learners: “as one matures, his or her self-concept moves from a dependent personality toward a self-directing human being; one accumulates a growing wealth of experience which forms a rich resource for learning; one’s readiness to learning is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role; one’s perspective of time changes as they mature so adult’s desire immediate application of knowledge and adults are motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external” ( Knowles, 1968, p. 351).
- **Learner centered pedagogy:** teaching that focuses primarily on the learning process and the characteristics of the learner, and secondarily on teaching and the characteristics of those who help the learner to learn; learners identify the content to be learned as the knowledge and skills they need for themselves, their work or their world “while facilitating is regarded as a responsive activity that adapts to the learner’s activities and natural learning process” (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 5).

- **Lived experience:** as interpreted by van Manen (1990) is the way an individual experiences and understands his or her world as real and meaningful; the describing of reality as a dynamic situation as uniquely experienced by the person in it (p. 36).
- **Pedagogical competence:** a moving toward the lived experience of ourselves and/or others and a constant questioning of how we orient to a phenomenon and a critical philosophy of action with an aim to access “situational perceptiveness, discernment, and depthful understanding” (van Manen, 1990, p. 156).
- **Phenomenological hermeneutics:** phenomenology is the going “back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1972, p. 252) to examine lived experience through the process of description and reduction to uncover the essence of an event; van Manen (1990) describes phenomenological hermeneutics as the transforming of “lived experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful” (p.36).
- **Situated learning:** an approach to teaching that acknowledges students live, not in a world based on academic disciplines or rote knowledge, but in a dynamic, generative context where they must apply what they have learned in practical situations (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tennant, 1997).
- **Transformational learning:** a theory originally developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s, concerning the dynamic, ongoing process of purposively questioning one’s own assumptions, beliefs or perspectives with an aim of making sense of experiences; overcoming potentially limiting and distorted modes of perception and a movement through these cognitive constructions, confirming or negating them, until new meanings are significantly restructured and action taken (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1990, 1991). Subsequent theorists have included a focus on relational or connected learning (Belenky & Stanton, 2000) and extra rationality (Cranton, 2006, Dirkx, 2001).

## 1.6. Limitations

To delineate the limits of both my study and myself as a researcher, and to position my study within my own practice, a personal narrative is in order. This is especially true because I am undertaking qualitative research and need to make explicit to myself and others my personal values, assumptions and biases. Even as I began this research project, I realized that these must be subjected to careful scrutiny to reveal what is personally invested and involved in the research. For example, choosing to do research on adult female learners exhibits several biases: the belief that women should



be in school, that what they say is important, that I have the ability to study this phenomenon and that the study itself is important. Phenomenological study, as it was originally conceived by Husserl (1972), required one to bracket or set aside judgements when analysing experience. Van Manen's approach to phenomenological hermeneutics also employs the term bracketing but it is operationalized in a different way. Van Manen (1990) claims that by making explicit our bias and pre-suppositions we engage in a dialogue with them and we "try to come to terms with our assumptions not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character" (p.47). A phenomenological study is inter-subjective in that it values the interpretation of experience brought forward by others, for example my study's research participants, as well as mine. The interpretation of experience by others cannot be believed at the expense of any single individual. In this way, my study is inter-subjective, a co-construction of all participants. Since it is the duty of the phenomenological researcher to be aware of the preconceptions one carries and to reflect on these while reflecting on the process of the research itself, I constantly reflected on my curiosity about whether bracketing in the Husserlian sense is even possible. van Manen's assertion that humans cannot be entirely acultural or acontextual suggests that I am a co-constructor of the interpretation of my study's data.

I have, over the course of this research, continually reflected on why I am so interested in the phenomenon of adult female learners. My interest in this demographic and their experience in returning to post-secondary has been sparked by the high numbers of adult women in my classroom. Over the years there have been many graduates of Thompson Rivers University's University Preparation Program in my first year composition courses. In this sense, the research population presented itself to me. Initially this led me to seek out information about the Career Opportunities and Personal Growth (COPE) program, which is a (re)entry point for many adult learners at TRU. The program places a heavy emphasis on personal empowerment and transformational learning. My first encounter with Mezirow's (1990, 1991) ideas of transformational learning were here, as they were discussed in class by the teacher. The experience of being a COPE student was indeed transformational for me, as it caused me to truly "feel" the potential complexity of human interaction. Knowing intellectually that people's lives

are complex and that there is much in interactions that one cannot see is one thing, but truly feeling it in one's body is quite different. I felt like I stood differently and held my body differently after spending time sitting in class, side by side, with the women who made up the group, and for that I am very grateful. Graduates of COPE who intend to go further with their post-secondary education often take more courses within the University Preparation department, consequently I familiarized myself with the program and more specifically, the English 0600 course.

When working with potential participants in either the COPE or English 0600 classroom, it was important to disclose my identity as an instructor for both ethical and practical reasons. This transparency was also necessary to add rigour to the study. Documentation from the appropriate Research Ethics Review Committees made clear that the subjects' participation in this study would have no effect on their current or future grades at TRU and I also made this clear when approaching the potential research population. The fact that I am also a full-time instructor at the institution may have played a role in potential participants' decision to join the study. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not my role contributed to participants' willingness to volunteer and therefore, I will include this as a potential limitation of the study. The key is that my identity was made clear.

I am aware, that as a post-secondary instructor and more specifically, an instructor at the same institution that houses the program under examination, I carry certain institutional knowledge, personal assumptions and biases into this study. Having taught at TRU for the past 17 years, I know that programs within the Department of Student Development (DSD), including University Preparation, have historically been considered by many faculty and administration as remedial. Some individuals may consider DSD programs dispensable because they are, to some individuals, not purely academic in nature and perhaps better facilitated by other organizations or institutions off campus. I find this attitude narrow-minded and elitist and this partly fuels my interest in this research area. I would argue that, at a pragmatic level, programs which prepare students for success at the post-secondary level are very necessary at an institution that is facing declining enrolment among the traditional university demographic and that experiences significant attrition at the second year level. Although I acknowledge that I carry biases concerning these preparatory programs, I did not reveal these to students

enrolled in courses such as English 0600 and I made a conscious effort not to influence their perspectives about being marginalized. I predicted that the data will reveal students' actual perspectives.

Because I often teach adult female learners, I believe this provides me with a basic awareness, knowledge and sensitivity to this group. It is because I interact with this demographic in my own classroom on a daily basis that I became interested in this research. This rich experience, however, means that I bring certain assumptions to the study. I do understand that my past experience may shape the way I view and conduct the study and consequently, my data analysis. The question of bias is a more complex one when working in the qualitative paradigm, made even more complex by working with the theories of learning, which fully embrace the subjectivity of memory, knowledge and experience. I undertake this study with the realization that this research will be an ongoing balance of these elements of academic rigour and my own belief in the primacy and subjectivity of experience.

## **1.7. Outline**

This study is divided into four main sections.

Chapter 2 (Literature Review) provides an overview of the literature relevant to this study. There is no single theory that explains all of human learning and accordingly there is no single theory that explains adult learning, however an overview of competing theories make clear the complexity of the learning process and all contribute to our understanding of the field. The chapter opens with a discussion van Manen's (1990) pedagogical competence. As the concept of pedagogical competence is key to my study, this is the lens through which the literature in Chapter 2 will be explored. Dewey's (1916, 1938) theories on learning are covered, specifically his claim that the goal of education is "reflective learning" and then moves to a review of past research specifically on adult learning. Knowles' (1980, 1998) concept of andragogy is important for any discussion because it differentiates the learning process of adults from that of children or pre-adults. Jarvis' (1992) theories of reflective learning are discussed. Mezirow's (1990,1991) concepts of transformative learning are also investigated. The chapter

continues with an overview of contemporary theory, including critical and feminist theory (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Hayes & Flannery, 2000), and a discussion of how, as a composite, the theories covered in this chapter contributed to the study as a whole. The chapter closes with an examination of the practice of journaling, the data collection method used by the current study.

Chapter 3 (Method of Inquiry) outlines the research method used in this study, discussing the qualitative paradigm, and phenomenological hermeneutics, particularly as interpreted by van Manen (1990, 1995, 2007). Also covered are three relevant studies (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; MacFadgen, 2007; Samuels, 2005) that have employed similar methods. Included next is a personal narrative, which tells the story of coming to the research population. The chapter continues with a summary of the current study's location and the participant selection process, as well as participant profiles. The chapter closes with an explication of a particular aspect of the study's data to provide a snapshot of the data analysis process.

Chapter 4 (Results) provides the findings of the study, and presents the three essential themes (motion, emotion and connection) revealed in the data and uses particular aspects of the data to illustrate these themes. As it is the duty of a phenomenological researcher to reflect on experience, I have included my personal reflections on the interpretation of these findings.

Chapter 5 (Discussion and Conclusions) provides a discussion of the study's findings and the implications for our understanding of the lived experience of adult female learners. Each of the three main themes is explored in relation to students and educators. The chapter also grounds the current study in the existent literature, making and points to future related research. It closes with a personal reflection on what this study has meant to me and the field of adult education.

## Chapter 2.

### Literature Review: The Role of Experience in Adult Learning

All good research begins with curiosity and this would certainly be true of my exploration of the adult learning literature. I was indeed curious to see how past research resonated with my experience in the classroom. My background is in linguistic theory and I make note of that for two reasons. First, I, as someone new to educational theory but keenly interested in reflective learning, I needed to journey through both foundational and contemporary thinking in the field. I needed to find connections between the key points in the literature. Secondly, as someone very interested in language, and therefore, writing, I wanted to discover what the place of writing was in relation to transformative learning. I found myself more drawn to constructivist theories of learning (Dewey, 1938; Knowles, 1980) and then to theories of transformational learning (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991, 2000). My interest in the affective domain of learning and expression of emotion and caring led me to theories of transformational learning beyond Mezirow (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Cranton, 2006). Through all of this reading, I was myself trying to see how writing could be integrated into these ways of knowing.

The following is a review, although not an exhaustive one, of the literature relevant to my study of experience and transformation in adult learning. There is an ever increasing wealth of literature on adult learning. I have had to be selective in constructing this review. It is an overview of the major trends in the adult learning literature, one designed to set the stage for this study on the transformative and connective qualities of adult female learners' lived experience. It reflects my "personal research signature" (van Manen, 1990, p.132) as it represents the literature that spoke to me, either in that it confirmed my experience or forced me to question or think more deeply.

As my study was inspired by van Manen's (1990) theory of pedagogical competence, this chapter opens with a discussion of this stance or way of being in the world. van Manen's valuing of lived experience provides a meaningful lens through which one can examine the adult education literature, which implicitly acknowledges the importance of experience and in many ways. Experience is a common thread through the majority of research in the field of adult learning and certainly at the core of this study, therefore the thread of experience runs through this literature review. Examined first here is Dewey's (1933, 1938) contribution to our understanding of learning and experience, which certainly opened new possibilities for scholarship. Subsequent research by Knowles (1968, 1980, 1998) enlarged our understanding of how adults might learn. Prior, adult educators relied primarily on psychologists' understanding of learning to inform practice and did not necessarily distinguish between the learning of children, pre-adults and adults. An overview of the research in this area reveals no shortage of theorists, including Jarvis (1992), Mezirow (1991), Belenky et al. (1986), Cranton (2006) and Belenky and Stanton (2000), who spoke to my interest in the dynamic nature of the adult learning process. The ideas put forth by these researchers both compete against and complement one another, speaking to the complexity of learning and therefore the human condition, and therefore encourage further study into the lived experience of female adult learners. The chapter closes with an examination of literature related to the practice of journaling, as this is the strategy used to uncover the key insights of the participants.

The literature selected here reveals something about me, and my valuing of learning and reflection. I consider reflective learners to be researchers. By engaging in reflective learning, I feel we are, on some level, investigating ourselves and our relationships with others. I impress this upon the students in my classroom. I encourage them to go beyond what they think about an issue, but consider why they perceive the issue that way and imagine alternative ways of seeing the topic. I ask them to reflect on their learning style, their writing process, and ultimately their feelings at a project's completion. Reflection is research. Being mindful is ongoing experimentation and therefore prioritizes the agency and creativity of the individual. I can see all of these values threaded through this review of the literature.

## 2.1. van Manen's Pedagogical Competence

When reviewing the literature of adult learning, I was struck by the fact much of it didn't speak to my experience as the classroom as a very social place. One of my favorite sounds is that of laughter filling a classroom. The feeling of social connectedness embodied in that moment of shared laughter is a very powerful one. Much of my early reading of the adult learning literature did not speak to this type of dynamic classroom activity. Nor did this literature speak to me about the importance of relationships and connected learning. Granted, the literature is academic and therefore tends to theoretical abstractions, and it does address learning process from several valuable perspectives but didn't speak to my experience of the classroom being collective space, inhabited by living human beings who speak about success, failure, hopes and fears and, of course, do so in their own voice. My reading inspired me to undertake a study that allows adult learners to speak out about and document their lived experience. I hoped to create a document that was, in a sense, filled with the noise of students' lived experience, one that allowed them to assert their presence in the literature.

My desire to explore the lived experience of adult learners led me to phenomenological hermeneutics, particularly as interpreted by van Manen (discussed more fully in Chapter 3 – Method of Enquiry). This also led me to what van Manen (1990) considers the goal of phenomenological hermeneutics: pedagogical competence, or movement or orientation towards an experience in a mindful way resulting in a "situational perceptiveness, discernment or depthful understanding" (p. 154) of that event. The practice of pedagogical competence should, ideally, result in a more evocative, nuanced experience of moving through one's life, as one is able to be as close to an experience as is possible. When we are aware of the complexity of experience we are more likely to "be at the edge of speaking up, speaking out, or decisively acting in social situations that ask for such action" (van Manen, p.154).

To me, pedagogical competence is about connections. If one lives with an active willingness to critically reflect on one's own and others' perspectives, then one has to be intimately connected with oneself and other people. Constitutive of this is a genuine respect for all involved. Connected or relational knowing (Belenky & Stanton, 2000), or

playing the believing game (Elbow, 1973) is not possible otherwise. The result of pedagogical competence is more sensitive decisions, and consequently action that is more open to reflection. It also results in stronger connections. In terms of classroom practice, this means more meaningful classroom activities, responsive to students' needs, rich with opportunities for reflection and supportive of transformation. For me, now living with pedagogical competence in mind, I see myself as very small in the whole scheme of things but simultaneously connected to everything. This has been a significant perspective change for me. It leads one to live with great humility.

van Manen's (1990) coming to this way of contemplating experience, and specifically educational experience, is the result of a frustration with current educational theory. He isolates three main concerns in modern educational theory: a tendency to adopt the discourse of other disciplines, the tendency to abstraction and the loss of connection to the life world of learners, and a general erosion of pedagogic meaning from the life world (van Manen, 1990, p. 135). All of these factors contribute to a moving away from the lived experience of teaching and learning. van Manen's use of pedagogy is *not* understood as instructional methodology or curriculum. It is a constant questioning of how we orient to a phenomenon and it is a critical philosophy of action (van Manen, 1990, p. 154). In other words, it is the attempt to deeply connect with an experience, to more fully understand the experience and develop empathy. In keeping with van Manen's vision, my desire to undertake this current study and search for meaning in the lived experience of adult learners is fueled by deep personal engagement with the object of study and the desire to enter into the discussion of how we stand in life pedagogically, as teachers and learners.

As reflection is the duty of a phenomenological researcher, I will comment on the impact of discovering the concept of pedagogical competence. If one was to view this project as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, then the idea of pedagogical competence was the one piece needed to bring the entire project together. I still remember the moment my eyes came across the phrase "pedagogical competence" on a page that up until that moment had not been alive in the same way. The concept puts into words, and therefore makes real, something I very much wanted to do. I wanted to look at experience, even just the moving through one's life on a daily basis, as an ongoing experiment undertaken by every individual, every day. This speaks to agency that I believe each of us have in



our lives and the ability to take that capacity for agency further by reflecting on our pedagogical choices to live with “situational perceptiveness, discernment or depthful understanding” (van Manen, 1990, p. 154). It also speaks to the connectedness I believe is critical to learning. This truly was the final piece of puzzle, allowing me to better engage with the adult learning literature as well as complete a meaningful analysis of my data.

## **2.2. Educational Theorists**

### **2.2.1. *Dewey and Experience***

John Dewey’s ideas are significant to this study, primarily in his valuing of experience, transformation and connected learning. His (1938) assertion that students can reflect meaningfully on their world validates the current study which is grounded in reflection on lived experience. It also echoes van Manen’s (1990) ideas of phenomenological hermeneutics, in that both theorists emphasize self-reflection as a way into change. For Dewey (1938) education was the way we study our world and acquire cumulative knowledge of meaning and values. For him these are data to be applied critically to what he termed “more intelligent living” (p. xi) and therefore personal transformation and subsequent learning. He advocated for a critical examination of traditional educational methods that emphasized rote learning that aimed to “prepare learners for future responsibilities and success by means of acquiring information and prepared skill sets handed down from the past” (p. 4). Dewey criticized this form of education as largely static, a finished product that was handed from teacher to learner unidirectionally, the passing of said knowledge an end in itself, with little or no regard for either the independence or ingenuity of learners. His emphasis on the agency of learners and better living as the result of reflection also fuel my study.

Dewey (1938) did not suggest facilitators abandon an emphasis on the past or the impact of experience, rather he advocated basing education on personal experience, acquainting students with the past in such a way that the link between past experience and newly acquired knowledge or insight was a “potent agent of appreciation of the living present” (p. 12) and, consequently, future actions. Emphasized here is an exploration of

experience that leads to learning. The resulting action of investigating problems or maladaptive strategies drives the individual's ability to review their resources of knowledge (i.e., past lived experience) and enlarges the learner's experience. What is implicit in Dewey's theory, and quite overt in van Manen's pedagogical competence, is praxis or action, and consequently change, based on reflection. Both speak of enlarging or making more open and permeable one's perspectives.

Dewey's ideas link tightly to both van Manen's theory and my study in that there is a distinct honoring of the complexity of human interactions and the learning that results from reflecting on these interactions. Dewey (1938) claimed that the valuing of subjective experience needed to be integrated into contemporary education in order for schooling to be truly educational, inspiring personal growth. The strength of education is, according to Dewey, to allow individuals to relish in the knowledge that they live in the world: "that they live in a series of situations...that they live *in* these situations...interaction is [constantly] going on between an individual and objects and other persons" (p. 41).

These ideas suggest a transactional theory in that experience is constitutive of a transaction between an individual and environment. Transaction implies a succeeding of events or experience, a necessary element of change. Dewey (1938) claimed that the strength of education is not in "relatively momentary incidents" (p. 41) but is found in connections or the continuity of "developing experience" (p. 41). Additionally, every experience is a moving force since "its value can be judged only on the grounds of what it moves toward and into" (p. 31) and it is this force of change that leads an individual through a transformational process. Every experience lives on in further experiences and according to Dewey:

as one moves through life, one is not living in another world but in a different aspect of the same world...what [one] has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow, a process as long as life. (p. 42)

The above ideas suggest that the result of learning could be transformation and that a sense of volatility or motion might be constitutive of their conceptual understanding of this experience.

Dewey's (1938) work, though considered by many revolutionary, can be problematized. His work, which was primarily concerned with the education of children, raises questions about the characteristics of the learning of adults. Dewey asserts that a child [learner] needs little correction and the role of the teacher is to understand and follow that student's interest and impulses. This foreshadows later interest in self-directed learning among adult educators. But following a student's inclination as a guide for setting curriculum, according to Edmondson (2006) does not allow for sufficient room for development. I wonder if it is more or less appropriate for adults. I question the prioritizing of self-directed learning for an adult learner who wants the structure of a teacher led curriculum or lesson. Such a learner could experience anxiety and other negative emotions if such structure is not present.

Dewey (1938) claims that rote learning from books in a traditional classroom means that the subject matter is not unique to each individual but if experience is a key element of learning, as he claims, then all learning is viewed through the lens of experience and is therefore unique to that individual. Personal reflection is then also always unique to the individual. Dewey's emphasis on the individual, active rather than passive learning and an early mention of situational learning (Dewey, 1916, p. 238) affords him a place in any discussion of learning and adult learning.

More specifically, Dewey's (1938) theories link to this study in three major ways. First, his characterization of learning as "appreciating the living present" (p. 22) suggests strongly that the lived experience of (adult) students deserves investigation. Secondly his acknowledgment of the active quality of learning invites inquiry into the affective dimensions of learning, including viewing those dimensions from the perspective of the learner themselves. Finally, while his emphasis on learners as individuals, but individuals who interact with others, suggests that connection plays a key role in the learning process.

### **2.2.2. Knowles and Andragogy**

Malcolm Knowles, whose 1980 *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy* sparked an increased focus on adult learning, links to my study in many ways. The first link is the simple fact that Knowles made adult learners an increasingly viable area of study, separate from the study of the learning of children. This is an early acknowledgement that there are many ways of learning and therefore, knowing. Additionally his claim that adult learners' self-concepts and goals change over time (1980) and that connected and situated learning are key principles of effective learning environments (1980) in part fueled my interest in the adult education field.

Knowles (1980) claimed adult learners emphasize integrating their education experience to professional and personal goals that have real life consequences. He argued that this separates adult learners from children and leads to certain assumptions. These assumptions include that adults gain a growing wealth of experience, a readiness to learn that is linked to tasks of social roles, a change in focus to immediate application of learning, and increased internal motivation (Knowles, 1980, p.41). Knowles suggested these principles could assist in the design and evaluation of learning activities to create a learning environment of "adulthood" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 272) physically, socially and psychologically where adults "[should] feel accepted, respected and supported" (Knowles, 1980, p. 47) with "a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers" (p. 47).

However, Knowles' theories can be considered an over generalization of the context of all adult learners. Critics felt these assumptions simply would not be evidenced in all learning situations and that a stark, unbending contrast between child and adult learners was too inflexible. Hartree (1984) considered Knowles' ideas simply principles of good practice and possibly just prescriptivist statements of what an adult learner should be. Brookfield (1987) notes that the assumptions of self-direction might be more a desirable outcome of good teaching practice and not necessarily a given condition. Knowles (1980) does not acknowledge that this might be a desirable quality or outcome in learners of all ages. It could also be argued that all learning is self-directed at some level because one simply cannot force another to learn, so to claim it is a characteristic of adult learners is limiting. Also Knowles (1980) does not, for me,

adequately address that behavior is context sensitive and that a person may behave differently, for example more or less independently, in different situations.

Although Knowles and many other adult learning theorists claim that adults' accumulated experience forms a resource for learning, there is no recognition in Knowles' (1980) idea that this might not "translate into quality experience" and "indeed certain life experience can function as barriers to learning" (Merriam, Mott, & Lee as quoted in Merriam & Carrarella, 1999, p. 274). Negative experiences can create obstacles to learning. In contrast, later theories, Mezirow (1991) for example, assert that negative or disorienting experience can, with care, be used to facilitate reflection, transformation and growth. Negative experience and emotions may be constitutive of transformational learning for some learners but halt the process for others.

Knowles revised his own principles, and in fact discarded his stance that andragogy exclusively characterized adult learning which led to a consideration of situation sensitive principles and subsequently, an interest in situated learning (Hartree, 1884; Brookfield, 1987). Critiques of andragogy that point out it relies too heavily on humanistic psychology and its idea of an individual who is "autonomous, free and growth orientated" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 275) have led to an awareness that a learner is socially situated and engaged in a transfer of information. The socio-historical and cultural context in which a learner lives is constitutive of that learning event.

Knowles (1980) did launch a major shift in the study of education by recognizing adult learners as unique and deserving of study. He provides a lens through which we can continue to view practice, especially with adults and assists us in understanding the complexity of adult learning. This caused me to reflect on my original curiosity: is there something unseen happening as an undercurrent for my adult learners as they sit in my classroom? Knowles' andragogy suggests that there is a certain "adulthood" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 272) being embodied by our students and I was interested in what part of that is being performed unseen. Trying to uncover these "unseen" events justifies using phenomenological hermeneutics and was a major goal of my study.

### **2.2.3. *Jarvis and Reflective Learning***

The complex relationship between learning and experience, suggested by Dewey (1938) and Knowles's (1980) theories, is furthered in Peter Jarvis' (1992) work, which unlike these other models, concentrates on the learning process rather than learner characteristics, or environment. Jarvis (1992) claims that learning is an exercise in constant negotiation between an individual and environment or "the process of transforming experience into new knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and beliefs... seeking to create experiences and to discover from them new knowledge and action" (p. 11). Learning, for Jarvis, is not just reacting to experience but giving meaning to experience. His (1992) assertion that learning is giving meaning to experience links the one of the current study's research questions: what will a phenomenological hermeneutical study reveal as meaningful to adult female learners?

Jarvis (1992) speaks to the importance of reflective learning. It doesn't necessarily result in upheaval or even radically dynamic changes, but is simply the act of standing back, examining a situation that seems new and unfamiliar, making a decision based on that examination, taking some action, possibly in a new, previously unknown way (Jarvis, 1992 p. 78). For him, reflective learning can be broken down into three processes: contemplation; reflective skills learning, which is responding to a unique situation with the development of new skills or strategies instantly; and experimental learning, where "theory is tried out in practice and the result is a new form of knowledge that captures social reality" (p. 78). To Jarvis, all forms of reflective learning are analogous to a scientist or researcher, always experimenting on the world around them, and in a sense, on themselves as well. This resonated with me and encouraged me to pursue a study grounded in pedagogical competence or more mindful, reflective living, which I also see as analogous to ongoing research or experimentation.

Jarvis (1992) suggested that reflective learning can only occur when some sort of cognitive or emotional disjuncture occurs (p. 82). Although it is assumed that educational facilitators strive to create environments that allow learners to be free of harm, stress and danger, according to Jarvis (1992), it is paradoxically only when a sense of harmony is disturbed that learning occurs. It is when this sense of disjuncture occurs, when what one has experienced and therefore "knows" no longer applies to a

current situation, that reflective learning can occur. An individual's "stock of knowledge is insufficient to cope with, or [they are] prevented from responding to, their action experience. They are no longer able to act unthinkingly" (p. 82) or in a presumptive fashion.

Humans bring certain presumptions to events. We simply cannot intensely reflect on each and every event as exhaustion would be the result. So a balance between presumption and openness is desirable. Confidence is touched on by Jarvis (1992), who claims "confidence should be a matter of having faith in one's understanding but being prepared to be open to others and indeed willing to adopt new perspectives if these seem desirable" (p. 170). Confidence does not preclude openness and the potential for perspective transformation. The goal of adult education might be then defined as instilling confidence through generative reflection—the ongoing search for understanding, openness and self, which echoes van Manen's concept of pedagogical competence.

One strength of Jarvis' (1992) theory is that it does focus on the learning process and is a model of how we learn. Additionally the fact that it can be applied very easily to all learning situations, formal or informal, and incorporates the situatedness of learning gives his theories depth. However, if it can be generalized to all learning situations leads me to question whether or not this is just a model of adult learning process. Jarvis' (1992) model could be used to explain that children do carry with them experience and use it in decision making. Further, adults with little relevant experience, confidence or capacity for risk taking might not engage in reflective learning. As a result, Jarvis may be ultimately presenting a theory of learning, generalizable to all ages. In terms of applicability to this study, Jarvis' work links well with my belief that learners are researchers themselves, and learning is an act of ongoing investigation into best practice, including the best practice of living one's life.

#### **2.2.4. *Mezirow and Transformational Learning***

Transformational learning theory resonates with me for many reasons, including its emphasis on reflection leading to change. When standing at the front of a class, I

always sense that changes are occurring for my students but I also sense that the process cannot necessarily be seen and that is what has led me to conduct the current study. I suspect that a fundamental change in perspective, including becoming a student after never identifying as such, doesn't happen in one instance. In fact, this transformation might only be overtly noticed long after the perspective change has occurred. Many researchers are associated with the ideas of transformational learning (Brookfield, 1987; Cranton, 2006; Daloz, 1986; Dirkx, 2001; King & Kitchener, 1994; Taylor, 1997) but Jack Mezirow (1991, 2000) pioneered this approach, emphasizing the meaning or dynamic interpretation of experience. He outlined how adult learners interpret past experience and modify the meanings of experience when these meanings are found to be dysfunctional or maladaptive. In this framework, learning is defined as "using a meaning we have already made to guide the way we think, act or feel about what we are currently experiencing...making sense of or giving coherence to our experiences" (Mezirow, 1990, p.10). Clearly this assumes a constructivist standpoint as "it is not so much what happens to individuals but how they interpret and explain what happens to them that determines their actions, hopes, contentment and emotional well-being, their performance" (p. xiii).

Within any constructivist framework, the external world is not negated but the nature of any experience consists of the meaning that an individual gives it. Since information, ideas and context are in constant flux, one's interpretations of reality are subject to revision, or as Mezirow (1991) asserted, transformation. This theory views experience not as unmediated sensory input but as social constructed and therefore it can be deconstructed and reconstructed, potentially throughout one's entire life. With this in mind, I thought it likely that the adult learning experience would involve emotional volatility.

Within Mezirow's (1991) theory, the *formative* learning of childhood and even early adulthood becomes the *transformative* learning of full adulthood. Transformational learning is not just the testing of a hypothesis and detailing of the results, as with the scientific method. It involves overcoming potentially limiting and distorted modes of perception and a movement through these cognitive constructions, confirming or negating them, until new meanings are significantly restructured, and action is taken (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (2000) claimed this is a process:



by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and options that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (p. 8)

I expected that this process would have a strong affective component.

It is Mezirow's (1991) assertion that transformational learning is a constant narration between the individual and environment, past, present and future, that first inspired me to consider using reflective journals as a data collection method. His further claim (1991) that the ideal conditions for adult learning and better understanding of experience are free and full participation in reflective discourse, furthered my commitment to this method. For Mezirow (1990), when an experience appears incompatible with established meanings or personal values, or a disconnect occurs between the memory of an experience and new knowledge, anxiety is the result (p. 6). Transformation occurs when, as a result of this new information, assumptions are found to be distorted, inauthentic and the goal of adult education, for Mezirow, is then confirmation and transformation of ways of interpreting experience. This echoes van Manen's (1990) theory of pedagogical competence, in that this transformation could lead to an enlarged, more sensitive understanding of said experience.

Aspects of Mezirow's theories have been problematized (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Merriam 1988; Taylor 1997) both on grounds of insensitivity to cross cultural contexts, and to the complexity of the learning environment created by the goals of transformational learning. Mezirow's (1991) early work was criticized (Merriam 1988; Taylor 1997) for not addressing the cultural (Western) context in which it was constructed and its heavy emphasis on the individual. Personal autonomy, so critical to Mezirow's work, is not a universal value. Many cultures value group conformity over individualization and therefore perspective transformation in the individual may not be considered significant or possibly may not even occur. This emphasis on the individualized meaning construction does not necessarily fully address that learning can be done through relationships and is socially situated, a gap addressed by later expansion on transformational learning theory (Cranton, 2006; Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

Having taught in the university classroom for 17 years, I must consider several ethical issues of particular importance to practitioners that are raised yet unresolved by Mezirow's (1991, 2000) theories. The relationships students make during their educational journey, including the connections made between students and their teachers, is of interest to me. One of the major goals of transformational learning is to facilitate the questioning of one's belief system, but I wonder if an educator has the right to interfere with a student's world view, or even create the environment with the potential to interfere with that view. This stance may create a hierarchy and move away from a learner centered model. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), Mezirow lays out "the ideal conditions' of discourse for fostering transformative learning, but to date there is little verification of these conditions in the empirical research" (p. 337). This echoes criticism of andragogy that contend that what Knowles (1980) created is not a theory but a description of an ideal learner, or in Mezirow's (1991) case, an ideal learning environment, both prescriptivist in nature and difficult to truly test empirically.

### **2.2.5. Transformational Learning beyond Mezirow**

I have not encountered a single, definite definition of transformational learning. In fact there is healthy debate "between those who view it as a cognitive, rational process and those who prefer an imaginative, extra rational interpretation" (Cranton & Roy, 2003, p. 86). As stated in the previous section, I would expect the process of transformation to have a strong affective component, despite Mezirow's (1991) stance that it is largely a cognitive process. It may be that it involves both. The very question that began the current study comes into play here – is there something occurring for students that the teacher at the front of the room can't see, or perhaps can't know? Reflecting on my classroom experience, I would suggest that what is unseen on students' faces is deeply emotional. Robertson (1996) draws attention to the fact that the learning environment, and perhaps particularly one that aims to foster transformational learning, can be intensely emotional, both for students and facilitator. It is true that adult educators may arrive in the classroom with a variety of educational backgrounds, none of which adequately prepare practitioners for this. There exists a relative lack of preparation and support in the field and little within Mezirow's (1991) work to support educators accomplish the goals of transformational learning responsibly. Robertson (1996) maintains that education is not counseling or therapy but that some overlap may exist at

times and that the field of adult education could benefit from examining these fields and their support for practitioners. Robertson (1991) advocates for expanding our understanding of transformational learning as neither learner nor teacher centered but as a system that necessarily involves the subjective realities of key participants. He also recommends, within adult education, the establishment of “scholarly literature, preparatory curriculum, ethical code and consultative support” (Robertson, 1991, p. 50). Further to this point, Cranton (2006) states that “the educator who fosters transformative learning has a moral responsibility to provide and arrange for support for his or her students” (p. xi).

To not consider connected learning within the process of transformation seems counterproductive to me when we do so much group based activity in the post-secondary classroom. Learning or seeing something in a new way is not a risk free activity, and the safety of knowing others seems integrative to the process. Both Belenky and Stanton (2000) and Hayes and Flannery (2000) emphasize relational or connective learning, stating that women learn through connection with others, and through compassion and sharing, all of which suggests an emotional experience. In particular, Belenky and Stanton developed their concept of connected knowing to fill a gap in Mezirow’s theory of transformational learning. Whereas separate knowers look for difference and flaws, Belenky and Stanton suggest that connected learners look for common points and strengths and “the more connected knowers disagree with another person the harder they will try to understand how that person could imagine such a thing, using empathy, imagination and storytelling as tools for entering into another’s frame of mind” (p. 87).

The transformational learning literature re-enforced my belief that learning is a very dynamic, multi-faceted and powerful process and that the learner is an active participant in that process. I increasingly believe that learning might also occur in very small, perhaps almost imperceptible steps. An examination of the lived experience of students, in this case through the lens of phenomenological hermeneutics, will reveal valuable information about those steps. Mezirow’s (1991, 2000) perspectives on learning seem to me too neat and tidy, and do not prioritise the affective domain. I believe learning is somehow more raw and emotional, leading me to look further in the adult learning literature, searching for research that explored more explicitly learners’

construction of knowledge and their assertion of their own place in the world. Upon reflection, I felt I was searching in the literature for something that captured the unmistakable energy of the classroom, in the actual voices of the learners themselves. The canonical theories of Dewey, Knowles and Mezirow do not address the full experience of adult learners. Their contributions do, however, provided the solid foundation for subsequent work on transformational learning that does resonate with me.

### **2.3. Contemporary Theory**

My search for literature that informed the dynamic nature of the educational journey of female adult learners led me to consider post-modern and feminist theory. The adult education literature discussed so far is situated, to varying degrees, largely in a modernist context, resulting from humanistic ideals of developmental growth and truth. More contemporary philosophical thought emphasizes diversity, fluidity and connectivity, and as a result, the very nature of reality is contested. In many ways, Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformational learning, with its focus on change, represents a shift from modernism to post-modernism, however subsequent work using post-modern and feminist theory has shed new light on adult education, resulting in no single definite theory or model of adult learning but multiple ways to examine the phenomenon. These theories resonated with me, in that they speak to the complexity of learning, and perhaps more importantly, to the agency and creativity that learners have as they experience that complexity.

The post-modern world is characterized by uncertainty. It is marked by "crisis of power, patriarchy, authority, identity, and ethics" (Giroux, 1992, p. 39). According to this line of thought, there are no universals, except for that of constant change, and phenomenon like learning then become difficult to define. One's approach to adult learning then becomes inseparable from the multiple interpretations possible, based on "where one is standing and what factors are in juxtaposition with one another...there are no absolutes, no single theoretical framework for examining social and political issues" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 356). Contemporary philosophy's focus on only pluralistic interpretation can suggest a meaningless existence of extreme relativism, offering "a pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment...of fragmentation, disintegration,

malaise, [and] meaninglessness” (Rosenau, 1992, p. 15). It can simultaneously suggest a world that is endlessly creative, hopeful and not tied to dogma, ideology or fixed history, and therefore a world where learning is of utmost importance. This affirms my sense that the classroom is a place of creativity and transition and that reflection, both on the part of learners and practitioners, is an important objective.

The concept of self is given priority and the learner is viewed as “not a unified, integrated self but a multiple, changeable, fluid, fragmented self” (Gergen, 1991, p. 7). The self is always considered to be at the intersection of several variables, mostly notably power, class, race and gender. The role of education is then to encourage reflective questioning of both self and the context that self is situated in, and the creation of new realities. Within the context of adult education, the focus then becomes, how can the facilitator create the environment where this can occur and what is her role in that environment? Along with the focus on self and the construction of knowledge that comes with a changing self, is a focus on relationships, connections and interdependency. While of primary importance, the self, and therefore the learning, is always understood as situated and existing in a multiplicity of simultaneous relationships. These concepts relate to my three research questions: (a) what will adult learners reveal as the most meaningful aspects of their experience?; (b) what supports can be created to maximize that experience?; and (c) what can an educational practitioner and researcher learn from the experience of adult female learners? Post-modern theory strongly supports the intersection of these questions and the reflection that enables such examination to occur.

Critical theory’s goal, the analysis of existing power structures and the intersection of gender, race and class, makes it a valuable lens through which to examine adult education. Critical theory encourages that questions be raised by both learners and facilitators, with an aim to establishing the nature of learning, and knowledge construction. There is no absolute truth within critical theory, only knowledge privileged by power. The agency possessed by learners, when viewed through a critical theory lens, appeals to me greatly. I often sense that students in my classroom experience increased agency and control as they move through their educational journey. To me, it feels as if they are actually *taking up more space* in the classroom as this sense of control, and potentially power, grows.

Because my study focused exclusively on adult female learners, it is important to also consider feminist theory as it relates to learning. This focus on adult female learners was chosen for three pragmatic reasons. Firstly, this demographic is increasing in my own classroom and is consequently of interest to me. Secondly, there was an easily accessible research site featuring this demographic at the institution at which I teach. Thirdly, adult female learners are interesting to me. Perhaps, upon reflection, I could come up with another, more personal reason. I feel that adult female learners deserve to be heard, in their own words. For all of these reasons, it is important to consider feminist theory.

Feminist pedagogy focuses on both the concerns of women in the teaching and learning environment, as well as deconstruction of established educational ideology to the benefit of a more diverse audience. Learners are encouraged to:

examine how social systems of privilege and oppression have affected their own identity, including their beliefs and values [and disrupt the discourse] thus shifting their identity, as well as increasing their capacity for agency...[o]ne also begins to see that there are different 'truths' and perhaps not one 'Truth'.  
(Tisdale, 1998, p. 146)

There are many feminist approaches to learning but what resonates strongly for me is the gender model, which examines the how female identity and knowledge is constructed socially (Belenky et al., 1986). Belenky et al. posit that a person moves through four types of knowing: received, subjective, procedural and constructed. Silence, the experience of perceiving oneself as voiceless and subject to external authority, precedes these four ways of knowing, which include:

1. feeling capable of receiving and possibly replicating knowledge from established authorities;
2. feeling that truth and knowledge are personal, private and subjective;
3. feeling invested in learning and applying objective procedures for communicating knowledge;
4. feeling that knowledge is contextual and capable of creating it oneself.  
(p. 15)

If I reflect on my own experience as a student, writer and researcher, the theories presented by Belenky et al. (1986) put into words what I have felt as I embodied and

moved between each of those roles. I still remember the first time I encountered these ideas of received, subjective, procedural and constructive knowledge, as presented by Belenky et al. In an instant I felt like others would actually understand my experience and if I explained my lived experience in my own voice, others would appreciate it. This memory is part of what fuels this study aimed at documenting, in their own words, the lived experience of adult female learners.

A study of female learners' lived experience using a phenomenological hermeneutics connects strongly to the aims of feminist pedagogy. This pedagogy questions how knowledge is constructed and consequently the historical authority of teachers, and encourages the development of learners' voice. It is no longer assumed that pedagogical techniques appropriate for a dominant culture work for all learners and therefore links to phenomenological hermeneutics goal of studying the unique. Feminist theorists question the universality of an authoritarian "banking" model and its inherent adversarial stance, advocating for a model that values and fosters emotionality, connectivity, community and personal agency (Belenky et al., 1986; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Noddings 1994; Tisdale, 1998). Such models encourage what Elbow (1973) describes as "the believing model", where learners, as much as is possible see reality through another's eyes with an aim to seeing the other's perspective as well as how this reality relates to them. This construction of knowledge is based in the "personal, particular" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 113) and is "grounded in firsthand experience" (p. 113). This links to theories of connected or relational learning (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Hayes & Flowers, 2000) and is in contrast to the "doubting game" where learning is putting a person or a hypothesis on trial to find its weaknesses, failings or contradictions (Elbow, 1973).

Belenky et al. (1986) forward a model of teaching as midwifery, where knowledge is something already possessed by the learner. Facilitators do not do the work or thinking for the learner but instead draw out knowledge and give back to the learner what was theirs all along (Belenky et al., p. 217). This is congruent with feminist pedagogies' emphasis on connected knowing and the belief that the most valuable knowledge come from personal experience, participation and emotion rather than information lauded down from authorities. Belenky et al. characterize learning as creating a network of connections, based on equality and empathy, moving oneself

toward a more mature stage of development. The ideas that learners may return to post-secondary with pre-existing strengths and knowledge that need to be drawn out influenced my decision to employ personal journaling as my data collection method. The midwife model appealed to me partly because it is congruent with my classroom practice. I tell students on the first day of class that they've arrived with everything they need to succeed and that we "just have to find it". The ideas of Belenky et al. (1986) encouraged me to reflect on this classroom practice but more importantly for the current study, reflect on a strategy to uncover the key insights of my participants. I eventually chose personal journaling, since this method would allow the study's participants to document their experience in a very concrete way, allow for reflection and ultimately give back to them what was theirs all along – their experience.

The concept of experience, so important to my study and, I would argue, to any study of learning, becomes problematic when considered within the context of postmodernism, because postmodernism would argue that we can never truly analyze one's experience—experience is purely personal and what we are presented with is simply a representation of one's experience. Because reality is considered subjective, what one experiences as reality is also simply a representation. This extreme relativism has led to criticism of contemporary theories and their apparent lack of moral centre and a world view mired in pessimism and meaninglessness. However, the same contemporary theories' emphasis on subjectivity and change, which can be characterized as learning, point to the paramount importance to the ongoing study of learning itself, and of learners' lived experience. Critical theory is predicated on the act of critical reflection and the examination of gender, race and class. Feminist theory emphasizes the personal and the particular. These theories therefore strongly support using phenomenological hermeneutics to explore the lived experience of adult learners which places an emphasis on subjectivity and the very personal nature of learning. Such theories also make one open to the potential presence of the affective dimensions of learning and the connectivity involved in the learning process.



## 2.4. The Practice of Journaling

My study examined the lived experience of adult female learners through the lens of phenomenological hermeneutics, as interpreted by van Manen, and did so by analyzing the personal journals of seven research participants. The choice of personal journals as a data collection instrument was arrived at for several reasons, the most obvious of which is my own professional experience. Because of my educational background in linguistics and textual analysis, and my current immersion in writing as part of my life as a composition instructor, I am drawn to the idea of *writing one's experience*. I have several times during my classroom career encouraged students to engage in the practice of personal journaling, to complement their learning. I have noticed that the students most likely to take up this challenge and stay with the practice of personal journaling over the length of my class, or perhaps even longer, are adult learners. This observation led to an initial consideration of journaling for the current study. Subsequent reading around the literature of personal writing made clear the value of such practice, incidentally causing me to reflect on my own experience of writing. Support for the use of journaling as a data collection method comes then from three main sources: van Manen's (1990) unmistakable enthusiasm for the practice of writing, the established use of journaling across several disciplines including adult education, and my own experience of personal journaling.

van Manen (1990) emphasized the important relationship between writing and experience in that a phenomenological study attempts to transfer lived experience into a textual expression of its essence "that is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something experienced" (p. 36). Phenomenological hermeneutics examines lived experience with the goal of mining these experiences in order to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. Traditionally, the data has taken the form of interviews transcripts, observational or anecdotal diaries, the visual arts or other texts (van Manen, 1990, p. 73). In the human sciences, one commonly finds "diaries, journals or logs that are of educational, research, personal growth, religious or therapeutic value" of interest (van Manen, 1990, p. 73).

The long history of journaling and its increased use in a variety of modern settings speaks to the power of simply sitting down and creating a text that reflects where one exists, at a single moment in time. Journaling is established as a way in to a person's lived experience. van Manen (1990) argued clearly that writing is integral to human science and phenomenology in particular, as writing "separates us from what we know but unites us to it...we come to know what we know in this dialectic process" (p. 127). In relation to learning, journaling is a method to document, reflect and set the stage for further learning. These intellectual, reflective and affective qualities are what make journaling an important addition to an adult learner's experience of education, and not just a means of data collection. In practical terms, there is great potential for journaling to create a less formal and less threatening way for adult learners to approach writing and their own learning. Kerka (1996) argues that many of the important themes of adult learning, including "coming to voice, developing the capacity for critical reflection and making meaning" (p. 2) are possible or enhanced through journaling. I would add that journaling may encourage and support transformative learning and the development of pedagogical competence.

Journaling has a long history, as a documentation format for both public and personal endeavours. The use of journaling for personal reasons, including the documentation of change, is increasingly prevalent in our society, as evidenced by our society's preoccupation with food journals, dream journals, therapeutic journals and online blogging. It is a "multi-faceted, flexible, dynamic process that leads the writer through evolving insights based on conversations with self, others or imagined others" (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 21). It has been described (Schneider, 1994) as akin to natural speech, flowing without self-consciousness, self-criticism or inhibition. It provides a space initially to document events or reactions but allows for subsequent reflection on these, revealing existing habits, beliefs or what Mezirow (1991) would term meaning perspectives. Journals can then be used to document change. They are a safe place to do so, without the restrictions of form, audience, and judgement. It is these qualities that led me to consider having participants write, rather than be subjected to interviews.

Reflective journals are widely used in both the education of and the work environment of many professionals. Schools of nursing, social work and education routinely use journals to guide students through analysis, reflection and critique of

events; Daroszewski, Kinser, and Lloyd (2004) refer to journaling as a valuable tool to develop thought processes, discussion, introspection and reflection. Bush (1999) documents using journals with adult nursing students as a way to connect past thoughts, feelings, and actions and relate them to what was happening now, as opposed to an exclusive focus on the past. Many social workers and therapists use journaling in clinical settings as a supplement to face-to-face interaction to further enable the client's process of self-exploration and change. All of this is evidence of the importance of personal writing.

The themes of reflection and personal transformation that run through the adult education literature reviewed in this chapter provided a further justification for the use of reflective journaling. The emphasis on examining past experience or taken for granted assumptions, found from Dewey's (1938) theories right up into post-modern theory, encourages the critical stance one assumes in journal writing. Writing, van Manen (1990) asserts "is not just the externalizing of internal knowledge, rather it is the very act of making contact with the things of our world" (p. 237). Personal writing in the classroom, according to Gillis (2001) "is a method of promoting exploration and facilitating reflection on learning and new experiences within the context in which it unfolds" (p.49). The activity of personal writing has been characterized as a "paper mirror" (Hubbs & Brand, 2005, p. 60) through which learners "gain an ability to connect their internal process with external realities" (p. 70). Other disciplines make great use of journals or ethnographies. Cultural anthropology is based on such data collection. As qualitative research is gaining acceptance in adult education research, so should the use of journaling in the research process. Practitioner, observer-participant and action research all use journaling. If journaling is accepted as part of these approaches to research as a way to make meaning of the researcher's experience in other disciplines, then journaling can be used to make meaning of one's experience of learning. All of this pointed to the use of personal journals in my study.

Sifting through the literature on journaling led me to reflect on my own experience. Like many others, I did write in a journal as a younger person but often stopped doing so, sometimes for years at a time. Curiously, I would effortlessly keep up a journaling practice when I found myself far from home, either travelling or actually living overseas for long periods of time. This pattern is quite consistent. At home I would

not necessarily bother to keep up with a journal but when away from home, I would do so without any prompting. Undertaking the current study has provided me with the opportunity to consider this pattern and I believe the reflection is quite an important one. During periods of change and intense learning, including coming to grips with living in a new culture, I was compelled to write. I also remember spending a lot of time rereading my writing and reflecting on the ideas and feelings documented there, which led to further writing. It is also worth noting that much of what I wrote was very emotional in nature, fueled by both negative and positive emotions. Also present was a dialogical element, often highlighting a sense of not belonging but then a sense of belonging. All of these observations lead me to believe in the importance of personal writing, but more specifically in the importance of personal writing when experiencing periods of tremendous learning or transition, including when assimilating to a new culture. This has allowed me to consider adult learners (re)engaging with post-secondary from a startling new perspective: these individuals are transitioning into a new culture, something that can be documented in powerful ways through personal journals. This discovery prompted me to move forward with my study.

## **2.5. Synthesis of the Literature**

My study is fueled by curiosity concerning the experience of female adult students in my classroom and my sense that there is something being experienced by them that cannot be immediately seen. My journey through the adult education literature has confirmed the importance of pursuing this curiosity, since the immense complexity of adult learning is obvious in said literature. This journey through the existing research has also confirmed that I have something valuable to contribute to the field. My goals are:

1. to uncover the most meaningful aspects or themes of female adult learners' (re)engagement with post-secondary;
2. to consider if these themes can be translated into support that maximizes their learning experience; and
3. to reflect on my own learning that results from these findings.

These goals mirror the aim of van Manen's (1990) pedagogical competence – a careful consideration of a particular phenomenon so that one can approach that phenomenon

with better understanding (p. 156). My hope is to better connect to students' experience, and in particular, better support transformational learning in my classroom. Because van Manen's ideas are integral to my study, this chapter began with a discussion of them. Readers can consider how his valuing of experience and of the complexity of experience is a thread which also runs through the adult learning literature. It also sets the stage for my belief that pedagogical competence is present in transformative learning.

This review of the existing literature relevant to my study of adult learners was sourced to set the stage for this specific phenomenological study on the lived experience of adult female learners (re)engaging with post-secondary education. As is clear from this review, research on adult learners has resulted in multiple models of learning and theories of knowledge construction which have provided great insight into the complexity of the learning process. As I reflect again on the existing literature, I am still struck by the fact that much of it doesn't capture the vitality and energy that I experience in the classroom. The classroom, to me, is a collective space, inhabited by living human beings with voices that need to be heard. My study allows those voices to be heard.

After careful consideration, I decided that personal journaling is the appropriate way to investigate this phenomenon. As is documented in this chapter, journaling has a lengthy history, in both the public and personal spheres, and is often connected to change or transformation. It is also used as a data collection method and as research itself. For all of these reasons, personal journaling seemed a good fit for a phenomenological study of the lived experience of adult female learners, as they embark on their journey through post-secondary education.

## **Chapter 3.**

# **Method of Enquiry: Phenomenological Hermeneutics and Adult Learning**

The following chapter outlines how I came to be engaged in research on the lived experience of adult female learners in the University Preparation program at Thompson Rivers University, a mid-sized, primarily undergraduate university in Kamloops, British Columbia, why this research is an important and rich area of enquiry, and why I conducted the research as I did. My intention was to conduct a qualitative study, informed by a phenomenological hermeneutical approach, to give an opportunity to these students to articulate what they experienced as learners. This chapter opens with a discussion of the qualitative research paradigm and phenomenological hermeneutics, before focusing on van Manen's interpretation of this philosophical stance. To better illuminate van Manen's approach, I included a discussion of three studies (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; MacFadgen, 2007; Samuels, 2005) that employ phenomenological hermeneutics and therefore resonated with me and encouraged me to continue with the current study.

As the practice of phenomenological hermeneutics, particularly as interpreted by van Manen (1990) puts value on a strong commitment to the phenomenon being studied as well active participation or immersion in said phenomenon, the subsequent sections of this chapter form a substantial personal narrative which contextualizes the research. Additionally it documents my relationship to the phenomenon under investigation, revealing the potential prejudices, knowledge and bias that I carry. It tells the story of how I came to recognize, in my own class, graduates of Thompson Rivers University's COPE (Career Opportunities and Personal Empowerment) program, and how I subsequently chose to enroll in the program myself in winter 2007 in order to conduct pilot testing, which allowed me to refine aspects of my final study, including most critically the research location, which ultimately was not the COPE classroom but TRU's

English 0600 classroom, as well as participant selection, and data collection methods. The chapter continues with the biographies of each of the seven research participants, who were enrolled in TRU's English 0600 at the time of the study. Finally, the chapter closes with a step by step explication of the actual data analysis process, to illustrate for readers how phenomenological hermeneutics has been applied to data in my study.

### **3.1. The Qualitative Research Paradigm**

The intent of my study was to capture adult female learners' experience, as revealed through their own words, through their own writing. I wished to give the opportunity to the participants themselves to highlight their perspectives and beliefs within the contextualizing conditions that influence their experiences. A qualitative study enabled me to conduct an in depth study of a single moment in time, and illuminate the potential for transformative learning within post-secondary settings.

The qualitative research paradigm has developed in the social sciences, humanities and related interdisciplinary disciplines, and is now used often by educational researchers (Gall et al., 2003; O'Toole & Beckett, 2010; Yin, 2011). The paradigm as a whole has been influenced by post-modernist, post-structuralist thought, "rejecting what [researchers] perceive to be the 'business as usual' orientation to scientific endeavor of the entrenched power structure of the professional research establishment" (Gall et al., 2003, p. 476). Historically, the study of (inner) experience, so much the foundation of this particular study, has been ignored by those in the hard sciences. In contrast, the intent of qualitative research is to investigate and document a particular event, group, or experience (in this case participation of adult female learners in TRU's English 0600 classroom) and to gradually make sense of said phenomenon.

My study adhered to the unique characteristics of qualitative research as outlined by Creswell (2003), including a natural setting, descriptive data, a focus on process not product, attention to particulars and inter-subjective truth (p.198). Having carefully considered various types of inquiry, I determined that an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject matter, one exhibiting the above qualities, would extract the most significant data from the study's participants, revealing the essential qualities of the

lived experience of these adult female learners as they engaged with transformational learning.

### **3.2. Phenomenological Hermeneutics**

This study used principles of phenomenological hermeneutics, as informed by the work of van Manen (1990, 1995, 2007). The selection of this approach resulted from the review of variety of readings in qualitative methodologies and subsequently, philosophical phenomenology. My choice was also inspired by studies conducted by Lindseth and Norberg (2004), Samuels (2005), and MacFadgen (2007). The emphasis within the phenomenological literature and these particular studies on the development of a “personal research signature” (van Manen, 1990, p. 8) and the primacy of writing as integral to the examination of lived experience spoke to my own strengths as well as my research questions. I wished to conduct a study that validates learners’ lived experience. The most effective means to do was phenomenological hermeneutics.

Phenomenology, as a movement, has been in existence since at least 1900 (Giorgi, 1985, p. 5), fueled by empiricist and positivist natural science’s inability to capture the meaning of human events. It is a human science, the going “back to the ‘things themselves’” (Husserl, 1972, p. 252) and as such, is described as both a methodology and a philosophical paradigm. It is the examination of lived experience, as documented by participants, through the process of description, reduction, the search for essences and the recognition of significance, meaning and intentionality in such experience. It is a philosophy or theory of the unique. van Manen (1990) describes its aim as the transforming of

lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

Through the thoughtful study of descriptions of lived experience and the mining of these descriptions for meaning one arrives at an evocative interpretation of events and their essence. Gadamer (1975) noted that as a concept, experience has an intense meaning



here because if a participant considers a particular event as experience or an experience, it is already embedded with significance for the participant. It is therefore worthy of study.

Husserl is considered the originator of philosophical phenomenology, based on the importance of “the intentional nature of consciousness, the necessity of self-evidence, the value of inner perceptions, and the dependence of knowledge on self-experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). Key to his approach is *epoche*, a word of Greek origin meaning “to stay away from” or “to abstain.” This, according to Moustakas, is the setting aside of preconceptions, prejudices and biases, placing the world “out of action” (p.85) while keeping it contained. Similarly, Giorgi (1985) wrote of reduction, or ensuring that theoretical prejudices in terms of analytic or explanatory categories do not enter our initial and naive descriptions—we therefore bracket them (p. 43). Human events are described simply as the present themselves. Once those descriptions of how one sees the world are established, the process of searching for meaning begins, reducing participants’ text to essences or, as Valle (1998) stated, more precisely descriptive terms that do not violate their original formulation. The process becomes a dialectical one, moving between contextualized particulars to universal essences with the aim of a deep, rich phenomenological description. It is a process that allowed me to explore the essential qualities of these adult female learners’ re(engagement) with post-secondary education, resulting in a deep integration of their experience.

### **3.2.1. *van Manen and Phenomenological Hermeneutics***

The hermeneutic tradition of phenomenology, in particular as advocated by van Manen (1990, 1995, 2007), was selected as the method for this study, given its emphasis on interpretive analysis of actual life texts, writing as research and the development of a pedagogic competence. One comes to phenomenology as a way of understanding the world, or an aspect of the world, that is meaningful to the researcher. There must exist a strong commitment and sensitivity to the phenomenon and when we “raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon and construct textual interpretations, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogic way” (van Manen, 1990, p. 1). The goal, as discussed in the previous chapter, is pedagogical competence, or the constant and ongoing questioning of our actions and the “listening”

to that dialogue in order to act in a better way in the future, “with more thoughtfulness, respect and tact” (p. 163). In questioning the way we experience the world, one can actually more intentionally connect to it and become more fully part of it.

It is a human science and unlike the natural sciences which value detached observation, quantitative measurements, variables to be controlled out, taxonomies and rigid categories, it encourages the study of beings who have consciousness, act purposefully by creating meaning and the orientation one takes to lived experience (van Manen, 1990, p.4). Individuals with responsibilities for others have much to gain from such analysis, since “in our desire to find out what is effective systematic intervention (from an experimental research point of view), we tend to forget that the change we aim for may have different significance for different persons” (p. 7).

Science is derived from the Greek *scientia* or “to know”. To claim that hermeneutic phenomenology is unscientific or an attempt to do the impossible is to misunderstand the full meaning of science. The same criticism can be leveled against the claim that constructing a phenomenological interpretation of lived experience is in vain, because by phenomenology’s own tenets, it is simply an attempt to document something always more complicated than any description can claim to be. This criticism neglects that the phenomenon can still *be known*, in the scientific sense. There is an inherent tension between phenomenology and the scientific method as it is largely understood (Giorgi, 1985; van Manen, 1990; Yin, 2011). As a qualitative method, phenomenology is scientific as it can be performed by many researchers, the findings are inter-subjectively valid and the method definable. Phenomenology is scientific, according to van Manen (1990), since it is a “systematic, explicit, self-critical and inter-subjective study of its subject matter, our lived experience” (p. 11). It speaks to a broader notion of rationality, one that is predicated on the assumption “that human life may be made intelligible, accessible to human *logos* or reason...and with the power of thinking, insight, and dialogue...we can make things understandable to each other (p. 16). It is an inter-subjective human science, and one test of its rigour is the “phenomenological nod” or the acceptance by another of one’s interpretation of an experience as a plausible and possible reading of that phenomenon. It is to know, perhaps fleetingly, what it is to experience being human.

van Manen's (1990) emphasis on writing as constitutive of the practice of phenomenology appealed to me, as a writing instructor and someone who believes in the importance of text creation, in all senses. For him, "human science research is a form of writing [and] creating the phenomenological text is the object of the process" (p. 111) as one attempts to transfer lived experience into a textual expression of its essence "that is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own experience" (p. 36). Writing forces one into reflection, even more so than face-to-face dialoguing, which can still maintain more immediate, primal involvement. This forced reflection is due to the inherent abstraction of language; it brings experience into symbolic form and adds conversational component with the writer of this symbolic form that speech does not possess. Through writing thoughts and experience are arranged on paper and what is purely internal becomes externalized and available for analysis. A reflective cognitive stance that "generally characterizes the theoretic attitude of the social sciences" (van Manen, 1990, p. 125) can now be assumed. Paradoxically, this abstraction constitutive of writing, which takes us from concrete experience and the concrete world which actually created language, allows for "depthful" (van Manen, 1990, p.154) writing and a subjective understanding of a phenomenon that engages us. It "decontextualizes thought from practice and yet it returns to thought through praxis" (p. 128) by which he means intentional practice or thoughtful, respectful, and tactful action. Ideally, this dialectical action is ongoing.

This hope for future reflective practice, integral to this approach to human science research, appealed to me greatly and became part of my personal signature on the research design. I may have initially considered journaling as a strategy because as a writing teacher, I am comfortable with and constantly immersed in the analysis of text. However, after exploring phenomenology, particularly as it is interpreted by van Manen (1990), I became aware of how writing was of primary importance to the various steps of this methodology, including writing on the part of the research participants and the researcher. van Manen wrote of how phenomenological studies and their methods often can have a "transformative effect on the researcher...[as the research] is often itself a form of deep learning, leading to a transformation of consciousness, heightened perceptiveness, increased thoughtfulness and tact" (p. 163).

### 3.3. Three Studies of Interest

In addition to readings in philosophical phenomenology, several studies employing phenomenology as a main methodology influenced the design of my study. Lindseth and Norberg (2004) employed a phenomenological hermeneutical method, based on Ricoeur's interpretation theory, to analyze interview texts conducted with health care professionals on the topic of ethically difficult workplace situations. The researchers maintain that humans live and act out of their morals but often don't talk about or reflect on them. The challenge of the study then was to investigate the lived experience of these nurses and doctors to isolate the understandable meaning or essences of these experience which are "something with which humans are familiar with in the practices of life...expressed though the way of living, through actions, through narratives and through reflection" (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 147). Interpreting the texts involved moving through Ricoeur's hermeneutical circle: (a) reading the text several times in order to grasp its meaning as a whole without judgments, or in other words, reading naively or as a first conjecture; (b) dividing the text into meaning units and even sub-units, which can be of any length, that convey a singular meaning, reflecting on these and comparing them with the naïve reading; and (c) creating and summarizing the main themes, themes and sub-themes and reflecting them upon the original research question and larger context of the study and related literature and formulating results in accessible, concrete language, as close to lived experience as possible (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, pp. 149-150). Lindseth and Norberg's study makes clear why the study of lived experience and the essential meanings constitutive of such experience are important. To understand and if necessary improve our own practice we must reflect on the meaning that we take part in as contributors to the discourse communities in which we exist.

Samuels' 2005 study of the social and academic experiences of adult students at a small American undergraduate university also informed my study. Samuels' methodology is very similar to that of Lindseth and Norberg (2004). Much like Ricoeur's circle of hermeneutic inquiry, her "data analysis spiral" (Samuels, 2005, p. 50) involves reading text to become immersed in the data, moving in a circular rather than in a linear fashion that involves "constantly reading, re-reading, coding, combining meanings and

finally describing the phenomenological account based upon the participant's experience" (p. 51). Noted here are five elements of a good purposeful qualitative study, including a phenomenological one: a specific theoretical foundation; a methodology that outlines a specific plan of action; clearly identified data collection techniques; reflection on the part of the researcher on their own experience and voice as part of the study; and interpretation of results that provide new insight into a phenomenon or professional practice (p. 51). Open ended interviews were used and purposeful sampling resulted in 15 students being chosen to achieve a diverse sample on social, racial and gender lines (p. 47). The study's findings suggested that adult learners come to post-secondary with strong personal motivation and clear goals and that family support was important. While good advising and accessible programming were considered key, social integration was not necessarily valued by adult learners as the classroom itself was the focal point. Samuels suggested strongly that more qualitative research be undertaken with adult learners and her study clearly shows the value of conducting phenomenological studies to that end.

The third study of interest, conducted by MacFadgen (2007), focused on the connections between adult students' quality of life and their persistence in first year Arts or Science programs at a small Canadian university college. MacFadgen used mixed methods, including a phenomenological-hermeneutical interpretation of data collected from in depth interviews with 12 participants, whose ages ranged from 25 to 72 (p. 70). Data were also collected from faculty focus groups that reviewed the qualitative data and provided additional identification of teaching and learning strategies employed to support adult students' commitment and persistence (p. 75). The study takes further van Manen's (1990) idea that phenomenological themes are like "knots in the webs of our experience, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (p. 70). MacFadgen (2007) thinks of phenomenological themes as "the interlocking pieces of the puzzle that provide important connections among adults' various life experience, and that facilitate a deeper understanding of the multi-dimensional, multi-textured and layered nature of mature students' lives" (p. 72). The study found that the most influential contributors to educational commitment and success were goal orientation, perceived relevance of studies, student faculty relationships and finances (MacFadgen, 2007). It was this research, which used

phenomenological methods to explore the lived experience of adult learners in a Canadian institution much like my own, that convinced me to move forward with my own study.

### **3.4. A Personal Narrative**

#### **3.4.1. *My Discovery of the Research Population***

One of my first teaching assignments upon arriving at TRU was a first year composition course designed for students enrolled in the Human Service Worker (HUMS) Program. The course enables students to work in the social services field as well as gain credit towards TRU's Bachelor of Social Work (BSW). It was clear when I walked into the classroom on the first day that this was going to be both a challenging and immensely rewarding experience. I did not yet know that it would lead me to doctoral research.

The majority of the students were adult learners, defined by Canadian post-secondary institutions as any student over 24 (Bean & Metzner, 1985; MacFadgen, 2007; Myers & de Broucker, 2006). The majority of the students in this particular classroom were between the ages of 30 and 55, and carrying the adult responsibilities of caring for children and/or aging parents and often, working a part-time or even full-time job outside the home. Traditionally, university students have been between the ages of 18 and 25 and as a result, the culture of Canadian university campuses has reflected this demographic. As a result of a variety of social and economic factors, including declining birth rates and declining public funding, however, post-secondary institutions have now turned to adult learners as potential students, proof that the experience of such learners is an increasingly viable and important area of inquiry.

Nationally, the number of adult learners enrolled in both credit and non-credit post-secondary programs in Canada is over 400,000 (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2008). At Thompson Rivers University, adult learners make up 26% of the total student body, most enrolled in professional programs, including 1-year certificates and 2-year diplomas and this percentage increases every year (TRU, 2010). The COPE (Career Opportunities and Personal Empowerment) program, the location of this study's

pilot project, is an example of a certificate program that, by definition, is for adult learners considering a transition into post-secondary. English 0600, the location of the study itself, is the equivalent of English 12 but designed for students who are (re)entering the postsecondary system. The fact that adult learners are targeted in post-secondary recruitment practices, that programs such as COPE and University Preparation's English 0600 exist and that traditional academic classrooms now reflect a greater demographic diversity, is proof that the experiences of adult learners deserve inquiry. This was certainly what was impressed upon me entering the HUMS classroom, even on that first day of class.

It was very clear from my first semester of working with adult learners that they possessed some very consistent qualities that set them apart from the 18-year-old students with whom they shared the classroom. What I observed is expressed in much of the adult education literature. These students bring much experience to the classroom and, unlike the younger students in the room, are actively interested in reflecting on the experience of being there. When I have encouraged my students to embrace the practice of personal journaling to complement their learning, it has been adult learners who have done so. I would argue that the omnipresence or the reach of an adult learner's prior knowledge colors all aspects of the student's classroom experience. It appears to fuel the students' enthusiasm for integrative learning and further experience.

On initial observation, I felt this prior knowledge or lived experience coupled with the need to actively understand the learning process that is constitutive of an adult learner sets them apart from more traditional learners. It manifests itself most prominently through high anxiety, a need to vocalize and share fears about learning (particularly writing), and more overt intrinsic motivation. This observation is supported by the adult education literature and may be evidence of what said literature, particularly that of Jarvis (1995) and Mezirow (1990, 1991) characterizes as a disorienting dilemma or disjuncture and part of the process of transformational learning. Students strive to connect what they know through past experience with what is happening in the classroom, and perhaps these two realities do not, at least initially, match.

Anxiety around writing is high among many student demographics but in my experience is highest among adult learners. And as more and more adult learners fill

post-secondary classrooms, the challenge is to “address the sensitive issues of writing anxiety in adult learners who are confident and successful in the workplace [and in other aspects of their lives], but uneasy and often underprepared as writers in the classroom” (Miritello, 1996, p. 2). This statement resonated with my experience, as adult learners, many of whom have been out of a formal education setting for many years but have been in the workplace, become frustrated by having to learn to write in academic or creative modes. This is in spite of the fact that most feel very strongly that they have much to say and share. They are passionate about their opinions. The potential for frustration is compounded for students who have been absent from schooling or the workplace in a significant way, for a significant time. This is the profile of many of the female adult learners in my HUMS classroom, the COPE program and the English 0600 course. Such students have lived lives filled with experiences apart from post-secondary and are eager to tell their stories, which often reveal precisely how they came to be post-secondary students. This valuing of writing is echoed in van Manen’s (1990) approach to phenomenology and led, in part, to my deciding to conduct phenomenological hermeneutical research. His assertion that writing externalizes the purely internal, making it available for analysis, and that it “decontextualizes thought from practice and yet it returns to thought through practice” (p. 128) provides the philosophical core of the current study.

It is important to note that students frequently perceive (often incorrectly) a deficiency in their writing skills. This has certainly been my own observation in the classroom. Consequently, turning these narratives into text is sometimes a challenge, requiring skilled encouragement and the right learning activity, both provided by the classroom facilitator. I believe this anxiety around writing links to adult learners’ strong commitment to learning and achievement, as they as individuals might define it. It is proof of commitment and investment in their own learning process and yet another reason to both investigate this dynamic demographic and use writing to do so.

The anxiety often felt by adult learners as they (re)integrate into post-secondary culture can be linked to self-esteem, perspective change and transformation, important themes in the adult learner literature. The relationship between the act of writing and revealing one’s self to a larger audience is something that I monitor with fascination in my classes. In my experience, adult learners initially tend to hesitate more than the



more traditional student. When written work is shared and/or critiqued textually or orally, the adult learners express more trepidation. The fear of making public errors is strong, in spite of the fact that students are usually quite excited about what they have authored. Sharing is important to these students, as it is part of the process of connecting with others.

It is true in any classroom that some students are more skilled than others but it was apparent to me soon after I started teaching composition classes that some of the adult learners had something that other students, particularly more traditional students, did not. The qualities exhibited by these adult learners are difficult to categorize, and still after many years of working with this demographic, I am not certain of a pure definition of what I observe in these students. However, my desire to isolate and further examine these qualities has led to this research project. The adult learners I am speaking of showed a great deal of ability to reflect on the course content, as well as on their own learning process in relation to that course content. They see learning as integrated into their lives. These students, like so many other students, did express anxiety about coursework and sometimes tremendous concern about grades. But at the same time, they showed great initiative in asking for clarity about what was being required of them vis-à-vis classroom assignments; they attacked each task with great enthusiasm. This vitality and enthusiasm that I see in my students confirmed for me the importance of the current study, which aims to understand these elements of the adult learning experience.

My observations also suggested that adult learners were clearly open to learning as a process and a process that could be reflected on, both on an individual and group level. These students often had meaningful insight into ways course materials could be modified to allow students to overcome perceived obstacles. I witnessed, semester after semester, students who exhibited these qualities become leaders in the classroom. What struck me most about these students was their appreciation of various learning styles and ways of knowing. I admired their resilience when the learning activities did not seem to match what they had already experienced or were comfortable with. They were able to provide examples of past experiences, both from the classroom and from other environments, which related to the course assignments. In line with theories of situational learning, they also actively suggested ways they could incorporate classroom activities and skills into their future, suggesting to me that they value integrative learning.

Additionally, they feel that returning to school was in part a way of working on themselves as a whole person. These students were interested in the affective dimension of learning. They wanted to talk about the personal, intrapersonal and interpersonal growth that results from learning. One student even told me that this course was just another step in her discovery of who she truly was. This is echoed in Toynton's (2005) theory that adult learners experience returning to formal education as an element of life, rather than a discrete and bounded stage within education and life as traditional students do. More mature individuals already have a personal landscape "within which [education] must find a place" (p. 107). Toynton's students, similar to mine, understood learning as a continual process to be tried out, to be experienced and in my opinion, constitutive of transformation.

I found the attitudes of these adult learners to be fascinating, because they differed so much from my own experience, at least on the surface. In both undergrad and grad I constantly felt I was being forced to jump through academic hoops, only to make it to the next course and repeat the exercise. I was, even as an undergrad student, aware that I was growing as a person, transforming my intrapersonal and interpersonal skills as a result of becoming part of a new culture, in this case the culture of post-secondary. My adult learners emphasized the development of these personal skills over some of the more traditional quantifiable academic skills that still carry so much weight in the post-secondary setting, and because this seemingly new redefining of priorities resonated with me, I tried to discover the link between these students, who stood out, semester after semester. The link was that these students had enrolled in Thompson Rivers University's COPE program when first considering a return to post-secondary education and then enrolled in the same institution's English 0600 to transition into academic courses. Both the broad scope of the COPE program and well as its specific focus on personal awareness and personal growth made it an ideal environment for a pilot project examining the experience of adult female learners. The English 0600 classroom, with its singular emphasis on writing, made it an ideal environment for the study itself.

### **3.4.2. *Participant Observer Experience Winter 2007***

Observation, it has been claimed, is “the fundamental base of all research methods in the social and behavioral sciences” (Alder & Alder, 1994, p. 389). This may only be partly true, in that a wealth of data can also be obtained through researcher participation. To be congruent with a research project that focuses entirely on the role of experience in learning, a researcher can choose to be immersed in the very experience being examined. More commonly, this is referred to as “participant observation, grounded in the establishment of considerable rapport between the researcher and the host community and requiring the long term immersion of the researcher in the everyday of that community” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 732). This connection to the phenomenon under study is key to van Manen’s tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics, in that there must exist a strong commitment and sensitivity so that when we “raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon and construct textual interpretations, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogical way” (van Manen, 1990, p.7).

Consequently, to get the best understanding of the experience of adult learners in the COPE program, I decided to enroll in the winter 2007 class and use the opportunity to observe and more importantly experience the program. This was in some sense an apprenticeship, as I was in the classroom with an experienced facilitator who had developed the COPE curriculum largely by herself. Beyond the opportunity to observe the facilitator, since I was interested in the experience of female adult learners in the COPE program I felt that the best way to acquire a meaningful understanding of this was to actively participate in the class for a full semester. I strongly felt it was necessary to sit side by side with adult female learners, and experience with them the impact of the course and the impact we, as participants in the course, had on each other.

There are claims that a researcher can never fully participate in a “natural setting”, since the very presence of an outsider alters the environment. This phenomenon, well documented in linguistic studies as the “observer’s paradox”, threatens to alter (linguistic) data being presented to a researcher simply as a result of their stated role. I believe this phenomenon was present in my pilot study and this

influenced my subsequent decision to not use the COPE classroom as my research location. In spite of the “observer’s paradox”, I will refer to my time in the COPE classroom as “naturalistic observation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 729). This naturalistic observation, which allowed for a pilot testing of my research project, then becomes part of the narrative of this study.

Although participant observation, as a research strategy, belongs more to the ethnographic tradition, it is important to detail my time in the COPE program in this dissertation. This is because it was a truly transformative experience. For one semester I completely abandoned my work-life and enrolled as a full student in the program. It was a very challenging experience. I attended every day, embraced the morning yoga and meditation, did the classwork, participated in the role-plays, shared my fears and wrote in the journals. I was sitting side by side with women who had very complicated pasts. Stories of living through active addiction, domestic violence and poverty were common. While participating in this program, I begin to realize that we are all more complicated than we seem on the surface and all interaction is complex. A single event, a single decision, is connected to our present, but also to our past experience and even our future plans. Soon after the program came to an end, I realized I saw life differently. I felt that we cannot possibly observe all the complexities a single phenomenon entails, but that if we “sit” with that phenomenon (or text, person or piece of art) and really listen, then some of those complexities will reveal themselves.

I still feel the impact of sitting in the COPE classroom every day. I still feel connected to these women, even though I no longer see them on a regular basis. My COPE experience led to this research project and without it, the project would not be what it is. But more importantly, the experience led me to more deeply value connections with others and I learned empathy through believing in others’ experiences. I realized that learning can be experienced through sharing and connection. I had not heard the term “pedagogical competence” at the time, but I now believe that my COPE experience was the start of my journey toward this practice. I feel closer to the experience of being human as a result. Because the experience of the COPE program was transformational for me, I include it here.

I attended the COPE program in the winter 2007 semester. This is a 13-week program:

designed for women wishing to establish career goals and to gain a better understanding and awareness of who they are. Extensive inventories of personal abilities, academic ability and aptitudes are experienced. These are weighed against potential and future academic/career exploration and training...through a series of holistic modules using self-reflective, cooperative learning models...focusing specifically on effective communication, expressing emotions, inter and intra personal relationship, resolving conflict, effective time management, building self-esteem and confidence, developing critical thinking skills [and] student success skills and parenting skills. (TRU, 2000, p. 215)

According to the 2000 Institutional Review of the COPE program, students enrolled in the program conform to a consistent demographic pattern: ages ranging from 19 to 60, the average being 33 to 35; educational backgrounds ranging from Grade 9 to university graduate; marital status varying with the majority of students single, 60% divorced with children; and employment history ranging from labour to professional, with 60% having worked outside the home (TRU, 2000).

Added to the COPE curriculum was a “wandering journal”, inspired by Alexander’s 2001 study. Alexander examined a community of grassroots literacy workers through the analysis of the genre of “Wandering Books,” “11” x 14” blue, accounting ledger books” (Alexander, 2001, p. 18) in which community members were ask to “tell something about [themselves] and about [their] experience as a woman in literacy” (p. 18) before sending them on to the next name on the mailing list, who would then do the same. As a participant writer in the Wandering Books project, Alexander states she was “profoundly moved by the stories, shared experiences and transformational potential of the genres that were developed to facilitate communication and network across an extremely heterogeneous group of feminist grassroots educators” (p. 19). I was inspired by Alexander’s work and the type of writing, sharing and support that could be fostered within a community by such a project and proposed a similar type of journaling while a student of the COPE classroom. This pilot testing is defined by Gliner and Morgan (2000) as an informal trying out of procedures and instruments with a small group, even possibly acquaintances, with their full understanding that it is, in fact,

a situation allowing for “the refinement of one or more aspects of a final study” (Yin, 2011, p. 37).

The limitations of the wandering journal project with this particular participant group emerged quickly, categorized into concerns with both the research instrument and location. The attrition rate in this course is high and students did suddenly quit the course and often took the journals with them. Although this could just become part of the “narrative” of the journals, it did suggest that data collection using this model would be difficult. In spite of the potential for the journals to suddenly wander off, participants were very enthusiastic about journaling, and about the way in which personal writing being passed daily from community member to community member could document emerging themes, both individually and collectively. This reinforced for me Alexander’s (2001) finding that journaling can be a very moving and powerful experience. This feedback led me to retain journaling for data collection but to refine its use.

The research location was also altered as a result of this pilot testing. Although the COPE program is a rich location to experience tremendous learning and an equally rich site for the examination of that learning process, the broad focus of the curriculum and its heavy focus on the affective elements of our experience did not allow much space for writing that would be done in addition to the existing curriculum. The curriculum is extremely demanding as it is, and although participation in the proposed project would have of course been voluntary, it is of extreme importance to take into consideration the burden that participation might place on even the most eager of volunteers. I consider this to be unethical. This realization led me to reconsider the research site for this project. What was required was access to a class that was being taken by my target demographic that had more of a focus on writing, so that my proposed research instrument, weekly journaling, was not a substantial burden to participants. As a result of enrolling in the COPE program, I was able to see that many of its graduates then moved on to upgrade their English skills in TRU’s University Preparation Department and incidentally were excited to do so. My study then found a home in TRU’s English 0600 classrooms.

## **3.5. The Current Study**

### **3.5.1. Location**

This study was conducted at Thompson Rivers University, a midsized, Canadian, primarily undergraduate university of 13,000 students. The university offers 1-year certificates, 2-year diplomas and bachelor degrees, as well as courses that prepare students for these post-secondary programs. Research participants were recruited in the spring of 2011 from English 0600, which is a provincially articulated course of Grade 12 equivalency which prepares student for the academic writing demands of post-secondary. This course is housed in the University Preparation Department, in the Faculty of Human, Social and Educational Development. The evolution of this course mirrors the evolution of adult education programs provincially, therefore an examination of the lived experience of students enrolled in the TRU's English 0600 allows for a better understanding of what is occurring in the education of the adults on a larger scale.

The history of Adult Basic Education in BC and its growth at the institution now called Thompson Rivers University is significant in that the evolution of programming speaks to an ongoing effort, both provincially and institutionally, to improve access for adult learners. ABE programming begins in Canada in 1960, when the federal government expanded existing vocational programming and in 1963, when BC established regional colleges, in part to house this programming (MAVED, 2010). The increase in student numbers and increased diversification within this student group revealed the need for the upgrading of basic academic skills. As a result, in 1973 the federal government launched programming to provide Grades 1-12 to adults, in addition to increasing job skills training; at this time the academic components were housed both in the school system and post-secondary (MAVED, 2010). TRU's involvement with Adult Basic Education starts here. In 1973 the college offered a 3-level upgrading program in English, Math, Science, and Social Studies, with the goal of preparing students for both the work place and post-secondary. At this time, the course (Developmental Composition 020) that was the pre-cursor to the current English 0600 was actually part of the different department and was offered at a different, smaller, marginalized campus.

ABE's provincial profile continued to grow during the 1970s and 1980s as part of the Ministry of Education (MAVED, 2010). At a local level, Cariboo College (pre-cursor to TRU) created an Adult Basic Education department and moved the above mentioned Developmental Composition 020 into this newly formed department and renamed the course English 050. In 1986, responsibility for the education of all adults, except those in secondary school, the GED program and some adult ESL programs was transferred to the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, further solidifying ABE's connection to the post-secondary system (MAVED, 2010).

At a local level, the existing ABE department was repatriated to the Cariboo College's main campus. The course that is the focus of this study emerged at this time. Faculty felt that the 13-week Developmental Composition 050 was inadequate training for those students heading for post-secondary study. As a result English 0500 and English 0600, housed in the newly created University Preparation Department, were created, the later course adding a focus on literature and research. The English 0600 curriculum has remained relatively unchanged to the present day: the course covers academic writing, literature, and research skills.

Reflecting on the history of adult education in BC, and specifically at TRU, reinforces for me the importance of the current study. Adult education has experienced a great deal of upheaval over the years as institutions grapple with delivery models and best practice. Within the post-secondary system, adult education programs are currently offered through a variety of formats: face-to-face semesterized classes, self-paced individualized instruction, distance education and community outreach classes (MAVED, 2010). The current status of adult education in BC reflects "efforts by practitioners and the provincial government to develop two [secondary and post-secondary] integrated systems that provide support and basic learning opportunities for adults" (MAVED, 2010, p. 8). The University Preparation Department at TRU is "committed to coordinated, flexible and responsive approaches to preparing students and supporting them in the successful and satisfying completion of their post-secondary study and their transition to the workplace" (TRU, 2011b, p. 168). An integral part of this mandate is English 0600, the recruitment location for this study's participants. The discovery of this research site allowed for the current study, which aims to contribute to the search for best practice in adult learning, to proceed.



### **3.5.2. Participant Selection**

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to identify participants who were 21 or older, female and enrolled in English 0600 at Thompson Rivers University in the winter and spring of 2011. Prior to the start of the new semester, I personally visited English 0500 classes, to provide information on the study to all prospective participants (i.e., students moving from English 0500 to English 0600). At this point, all students in 0500 were provided with a recruitment letter (see Appendix A) which fully explained the study and both the researcher's and participants' roles and rights, as required by ethics committees at both the researcher's university and the university where the study was conducted. Seven students expressed interest in participation and in the winter and spring of 2011 I held individual meetings with each of them, and the scope of the project was discussed more carefully. Although the sampling was purposeful, I did not place any stipulations on the ages of the participants I was looking for, beyond being older than 21 years. This limitation was chosen because TRU defines an adult learner as a student over the age of 21 years (Thompson Rivers University, 2000), however the youngest participant in my study was 27 years. The range of ages fell naturally into three cohorts: two young participants (27 to 30); three middle participants (31 to 45) and two older age participants (46 to 57). Letters of consent and research participant feedback forms were signed (see Appendix B), as required by the above mentioned ethics committees prior to each participant's first session. Participants were asked to create a pseudonym for their work to protect their identity. All agreed to be contacted after data collection had been completed, to validate content, to member-check, and to share insight into emerging findings. They were also invited to examine the final results.

### **3.5.3. Participants**

Cham is a 27-year-old self-described "West Coast girl" who grew up with her mom and step father on Vancouver Island. Since high school graduation she has worked a series of jobs in the service industry and seasonally in the commercial fishing industry. She moved to Kamloops for work, and maintains a full-time job while attending Thompson Rivers University. During the time of this study she was actively involved in court proceedings concerning the custody of a much younger step-sibling. She intends to get her Bachelor of Social Work and her goal is to work with children and youth.

Ashton is a 30-year-old single mother of two small boys, ages 3 and 5. She spent most of her life in Kamloops and as part of the foster care system, which she feels created many challenges for her growing up. Since high school graduation she has had several different jobs including cashier, housekeeper, and gas station attendant. Finances have always been a struggle. A lack of family support made this more complicated. Following her divorce one year prior to this study, she decided to return to school and pursue a Bachelor of Social Work. She lives with multiple cognitive disabilities and works with a tutor. Her primary goal in going back to school is to provide stability for her two sons.

Judy is a 57-year-old from British Columbia and mother of two grown children. She describes herself as living with multiple disabilities. Following high school she attended Grant McEwan College in Edmonton for a short time but did not continue as the balance of academics and home life became difficult. She describes retirement as “not such a vibrant place” and feels that having been a caregiver for much of her life prevented her from finding the focus and drive she needed to find more genuinely satisfying work and that she is now taking back the right to those opportunities.

Lynne is a 45-year-old originally from Courtney. She grew up in a military home and was herself an Army Cadet for 6 years. After high school graduation, she married an American military man and moved around the US with him for 18 years, stopping in Colorado, Washington, Georgia, Louisiana, Kentucky, Tennessee and Oregon. Lynne started computer and hair dressing training without finishing either and worked various service and security oriented jobs. She returned to Canada in 2005 and was divorced in 2007. She began studying at Thompson Rivers University in the COPE program in fall 2010 and at the time of the study was enrolled in English 0600 and newly accepted to the Human Service Worker program. She also currently is the full-time caretaker of an 11-room rooming house.

Naomi is a 36-year-old Japanese immigrant. She is married to a Canadian and they have decided to live in Canada. However, she first experienced Canada as a 23-year-old exchange student in Okanagan University College’s Tourism program. She claims she had no interest in tourism but was motivated to study in Kelowna to be close to nature. She has lived in various cities and worked many different jobs in both Canada

and the US. She noticed that during this time she was not very comfortable with herself as her world-view was changing. She decided to get a Canadian high school diploma through online education and is now enrolled in the Bachelor of Science program at TRU. She is in no hurry to graduate as she is interested in “the process of learning rather than the possession of knowledge.”

Heather is a 46-year-old from the Lower Mainland. She attended Trinity Western at 20 but decided that she did not want to complete her degree there. Subsequent academic stops included a year at UBC, which was halted by health issues, and then a 6-month program at a Vancouver fashion and interior design school, which resulted in work and a move to San Francisco. She ultimately decided to return to Vancouver and UBC, completing a Psychology degree in 1999. She describes herself as not coming from a family of academics and is therefore proud to be the first of her siblings to go to university. Heather’s life, by her own description, has “never been any straight forward, laid out plan” and she is not now in Kamloops by choice. At the time of the study she was applying for admission into the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies but also thinks that the journalism program or even another Bachelor of Arts (BA) would be of interest.

Shannon was born in Kamloops where she lived until the age of 8, when her father’s work as a crane operator took the family to various places in BC. At 17 she gave birth to a daughter who was given up for adoption. Shannon claims she “went a little wild” in her 20s, working various jobs in the bar industry, getting married and quickly divorced and then moving back to Kamloops. She took some secretarial training and continued to work bar jobs as well as for her dad. Now at 40, she is working at a laundromat and taking English 0600 as a first step to attending Thompson Rivers University full-time.

Participants were each asked to meet at my office once a week for an hour during the winter and spring semesters, for the purpose of journaling. Each session usually began with some small talk around how school was going that week and this sometimes resulted in some key words or phrases being posted as prompts on the wall above my computer. Often though, the prompt above the computer was simply the phrase “What are you experiencing in English class this week?” This general question was purposely selected to prevent directing the students to focus on any single aspect of

the class. I didn't want students to feel as though I was more or less interested in a specific component of the experience. I also didn't want to prevent the students from discussing how their life outside the classroom was integrated into their experience. There was no input from me beyond that as I left the office. Students were free to write freely for an hour. I left because I was conscious of the possibility of the phenomenon of observer's paradox, or my presence influencing the performance of the participant. I wished for participants to encounter the writing in the most uncompromised way possible and so removed myself, at least physically, from their experience.

### **3.6. Data Analysis: An Explication**

This chapter outlined how I came to be engaged in research, using a phenomenological hermeneutical approach, on the lived experience of adult female learners returning with post-secondary education at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, British Columbia. The chapter began with an exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of my method of inquiry, namely discussions of phenomenology, van Manen's (1990) phenomenological hermeneutics, and three studies which employ these philosophical stances. Following this was a personal narrative of how I came to my research location, data collection method and research participants.

To further illuminate my method of inquiry, I have included here a snapshot of the data analysis process to convey what moving through a phenomenological hermeneutical analysis feels like. The experience confirms the assertions of Giorgi (1985), Valle (1998) and van Manen (1990, 1995, 2007), among others, that this method of inquiry is a dialectical one, moving continuously between the particular and the general, to keep an experience vivid, while allowing it to reveal its meaning. Please see Appendix C (Sample of Data Analysis) for the original documents involved in this analysis of Ashton's first journal entry. Included are the original journal entry, first structural analysis, first coding, second structural analysis, second coding, a frequency count and Ashton's own coding of her journal. Also included is a diagram of the process and an accompanying commentary. My aim in including them is to give others a glimpse into what the process of phenomenological reduction looks like.

The participants' journals were divided into meaning units, in this case, paragraphs, and read and re-read several times to receive a naive understanding of the experiences documented. I use the verb *receive* here specifically because during analysis it felt very much like the text would, if one was patient and consistent, reveal its essential meanings or make them visible, allowing the reader to receive them. It is important to employ van Manen's approach to bracketing and consider what personal bias and assumptions one brings to the reading, beginning a dialectic between the reader and the text. So begins the process characterized by Lindseth and Norberg (2004) as sitting with a text and being "open enough to allow the text to speak to us" (p.149). MacFadgen (2007) interpreted this as pulling together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle of meanings. The following passage from Ashton's journal was selected to illustrate the process:

my experience of English in high school was mostly social, meeting up with friends and students outside of class, having fun and not learning much. My experience of English 0500 was very positive and I had a lot more focused [sic] going in to the class. My teacher was fabulous; I almost think of her as a mentor. She taught me self-confidence and made me believe in myself. After the 0500 class I was more prepared for coming into English 0600. One the first day of English 0600 I was very nervous, scared and a little bit intimidated, as well as excited. I was also assuming that the class would be very similar to the last class that I had. When I sat down in the classroom I looked around at all of the students, I noticed that a lot of the students seemed really smart, as they talking [sic] about their grades from the last semester.

A naïve reading of the text involves moving from being a natural reader to a phenomenological one, forming a first conjecture or estimation of meaning. The fact that a participant has chosen to write about an experience proves that said experience has significance for them. The naïve reading began to tease out that significance. Writing, so critical to van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenology, comes into play here because it "creates signifying relations" (p. 132) and because "response-reflective writing is the very activity of doing phenomenology" (p. 132). A formulation of a naïve understanding is realized in the form of a paraphrase or structural description of the original text:

an educational experience is a dynamic and social one, involving connections with others, including friends, teachers and classmates. Positive educational experience involves the building of confidence and new skills, both of which can be tested in a new educational environment.

This naïve reading then guided the coding. The approach taken here is identified by van Manen (1990) as the *detailed or line by line approach*, where every meaning unit (sentence) was examined to determine what the unit reveals about the phenomenon and is coded using everyday language, taking the specific experience to general themes. These codes or “condensations” (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) are presented here in bold type.

1. My experience with English in high school was mostly social, meeting up with friends and students outside of class, having fun and not learning much.  
**(being social, connecting to friends, belonging)**
2. My experience with English 0500 was very positive and I had a lot more focused going into the class.  
**(experiencing success and positivity)**
3. My teacher was fabulous, I almost think of her more as a mentor.  
**(connecting with teacher)**
4. She taught me self-confidence, and made me believe in myself.  
**(connecting with teacher, learning skills, experiencing confidence)**
5. After the 0500 class I was more prepared for coming to English 0600.  
**(developing coping strategies, planning or continuity, experiencing confidence)**
6. On the first day of English 0600 I was very nervous, scared and a little bit intimidated as well as excited.  
**(experiencing fear, intimidation, anxiety)**
7. I was also assuming that the class would be very similar to the last class that I had, positive  
**(experiencing expectations, making assumptions based on previous experience, hoping for continuity)**
8. When I sat down in the classroom I looked around at all of the students, I noticed that a lot of the students seemed really smart, as they talking about their grades from last semester.

**(belonging, experiencing classroom culture, comparing to others, connection with classmates)**

It is at this point in the analysis where one must attempt to view the meaning units as objectively as possible and sort them into similar themes. The themes emerging here are 1) connection to others, whether that is friends, teachers or classmates; 2) the presence of very emotional states including success, confidence, fear and anxiety; and 3) an emphasis on continuity. These themes were then compared with the structural analysis of the naïve reading, in an effort to validate or invalidate that initial reading. I noted that the concept of “learning new skills” was present in the paraphrase and codes but not in the themes and this forced a re-evaluation of both the original formulation and coding. This resulted in the revelation that learning, defined generally, could be found in phrases such as “not learning much”, “taught me self-confidence”, “I was prepared” and “I noticed that the other students.....” A fourth option, learning, was then added to the list of themes.

Subsequent to the process detailed above, I did another round of coding, without reference to the original findings. The research participants also engaged in parallel examinations of their own journals, adding their codes to the data. This was to ensure the rigor, accountability, and purposefulness that is the hallmark of qualitative human science, while maintaining phenomenology’s faithfulness to the initial experience, the total phenomenon, and an ongoing understanding of subject-participant-research relationship. The independent contribution of this particular passage’s author resulted in a strong affirmation of the theme of connection with the teacher and the primacy of emotions.

As a result of this entire process, the themes were then summarized and compared to the initial intent of this research project which was to discover what adult female learners reveal as the most meaningful aspect of their learning experience and secondarily what an educational practitioner can learn from the lived experience of these students at her own institution and a stable interpretation (post member and cross-checking additions in bold) of the text was created:

a **positive** educational experience is a dynamic, **emotional** and social one, involving connections with others, including friends, teachers and classmates. **It also inherently involves a dynamic relationship**

**with one's self.** Such an experience involves the building of confidence and **acquisition** of new skills, both of which can be tested in a new educational environment. **Reflection on learning itself is part of the learning process.**

This interpretation was then compared to the original text, the emerging interpretation of this entire journal, the themes emerging from the other six journals within the study and finally the relevant literature to arrive at an emergent but stable perspective on the essential meanings of the participants' experience and an enhanced understanding of it. The final results of the analysis process were examined by the research participants. As will become clear in the subsequent chapter, the themes of motion (continuity), emotion and connection found in this explication resonated with both the larger findings of the study and the adult learner literature.



## **Chapter 4.**

### **Results: Motion, Emotion and Connection in Adult Female Learners**

The goal of this study was to increase our understanding and appreciation of the lived experience of adult female learners during their journey through post-secondary education. The research, guided by phenomenological hermeneutics, particularly as interpreted by van Manen (1990) and the concept of pedagogical competence, was conducted with seven adult female learners between the ages of 27 and 57, all enrolled in English 0600 at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, British Columbia. Purposeful sampling and data collection occurred in both the winter and spring semesters of 2011. I did a complete data analysis (structural analysis, line by line coding, thematic variation) in August 2011. I did a second complete analysis of the data in April 2012. My preliminary findings were presented to the research participants in the April of 2012. A stable analysis of the data was achieved in May 2012 and again research participants were invited to examine the findings and provide feedback.

#### **4.1. Emergent Themes**

Phenomenological hermeneutical based approaches were applied to the journals created by these participants, both in the form of structural analysis and meaning unit coding. These two methods of analysis were then cross checked. The reduction of these initial findings resulted in the emergence of ten themes which were then refined into the three main themes of motion, emotion and connection. The theme of motion was made up of four components: the sensation of moving too quickly, moving too slowly, moving between opposing poles and moving toward the future. The theme of emotion was formed by two subthemes: negative and positive emotions. The theme of connection consisted of labelling, connection with others, connection with the teacher

and connection with one's self. These three main themes and ten sub-themes are independent of each other but also intricately connected, evidence that the lived experience of these participants is immensely complex.

As reflection is the duty of the phenomenologist, I must mention here the visceral quality of doing phenomenological analysis. There were times during this study, when I was spending hours upon hours sitting with the data, hoping that the essential themes would become clear to me. The process was intense and emotional. However, when those themes did emerge, it was almost as though the text itself was being elevated from the page. The text seemed to adopt a physicality, becoming bolder, louder, standing more robustly above the paper on which it was printed. I believe these qualities reflect the lived experience of the research participants themselves – their educational journey makes them bolder, louder and more robust. To ensure that the voices of these participants were firmly connected to these themes, I chose to begin each section in this chapter with a quote from their journals. The inclusion of these quotes is intended to add an evocative quality to the emergent themes. When viewed together these three main themes of motion, emotion and connection suggested that the central experience of adult female learners is that of developing pedagogical competence, or an increasing and active willingness to reflect on experience and live with more “pedagogical tact” (van Manen, 1990, p. 154). It is about developing strength.

It was important to me that the voices of the women who wrote these journals are heard. Giving a voice to adult female learners was the inspiration for this study, so to honor them, I have bracketed theory in this chapter and do not link these passages to the conceptual framework of Chapter Two (Literature Review). Integration of theory is found in Chapter Five (Discussion and Conclusions). The current chapter illustrates a metaphor I have used throughout this research project. In this chapter, the women are exercising their right to *take up space*.

#### **4.1.1. Motion**

Everything seems to run smooth. (Ashton)

A sense of motion or movement of some kind was present in the lived experience of these students. It may seem obvious that a sense of moving forward and possibly in a

linear fashion toward an end point or goal is part of learning but an analysis of the data revealed that the sense of motion experienced as constitutive of their learning was far more complicated than that. The fact that learners experienced motion as going too fast, not fast enough or not at all suggested that there is an essential quality of movement in their learning and upsetting what feels like the right “speed” was distressing. The sensation of motion experienced by participants was not unidirectional, but did eventually suggest an orientation towards the future and often towards more learning, and consequently, more motion.

### **Motion as Too Fast**

...take deep, big breaths and think to myself it's okay. Stay calm.  
(Ashton)

Stress and anxiety were experienced by students when things seemed to be moving too fast. Ashton is a single mother balancing multiple cognitive disabilities, sick children and an ongoing court battle with her children's father; she has enrolled in English 0600 as a first step toward her Human Service Worker Diploma and Bachelor of Social Work. She reported feeling mixed emotions at a variety of points over the semester, but most clearly when she felt there was too much to do in too short a time. This passage came near the end of the course. Things were moving too fast.

This week I am having a lot of mixed feelings. I feel like someday [sic] are going very well and other days seem more difficult to get through. I feel that with it being so close to the end of the course, there is a lot more pressure and very little time to do anything. I have three essays, a research project, plus homework, worksheet assignments etc. to do by the middle of April. It is becoming very stressful. On some of the other days I feel good like my teacher is on the same page and the class is communicating well. Everything seems to run smooth. The most difficult part of the course for me was the midterm. I felt that will all the pressure and stress of it, made me do more poorly then [sic] I am capable of doing in a more comfortable setting. I also thought that with a lot of the worksheets that we were supposed to study off of weren't corrected with the right answers so I couldn't use most the material that I had for studying. I also felt that there was quite a large amount of writing and very little time to complete all of the answers that she wanted in paragraph

form. The way that I have dealt with these difficulties is trying to stay calm, positive and focused. I would take deep, big breaths and think to myself it's okay. Stay calm. I would also keep telling myself that I am going to do well and just go through [sic] it the best I can. I even tried picturing the times in the class that we went over some of the questions, hoping that I would remember some of the answers. I tried not to let anyone distract me or let my thoughts run away on me.

Motion was realized in this passage in a variety of ways. There was the oscillation between positive and negative feelings or "mixed feelings" and also between days when everything went well and days where the participant felt like there are obstructions. There were also days experienced as "smooth" when everyone, including teacher and classmates, were moving together. However the most prominent sensation of hurtling to the end of the course with too many assignments and not enough time was clearly distressing. Having too much to complete on a midterm in too little time mirrored this. The sensation of moving too fast and perhaps an accompanying loss of control were counteracted with a slowing down action, through deep breaths, calm self-talk and the quieting of racing thoughts.

Echoes of Ashton's experience were found in Heather's time in the classroom. Heather, a 47-year-old returning to post-secondary with the aim of second bachelor degree, was in a slightly different situation than Ashton, in that she has substantial post-secondary experience behind her, having earned a BA in Psychology in her 20s. Yet despite a different background and different goals, she experienced a similar sensation of being rushed or of things moving too fast at several points of the semester.

Part of me is very much looking forward to being thrown back into a fourth year course so that I can receive feedback and be assessed from a level of higher expectations. But then again, I do find writing at this level a challenge already. The fact that there are three assignments due for this Thursday is the stressful part. I know from experience that I do not like to be rushed. This is a good reminder for the fall and I will always have to work at pacing myself adequately for that. The essays themselves are going fine. No doubt this is mostly because of the opportunity to choose the topic on all three. Doing both a movie review and a book review on something is far

easier and pleasurable than having something chosen for me. So all in all I supposed the previous experience and being an adult in the class is helpful but I am still just as unsettled about the pressure to have things completed as when I was younger. Just from today's help I realized how very important it will be to be clear about what is expected from each and every individual instructor. No doubt I'll learn more about specific requirements as I go along.

The sensation of motion was expressed in a number of ways here. Being “thrown back” into fourth year vividly expressed motion, and not in a negative way. However, as also seen in Ashton's passage, the pressure of having to finish many assignments in a short space of time created anxiety. The fact that Heather was aware of not liking to be rushed indicates that this sense of motion has been felt before, suggesting it's a reoccurring element of learning. The need to pace one-self was a counteraction to the motion, and was a need to assert control over movement that was too fast and therefore out of control. Failure to do so led Heather to feel “unsettled.”

### **Motion as Stagnation**

Doing the same thing, going nowhere. (Shannon)

In contrast to experiencing motion that is too fast or out of control, was the experience of no motion or being stagnated. This sensation appeared in a variety of contexts in the participants' journals, always paired with negativity. This suggested that being stuck is in opposition to the essential element of motion. Cham is a 27-year-old working full-time and was taking English 0600 as her first step toward a Bachelor of Social Work. Lack of motion or the sense of being “stuck” was experienced several times over the semester.

I still seem to find that a lot of stuff that we talk about in class I already knows [sic] how to do. When I look at my homework list for the night or week I feel like I already know what I am doing and want to almost not do it because it is repetitious for me. I do the work anyways but it is hard because most days when I get out of class I have to race to work and work until 9:30 so I am stuck bringing my homework to work and going [sic] while on shift. Now my bosses haven't noticed that I am doing this yet but if they do I will then be stuck having to say [sic] up until 2 or 3 in the morning trying to get

my homework done that I already know now [sic]to do. I am not really learning much in class. I am learning new words and ways to make my sentences have more style to them I guess. But I have already learned how to do that last semester. It feels like I am doing the same class over again but with a different teacher. That is not my preference.

This experience suggested that already knowing the content (of a learning experience) and the lack of challenge that comes with no new content led to frustration; there was no forward motion. This lack of motion was potentially difficult to counteract; it may even have been self-sustaining, as it encouraged lethargy or stasis. This suggested that challenge, testing in the sense of testing new boundaries or skills, or newness was an essential component of the participant's learning and when the accompanying sense of motion was missing, Cham experienced its absence. As will be seen later, the presence of newness or the unknown does caused anxiety *initially* but was countered with action. A lack of newness appeared to result to a lack of action and frustration and negativity.

This sensation of being stuck also appeared in a particular context, like test taking. Lynne was a 45-year-old returning to school after false starts in both computer and hair dressing trade schools. She was enrolled in English 0600 in hopes of working toward a Social Work degree. She lives with physical and cognitive complications from a car accident and was on crutches the entire length of the English 0600 course due to a recent fall.

All this while still coming to class on crutches. I have taken everything as it comes and done the best I can though burnout is on the horizon. I was writing my midterm today and I could not get started. In fact I sat there trying not to cry. I was stressed already this morning about the studying I did, whether it was enough. I get worried when people begin leaving that I might not be going fast enough or that I am doing it the wrong way. It just builds and builds. I can get really distracted by people flipping pages and shuffling around and I lose focus easily.

What was expressed here was the intense frustration felt when one is overwhelmed by not being able to start or feel any motion. The profound sensation brought Lynne almost to tears as the sense of being immobile "builds and builds." This sense of not being able

to move, being helpless, excluded or being left behind linked with the theme of connection (and therefore disconnection) to others, discussed later in this chapter.

The adult education literature suggests that adult learners see learning and education not as a discrete unit separate from their life, but as an integrative part of it. If experiencing distress as a lack of motion is part of learning, then it should be felt when life and learning intersect. At 40, Shannon was tired of working service jobs and was looking for a change, and she chose to take English 0600 to start this change. However, the journey has been a difficult one and the sense of being stuck repeated in her journals.

Last week was a mixture of emotions. I have been feeling that maybe I am not meant to be here anymore. It seems like the odds are stacked against me. Maybe I'm just feeling sorry for myself. I am at another crossroads in my life again. I had full heartedly thought that my next path would be to attend school full-time come fall. I have been faced with the truth that it will not be happening. I really do not know what's next for me. I was planning on continuing with English 1100. I know that it will be good for me and my partner and I have the money for me to be able to do this. So that is one good thing. I am also thinking that this is a smooth way of transition for me as well. I keep wondering why this is so important to me. To be attending school. I realize that I absolutely need this education to further myself. I felt so stuck before coming here. Doing the same thing, going nowhere.

The sense that something needs to change implied that Shannon felt something about her day was not working or was not connecting with her. Experiencing the repetition of “doing the same thing, going nowhere” had no forward motion. It felt like nothing is happening. The frustration of sensing what was needed to break this cycle but being not quite able to grasp it was vivid. Equally vivid was the how the lack of motion was felt as a negative state, in this case as isolation and exclusion, implying that motion was the essential quality of learning but also linked with the essential quality of connectedness, and perhaps in part, created it.

## **Motion as an Oscillation between Two Points**

After I left class I wasn't feeling as confident as I did when I walked in. (Ashton)

As the passages in the previous section illustrated, motion was an essential quality of the lived experience of these participants and was felt as the sensation of too much movement, too little or none at all. Inherent to the sensation of motion described above was the sense of going forward (or not going forward) toward some end point or at least away from where one started. What also emerged from the data was that participants experienced an oscillation between poles or a dialectic, as they moved through their return to education. This movement was realized in many different ways, including moving between negative emotions and positive ones, between a passive to active stance in the classroom and between a sense of competence to a lack of control. This sensation of swinging between two poles was felt deeply by Ashton on the first day of a new class.

After the 0500 class I was more prepared for coming into English 0600. One the first day of English 0600, I was very nervous, scared and a little bit intimidated, as well as excited. I was also assuming that the class would be very similar to the last class that I had. When I sat down in the classroom I looked around at all of the students, I noticed that a lot of the students seemed really smart, as they talking [sic] about their grades from the last semester, A's and B's. I received an A in my last English class, so I was feeling confident. The teacher walked in, she seemed very nice. I was a little nervous because I had a letter for her to sign from student services regarding my disabilities. I didn't want anyone to see the letter, because it is a little embarrassing for me. Also I may look young but I am not as young as some of the other students in the class so that was a bit uncomfortable for me as well. When listening to [the teacher] I started feeling like this isn't like the other class that I just had. It seemed a lot more intense and I started to realize that is was nothing like my last class. [The teacher] seemed to be very structured and didn't take any excuses from anyone which made me wonder how she was going to treat me with my disabilities. We went over some paper and information about this year [sic]semester. I was still a little nervous but I felt like I could handle it. I sat there wondering how [the teacher] was going to be, was she to [sic] tough,



was she fair, how dose [sic] she grade assignments? The other students were very outspoken and seemed very confident as well, which did intimate [sic] me too. I didn't give [the teacher] my letter that day; I made an appointment with her after class. [She] seemed to be quite happy which made me feel more comfortable. She seemed quite open with allowing the students to make appointments with her which made me feel happy that I was going to be able to find out more about her and she was able to find out more about me. After I left class I wasn't feeling as confident as I did when I walked in. I was actually more worried.

This passage showed the rapid swinging between negative emotions such as anxiety, fear and intimidation to excitement and back again, all within a short space of time. There was also the movement between assumptions and expectations based on past experience and the sudden current reality. Ashton walked into class as an individual but then quickly compared herself to others but was returned to the experience of being an individual, as the reminder of her disabilities led to embarrassment and isolation. She left the room less confident and "actually more worried" than when she arrived.

The intense emotional experience detailed above was echoed in Cham's first day experience. She moved from the uncertainty and hesitation of walking into the classroom for the first time to relative comfort, including connection with the teacher, and back again. Additionally, a pattern repeated in Cham's experience was first seen here: she moved from being a student to being a commentator. The adult literature speaks of how adult learners experience learning on a meta level, wanting to understand why learning is approached in a particular way. Here we see a student experiencing a swing to that pole.

Going back to school for me was one of the hardest decisions in my life for me to make. Making that first step in the classroom is almost mind blowing; you see all these new faces and not sure what to interpret of all of it. By having a teacher with a smile on there [sic] face and a cheerful hello makes that initial entrance a little easier. I like that there is no assigned seating in the classes anymore. When I started class today the first thing I noticed was the teacher didn't speak very loudly. I am very much a visual and vocal learner and to be stuck sitting in the back of a classroom with a teacher that has a

quiet voice makes it harder for me to learn. The ice breaker assignment that my teacher used for first day is something that people have been using for time and time again. It is effective but it would be nice to try something new. A lot of people are shy about telling people new things about themselves when they have only heard there [sic] name and seen them for 5 minutes. I think that maybe switching it up and using a different tactic could work.

Cham changed her stance as an individual walking into a room to a critic, moving from a single participant in an unsuccessful activity to someone engineering a new activity, ideally for the group. This swing from a passive stance to an active one, and from individual to group member was evidence of the adult learner moving from participating in someone else's pedagogy to constructing one's own and contributes significantly to the sensation of motion.

The movement between two poles was also felt as Lynne swings between experiencing competence and the accompanying sense of calm, closely followed by a sense of incompetence, uncertainty and isolation, and in some cases, back again. This oscillation, repeated throughout Lynne's journals, from positive to negative and back to positive thoughts will be discussed later in the chapter as constitutive of the experience building of strength.

I CAN write! I am on a bit of a high because of received an excellent mark on my last essay. I was feeling overwhelmed at the beginning of the week. I was preparing for the worst. That would be giving up on the HUMS program. I was going to wait until today to see my marks on the midterm and my third essay before I made a decision. Now that I passed with a C plus on the midterm and, I am going to keep the dream alive. I was starting to wonder if I could still learn. I feel encouraged again; I am worried about the marks for my entire body of work for the class since my instructor's course value breakdown is essay 50%, activities and quizzes 20% and midterm 30%. I have missed a few in class activities and quizzes that are not allowed to be made up. In general I have done [sic] fairly well on the ones I have been able to.

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I have some problems getting my memory to respond when trying to recall information for example. I am improving all the time though. I will have a better understanding of the expectations on the midterms now as well. I froze on the first one. It was the first test I had taken in year so I have to give myself a break. I did expect a better mark but I passed so that is good for now. There is an area that worried me...our research project. I feel like a fish out of water. I chose dolphins, which I adore. Every section is due at different times. The last one I just turned in was to pick a topic and go to the library, the internet and wherever else you can find documented facts. I only used the internet and quoted the facts and the sites I visited. I believe I may be on the right track however I am concerned that I try to hard and miss the main point. I am a work in progress!

The oscillation between “I can’t” and “I can” was a result of external and internal forces (i.e., a new project, a test, a research essay) but was experienced as a highly personal and internal discussion that started from one’s reaction to an unknown or new task, and accompanying the sensation of incompetence or even fear and moved eventually to a sense of competence, action and positivity. Despite experiencing this positivity and carrying it into the next task, the cycle appeared to repeat. This constant back and forth motion was consistent across Lynne’s experience and the force of the motion toward the positive pole appeared to increase in impact each time. This oscillation appeared to build strength.

### **Motion as an Orientation to the Future**

Now I am on that road.

(Lynne)

In addition to the sensation of moving away from a starting point and oscillating between two points was the sense of moving into or orienting oneself toward the future. This sensation was most evidently experienced near the end of the course. The focus of the participants was not the ending of a course but movement into the future and more learning. At the end of the English 0600 Ashton wrote:

The way I feel now compared to the way I felt at the beginning of the semester is completely the opposite feelings. I feel so much better about myself. I am happy and very excited that I again accomplished another on [sic] of my goals. I feel like now that I have

complete [sic] university prep I have opened another chapter in my life. I look forward to starting a new year in September. I have gone through so many changes in the last year that I feel like it's all just going to get better from here.

This sense of moving into a new future not only contained the sensation of motion but also a sense of expansion, strength and the gaining of traction. The way Ashton related to herself was expanded and she feels more confident. She also experienced her future as expanded as she was oriented to newness, more learning and further positivity. She was becoming part of something bigger than herself.

Naomi's experiences were similar even though on the surface, her situation seemed slightly different from the other participants. She was a 38-year-old immigrant from Japan and English was her second language. She was enrolled in English 0600 to self-assess her level of English as she prepared to start a Bachelor of Science degree. The movement toward an expanded future evident in Ashton's experience was found here too. As she moved to the future, Naomi felt increased confidence and a new determination that was found across all of the participants' journals.

This course was helpful to me because I'd never really learned to compose an essay before. Mostly in the past I was self-taught. I though [sic] the textbook we used was easy to understand since its instructions was clear. We were given a lot of opportunities to write. I think this was important. The grammar skills came along as we wrote more because its usefulness became clearer. But the high school quality of the course may be a setback. For someone like me, an adult going back to school because she feels the need of education and needs help badly because she speaks English as a second language, this course was a great help. I didn't know where my English level was at, so I didn't know where to start. By realizing that I have the capacity to learn boosted my confidence to continue my education. I'm like the turtle, I may be slow but as long as I keep going I'll get to my destination.

Naomi had experienced both the lack of motion and the oscillation between two poles discussed previously but most evident here was the orientation to the future and

something bigger than herself. The determination was experienced as slow and steady forward motion and part of an increasing capacity for more learning.

Lynne's experience of moving toward a new and expanded future was vividly revealed in the following passage. A sense of accomplishment was indistinguishable from the determination and desire for more and although anxiety and worry was felt, excitement was present as she oriented herself to her future.

I am now accepted to the Human Service Program so the work will really begin. I am nervous but excited. I know that my goal is solid; it is the journey to get there that is unknown. I will probably discover that I have found my niche. I want to understand people and help them succeed as I am now. I want to assist people in meaningful ways and feel good about how I do it. I need to be educated more to be confident in the way I help people. I feel like I am moving forward. Now I am on that road.

Movement into the future was present but also evident as part of that was Lynne's sense of belonging in that future; she felt she will find her place there. This confidence that she belongs included connection to others since her future includes wanting to "assist people in meaningful ways and feel good about how I do it." This expanded sense of self that includes growing connection with others and a future beyond just Lynne herself was part of the building of capacity that was constitutive of the lived experience of these adult female learners.

This essential quality of motion was one of the strongest themes emerging from the data and upon thorough analysis it was revealed to be far more complicated than simply moving from point A to point B. The absence of any motion was distressing and too much motion was met with the desire to slow it down. But when participants were connected to the motion then the sensation was positive and took on the quality of building strength and capacity and also orienting people in a new direction. It was the discovery of the sense of motion in the data that first prompted me to consider that the text was taking on a physicality, representing the experience of the participants as they became bolder, louder and more robust. The text suggests great strength.

The discovery of this theme of motion was a turning point in my research. I can only describe its discovery as being “hit” with the sensation of motion myself. I had been sitting with and reading the seven journals for quite a few days, with very little success. Possible themes were simply not revealing themselves to me. In retrospect, I believe I trying too hard to find the themes, rather than waiting for them to “lift off the page”, as it were. To offset this lack of progress, I chose to start again, with just four of the journals and read them, as if for the first time. I lined them up on my desk and quietly and carefully read a large section of each. When I got to the fourth journal, something amazing happened. When reading that fourth journal, I realized I was suddenly not feeling something that I had been feeling, while reading the other three. A sense of motion, almost like a hum, was not present during the naïve reading of the fourth journal. It was almost as though a switch had turned off, but it was only when the switch was flipped that I recognized the motion or the “hum” that was present in the other journals. The sense of motion was defined by its sudden absence.

The experience was visceral and I will not forget it. I believe this was a powerful close encounter with the phenomenon of pre-reflection. I was experiencing the motion present both in the text, and in the lived experience of these students. However, this brief glimpse of pre-reflection was instantly transformed into post-reflection with the thought that this couldn't be real, followed closely by the thought that no one will believe me. I still find it fascinating that I could have this moment of pre-reflection, recognize it as such, but then experience doubt. This self-doubt was immediately replaced with a turning to “others” and the thought that others would never believe this story. It's almost as though the experience of pre-reflection was too powerful to be believed. Whether I am believed or not, my own experience of sensing the motion constitutive of the lived experience of these participants was a compelling one, and leads me to believe that motion, in all of its forms, was one of the strongest essential qualities of that experience.

#### **4.1.2. Emotions**

I am struggling....

(Ashton)

The lived experience of female adult learners is an intensely emotional one. It is true that many of these students return to school because of enormous shifts in their personal lives, whether that is divorce, a sudden need to change employment or

something equally significant. Consequently the experience is already framed as an emotional one. When the stresses of being a student are added, emotions, both negative and positive, escalate. What emerges from the data is that negative emotions are far more present than positive ones and the negative ones take a variety of forms: frustration, exhaustion, discontent and self-doubt. I found this discovery quite upsetting and it certainly caused me to reflect on my classroom practice and what role a teacher plays in causing and alleviating these negative emotions. I was also intrigued to discover that a single positive emotional event can offset the impact of several negative ones.

### **Negative Emotions**

In fact I sat there trying not to cry.

(Lynne)

I doubt most teachers would want to create situations that result in negative emotions for students or even wish to be part of an experience that involves intense negative emotions. However, the analysis of this data suggests that the lived experience of female adult learners does involve strong negative emotional states, which I have divided into frustration, exhaustion, discontent and self-doubt. As was discussed in the previous section, motion is an essential quality of this learning experience, and the lack of motion creates great frustration. The excerpts from Lynne and Cham's journals prove that frustration is felt both as part of a specific event like test taking or in a more general sense. Another source of frustration is maintaining a balance between the demands of both home and school. All students have complicated lives and adult learners are no exception. They carry with them the caring for family members, both young and old, full-time jobs and other weighty adult responsibilities. As will be shown, when striving to fulfill all of these responsibilities, they often feel very alone.

### **Frustration**

Ashton is full-time mother for her two young boys and juggles this with her studies and the frustration of making all of this happen appears often over the course of the semester. A sense of frustration, even exhaustion, built as she struggled under the weight of multiple roles.

I am struggling this month with trying to accomplish all the work from school and all my personal stuff from home. My son is sick again

and I was in the hospital until 3 a.m.. The next day going into class was a struggle. I was so tired I could barley [sic] keep my eyes open. I had to apologize to the teacher when I was leaving the class; she just chuckled at me telling me that she never even noticed. Sometimes I think I get too far ahead of myself and should just keep quiet. I still have to find a place to move at the end of the month, thankfully I have set up two appointments to view on my day off of school. I really hope I am able to find one of the suites livable for me and my boys. Finding a place to live would take a huge weight off of me and then I would be able to focus my energy on something else.

The sensation of having one's energy and strength slowly drained from them is apparent here, as the building frustration takes on an almost physical quality. Simultaneous to this is the belief that feeling this way is one must apologize for and justify to others, because it is not expected nor the norm. This adds to the negative emotional impact. The experience is exhausting on every level. This sense of culminating pressure from a number of aspects of one's life and growing frustration is also evident in Lynne's experience. The crush of multiple obstacles in her home life is felt in this passage:

I have been on crutches and still coming to school in the snow and ice, mostly by bus...alone. I was actually getting ready for school when I injured my knee. I am older than most in my class so I am not really connecting in ways that solidly connect me to anyone. I go home and deal with tenants that, for the most part are independent adults but they are not skillful in the public relations of the house. A big distraction when they come to me all the time. If I am trying to write or edit, it takes a while to refocus on my work. I have a roommate this is hardly ever home but when he is he is a very big distraction, on the computer, the phone and talking. My landlady is usually living in Kamloops and right now she is with her husband in Victoria for this semester while he guest lectures at UVIC. This means I have been left to be the bad guy in regards to evicting a tenant that did not pay and find a new tenant. All this while still coming to class on crutches. I have taken everything as it comes and done the best I can though burnout is on the horizon. I was writing my midterm today and I could not get started. In fact I sat there trying not to cry.

The rising frustration experienced by having to balance the stress of home and school and work was vivid, as were increasing feelings of isolation and even resentment. As will



be discussed later in this chapter, the experience of isolation, or at the very least not connecting to others in the classroom, was a powerful theme in the lived experience of these participants. The links between the experience of juggling multiple roles in and out of the classroom, the intense frustration it caused and the potential for feeling alone and isolated were significant. The overwhelming quality of this experience reached a breaking point when Lynne felt like she will cry. And the fact that she feels that she can't emphasized her sense of solitude.

### **Exhaustion**

The frustration and exhaustion experienced by students balancing school with complicated home lives inevitably takes a toll of their physical health, especially when the intensity of either component of their life increases. Here, Lynne detailed a crisis point in the semester when she was wrestling with difficulties at home and a large research project. The negative emotions she expressed in regards to the library were something that appeared in the journals of other participants. Walking into the library or even just thinking about having to do so caused fear, frustration and profound feelings of inadequacy, compounded by the sense that everyone else could tell that this is what is going on, and consequently, that one was different or alone. This was just a single aspect of mounting frustration resulting from the balance with what one has to do and one feels they can do.

*I feel like people can tell I don't know what I am doing. Citation is something I feel very much anxiety about. I am very anxious about the library. When it comes to balancing my student life with the realities outside of the classroom I see that I am struggling with priorities. I do tend to leave things too long at school and at home and that increases the stress I am experiencing. I feel this is matter of time management and experience that will change as I become more skilled at scheduling my life better to meet the needs that I have. I have to find balance. I have times where I feel so overwhelmed and lose some confidence in my abilities that my health actually reflects it. I have increased pain in my body, I do not sleep appropriately and I get super headaches. I push through the best I can and try to learn different ways to handle things.*

In this passage, as well as the others, there was, in spite of immense frustration, a belief that obstacles could be overcome. Ashton sensed that finding a place to rent would lift weight off her shoulders and Lynne that she was, despite exhaustion, doing the best she could. This connected to the findings in the previous section that students experienced a swing between negative and positive emotions. Although the students were experiencing intense negativity in these passages, the movement toward positivity was starting.

### **Discontent**

Another source of frustration for these participants was discontent or even conflict in the classroom. Just as the data suggested that there was an optimum sense of motion constitutive of the learning experience and that going “too fast” or “too slow” was upsetting, it also suggested that a certain sense of calm and order was desired as well and when those were disturbed, frustration was the result. A central focus in the maintenance of this calm was the teacher. Students looked to the teacher to establish and maintain classroom dynamics and negative emotions surfaced when this didn’t happen. A rising frustration and even anger was evident in the following passage from Cham.

*Class is going pretty well except for the fact that there is one chick that goes on and on about her family, her mother and her life. Yeah sure, if it relates to the topic that’s fine but when every word that comes out of her mouth is about how society is harming her mother, it gets to the point where someone in the class will almost have to yell over her for the teacher to move on. My teacher doesn’t seem to have much of a backbone for assertion with her students. We are in Week 4 I think now and I honestly have only learned maybe a week’s worth of stuff. I pay money to go to school and this girl is wasting my hard earned money. It is not all her fault though. If my teacher would take initiative and tell her this class isn’t all about her. From there move on to teaching her students I would be okay. Three hours of class is a long time to sit in a room and learn barely anything.*

While there was anger with the student who was monopolizing the class' time, Cham's main frustration was aimed at the teacher, suggesting that students orient themselves towards the teacher, and consider that individual as central to classroom dynamics. Cham felt little connection to her classmate, seeing her as someone who needed to be made to comply with Cham's sense of a functioning classroom discourse, but not by Cham herself. Both this frustration with classroom dynamics and the sense that the teacher was inextricably linked to the establishment of classroom dynamics was seen in Naomi's experience.

I think most adult students have already been exposed to the reality of life to some extent that they are willing to work hard for whatever they are aiming for but only they are not sure how to start something that they left off long ago. However English 0600 gathers a wide range of students that some students may not have the same kind of attitude toward learning as returning adults. So the teacher giving these students more confidence may not help them at all. More ethical guidance from teachers may be more help to adjust to their advanced studies I think.

Naomi focussed here on a theme that reappeared several times in her experience: that the English 0600 class seemed to be designed just to boost students' confidence and this distressed Naomi, although she never articulated exactly what it was she wanted in place of that. Like Cham, she was experiencing frustration with classroom dynamics and while her emotions were not the same as Cham's, she also turned to the teacher as the one responsible for setting the tone. What emerged here links to a theme to be discussed later in this chapter, that being the significance of adult learners' connection to others, both classmates and teacher. Heather experienced similar frustration with classroom dynamics and the same reaction: frustration when the classroom wasn't comfortable led to a focus on the teacher's role in this.

Suffice it to say that day one went just fine. The biggest curiosity for me is the professor. Who am I to judge the accuracy of those around me but I think many others were a tad bit taken aback by [the teacher]. It didn't take me long to like her but that is merely a day one first impression. Day two was entirely different for me. Being put into groups by the teacher is for me a somewhat loathsome

experience. I am not an extrovert by nature and I have significant hearing loss—I wear hearing aids. Naturally depending on who is in the group and who I have to converse with makes a big difference. One can only hope one will jive with those in one's group. Well I can't make a single word out of [fellow student]. As for the others they're all pleasant but considering I am a true introvert, why is it that I always come across as an extrovert? Maybe I have more initiative or confidence or leadership than I realize. Maybe I should acknowledge that younger people are less assertive but I know this is not true. Ultimately I didn't enjoy day two at all. It felt stressful and I was glad to be out of there early. I might add, the fact that I know every so little about refugees, the professor's topic of choice, certainly didn't help my confidence level.

Heather's positive first day experience was replaced with a second day defined by the desire to recoil away from group activities and even escape, an emotional shift that was further evidence for the previous section's exploration of the oscillation between positive and negative emotions that appeared to be part of the lived experience of these participants. She felt discomfort when the group dynamic didn't feel right to her which was probably not expected. Most individuals would feel the same when faced with the same experience, even in a non-classroom environment. What was significant was that when both Heather and the other participants experienced frustration, they quickly turned to the teacher as a key component of this emotional event, often to the exclusion of any concern for classmates' roles. The fact that discontent or conflict in the classroom created frustration for students and that they oriented to the teacher as both responsible for creating and restoring an equilibrium spoke to a theme to be discussed later in the chapter - the connection between adult female learners and their teachers.

### **Self-Doubt**

Another strong negative emotion that made up the lived experience of these adult learners is self-doubt. Although this emotion appeared across the students' journals, it showed up most intensely at the beginning of their journey and this suggested the emotional complexity of moving into a new world, both social and academic. This doubt often stemmed from a single concern: will I belong? Lynne's struggle with self-doubt illustrated this as, even before the English 0600 class had

started, she questioned whether she will connect with other students or fit into social groups she assumes have already formed without her.

I remember the night before I started the winter semester that I was thinking that I would probably not fit in, that the other students would all be younger and that they would have groups of friends already set up from high school. I believed that I was going to not really fit in but I decided that might be to my credit since I needed to focus on the course not socializing anyway. I was nervous that maybe I had been away from so long that I would not get it. Why am I doing this? Is it worth it? Was the instructor's teaching style going to match my learning style? I was wondering if I should give this education dream a rest and just accept my place in this work where I am.

Not only did Lynne fear she would not connect with classmates, she also was concerned about connecting with the teacher, suggesting that relationships with teachers were a central focus for these students. Open communication with the teacher was an integral part of a positive learning environment for these adult learners, as Lynne was indicating. The emphasis on the student/teacher dynamic suggested strongly that teachers are "gatekeepers" to entry into a new culture, academic culture. Lynne sensed this moving into a new world, doubted if she belongs and wondered if she should just "accept my place." This questioning whether one belongs in this new culture was represented in the following passage, where Lynne experienced self-doubt not in relation to classmates, but in her ability to cope with academics.

I have had a few essays that I am not happy with my marks at all and I must receive a C plus or better to be accepted in the Human Service program here at TRU. I wonder if I can maintain a full course load including English. I know that if I focus on English in the hope to get the writing correct I will be better able to do other course writing. Yet I wonder if I can do it at the pace of the university semesters with all the courses at the same time. I want to be good if not great at writing and I am concerned that I will not be. So far I have not done well on writing and I worry that I am not doing it write [sic] or I cannot unlearn bad habits like not organizing or planning my assignments properly. I am in the habit of doing things either in bit and pieces or at the last minute having not known where to start. I

am weak on the rules and formulas of essays that are correctly done. I feel like I should just stop and people would say "oh that is understandable look how old she is poor lady".

Doubting whether or not one belongs truly cuts to one's emotional core. It brings into play both identity and ego, or in other words, who one really experiences themselves to be. Lynne questioned her ability to unlearn bad habits, her age, her capacity for academic work and her place in this world. Self-doubt is a heavy negative emotional state that calls into question one's very self.

Naomi experienced much the same at the beginning of her journey back into post-secondary culture and when one carefully considers both Lynne's and Naomi's experience, a pattern emerges. The fear of being labelled played a significant role in whether one experiences belonging or not, which in turn contributed greatly to self-doubt.

I feel embarrassed about my writing skill. I can't write one sentence without worrying about the grammar and nuance of the sentence and the spelling of each words [sic]. But typing makes my life much easier. I've been avoiding English courses because I didn't want my confidence to be crushed so that I may not want to continue my education. I do realize the importance of English for any subject that we learn because writing an essay is a learning process since we try to organize our thoughts in a more coherent way it give us a clear point about the subject that we are trying to understand. But of course I find writing essays very challenging, I don't know, it feels like double learning process to me. When I enrolled in English 0600 because English is my second language I wasn't sure whether my English level met the level of this course. I worried that I may not keep up. I wasn't nervous only about writing but also reading and speaking. Yeah, I think I stressed out about everything.

Naomi doubted her academic abilities, both in terms of writing and reading skills but also just the ability to keep pace with others. Her self-doubt was so strong and her sense of belonging so tenuous that she felt a single course might destroy her confidence so completely that she would not continue her education. This fragility was compounded by Naomi's fear of being labelled as a second language learner, a theme that existed

across her experience. Being labelled, and therefore considered different or not connected to the norm, clearly felt negative.

One significant element of the self-doubt experienced by the participants was that it is not absolute or static. Both Lynne and Naomi appeared to be engaged in a debate with themselves, as they shifted from self-doubt to a reminder, even just a quick glimpse, that things might work out and that they might belong. Lynne sensed a disconnect with classmates but quickly realized that might allow her more time to study. She felt disappointment at her grades but believed if she focused better those grades will change. Naomi doubted her writing abilities but acknowledged that writing essays is an important learning process. This shift, perhaps only very subtly, between negative self-doubt to glimmers of hope and resilience was further proof of the essential quality of motion constitutive of the lived experience of these participants detailed more fully in the previous section. It also suggested that negative emotions were a significant component of this experience.

The fact that frustration, exhaustion, discontent and self-doubt formed such a significant part of the lived experience of these students was surprising, even very upsetting, to me. I have been in the classroom for 17 years and those classes have been filled with the exact demographic examined here and I have never considered that my pedagogical choices could be causing so many negative emotions. As stated in the beginning of this section, few people would want to be associated with such an activity. I found consolation in the fact, mentioned above, that these heavy emotional states were not permanent, and even more consolation in that fact that positive emotional states were present as well. The finding of such strong negative emotions in the data caused immediate reflection on my part, and this, in turn, reinforced my belief in the importance van Manen's pedagogical competence. I needed to consider if I want to be part of an activity that causes these emotional states. If they are constitutive of transformative learning, I needed to consider how to best support these emotional states. This type of reflection, and the intention to orient more fully to a phenomenon and consider future action with more understanding and care is the experience of pedagogical competence.

### **Positive Emotions**

*I feel encouraged again.*

*(Lynne)*

The single strongest positive emotion found in the data was that of joy as a result of accomplishment. This came as a result of acquiring new skills or a new understanding, and often was accompanied by a new orientation to the future, which made it a key element of the building of personal capacity. Cham's overall experience was marked by negative emotions resulting from not connecting to others and a very difficult struggle to balance home and school, yet the joy she felt when she realized progress was made is unmistakable. Her obvious delight with new found literacy skills, both writing and reading, spoke to a desire to communicate, connect and be understood with and by others, and reinforced the findings of this study that suggested a sense of belonging was a powerful component of the lived experience of these students. It was in these moments of positive emotions that one began to sense the increasing resilience and strength of the participants and their growing capacity to assert themselves and take up space in a new culture.

Writing for me is something I have started to love to do. Four years ago if you were to ask me to sit at a computer and write for an hour or give me an assignment on writing I would probably have not done it. Over the last four months I have started school at TRU and I don't know if it is because there [sic] teachers here are more willing to help me succeed or that I have grown as a person. Being able to put my thoughts into words and have someone understand the point I am trying to make gives me a feeling of greatness. I love that words are not just one dimensional and that even though you write something to show one meaning the next person can read it and have a totally different feel for the same sentence.

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I came out of class today with confidence that I am succeeding well [in] this class. Learning for me sometimes can be pretty easy. I understand things well and only need to go over items once or twice for them to stick in my head. What I am really learning in class that I didn't know how to do before has to do with short stories. I read a lot but I never really take the time to see the underlying meaning or themes to the story. I now can read a story and when I go over it a second time I can pick out actually what the author is portraying to us as readers threw [sic] words. It is really neat to reread some book that I have read and come out with a total different understanding from when I read before.



There was a sense of forward motion here, a feeling of expansion and building of capacity as one's past self is pushed into newness. Cham did not used to spend time in front of a computer composing an essay and now she does. She was a reader but was unable to read for great depth and now she can. There was a significant sense of accomplishment here. New academic skills, an increased capacity for communication with others, and an increased confidence were all developing. But perhaps the most important component of this accomplishment and the most positive piece was a newly emerging sense of self.

Positive emotional experiences were few in Cham's journals, which made the above discoveries that much more significant, proving that even if the overall experience of returning to school was a difficult one, positive emotions still existed and propelled one onto new experiences. Lynne's experience was different. Positive emotions were found across her semester. However, in keeping with Cham's experience, Lynne's moments of positivity were tempered by negative thoughts, doubt and anxiety. Both provided further evidence for the sensation of swinging between two poles detailed in the previous section. Lynne's experience of positivity also featured an orientation to the future.

*I CAN write! I am on a bit of a high because I received an excellent mark on my last essay. I was feeling quite overwhelmed at the beginning of the week. I was actually preparing for the worst. That would be giving up on further education in the HUMS program. I was going to wait until today to see my marks on the midterm and my third essay before I made the decision. Now that I passed with a C plus on the midterm and a 19/20 on the essay, I am going to keep the dream alive. I have taken the feedback from informed professionals that are only trying to help me and learned. I was starting to wonder if I could still learn. I feel encouraged again.*

Over the course of her first semester, Lynne moved repeatedly between negative and positive emotional states, and even the joy experienced here as a result of accomplishment was tempered with caution. Positive emotions connected to accomplishment were also fueled by a sense of belonging and connecting to others. Success on an essay or test was, in part, proof of successful communication with others and that one belongs in the classroom or academic culture. It also oriented the

individual toward the future, since experiencing encouragement appeared to create a desire for more challenges. This was especially evident in Ashton's journal.

The way I feel compared to the way I felt at the beginning of the semester is completely the opposite feelings. I feel so much better about myself. I am happy and very excited that I again accomplished another one of my goals. I feel like now that I have completed university prep I have opened another chapter in my life. I look forward to starting a new year in September. I have gone through many changes in the last year that I feel like it's all just going to get better from here.

Ashton has felt a sense of change within herself and achieving her goals resulted in feelings of accomplishment, pride, and increased confidence. These positive emotions fueled a drive for more learning, new challenges and additional accomplishment. There was an unmistakable orientation toward and embracing of the future, and a sensation of forward motion.

The fact that emotions played such a critical role in the lived experience of adult female learners was an unexpected, but tremendously valuable, finding for me. The importance of emotions in the classroom, particularly in classrooms focused on academic writing and research, is usually restricted to the desire for students to fully engage with or find passion for their topic of study. What emerges from this study is that emotions play a much more personal and visceral role in students' lived experience, and that the emotional complexity of learning deserves appreciation. An analysis of the negative emotions experienced by the participants provided strong support for the assertion that motion was an essential quality of their learning experience as both of the predominant negative emotions found in the data, frustration and self-doubt, consistently presented with acknowledgment of the possibility of change and consequently, movement between two poles. The positivity experienced as the result of accomplishment was also strongly connected to a sense of motion in that it led to appetite for more learning, more knowledge and more motion. All of this contributed to an overall sense of building of capacity in an ever expanding world.

### **4.1.3. Connection**

I was thinking that I would probably not fit in. (Lynne)

The third essential theme that emerged from the data was that of connection. Connecting to others and therefore belonging is a very basic human need. This becomes clear whenever we move into a new environment or culture. Post-secondary education is new culture for all first year students but because universities have long been focused on traditional university demographics, it is not surprising that adult learners have concerns about inclusion. An analysis of this study's data suggested that connecting with others, classmates, teachers and even one's own self, was also an essential part of learning for these women. It is interesting to note that each of the seven participants' memories about their previous schooling centers on connection or in many cases, disconnection. Judy wrote at length about how students in her hometown were labelled as early as elementary school as having academic potential or not based on their parents' occupation and how being considered not part of the successful group "robbed" her of her highest potential. Naomi wrote of avoiding or quickly dropping classes because she felt as a second language learner she didn't belong. The memories aren't all negative. Ashton and Lynne remembered only the social part of high school and spending time with friends who at the time they didn't think they could be without.

The preceding discussion of the essential themes of motion and emotion implied the significance of connection, and consequently disconnection, in many ways. Ashton experienced motion on days when the entire class, teacher included, felt connected. Cham shifted between positive and negative emotions on the first day of class when first she felt connected to the teacher but subsequently unconnected to her classmates. Lynne felt alone and helpless in the library, sensing that others could tell she did not know what she was doing and did not belong. The primacy of connection emerged from the data in four ways: disconnection as the result of labelling, connection with others, connection with the teacher and connection with one's self as a learner. As was stated at the start of this chapter, the essential themes of motion, emotion and connection, while unique enough to be analyzed as separate subjects, were also intricately linked, making clear the great complexity of adult learners' experiences. Together they provided

compelling evidence for the essential meaning of the lived experience of adult female learners: building capacity and taking up space in a new culture.

### **Disconnection as the Result of Labeling**

Are there others like me?

(Shannon)

The significance of belonging was suggested by the negative experience of being labelled by others, and therefore not belonging. There were many examples across the participants' journals of feeling the sting of a label, including Lynne thinking that she should give up on education and just accept her place in world working in a boarding house and Heather worrying if she can participate in school alongside younger classmates. Shannon's fear of the stigma of working in a bar motivated her to pursue education, but looms over her on days when staying in school seems unlikely. We care what others think of us and how they see us, and being labelled as different, an experience intensified when becoming part of a new culture, was an important obstacle for these adult female learners to overcome. The following experience of Ashton's was examined in the section on motion as evidence of the oscillating between positive and negative emotions. It was in fact an experience that involves all three of the essential themes presented in this study: motion, emotion, and connection.

After the 0500 class I was more prepared for coming into English 0600. One [sic] the first day of English 0600, I was very nervous, scared and a little bit intimidated, as well as excited. I was also assuming that the class would be very similar to the last class that I had. When I sat down in the classroom I looked around at all of the students, I noticed that a lot of the students seemed really smart, as they talking [sic] about their grades from the last semester, A's and B's. I received an A in my last English class, so I was feeling confident. The teacher walked in, she seemed very nice. I was a little nervous because I had a letter for her to sign from student services regarding my disabilities. I didn't want anyone to see the letter, because it is a little embarrassing for me. Also I may look young but I am not as young as some of the other students in the class so that was a bit uncomfortable for me as well. When listening to [the teacher] I started feeling like this isn't like the other class that I just had. It seemed a lot more intense and I started to realize that is was nothing like my last class. [The teacher] seemed to be very

structured and didn't take any excuses from anyone which made me wonder how she was going to treat me with my disabilities. We went over some paper and information about this year semester. I was still a little nervous but I felt like I could handle it. I sat there wondering how [the teacher] was going to be, was she to [sic] tough, was she fair, how dose [sic] she grade assignments? The other students were very outspoken and seemed very confident as well, which did intimate [sic] me too. I didn't give [the teacher] my letter that day; I made an appointment with her after class. [She] seemed to be quite happy which made me feel more comfortable. She seemed quite open with allowing the students to make appointments with her which made me feel happy that I was going to be able to find out more about her and she was able to find out more about me. After I left class I wasn't feeling as confident as I did when I walked in. I was actually more worried.

Ashton experienced being different in many separate ways here. The most significant was the having to identify as having a disability. She was hesitant to reveal this to both classmates and teacher. She also reacted to the fact that she was older than her new classmates. The label of age was further complicated by the fact that Ashton's felt she looks younger than she was, suggesting that she did not necessarily want to be labelled by that either. Further discomfort was the result of the fact that this new class appeared to be very different from her previous course, one she fit well in. Additionally the extroversion of her new classmates intimidated her. The overwhelming experience of difference and potential exclusion was vivid here, and Ashton left class feeling anxious. Yet she did return to this class on the second day. The one positive experience of the first day was interaction with the teacher, suggesting that the teacher/student relationship could be a critical one in offsetting negative emotions resulting from the sensation of being labelled or excluded.

Further evidence of the negative impact of being labelled and the role of the teacher in this experience was found in Heather's journal. It was a striking example of how pedagogical choice, albeit with good intentions, can generate negative emotions in others if it makes them feel separate from the others.

Well today was little uncomfortable for me in class. We were all given the opportunity to hand in our current drafts to the instructor

for some feedback, if we would like, Little did the instructor know that I already had received some help with my grammar and was able to apply these changes prior to going to class. Although she found a correction her and there, she ended up making a bit of an announcement [to the class] as to how very well my writing was. She ended up somewhat raving about my movie review along the line [sic] of "...this is how a movie review is done...what I am here for since you don't need my help?" At any rate I know I am ultra -sensitive but I didn't like the attention. Truth is, I do need help—I think. I only knew how to do what I did because of the handout I was provided with elsewhere beforehand. I do appreciate this instructor but I am also feeling glad this is not for the duration of 3 months. It is clear to me and has become clear to the instructor than I am not struggling in this prep class to the degree that others are. I somewhat anticipated that would be the case going into it but I am still very aware of how much I still have to learn.

Being labelled here led to disconnection on many levels. Heather was a strong student and as was clear across her journal, fairly confident in the classroom. However, when her writing was held up to the rest of the class as an example of excellent work, the implied comparison to others in the class made her deeply uncomfortable. It was true that close connections with younger classmates were not a priority for these participants but what others think still played a role in the classroom experience. Consequently, to be pointed out as different was unhelpful. It was, however, the disconnection with the teacher here that was more critical. Despite her confidence, Heather repeatedly indicated that she truly desired help, feedback and an open dialogue with instructors. For her this was an important part of her educational experience. And precisely because relationships with teachers were greatly valued by these adult learners, the assertion by the instructor that she [the instructor] was not needed denigrates an interaction that students want. It was experienced as a disconnection or, at the very least an uncomfortable moment, which led to Heather's reflection that she was relieved the experience will not go on forever.

Like Ashton and Heather, Naomi struggled with the negative feelings associated with labelling. She has immigrated to Canada from Japan and was quick to point out what she was not (an international student) but struggled to shed the second language

learner label. She did identify as part of the class, as she empathized with the difficulties everyone had with writing and participated in small groups. However being seen as different, at least in her own estimation, because of second language issues was noticeable here.

Writing within a deadline is a very stressful thing for me. I think for everyone. But because I spend twice or three times as much time as most people I'm guessing, I just never can be sure can make it in time. I also try very hard to construct sentences that doesn't [sic] sound like it's been written by someone who speaks English as a second language. Of course there is nothing wrong with me speaking English as a second language but I just think in writing an essay it is different matter altogether. So I can't do much about my stress right now because I really need to improve my writing skill otherwise it will be hard for me to live her [sic]. I'm not an international student. I do enjoy writing to some extend [sic] because in writing I can get my ideas more matured and get it fully across to someone if I spend enough effort. So I hope and think that I'm making progress in writing. About class discussion though, in small groups I participate well. But I don't say much in front of the whole class unless I'm asked. The last thing I want is pity from other people but I'm still haunted by the ghosts of people's impatience toward my slow speech and choppy sentences.

What was revealed here was the importance of communication and its relationship to inclusion. Naomi was largely concerned with not being able to communicate with classmates. She did not want to be defined by the fact she was a second language learner and labelled as different and consequently she was highly motivated to work on her communication skills so she was on par with native speakers. To be understood by others was to be connected to them. Being part of a class physically and even feeling affinity to a group enough to empathize with the stresses the group experience does not feel like true belonging to Naomi. To fully understand others and perhaps more importantly to be understood by others is to truly belong, and was what was missing here for Naomi.

The fear of labelling and isolation strongly suggested that connection and a sense of belonging was a key component of the lived experience of these students.

Clearly, feeling disconnected was undesirable and feeling connected was. Although labelling and consequently experiencing being “the other” felt negative to the participants, it was interesting that they were simultaneously adopting a label or performing an identity of their own construction: a female adult learner. And proof of the importance of this identity was seen in the participants’ search for likeminded students. Although they did not, in general, prioritize connecting with classmates, they did express happiness when they realized they were not alone and that a connection could be made.

### **Connection with Others**

I think the most wonderful part of the semester was becoming comfortable in the class. (Ashton)

Evidence that connecting with other students like themselves was important was found in both moments of desperation and elation. Shannon found herself without adequate funding to continue in school and while in the financial aid office waiting for assistance, she wondered “are there others like me?”. Lynne, when experiencing pride and accomplishment the end of English 0600, expressed that “others should do this!.” Both of these moments indicated that the participants had a strong sense of their identity and also that there must be, somewhere, students much like themselves. Further evidence that the participants sought connection with other likeminded students was found in Heather’s experience of peer editing groups with classmates:

I am learning that English is hard work. It is also hard to do peer review and correct other people’s work. I want to be able to do it well and still be positive and kind. How does one balance that with being helpful to their process? So honesty is important, along with maybe gentleness. I want to share with others with similar goals. So the writing process doesn’t look all light and fluffy. It really requires dedication and time and thoughtfulness. Oh so many qualities are needed including patience, dedication, strong commitment and the ability to persevere over time. Wow not everyone is going to have these qualities.

Heather showed commitment to a difficult and sensitive classroom activity and felt that even though it was challenging, she had the potential to do it well or to work toward doing it well. What was also being experienced here was the desire to face that



challenge with similarly committed and sensitive classmates. There was an understanding that working with all classmates was important but also the understanding that those likeminded individuals were out there. Additional proof of the desire to collaborate with similarly committed individuals was found in Heather's orientation to future studies.

*It is clear to me and has become clear to the instructor that I am not struggling in this prep class to the degree that others are. I somewhat anticipated that would be the case going into it but I am still very aware of how much I have to learn. Part of me is very much looking forward to being thrown back into a fourth year course so that I can receive feedback and be assessed from a higher level of expectations.*

Across her experience of returning to post-secondary, Heather exhibited open mindedness to and a connection to the major components of the university experience, including curriculum, pedagogical choices, and classroom dynamics. But she did seek one additional connection and that was one to other students like herself. The anticipation that she will join such individuals in the next semester fueled her move toward that future.

As has been previously discussed, Ashton's first day in class was marked by anxiety and fear, largely due to feeling that she did not belong for multiple reasons. By the end of the course, she felt very differently:

*I have gained a lot of confidence, I also made friends as well as enjoying the teacher and I have learnt to respect the way she teaches. Those are some of the things that I did not expect at the beginning of the class. I think the most wonderful part of class this semester was becoming comfortable with the class. It took me awhile to become comfortable but I am glad that I did because now I can prepare myself knowing that it will always be like that with every class that I take.*

Ashton now felt a strong sense of belonging and was moving into future classrooms armed with the knowledge that initial feelings of isolation can be replaced with a strong sense of connection and belonging. She was building the capacity to withstand future

stresses and create future successes. But Ashton also expressed excitement at joining the Human Service program in the fall, in part because it means being with other adult learners.

*I feel like I am becoming more of a mature grownup. I love having a life plan and being able to follow through with it. School, children and everyday struggles with life have made me grow as a productive part of society, as a parent and has helped me focus and organize my life in a proper manor [sic]. I am really looking forward to September and being able to work with students what share the same sort of lifestyle and struggles that my life has. Also working with students that have children will be a huge bonus for me.*

This excitement at the prospect of being in a classroom with other adult learners strongly indicated that the connection with such learners was something that Ashton valued greatly. It was a powerful component of the lived experience of adult learners, and one that can offset the negative emotions resulting from disconnection, labelling or isolation.

### **Connection with the Teacher**

*I am getting to know my teacher.*

(Lynne)

Clearly connection with likeminded students was something that these students seek, but it was not the only connection they desire. Perhaps the most powerful contributor to a sense of belonging was the relationship with the teacher. It was interesting to note that teachers figured prominently in these students' memories of earlier schooling, whether those memories were good or bad. It was equally telling that the participants were extremely curious about the teacher starting from the first day of school. Lynne hoped her learning style would match with the teacher's style, Cham was concerned that she actually cannot hear the teacher on the first day and was missing something and Shannon's realized the importance of respecting the teacher, something she did not do as a younger student. This keen first day interest in the teacher was an indication that these students were seeking or anticipating a meaningful relationship with the teacher. An analysis of the data suggested that the relationship with the teacher took on a form that felt like collaboration, as these students turned to the teacher for support when they faced challenges and then took that support and accomplishment with them into future challenges.

This was evident when Heather was struggling with her research project which was examining Canadians' attitudes to refugees. She had worked for hours in the computer lab trying to solidify her research question and outline, but it has not worked. The anxiety she experienced is vivid; however clarity and focus was achieved through working with her teacher.

We were asked to hand in an outline and thesis statement for our paper before leaving class. I was starting to panic a little. All I knew at this point was that I was going to reflect on some sort of social implication or the attitudes of people from the hosting countries. I read what I could but time was running out. I had a very rough sketch of an outline but it was mostly in my head. Feeling a little distraught as I knew class was soon to end, I packed up my papers [in the computer lab] and headed back to class. Now it was my turn to hand over the goods. Ughhh. [The teacher] asked how it was going and I replied with "I'm freaking out!." She laughed of course and said "oh, you too." So we sat down and I talked for about 3 minutes rambling away about what I learned from the last 45 minutes and she readily put my thoughts on paper forming an outline. It was very sketchy but her point was that I knew what I wanted to say, I just needed to get it on paper. I had been freaking out because I thought I had to hand something in! She merely smiled and said "you're good to go, I know you have an outline...have a nice weekend!" I headed to the House of Learning computer lab where it is all open, spacious and relaxing. My intention was to do a bit more research and leave my 3:30 p.m. but somehow the muse within miraculously took over. All I mean is that I decided that this should somehow be much simpler and so I dove right in and began typing. After having a little more than half written and since I was in the mood, I decided to stay and put even a conclusion on it! I stayed until 5:30 p.m. and was so pleased because it was only Friday. I had the whole weekend ahead of me to polish this baby!

Heather was clearly quite upset when trying to work alone on her project; she did not have control over the research topic, her thoughts on the topics were scattered and time was running out. Her panic could be felt and the dread with which she handed over what work she has to the teacher was real. This feeling of dread was evidence that she valued the judgment of the teacher. This relationship was important. As they work

together to clarify the research question, relief was felt. Her anxiety has been validated by “oh you too?” and now, after working with the teacher, she had a plan of action. Her emotional state was so positively altered that she was able to continue working on the project for several hours and her joy at this accomplishment was clear to see. This experience was proof that the relationship with the teacher is an important one for Heather and a connection between them inspired her.

Lynne also valued her relationship with the teacher. Early in the semester, when Lynne was still not feeling entirely connected to her classmates, she did feel a connection to her teacher. Despite feeling anxiety about belonging at school, it was the expectation of that connection that kept Lynne focused and moving forward.

I am nervous that people can tell that I haven't been in school for a long time and that the workload is very heavy for me. I feel overwhelmed. I have missed a few classes and worked on my own. Maybe I work better on my own. How much group work do we do in university? How much on our own? I am getting to know my teacher. I was pretty sure that they would be around my age and possibly have quite a bit in common. I respect the fact that she works hard to open up new ideas and way of thinking when it comes to writing. For instance, when people find that we go off topic in class I see it as her showing us how writing can branch off and one thought process can lead to another. I am trying to use this in my work.

The fear of not belonging was strong here as Lynne worries about the judgment of other students, multiple missed classes and the looming possibility of group work. In spite of this anxiety, she demonstrated a desire for, even the expectation of, a connection with the teacher. While she worried about not connecting with classmates, she saw the teacher's pedagogical choices as something to be incorporated into her own learning and this seemed relatively natural and unforced. Just as in Heather's experience, a positive connection, and in a sense, collaboration, with the teacher allowed Lynne to bravely look forward and accept future challenges.

The teacher's role in a developing sense of belonging for these students was something develops over time and this was vividly illustrated across Ashton's semester-long experience in English 0600. Her first day in the class was traumatic, as she

realized this class and the students in it were nothing like she expected. More crucially, she worried about having to reveal her disabilities to others. She consequently felt very alone. A first step toward alleviating these anxieties is taken by the teacher who sets up a private appointment. This was the beginning of a connection between teacher and student. As Ashton moved through the course and stresses increase, the connection to the teacher was a key component in Ashton's sense of belonging and her persistence in the course.

This week I feel like writing class is going well. The teacher was very helpful allowing us to do an in class essay. We could work at our own pace and [the teacher] was able to spend individual time with all the students, helping us in the areas that we needed it the most. We were also able to do a lot of in class discussion which helped me understand a lot more about the work we are doing. I am enjoying this week's writing class. School is getting a bit tense and I have lots of work to do. I am worried about the test coming up and I hope I can do better on it then [sic] I did on the midterm. I hope that [the teacher] gets the chance to do a quick review of the course for us.

Ashton's confidence was increasing and she clearly was feeling more at ease in the classroom, a classroom that felt very unfriendly and intimidating on the first day. It was interesting to note that being recognized as an individual, either through self-paced work or one-on-one consultation, led to increased connection for Ashton. It appeared that being valued as an individual led to a sense of inclusion. Still, stress existed and Ashton turned to the teacher for support. This ongoing support from the teacher appeared to have been forthcoming, as evidenced by Ashton's feelings at the end of the semester

I am definitely becoming overwhelmed with the amount of work. The teacher has been really helpful in providing the class with a lot of help and support. I was very hesitant at the beginning of the semester and I feel a lot more confident now. I feel proud of myself for accomplishing another goal which I have set for myself. The research project that I am working on has been unlike the ones that I have done before. I like the way that [the teacher] has broken it all up for us and the way she has been taking us slowly through it, step by step. I am on the last step of the research before I start the paper. I am a little nervous because [the teacher] has not allowed us

to know what is expected for that next step. She has told us that there will be options. I am very curious! I have changed tremendously throughout the semester in a lot of ways. I have gained a lot of confidence, I also made friends as well as enjoying the teacher and I respect the way she teaches. I did not expect that at the beginning of class. I think the most wonderful part of the semester was becoming comfortable in the class.

Ashton was clearly experiencing stress here but it was tempered with confidence and pride resulting from accomplishment. This sense of accomplishment stemmed at least in part from working on the research project with the teacher. What was also noteworthy was the way Ashton approached the fact that she does not yet know what comes next in the research project. Whereas the unknown on the first day of class caused fear and intimidation, now the unknown was evoking curiosity. This was a clear change in Ashton's capacity to take on new challenges and a shift toward the future. It also demonstrated that a connection with the teacher has been formed and it was one that involves a significant amount of trust. Ashton did not feel like she necessarily belonged in the classroom on the first day and was extremely concerned about revealing information about herself to others, including the teacher. Now she exhibited trust in the teacher and the teacher's pedagogical choices and was experiencing a strong sense of belonging.

### **Connection with Self as Learner**

Others should do this too!

(Lynne)

If a positive relationship with the teacher plays a major role in fostering a sense of belonging for students, then such a connection should be considered a main goal when considering pedagogical choices. Classroom practice has a major impact here. But the connection with the teacher is not the true goal. The true goal is having students identify as learners. This was evidence in the data that being a learner had become constitutive of their self-identity. Expressing pride in their work, excitement about course content and an eagerness for more was evidence that participants had begun to see themselves as learners. This was seen in the above excerpt from Ashton's journal, where despite the challenge of the research project, she was feeling prepared for that challenge and was not afraid of what will come next. This was a significant shift away

from how she saw herself at the start of the course. A shift in self-perception was also seen in Heather's experience. At the start of the course she expressed apprehension about her ability to cope with academic content, particularly that in a writing class.

If I were starting a math, biology or chemistry class, I know I would have been in an entirely different state of mind than where I was returning to an English class. I have mixed emotions. For the most part I was reasonably relaxed. I already have a BA accomplished from '99 but that was many years ago. I have the basics and I have the previous experience but again that was 12 years ago. The only reason I feel somewhat relaxed is that I have a fairly decent command of the English language. Do I know how to do a rhetorical analysis, dissect Milton or write poetry? Nope.

Heather acknowledged that she did not know the subject matter, and some uncertainty about being a learner despite having already earned a BA in Psychology. This suggested that external recognition of student status does not necessarily mean that it is part of the learner's self-identity. Becoming a learner is a much more internal process. Part of this not connecting to the learner label might be because she did not feel that connected to or in control of anticipated content of the course, which was seen as somehow more unpleasant than other classes. Neither what she learned in her past nor who she felt herself to be at this moment connected to English 0600. This discomfort contrasted greatly with her feelings later in the course.

Now we are moving from the topic of refugees to the Nobel Peace Prize [sic]. I feel very grateful to be focusing and learning about an important and interesting topic—something I do not know very much about. I thank the teacher for that. Last week I was reflecting upon how much I really appreciated the instructor's choice of topics. She is doing a fine job of expanding our awareness of the current global calamities taking place and drawing our attention to think about those in very unfortunate circumstances. These are not always easy to have to think about when one already feels bogged down in one's own petty stuff. Needless to say I value this experience. I was really quite nervous on the first day of class because I knew so little about refugees and would have to write about it. Ultimately I surprised myself once I started to write, the essay wasn't as difficult as I had first anticipated. Then we moved onto the topic of the Nobel Peace

Prize and that was especially interesting. We also had a film last week and it was fascinating to learn more about the 14th Dali Lama and some Buddhist history. So as far as the course topics being interesting, that is going quite well.

Heather had shifted significantly from being anxious about what she does not know to an openness and excitement about new learning. She was connecting to the course content and it was causing her to reflect on her own values, including being “bogged down in one’s own petty stuff.” She felt pride in her abilities, expressed gratitude to the teacher and was ready for more. Little motion or positive emotion was felt at the start of the course. The same could not be said now, as Heather was beginning to make the shift to being a learner with a sense of belonging and an orientation toward her future.

A similar shift in perception occurs for Lynne, as she was beginning to find her place at university. Anxiety and a strong sense of self-doubt were present at the start of the semester; she did not expect to connect with younger classmates, the teacher or the course content. There was little sense of purpose and almost a sense of defeat, as she wondered if she should just “accept my place in this world where I am”:

I remember the night before I started the winter semester that I was thinking that I would probably not fit in, that the other students would all be younger and that they would have groups of friends already set up from high school. I believed that I was going to not really fit in but I decided that might be to my credit since I needed to focus on the course not socializing anyway. I was nervous that maybe I had been away for so long that I would not get it. Why am I doing this? Is it worth it? Was the instructor’s teaching style going to match my learning style. I wonder if I should give this education dream a rest and just accept my place in this world where I am.

By the end of the semester, Lynne’s relationship with school, learning and one could argue even herself had changed dramatically. Her sense of accomplishment was vivid. She took pride in the work completed and the skills acquired. Perhaps as part of this sense of accomplishment, there was a substantial reframing of being an adult learner. She now felt that as an adult learner she had some advantages and that the English class was a place that adult learners belong, a place that she was encouraging others to



be. The most significant change here was Lynne's newfound orientation to the future and her place in it.

I have completed the English 0600 course. I am grateful that I have shown some real good improvement in the papers I am writing and my deeper understanding of literature. I have the ability to continue on to university courses in the fall and I want to do it even more now. I feel that I am learning. I know how to problem solve. I believe that if I had not gone through the university prep department to freshen up my grades I would have more difficulty adjusting to student life. Others should do this too! I am an older student so that already puts me in a separate category than the young fresh out of high school student. I am sure that being a mature student has advantages like that fact that I am past the partying stage of my life meaning that I do not prioritize that above homework. I am concerned that I may have too many courses in the fall but will wait and see how they fit together before deciding to spread them out. I would recommend that an older student does courses in university prep in order to get acquainted with the student experience again, like time management. I will need to keep this fresh in my mind for September.

This passage revealed a new sense of purpose, in that Lynne felt she can continue on to university courses in the fall. She not only had the ability to continue, but she “wants to do it even more now.” With this enthusiasm for learning came a new approach to the future. A transformation had occurred. Whereas before Lynne was considering just accepting where she was, and therefore exhibiting tremendous passivity, she was now more actively participating in the construction of her future. She was approaching that future with caution but with control. She was aware of the demands that university will place on her, but felt confident she can take them on and make adjustments if necessary. This move from passive to active was of tremendous significance; this element of control of her life showed that a sense of belonging has been achieved. She was becoming part of this culture and was an active participant in it. A sense of ownership in this was evident in that she encouraged other to do as she had, in their own journey towards becoming a learner. Lynne had experienced here tremendous perspective change in that she now self-identified as a learner, was orientated to her own future and actively encouraged others to do the same. She was now firmly part of

post-secondary culture and was inviting others, like her, to join. This was a significant example of the transformative power of the lived experience of our adult female learners.

## **4.2. Summary**

After several rounds of phenomenological reduction and analysis, ten themes (motion as too fast, motion as stagnation, motion as shifting between two points, motion as orientation to the future, negative emotions, positive emotions, disconnection as a result of labeling, connection with others, connection teacher, and connection with self as learner) emerged from the data, and upon further analysis, these ten themes were categorized into three main themes. Although the three main themes could be viewed as independent of each other, close analysis revealed that they are intricately connected. These findings suggested that the experience of these adult female learners was complex and dynamic. In this chapter, each of the ten themes was illustrated with selected aspects of the participants' journals, which animated and gave voice to not only the themes, but to the participants and their lived experience. Integration with theory is found in Chapter Five (Discussion and Conclusions).

The three main themes that emerged from the data are motion, emotion and connection. The four subthemes subsumed under the category of motion illustrated that the sensation of motion was constitutive of the lived experience of these students, and that there was a favored or ideal quality to this sensation, and when one felt like they were moving too quickly or conversely not at all, significant distress was the result. Experiencing this motion was a dynamic experience over which the students felt some control, in that when things were moving too quickly, students responded with attempts to slow the pace and when students experienced feeling no motion or stagnation they did attempt to construct forward motion. This linked to the oscillation that the students experienced when they moved between two poles, whether that between negative to positive emotion or between not understanding to understanding. Also emerging was evidence of a movement or orientation toward the future. The data suggested that the experience of these students was active and even volatile, although not necessarily volatile in a purely negative sense.

The main theme of emotion also suggested a certain volatility found across the participants' lived experience. One of the most significant findings of this study was the substantial presence of negative emotional states at several points in the participants' experiences. The most prominent of these were frustration, exhaustion, discontent and self-doubt. This discovery was the most surprising to me. That returning to post-secondary could involve so many negative emotional states was a finding that has prompted significant reflection. As a result, I feel one must be open to the presence of negative emotions, as they seem to be constitutive of the learning process, however counter intuitive that may seem at first glance. It's also critical to note that there was evidence in the data that negative emotional states pass. The single strongest positive emotional state was pride, resulting from a sense of accomplishment, and this positive emotion appeared to be powerful enough to offset the negatives, arming the students with confidence and the ability to continue their studies.

That the theme of connection to others emerged from the data was perhaps not surprising, in that belonging is a basic human need and one that is tested when one moves into a new culture, in this case post-secondary culture. The experience of or even the fear of being labelled and therefore considered "the other" is strong. However in an interesting finding, these students were assuming a label, albeit of their own construction, when they sought connection with other adult learners, or in other words, those much like themselves. This desire to connect with their peer group was superseded only by the desire to connect with the instructor, clearly a key component of the lived experience of these participants. Ultimately, the participants revealed a true sense of belonging when they self-identified as learners through the expression of accomplishment, engagement with course content and perhaps most importantly, an eagerness for more learning. One component of this self-identification as a learner was turning to invite others to do the same. This desire to connect with or include others was a particularly positive finding, one that I will be observant of in future classes.

The goal of this study was to increase our understanding and appreciation of the lived experience of adult female learners as they engaged with post-secondary education. Simultaneously it examined ways to document and support transformative learning. The hermeneutical tradition of phenomenology, particularly as interpreted by van Manen (1990), informed this study, allowing the researcher to "raise questions,

gather data, describe a phenomenon and construct textual interpretations” (p.1) so that I, and perhaps others, can stand in the world with what van Manen would call pedagogic competence, and the accompanying openness to reflection and transformation. It is my hope that this research will invite all participants in post-secondary education to do so, through a continued examination and valuing of the complexity of the lived experience of our students.

### **4.3. Personal Reflection on Working with the Data**

I will close this chapter with a personal reflection on the experience of working with the data and coming to the above results. Doing phenomenology has proven to be a very visceral and powerful experience for me. I did spend a great deal of (very quiet) time sitting with the data, awaiting the emergence of the themes. This was a very long and often frustrating experience. However, when the themes did reveal themselves, the experience was extremely intense. The themes did eventually appear, and seemed to lift themselves right off the page, above the other text. The words then became louder, bolder and took up a great deal more space. The text was then alive in a way that it was not before, and I would argue it did not return to its lifeless state.

One learns from doing phenomenology that every human experience is far more complicated than is assumed. We often take for granted that we know what is being experienced by both ourselves and others. The experience of working and living with the current study's data has taught me that the complexity inherent in learning, and therefore in life, requires great and ongoing respect. My study began with curiosity about what was being experienced by the students in my classroom. That original curiosity brought me to phenomenology, to my study and its findings. This has resulted in more carefully considered classroom practice, based on openness and respect. It has resulted in my knowing that I cannot see on my students' face all that they are experiencing and that I may never be able to know the completeness of that experience. However, it has taught me to strive beyond sympathy and reach for empathy, to believe in students' experiences and to connect with others. Beyond the classroom, this study has resulted in a greater revelation that now influences how I orient to everything in the world. This revelation is difficult to express meaningfully in words, but I sense that it can be

embodied and lived every day. I now move through the world fully aware that every human act is complex, well beyond what can be seen. This is an incredibly humbling experience. And one that makes everything come alive.

## **Chapter 5.**

### **Discussion and Conclusions: Moving to the Future**

This study examined the lived experience of seven adult female learners as they (re)engaged with post-secondary education at the mid-sized university in western Canada. Using the hermeneutical tradition of phenomenology, particularly as it is interpreted by Max van Manen (1990), the researcher aimed to elicit from the participants the essential themes of that experience, with the goal of increasing our understanding and appreciation of the (transformative) journey that these students have taken. This final chapter forms a response to the original three research questions and addresses the following:

- What the participants have revealed as the most meaningful aspects, or themes, of their learning experiences will be addressed by a recap of the study and summary of the findings. Links to the existing literature will also be made.
- Suggestions for implementing support to maximize adult learners' experiences with a focus on recommendations geared toward learners and educators.
- Finally, in keeping with the practice of phenomenological hermeneutics, a personal reflection on the implications of the current study and its impact on me.

#### **5.1. Summary**

As stated in first chapter of this dissertation, many Canadian post-secondary institutions face declining enrolments within the traditional student demographic and as a result, are actively discussing the multi-faceted concepts of student engagement, success, and persistence. Increasingly, this discussion includes non-traditional students. At Thompson Rivers University, the institution under examination, faculty are

frequently surveyed on various aspects of the post-secondary experience to identify institutional strengths and to support those strengths and improve educational opportunities for students. Students are also often asked to participate in data gathering, often in the form of surveys or questionnaires, to assess students' experience. What is missing from these institutional initiatives is a more refined focus on adult learners, a demographic that is growing at Canadian institutions and one that will become more critical as the traditional 18 to 25 age group shrinks as a proportion of post-secondary enrollment. What is also missing is the opportunity for students to express themselves in their own words, and a subsequent examination of how they construct experience and knowledge to integrate their learning. Thus this study, grounded in phenomenological hermeneutics, was undertaken as a way of examining the experience and extracting the wisdom of adult female learners, as they assert their place in post-secondary education. This then enables the creation of more responsive learning environments for these students.

The hermeneutic tradition of phenomenology, as advocated by van Manen (1990), was selected as the philosophical framework for this study, given its emphasis on interpretive analysis of actual life texts, writing as research and the development of pedagogic competence. One comes to phenomenology as a way of understanding the world, or an aspect of the world, that is meaningful to the researcher. Through purposeful sampling techniques, seven participants who were 27 or older and enrolled in a university preparation English course were recruited. Journaling, once a week, over the course of a 13-week semester, was the strategy used to uncover the students' insights. Phenomenological hermeneutical analysis was then applied to the data, both in the form of structural analysis and meaning unit coding. These two methods of analysis were then cross checked. The result was ten themes, which were further refined into three main themes of motion, emotion and connection. Viewed together, these themes revealed the experience of these adult female learners to be dynamic and complex. The experience can be characterized as the gathering strength and ultimately the building of personal capacity or pedagogical competence.

## **5.2. Discussion of the Results**

While data gathered through the hermeneutical tradition of phenomenology is not generalizable and transferable, it does provide meaningful and deep insight into the lived experience of adult female learners. The findings of this study, which suggested that the lived experience of these participants was complex and intense, can be explored more fully in relation to two main areas of impact: students and educators.

### **5.2.1. Motion**

#### **Implications of Motion for Students**

A sense of motion was present in the lived experience of these students and was found to be far more complicated than simply moving forward in a linear fashion. The fact that motion was experienced as a negative, for example when it was felt to be going too quickly or too slowly, suggested that there is an optimum sense of movement for these individuals. Although there was a sense of motion found in all participants' experiences, there was no indication of a commonly held "optimum" speed. There is perhaps no way to measure such a phenomenon. But what is suggested is that individual students arrive to the new culture of post-secondary with a developed sense of how they work and learn, derived from their previous life experiences, including their work, educational and personal life. This supports several studies that recognize the wealth of knowledge and skills that adult learners are equipped with upon arrival at post-secondary (Bash, 2003; Belenky et al., 1986; MacFadgen, 2007; McInnis, 2004; Sandler, 2000). This bank of personal knowledge, which includes intuition about their individual threshold for this sensation of motion, related to the essential quality of motion in a secondary way. It supported the finding that new learning and accomplishment orients an individual toward more learning and movement toward the future. In other words, past accomplishments and the skills acquired as a result of those accomplishments have propelled these individuals toward their current experience. And in spite of obstacles, these participants exhibited great determination, suggesting an unspoken belief in or a reliance on this self-knowledge and resulting resiliency.

This sensation of motion, including when it moves too quickly and too slowly, arose for students as a result of both classroom dynamics and pressure from out of



school roles and responsibilities. This was evidence that adult learners experience schooling as part of a larger landscape, one that necessarily includes family, work and other dimensions (Knowles, 1980; MacFadgen, 2007; MacKeracher, 2004). It was observed that that the building of stresses resulting from out of school responsibilities often is realized or “peaks” in the classroom. This included having too much to do at moment in time, but also when nothing appears to be happening and a student felt stuck. This second point tied closely to the fact that the study’s participants were very dedicated and serious students. They did not want to waste a moment of their time with “inaction”, as they were motivated to extract as much as possible from their learning experience.

The discovery of this sense of motion has implications for students, but those implications, particularly as they pertain to the classroom, are complicated by the fact that students historically have less control over pedagogy than other stakeholders. What is suggested is that educational practitioners should make clear to students that they arrive with substantial personal capital, one form of which is an understanding of how they work and learn best, given the multifaceted nature of their lives. Educators can create an environment that values this personal capital through classroom practice that references past experience and actively engages it (Dewey, 1938; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Knowles, 1980; Tennant, 1993). For example, as the result of the current study, I will be actively encouraging students to reflect on their preferred learning style(s) and consider what elements in their past have led to this preference. I will also encourage them to express what their preferences suggest in terms of classroom practice.

Students should feel that they can express when the motion, stress or pressure is overwhelming at any point in the semester and ask for support. It is also incumbent upon students to construct an environment that is respectful of differences, including difference in how this sense of motion is experienced. Educators may overtly state that their classroom is one that respects difference and model this goal through curriculum choices and discourse, but students should demonstrate support as well. Respect for difference is important for multiple pedagogical reasons. Respect for different learning styles and how each individual handles the sense of motion is one more reason to do exercise respect and caring.

## **Implications of Motion for Educators**

Discussion of this theme of motion and the related topic of individualized personal capital leads to the idea of learning being co-constructed by student and teacher. The data showed the relationship between adult learners and teachers is a critical one and learning was often experienced as a collaboration between both parties. In fact, relational and connected learning are integral to several approaches to transformational learning (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Hayes and Flannery, 2000). The data suggested that these adult learners came to learning with rich, individually determined profiles. Post-modern educational theories do assert that techniques that are good for one demographic, most often realized as the dominant demographic, do not necessarily engage others in meaningful ways (Belenky et al, 1986; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tisdale, 1998). However, my study suggested that learners have some need for a core structure and some form of stability. Evidence of this need for structure and stability was actually present within the findings of this study that pertained to motion. For example, one of the participants experienced extreme frustration and a debilitating sense of no motion when no new challenges were introduced in the class. The “steadiness” of new tasks was not present, therefore, motion was absent. Additionally, motion, albeit the negative quality of too much motion, was present when a number of the participants encountered, perhaps for the first time, various scholarly norms of post-secondary culture. What was key was that participants in all cases turned to teachers for support and guidance when issues related to motion arose, indicating that teachers play a key role of “gatekeepers”.

Herein lies the dilemma presented by the discovery of the essential quality of motion. Its very presence indicates that adult learners experience learning with individually determined sensitivity and that must be respected to encourage best practice. However, this sensitivity, in this case the sensation of motion, is only experienced in relation to established norms and/or external demands. The experience of these participants was not the result of egalitarian co-construction. This links to criticism of Mezirow’s theories (1990, 1991) put forward by Belenky and Stanton (2000) and Cranton (2006), wherein most human relationships are asymmetrical and not equal. When situation sensitive pedagogy, even individualized pedagogy, is the goal, substantial input from the classroom practitioner is required. It is the educator who

provides the stable core of classroom practice. At the same time, the educator should be equally responsive to the fact that students arrive with substantial personal capital and the educator should be flexible enough to expand and change with the demands of individual learning styles. This is a step towards van Manen's (1990) pedagogical competence and the openness to multiple perspectives that comes with its practice.

## **5.2.2. Emotions**

### **Implications of Emotions for Students**

The theme of emotion also has implications at each level of intersection in the post-secondary environment. One of the most significant findings of this study was the substantial presence of negative emotional states at several points in the participants' experiences. The most prominent of these were frustration and self-doubt, but these emotions were shaded with confusion, anxiety, and even fear. The single strongest positive emotional state was pride, resulting from a sense of accomplishment, and this positive emotion appears to be powerful enough to offset the negative effects of frustration and self-doubt, arming the students with self-confidence and the ability to continue their studies. The shifting between negative and positive emotions was also a component of the previously discussed quality of motion, and suggested that there is an interactive nature of the current study's main themes and the overall complexity of the learning process.

These findings indicated that returning to school was an intensely emotional experience for these learners and consequently that the emotionality of learning needs continued exploration. The strong emotions present prior to the first day of school indicated that these participants sensed that they were undertaking something significant. Even at this early point in the journey, the negative emotions were experienced as attacks on the self, realized as "I can't learn", "I can't do this" and "I'm not going to belong." These self-perceptions were transformed over the course of their studies, and replaced with "I can write!", "I have the ability to continue" and "others should do this too!" This suggested that a major component of learning is transformation (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1990, 1991), in line with the post-modern concept of self, emphasizing fluidity and changeability. This invites the reframing of learning as part of a larger process of (re)construction which inevitably involves difficult emotions, as does

any kind of experimentation and testing. Reframing corresponds well with both the larger personal landscape (Bash, 2003; Belenky et al., 1986; MacFadgen, 2007; McInnis, 2004; Sandler, 2000) that adult learners bring to post-secondary and the main theme of this study, that the essential meaning of lived experience of these learners is something akin to building capacity and strength or a sense of expansion. This may be pedagogical competence.

It is important to note that these students appeared to arrive at this new chapter in their lives in large part equipped to endure its emotional dimensions. Despite experiencing emotional states prior to school starting and early in the semester, these participants also experienced glimmers of positivity. For example, the participants sensed that the mounting stress of balancing the full-time care of two small children with school would be tempered by finding new accommodation, and the dread of making errors in a second language would be mitigated by being able to finally engage in academic discourse. There was a certain emotional resiliency demonstrated by these learners.

One hopes that students would themselves experience both the realization that learning has a strong emotional component and that they have the strength to withstand emotional states. This might be evidenced by the orientation that these students have, at the completion of one university course, toward the future and continuous learning. This suggested that they do feel equipped to deal with more challenges. To support students, it is incumbent upon classroom educators to create an environment that values emotions and the role that they play in learning (Belenky et al, 1986; Floyd, 2003; MacKeracher, 2004; Noddings, 1994). This may take the form of overt discussions on the presence of emotions in learning, especially negative emotions and the temporality of such emotional states. Including opportunities for reflection in the curriculum (Mezirow 1990, 1991; Jarvis, 1992, 1995; van Manen, 1990, 1995, 2007) might also be considered. However, this study suggested that students are often hesitant to express emotion publically, evidenced in the finding that students often hid their emotional responses (i.e., trying not to cry, not speaking out loud when frustrated). This speaks to a larger cultural belief that associates emotions with weakness and may not be overcome easily. However, if emotions are a central component of the learning, as is

indicated by this study, then emotions should be addressed in some way by classroom educators.

As a result of the current study, I will be looking for ways to incorporate reflection in my writing projects, particularly in the longer, more complex research projects. It is my observation that such projects often evoke frustration and a sense of being overwhelmed. It may be useful for students to have a “paper mirror” (Hubbs & Brand, 2005, p. 60) or an external representation of their experience to reflect their emotions and the transitory nature of negative emotional states. Because students may be reluctant to reveal emotions in public, private reflection may be preferred. Another element to be considered is the mode of the reflection. Different cohorts might prefer online reflection over traditional paper journals and other might prefer forms of expression beyond the printed word, including art, drama or music based reflection. I believe there is tremendous potential to incorporate reflective writing in post-secondary education and a continued investigation of this important component of transformational learning is required.

### **Implications of Emotions for Educators**

Because the sharing of emotions requires a tremendous amount of trust, the creation of that trust must be forefront in any pedagogy attentive to the emotional quality of learning. Key to forming trust is clear and consistent communication. Multiple opportunities for pair or group work early in a course could facilitate communication and the creation of trust among students (Clifton, Perry, Stubbs, & Roberts, 2004; MacFadgen 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2002). Educators may wish to participate in these activities as a way of modeling open communication, and trust, consequently setting the stage for the role these play in the emotional dimension of learning. This study has found that connections with teachers are of primary importance to adult learners and the positive consequences of being able to participate in open communication with teachers was revealed. Increasing the social quality of classroom learning, making oneself available for consultation outside of class and providing generous, clear and supportive feedback on assignments will model values that could foster trust between student and teacher.

Positive emotions also featured in the lived experience of these students and although far less frequent than negative emotions, these positive emotions, particularly the joy felt at accomplishment, played a major role in the students' persistence. The fact that negativity can be offset by accomplishment implied that educators should strive to create an environment featuring constant support that is informed by an understanding of the obstacles that adult learners face (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Hagedorn, 2005; MacFadgen, 2007; Myers & de Broucker, 2006; Sandler, 2000). It should be an environment where accomplishment is possible and responded to quickly and generously. It is important to avoid comparing students to other students. As seen in the data, one of the current study's participants experienced extreme discomfort when her writing was held up to the rest of the class as a model of exceptional work. Having one's success announced in a public way was experienced as negative labelling and exclusion. The study's findings suggested that praise from a teacher is critical in offsetting negative emotions but must be handled sensitively. Since personal identity and the reconstruction of that identity is a critical component of the lived experience of these students, more private approaches should be used to encourage individual students.

### **5.2.3. Connection**

#### **Implications of Connection for Students**

That the theme of connecting to others emerged from the data is perhaps not surprising, in that belonging is a basic human need and one that is tested when one moves into a new culture - in this case post-secondary culture. The experience of, or even the fear of, being labelled and therefore considered "the other" is strong. As universities are still largely geared toward the traditional 18- to 24-year-old demographic, adult learners are, upon arrival, already clearly not of the majority. As Sandler (2000) claims, adult learners "persist against difficult odds in an institutional system that is not well calibrated for the multiple roles of adults" (p. 569). The factors that contributed to feeling excluded in this study, beyond age, included disability and health issues, language skills, ethnicity, learning styles, personality (introversion versus extroversion) and past educational attainment. As these elements readily comprise, in some way or another, all students' identity, practicing inclusion in the classroom benefits the entire student population.

Several findings of this study indicated that the participants were sensitive to and desired a sense of belonging, even before the course started. The high levels of anxiety experienced both on the day before the start of the course and on the first day itself suggested this. Participants agonized over whether or not they would fit in with other students. They also worried a great deal about connecting with the teacher, giving credence to the importance of that relationship. Further evidence of the desire to belong were the negative emotions associated with labelling, whether that labelling is overtly presented in class by another party or visible only to the student herself. The fear of rejection was understandably strong. An interesting discovery, and one that is evidence that connection and belonging have been achieved on some level by these participants, is their desire at the completion of the course to invite others to participate in not only this course specifically but university in general. By stating that “other single mothers should aim to go back to school”, “this course is a good first step for those of us going back to school” or “I would recommend that an older student do courses in university prep in order to get acquainted with the student experience again”, these participants are not only experiencing belonging themselves but they are also encouraging others to participate in that experience. This was an interesting parallel to the finding that learning and accomplishment leads to a desire for more of both of these. Similarly, experiencing connection and belonging leads to the aspiration for more of these, for both the participant and others. It spoke to the building of capacity and the taking up of space indicative of the lived experience of these learners.

I feel that this desire to encourage others to enroll in post-secondary education and their wish to engage in others’ process of returning is one of the strongest supports for transformative learning in this study. By inviting others to become learners, participants are showing that they have become learners themselves and that they feel confident enough in that role to encourage others to do the same. They have assumed the role of learner and are, perhaps unconsciously, now demonstrating that role. Cranton (2006) claims that “by definition, transformative learning leads to a changed self-perception... when people revise their habits of mind, they are reinterpreting their sense of self in relation to the world” (p.8). I believe that the participants’ desire to be involved others in learning was evidence of such a transformation.

## **Implications of Connection for Educators**

Connection and belonging involve two parties so students and teachers' roles in creating an environment where these occur are intertwined. Just as teachers create an environment that values emotions, they can also create a classroom where connections are fostered. This starts with handling diversity sensitively, and being open to difference. Students can exercise control over this, as evidenced by Ashton not wanting to reveal her disability to classmates, and not approaching the teacher to speak about it in the classroom. She determined that a private appointment in the teacher's office was what she needed. Students can set their own boundaries, determining what is best for them to belong and educators can create the conditions for this to take place.

Since adult learners seek connections with likeminded students, educators can provide opportunities for pairing or group work early in a course. The data suggested that adult learners are looking to connect with other adult learners. Based on my findings I am reconsidering how I engage student in the classroom. I often pair students up for in class activities and in the past I have made a point, particularly early in a semester, of putting adult learners together. Because adult learners might be sensitive to being labelled, I discontinued this practice. The results of the current study strongly suggested that these adult learners were searching for other similar students so I will resume the practice of pairing them up at the start of a semester so that those connections can be made.

Interactive learning, linked with interdisciplinary and problem based learning has proven to be highly effective for adult learners (Clifton, Perry, Stubbs, & Roberts, 2004; MacFadgen 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2002). Part of high impact learning for adult learners includes teachers who are aware of the complicated life-roles and life-conflicts that adult learners have and therefore are flexible and supportive when school life intersects with home life. Curriculum which explores these complexities may allow like-minded students to "appear" to each other, resulting in a new source of assistance and encouragement. Teachers should familiarize themselves with academic and counseling services on campus. When the construction of a respectful classroom, high impact learning and a consistently supportive approach to students' needs was included, the result was a sense of connection for the participants. This link between



support and connection is congruent with several similar studies (Kuh, 2005; McInnis, 2004; MacFadgen, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

A key element that contributed to the participants' sense of belonging was good communication with teachers. Good communication plays a role in each of the essential themes of motion, emotion and connection - an indication of its importance. For example, the sensation of no motion and the accompanying frustration was often the result of a lack of communication with the teacher. Additionally, there was ample evidence that an emotional state could be alleviated by clearer communication or instructions, or even a one-on-one meeting. Employing teaching techniques that use multiple modalities to better connect with the learning styles of all students was helpful. Generous, specific and supportive feedback, both written and spoken, was desired by participants; they often experienced feeling lost when that was not forthcoming. Furthermore, availability for consultation, especially at key points in the semester, is a crucial component to students' sense of belonging.

Teachers are in the unique position of being "gatekeepers" to academic culture, consequently they need to communicate the new culture's norms. This is especially the case in the first few weeks of any given course, and throughout in first-year classes generally. The anxiety and fear experienced by this study's participants early in the semester was compelling evidence of the need for clear and timely information and support. The findings of the current study, particularly the importance of the student/teacher relationship and their good communication have reinforced for me the importance of a seemingly simple practice that I undertake at the start of every semester. I send a welcome email to each of my students two weeks prior to the start of class, introducing myself and the course expectations. I also encourage students to respond to me with their concerns. In my experience, replies sometimes take the form of questions, usually about logistics such as textbooks and final exams. But just as often, the replies are expressions of excitement and very often admissions of anxiety about starting school. Allowing students to ask questions and voice their anxieties before class begins is a very simple way to ease their transition into post-secondary culture and to create an early connection between students and the teacher. To build on early positive connections between students and teachers, departments should be encouraged to have "open house" events aimed at adult learners, so that a sense of belonging can be

further strengthened. Studies ((Braxton, Bray & Berger, 2000; MacFadgen, 2007) show that faculty teaching skills have direct positive effects on students' integration and persistence in post-secondary culture. Open communication is a major component of this. Connected and relational learning is well documented in the adult learning literature (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Cranton, 2006; Hayes & Flannery, 2000) and good communication is integral to this process.

#### **5.2.4. *Considerations for Institutions***

My study's focus was on students and educators, however, the implications for institutions deserve mention. Post-secondary institutions can support adult students and transformative learning in many ways. One of these is an active commitment to campus wide student services. Services that are respectful of the fact that adult learners arrive with substantial self-knowledge and services that provide individualized help are required. There is extensive research indicating that adult learners, including those experiencing significant difficulty balancing schooling and other considerations, succeed with external supports (Bean & Metzner, 1985; MacFadgen, 2007; Samuels, 2005). The presence of emotion, particularly negative emotions, across the participants' lived experiences should incentivize institutions to include a systematic and comprehensive approach to not only emotional health but to health and wellness in general on campus because as Floyd (2003) stated "how can a campus climate be truly conducive to learning if the health of the learner is not a key variable?" (p.39).

The individualized ways of learning demonstrated by my study's participants provide motivation for ongoing research into multiple learning styles, alternative course delivery and many ways of knowing. Institutions should push for a campus wide dialogue on these aspects of student life and reach into the experience and wisdom of adult learners for this initiative. The creation of a campus office for adult learners, where students could receive specialized assistance and mentoring would be a significant benefit. Most universities have offices for other select student groups, including aboriginal, international or discipline specific cohorts. The existence of such centers, whether it is acknowledged or not, suggests institutions' understanding that connected and shared learning are important.

As was stated at the start of this chapter, the study's findings, when viewed together, suggest that the experience of adult female learners is one of building capacity. Key to this building capacity is the development of van Manen's pedagogical competence. Alternatively, this experience could be described as gaining strength, gaining voice or even taking up space. It is clear that the experience is complex and very often difficult but that it is important, not only for individual students, but for all stakeholders. Therefore the many initiatives found in this chapter require a concerted effort from students, educators and institutions. The thoughtful consideration of these initiatives and the dialogue that will result from that consideration are steps toward the pedagogical competence that van Manen strives for. This involves a constant questioning of how we orient to a phenomenon and sensitive decision making, which in turn leads to tactful and high impact practice. It is my hope that this research will invite all participants in post-secondary education to engage in such practice, through a continued examination and valuing of the complexity of the lived experience of our students.

Although I will more fully detail the impact that this study has had on me personally later in this chapter, at this point, when I am considering the current study's findings in relation to students and fellow educators, I feel the need to recognize that impact. One of major results of undertaking this study is that I see students differently. When I meet new students in my classroom and see former students on campus, I believe I now unconsciously experience our conversations through the belief that their lives are complicated and that even our seemingly simple conversations have multiple layers of complexity. The result is an increased valuing of every single student that I interact with. I feel more present and more able to be part of their experience. I wish for others to experience the same. For this reason, I would strongly encourage students, educators and also institutional leadership, to actively engage with research on the lived experience of our students. It is in all of our interests to do so.

### 5.3. A Return to Pedagogical Competence and Transformative Learning Theory

My study adds to our understanding of adult learning, and specifically transformative learning, in three important ways. I suggest that van Manen's (1990) pedagogical competence may be a component of transformative learning, that developing pedagogical competence might itself be transformative, and that both of these findings recast learners as researchers.

I began my research intending to develop my own pedagogical competence. I wanted to look deeply into the lived experience of the research participants, to believe in their experiences, and to critically reflect on the essential themes of their experiences. The goal was to develop more sensitive classroom practice that both encouraged and supported transformative learning. This was to be about me developing pedagogical competence.

What I have discovered is that transformative learning involves pedagogical competence or "becoming more thoughtfully attentively aware of aspects of human life which hitherto were merely glossed over or taken for granted" (van Manen, 1990, p. 154) in order to act with more empathy or tact in the future. I myself have come to define pedagogical competence as engaging in a new experience with an *active* appreciation of each experience's complexity and an *active* willingness to see and critically reflect on one's own and other perspectives. It involves the believing of others' experiences and genuine empathy. I believe it has a dimension of caring. When my research participants expressed the desire to help other adult female learners at the end of their class, they revealed the transformation they had experienced. They now know themselves to be students. But in wanting to assist others, and therefore participating in someone else's experience of becoming a student, they are demonstrating the desire to apply what they have learning through reflection to future practice. This is pedagogical competence, the moving toward and critically reflecting on lived experience to develop "situational perceptiveness, discernment and depthful understanding" (van Manen, 1990, p. 156). For me, the key to this "depthful" understanding involves *connecting to one's self*, and *others and the future* that these parties share.

I believe the experience of developing pedagogical competence is itself transformative, as this has certainly been the case for me. This doctoral project has transformed the way I think about living the world. Maintaining an active sensitivity to the richness of human interaction and critically reflecting on one's experiences to further strive for best practice changes how one sees oneself. One comes to understand that this is an act of co-construction, as believing in others' experiences is necessary when considering one's own experiences. van Manen (1990) claims "phenomenological projects and their methods often have a transformational effect of the researcher himself or herself. Indeed, phenomenological research is often itself a form of deep learning, leading to a transformation of consciousness, heightened perceptiveness and increased thoughtfulness" (p. 163). My development of pedagogical competence has changed how I see myself. I now know myself to be a researcher and capable of constructing knowledge. I also feel a genuine desire to be a better listener, as this has been key to my process of reflection and self-reflection. I also now feel deeply human, inextricably connected to others and our shared future. This also comes with an element of deep caring.

The development of pedagogical competence is a phenomenological process, and is therefore research. This links van Manen's (1990) theory to the literature. The adult education literature which best resonates with me does so because of its prioritizing of critical reflection and learners' ability to change. This reinforces my belief that learners are researchers, continually investigating themselves throughout their life. The constructivist theories of Dewey (1938) and Knowles (1980) hint at this rich role of researcher that learners take on. Dewey (1938) advocated for reflection since "as one moves through life...what [one] has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow, a process as long as life" (p. 42). Jarvis (1992) further emphasizes the generative and investigative nature of critical reflection. When a cognitive or emotional disjuncture occurs, according to Jarvis (1992) "theory is tried out in practice and the result is a new form of knowledge that captures social reality" (p. 78). Learners are therefore researchers.

The various theories of transformative learning (Brookfield, 1987; Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 2001; King & Kitchener, 1994; Mezirow, 1991, 2001; Taylor, 1997) highlight

overcoming assumptions or fixed thinking to create new perspectives. They highlight the agency of the learner. Mezirow (2000) states reflective discourse is key to this process, assisting learners to “[assess] reasons advanced by weighing in supporting evidence and argument and by examining alternative perspectives” (p.11). Relational or connected learning theories (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Hayes & Flannery, 2000) suggest one learns through actively searching for common points and strengths in others’ perspectives.

van Manen’s (1990) theory of pedagogical competence deserves to stand with these theories of learning because it similarly emphasizes the power of critical reflection and the valuing of believing in others’ experiences to construct knowledge. Like theories of transformative learning, its goal is also the development sensitive, empathetic future decision making. It is certainly about connection, to one’s self, others and the future. It perhaps cannot be experienced in the absence of connection. It certainly reinforces my belief that learners are researchers. If transformative learning exists, pedagogical competence may be to be a component of it. The development of pedagogical competence is phenomenological research, which incidentally has the potential to cause transformation. Learners are therefore researchers, and should always be encouraged to experience life in that way, actively questioning what they see in front of them and how, and what, it makes them feel.

## **5.4. Implications for Future Researchers**

I hope that this study will encourage other researchers to consider further investigation of the lived experience of our students. I can attest to the fact that conducting this study has impacted me in major ways, one of which is how I orient to adult learners in my classroom. It is as if I see adult learners more clearly now, as if they have come into focus, like the pieces in a kaleidoscope. Additionally, I feel open to seeing new, and yet undiscovered, ways of seeing adult learners, as that kaleidoscope shifts. I believe I see more potential in my students, now knowing that what one sees, or thinks they see, is much less than what is actually present. I also find myself wanting to

listen and be present with learners in a much more significant way. One of the challenges of this particular project has been the absence of research exclusively aimed at understanding the journey that adult female learners make when they return to post-secondary. That is both a reason to have undertaken this study and an invitation to others to continue this work.

Because female adult learners make up an increasingly significant proportion of our student demographics, more study devoted to their experience is needed. This study was limited to the experience of a single 13-week course. It would be of tremendous value to study students over a longer timeframe, including investigating the experience of contemplating a return to school, long before their courses and programs are chosen. As the return to school is often the result of significant transitions in an adult learner's life, and, as this study has found, is a major transition in itself, this would undoubtedly prove to be a rich area of inquiry. It would also be of great value to examine the experience of adult female learners after they complete their engagement with post-secondary education. What is experienced at that critical point in their journey might reveal very interesting findings about how they have transformed as a result of post-secondary learning. How their learning integrates into their life after formal education needs to be studied. Investigating how connected learning or mentorship is realized would also be of great interest to me.

As the Canadian population ages, the numbers of adult learners, female and male, can be expected to increase proportionally within post-secondary enrollment. Consequently, increased attention to this demographic would be of value. A study such as this one, but conducted with male participants, would be an interesting step toward understanding the experience of men returning to post-secondary and a significant contribution to our understanding of the innovations needed for including all adult learners. Again, because the decision to engage with post-secondary education is rooted in experiences that take place long before an individual steps onto the university campus, and must certainly impact experiences that come after, studies conducted on various aspects of the learning trajectory should be undertaken. The choices one makes in the present are informed by one's past experience, and an examination of the past better illuminates the decision making process in the present.

There is a wealth of literature (Hagedorn, 2005; MacFadgen, 2007; Sandler, 2000) documenting that a critical component of adult learners' success is external support. Despite carrying multiple adult responsibilities including family and work commitments, adult learners persist when armed with outside support and encouragement. This suggests the possibility of studying the exact nature of those supports and the interaction between adult learners and their support systems. Conversely, since having a family member or colleague (re)engage with post-secondary creates change within an existing family or work structure, and can create negative feelings and reactions, these experiences also deserve investigation.

Further research is needed into the great variety of in-class and on-campus supports that become an integral part of female adult learners' post-secondary experience. Research into the learning and teaching practices that best serve this demographic is required. This study found motion, emotions and connection to be constitutive of the learning experience, consequently classroom practice that addresses and engages these elements should be explored. The success of adult learners across a variety of delivery modes needs to be investigated, so that post-secondary institutions can provide access to a larger number of students, including adult learners who are balancing complicated life-roles. Academic supports outside the classroom deserve attention, as does the critical role of educators in adult students' experiences.

Investigation into student support is strongly recommended, with the goal of creating university campuses that aim for inclusion, not only of adult learners, but of all learners. The supports needed by seemingly dissimilar demographics may differ in type, however, all students need support and how they interface with support is a complex process. My study clearly indicated that more research is needed into best practice around a number of student supports including but not limited to those focused on health and wellness, financial aid, housing assistance, admissions, academic counseling, tutoring, mentoring and disability services. A study of how and when students engage with these services for optimum benefit would be most helpful in planning for post-secondary resource allocation. Finally an investigation into the lived experience of those who provide student support at university campuses would be an innovative addition to the investigation of best practices on campuses at a whole. Discourse and connection are key components of transformative learning, and both should be experienced as a



part of good on campus support services. Investigating the contribution of those service providers toward transformational learning would lead to better integrated support for students.

Although there is an ever-increasing body of exciting research on adult learners, not enough of that research is informed by phenomenological hermeneutics. My approach to the study of adult education provided valuable insight into the lived experience of our students and I would actively encourage those contemplating conducting research into adult learning to consider its application. It has the potential to be useful in understanding other aspects of our post-secondary system. The experiences of students, students' families, support staff, faculty, and administrators are all critical components of university culture and merit attention and understanding. My study employed journaling as a data collection methodology. However, the lived experience of adult learners or the other above mentioned individuals could be examined through the interpretive analysis of other life texts. And precisely because the experience of phenomenological analysis is such a difficult undertaking, research into the experience of the researcher would be interesting for both those who have employed this approach or are considering doing so. I have found the experience of doing phenomenological research transformational. I simply do not see human interaction the same way and even feel as though I stand differently in the world. I feel more grounded, and even physically stronger, as my body carries the knowledge of life's complexities and therefore unseen potential. This phenomenon itself deserves investigation.

## **5.5. The Importance of Remaining Ever Curious**

Since this study was heavily informed by van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenological hermeneutics, and therefore put great value on reflective practice, a final reflection on the impact of this process on me is in order. In fact, I feel compelled to provide one. Undertaking this study has resulted in significant changes in the way I perceive and understand human interaction. I say this as a researcher, educator and individual. What I have discovered as a researcher is fresh and exciting to me. The impact of experiencing that moment when a text truly reveals itself to you and validates your experiences and those of your participants cannot be underestimated. I have

described it in this study as “being hit” by the text itself, giving rise to strong emotions and physical sensations.

My findings confirm existing knowledge within the adult education field and invite future investigation, as new problems are encountered and new questions posed. I have developed as a researcher and writer and am eager to build on this. I feel I now live with pedagogical competence. This means actively reflecting on both my own decisions and those of others in an attempt to make choices tempered with genuine empathy and care. There is a meaningful parallel between the journey of the study’s participants and my own. When I now examine my own journey through my doctorate program, I see the same elements at play. I have been stuck, felt both immense frustration and great joy, and I have sought connections with research participants, committee members and my support system. As I pointed out in the call for future research, there is much work to be done, both within the field of adult education and across other disciplines using the interpretive power of phenomenological hermeneutics. This study began with an element of curiosity and it ends with greater curiosity.

The impact of this process on my classroom practice is immense. It confirmed something I have always wondered about, often while actually in the act of teaching - is there something being experienced by my students that I can’t see? This study suggested that quite possibly *most of what is being experienced* by students is an internal process and both students and educators should be made aware of this process. Journaling, or some other form of personal expression, is one important way to reveal what is being experienced and what transformations are occurring. Discourse is critical to make transformation visible. I am reminded again that we are all researchers because reflection is research. Changes may be incremental and small, but are important as individuals prepare for change. Students are actively investigating their own assumptions and beliefs systems in these moments. Learners are researchers too.

As a result of undertaking this study, I would suggest that my role in the classroom is not only to provide an environment conducive to learning, however that may be constructed by the individual learner, but an environment where the experience of learning itself is reflected upon and those reflections shared. Practicing reflection in the curriculum encourages Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning. Including sharing

fosters Belenky & Stanton's (2000) connected knowing, as learners are invited to believe in others' perspectives. Students' self-concepts and self-esteem, as well as the volatility and complexity of the learning process, should be respected. Because these goals are difficult, small victories and accomplishments should be celebrated.

As an individual, I can say with confidence that the experience of undertaking doctoral work, and this research in particular, has changed the way I think about living in the world. Human experience is immensely complex and there is much more going on in each experience and interaction than meets the eye. Maintaining sensitivity to this richness and being mindful of how best practice, in all situations, is constructed and reconstructed is a valuable asset. This knowledge leads one to live with great humility.

Any qualitative study of the lived experience of adult female learners would be inadequate, for a number of reasons, if it did not conclude with the words of the participants themselves. As member-checking is a critical component of qualitative research, participants were invited to reflect of both their original journals and the findings of the study. This maintains the spirit of collaboration, communication and connection that characterizes adult education practice. The words of the participants speak to the essential quality of their lived experience, which is the building of personal capacity. They have gained self-awareness and confidence. They are taking up more space in the world, speaking more loudly and more often. They may also be developing pedagogical competence, and therefore the ability to reflect on their actions and make more sensitive future decisions. There is greater capacity for empathy.

Shannon spoke of how the journals reflected the change that she experienced over the length of the 13-week course and how both her return to post-secondary education and the act of journaling made her "feel stronger." Reading the journals a year after they were written, she confirmed that she was a different person than the one who had composed the journals and that she was still growing. She expressed the hope that other learners would feel the same. Reflecting on her personal writing, Judy spoke of the resilience she found, claiming that the writing proved she was "really doing this and determined to be heard loud and clear". Ashton spoke of change and connection in "this project opened my eyes to the realization I am not the only one going through loneliness, hopelessness and stress on a daily basis and that being open and up front with the

teacher and myself can help everyone understand the experience.” All of these reflections point to the strength and courage of the participants and their resolve to stay with the journey and be open to transformation.

I'll give the final word to Lynne, whose last journal entry has stayed with me throughout this journey:

I want to be a good writer and I want to understand. And I'm confident I will with time. I believe I have things to say. I am here to stay. Who knows.....perhaps a book could be written...

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A. Letter of Recruitment



Thompson Rivers  
University

900 McGill Road  
Box 3010  
Kamloops, BC  
V2C 5N3  
Telephone (250) 828-5000

### Letter Of Recruitment

#### *Female Adult Learners' Return To Post-Secondary*

#### SFU Ethics Application #2010s0346

You are invited to consider participating in the above research project, to be conducted in TRU's English 060 classroom, in the winter semester of 2011.

The University and those conducting this project subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of subjects. This letter and the information it contains is given to you for your own protection and full understanding of the procedures, risks and benefits involved in this research project or experiment.

This letter of recruitment is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details, feel free to ask at anytime. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

This study will identify factors which lead to success for female adult learners in the English 060 classroom at Thompson Rivers University. Research suggests that adult learners, identified as anyone over 21, come to or return to post secondary for a variety of reasons. Since adult learners are in a different stage of life than traditional students and arrive with a wealth of life experience, they have motivations and experience challenges separate from other groups. As more and more adult learners fill post-secondary classrooms, universities must address the concerns of this demographic and this study aims to do so.

6-10 student volunteers in your English 060 classroom will be invited to write bi-weekly journals reflecting upon their experience in the writing classroom. These journals will then be analyzed for themes pertaining to the role writing plays in the return to post secondary.

Should you wish to participate, you will be asked to dedicate 1 hour every 2 weeks of the 13 week winter semester for journal writing. These confidential journals will be submitted to the researcher electronically; students' real names will not be attached to their work so that personal confidentiality will be ensured. All writing will be stored on a secure hard drive at all times. Access to the data is limited to the principal researcher. You will be mailed a copy of the results of the study and invited to a meeting to review the process, analysis and results of the study. Should the results of this study be published or presented publically in any way, your confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

No potential for distress is anticipated in this study; however students will be offered access to TRU's counseling, academic counseling and Writing Centre services if evidence of stress or anxiety presents itself.

The principal researcher will ensure that all students wish to continue with the study. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

Feel free to contact the principal researcher XXXXXXXX at phone number XXXXXXXX and email XXXXXXXX should you require more information or if you wish to participate

## Appendix B. Informed Consent



Thompson Rivers  
University

900 McGill Road  
Box 3010  
Kamloops, BC  
V2C 5N3  
Telephone (250) 828-5000

### Informed Consent

#### *Female Adult Learners' Return To Post-Secondary*

#### **SFU Ethics Application #2010s0346**

Female adult learners over the age of 21 years are invited to consider participating in the following research project, to be conducted in TRU's English 060 classroom, in the winter semester of 2011.

The University and those conducting this project subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of subjects. This form and the information it contains is given to you for your own protection and full understanding of the procedures, risks and benefits involved in this research project or experiment.

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details, feel free to ask at anytime. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. Also included here is the Subject Feedback Form.

I have been asked by XXXXXXXX of the English and Modern Languages Department of Thompson Rivers University, telephone XXXXXXXX, to participate in a research project entitled *Female Adult Learners' Return To Post-Secondary*

You will be asked to write bi-weekly journals reflecting upon your experience in the writing classroom. These journals will then be analyzed for themes pertaining to the role writing plays in the return to post secondary.

You will be asked to dedicate 1 hour every 2 weeks of the 13 week winter semester for journal writing. These confidential journals will be submitted to the researcher electronically; your real name will not be attached to your work so that personal confidentiality will be ensured. All writing will be stored on a computer external flash drive that will be locked in a secure cabinet at all times; access to the data is limited to the principal researcher. You will be mailed a copy of the results of the study and invited to a meeting to review the process, analysis and results of the study. Should the results of this study be published or presented publically in any way, your confidentiality will be maintained at all times. All data collected in connection with this study will be destroyed in 3 years.

No potential for distress is anticipated in this study; however you will be offered access to TRU's counseling, academic counseling and Writing Centre services if evidence of stress or anxiety presents itself.

The principal researcher will ensure that you wish to continue with the study. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Refusal to participate or withdrawal after agreeing to participate will have no adverse effects on your grades or evaluation in the classroom or the course.

My signature on this form indicates that I understand the information regarding this research project, including all procedures and the personal risks involved, and that I voluntarily agree to participate in this project as a subject.

I understand that my identity and any identifying information obtained will be kept confidential.

I understand that I may refuse to participate or withdraw my participation in this project at any time without consequence. My involvement or non-involvement in this project is in no way related to my employment contract or to my status as a student.

I understand that I may ask any questions or register any complaint I might have about the project with either the chief researcher named above or with XXXXXXXXXXXX, Chairperson of English and Modern Languages, Thompson Rivers University, telephone number, XXXXXXXXXX or XXXXXXXXXX Director, Office of Research, Simon Fraser University, email XXXXXXXXXX or telephone XXXXXXXXXX.

If I have any questions or issues concerning this project that are not related to the specifics of the research, I may also contact the Chair of Thompson Rivers University's Research Ethics Committee – Human Subjects, XXXXXXXXXX telephone number, XXXXXXXXXX, email XXXXXXXXXX

I have received a copy of this consent form and a Subject Feedback form.

Name: (Please Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C. Sample of Data Analysis

### Ashton's Original Journal Entry

My experience with English in high school was mostly social, meeting up with friends and students outside of class, having fun and not learning much. My experience with English 0500 was very positive and I had a lot more focused going in to the class. My teacher was fabulous, I almost think of her more as a mentor. She taught me self confidence, and made me believe in myself. After the 0500 class I was more prepared for coming into English 0600.

One the first day of English 0600, I was very nervous, scared and a little bit intimidated, as well as excited. I was also assuming that the class would be very similar to the last class that I had, positive. When I sat down in the class room I looked around at all of the students, I noticed that a lot of the students seemed really smart, as they talking about their grades from the last semester, A's B's. I received an A in my last English class, so I was feeling confident.

Then the teacher Susie walked in, she seemed very nice. I was a little nervous because I had a letter for her to sign from student services regarding my disabilities. I didn't want anyone to see the letter, because it is a little embarrassing for me. Also, I may look young, but I am not as young as some of the other students in the class, so that was a bit uncomfortable for me as well. When listening to Susie I started feeling like this isn't like the other class that I just had. It seemed a lot more intense and I started to realize that it was nothing like my last class. Susie seemed to be very structured and didn't take any excuses from anyone, which made me wonder how she was going to treat me with my disabilities. We went over some papers and information about this year semester. I was still a little nervous, but felt like I could handle it. I sat there wondering how Susie was going to be as a teacher, was she to tough, was she fair, how dose her grade assignments. The other students were very outspoken and seemed very confident as well, which did intimate me too, I heard some of the students talking about other people in the class, and it kind of gave me the high school vibe.

I didn't give Susie my letter that day; I made an appointment with her after class. Susie seemed to be quite happy with that made me feel more comfortable. She seemed quite open with allowing the students to make appointments with her, which made me feel happy that I was going to be able to find out more about her and she was able to find out more about me. After I left class I wasn't feeling as confident as I did when I walked in, I was actually feeling more worried.

## **Ashton's Structural Description 1**

LH1-8

An educational experience is a dynamic, and social one, involving connections with others, including friends, teachers and classmates. Positive educational experience involves the building of confidence and new skills, both of which can be tested in a new educational environment.

LH 9-13

Feeling a sense of belonging or connecting in the classroom is important because the absence of this, created by a perceived age difference or by having exceptionalities and having to reveal those differences to others results in discomfort or anxiety. Having a sense of connection with the teacher is part of this need for belonging.

LH 14-24

Newness and uncertainty cause an emotional reaction and are challenging for students. Contributing to this is the relationship with new classmates, teacher and a new situation. The behavior of others is how we initially make judgments about them and the situation. Communication can greatly alter initial judgments of others and can alleviate negative emotions.

LH 25-32

Fluidity of emotions is constitutive of the learning process. The classroom experience involves moving from negative to positive emotions; a good experience can be followed by a bad one and a good day by a bad one. Communication with the teacher, which includes getting enough feedback on work, is important and can contribute to this moving between good and bad feelings. Testing, not enough time to finish work and having too much work all cause stress and the feeling of pressure. Feeling stress and pressure compromises performance.

LH 33-43

Strategies used for coping with stress and test anxiety involved calming one's mind and body through the control of breathing and racing thoughts, plus positive self-talk and self-acceptance. Accomplishment leads to positive emotions and calmness but also eagerness and excitement for the next step. Again, positive emotions can exist with or be replaced with anxiety quickly.

LH 44-59

Learning is social; it occurs as a result of communication and sharing between teacher and student, plus student and student. Relationship with the teacher contributes to positive feelings about the class; one

## Ashton's First Round of Coding

1 - My experience with English in high school was mostly social, meeting up with friends and students out side of class, having fun and not learning much. **Being social, connecting with friends, belonging**

2 - My experience with English 0500 was very positive and I had a lot more focused going in to the class. **Experiencing success, positivity**

3 - My teacher was fabulous, I almost think of her more as a mentor. **Connecting with teacher**

4 - She taught me self confidence, and made me believe in myself. **Connecting with teacher, learning skills, confidence**

5 - After the 0500 class I was more prepared for coming into English 0600. **Developing coping strategies, planning or continuity, experiencing confidence**

6 - One the first day of English 0600, I was very nervous, scared and a little bit intimidated, as well as excited. **Experiencing fear, intimidation, anxiety**

7 - I was also assuming that the class would be very similar to the last class that I had, positive. **Experiencing expectations, making assumptions based on previous experience, hoping for continuity**

8 - When I sat down in the class room I looked around at all of the students, I noticed that a lot of the students seemed really smart, as they talking about their grades from the last semester, A's B's. **belonging, experiencing classroom culture, Comparing to others, connections to classmates**

9 - I received an A in my last English class, so I was feeling confident. **Accomplishment, pride, confidence**

10 - Then the teacher Susie walked in, she seemed very nice. **Relationship with teacher, positive**

11 - I was a little nervous because I had a letter for her to sign from student services regarding my disabilities. **Nervous, disability label, relationship with teacher**

12 - I didn't want anyone to see the letter, because it is a little embarrassing for me. **Isolation, difference, embarrassment, labeling**

13 - Also, I may look young, but I am not as young as some of the other students in the class, so that was a bit uncomfortable for me as well. **Age, belonging, connection, discomfort**

14 - When listening to Susie I started feeling like this isn't like the other class that I just had. **Fear, newness, anticipation, uncertainty**

15 - It seemed a lot more intense and I started to realize that it was nothing like my last class. **Academic standards, intimidation, newness**

16 - Susie seemed to be very structured and didn't take any excuses from anyone, which made me wonder how she was going to treat me with my disabilities. **Relationship with teacher, disability label, difference, academic standards**

17 - We went over some papers and information about this year semester. **Academic standards, information**

18 - I was still a little nervous, but felt like I could handle it. **Anxiety, coping, confidence**

19 - I sat there wondering how Susie was going to be as a teacher, was she too tough, was she fair, how dose her grade assignments. **Anxiety, academic standards, relationship with the teacher**

20 - The other students were very outspoken and seemed very confident as well, which did intimate me too, I heard some of the students talking about other people in the class, and it kind of gave me the high school vibe. **Belonging, classroom atmosphere, intimidation, relationships**

21 - I didn't give Susie my letter that day; I made an appointment with her after class. **Relationship with teacher, academic culture, hesitation**

22 - Susie seemed to be quite happy with that made me feel more comfortable. **Relationship with teacher, positive, comfort**

23 - She seemed quite open with allowing the students to make appointments with her, which made me feel happy that I was going to be able to find out more about her and she was able to find out more about me. **Relationship with teacher, sharing, positive, belonging**

24 - After I left class I wasn't feeling as confident as I did when I walked in, I was actually feeling more worried. **Anxiety, academic standards, classroom culture**

## Ashton's Structural Description 2

LH1-8

A **positive** educational experience is a dynamic, **emotional** and social one, involving connections with others, including friends, teachers and classmates. **It also inherently involves a dynamic relationship with one's self.** Such an experience involves the building of confidence and **acquisition** of new skills, both of which can be tested in a new educational environment. **Reflection on learning itself is part of the learning process.**

**\*post-coding additions in bold.**

## Ashton's Second Round of Coding

- 1 - My experience with English in high school was mostly social, meeting up with friends and students out side of class, having fun and not learning much. Being social, connecting to friends, belonging  
*past experience, retrospection, belonging*
- 2 - My experience with English 0500 was very positive and I had a lot more focused going in to the class.  
Experiencing success and positivity  
*positive classroom experience*
- 3 - My teacher was fabulous, I almost think of her more as a mentor. Connecting with teacher  
*teacher, positivity, connection*
- 4 - She taught me self confidence, and made me believe in myself. Connecting with teacher, learning skills, experiencing confidence  
*confidence, success, moving forward*
- 5 - After the 0500 class I was more prepared for coming into English 0600. Developing coping strategies, planning or continuity  
*preparedness, success, growth*
- 6 - One the first day of English 0600, I was very nervous, scared and a little bit intimidated, as well as excited. Experiencing fear, intimidations, anxiety  
*fear, energy, anxious*
- 7 - I was also assuming that the class would be very similar to the last class that I had, positive.  
Experiencing expectations, making assumptions based on previous experience  
*assumptions, expectations*
- 8 - When I sat down in the class room I looked around at all of the students, I noticed that a lot of the students seemed really smart, as they talking about their grades from the last semester, A's B's.  
belonging, experiencing classroom culture, comparing to others, connection with classmates  
*community, belonging*
- 9 - I received an A in my last English class, so I was feeling confident. Accomplishment, pride, confidence  
*positivity, strength*
- 10 - Then the teacher Susie walked in, she seemed very nice. Relationship with teacher, positive  
*teacher, positivity*
- 11 - I was a little nervous because I had a letter for her to sign from student services regarding my disabilities/ Nervous, disability label, relationship with teacher  
*isolation, difference, anxiety, teacher relationship*
- 12 - I didn't want anyone to see the letter, because it is a little embarrassing for me. Isolation, difference, embarrassment, labeling  
*shame, labelling, difference*
- 13 - Also, I may look young, but I am not as young as some of the other students in the class, so that was a bit uncomfortable for me as well. Age, belonging, connection, discomfort  
*belonging, discomfort, age, connection*
- 14 - When listening to Susie I started feeling like this isn't like the other class that I just had. Fear, newness, anticipation, uncertainty  
*anxiety, fear, teacher*
- 15 - It seemed a lot more intense and I started to realize that it was nothing like my last class. Academic standards, intimidation, newness  
*rising fear, panic*

17 - We went over some papers and information about this year semester. Academic standards, information

academic standards, clarity

18 - I was still a little nervous, but felt like I could handle it. Anxiety, coping, confidence

anxiety, confidence, self-sustaining

19 - I sat there wondering how Susie was going to be as a teacher, was she too tough, was she fair, how dose her grade assignments. Anxiety, academic standards, relationship with the teacher

teacher, uncertainty, clarity

20 - The other students were very outspoken and seemed very confident as well, which did intimate me too, I heard some of the students talking about other people in the class, and it kind of gave me the high school vibe. Belonging, classroom atmosphere, intimidation, relationships

comparison, isolation

21 - I didn't give Susie my letter that day; I made an appointment with her after class. Relationship with teacher, academic culture, hesitation

teacher, caution, planning

22 - Susie seemed to be quite happy with that made me feel more comfortable. Relationship with teacher, positive, comfort

teacher, comfort

23 - She seemed quite open with allowing the students to make appointments with her, which made me feel happy that I was going to be able to find out more about her and she was able to find out more about me. Relationship with teacher, sharing, positive, belonging

connection with teacher, positivity, community

24 - After I left class I wasn't feeling as confident as I did when I walked in, I was actually feeling more worried. Anxiety, academic standards, classroom culture

teacher, worry, loss

? relationship with students  
\*check cham

rising fear  
rising anxiety

## Ashton's (LH1, lines 1-24) Frequency Counts

Academic standards 6	Learning skills 1
Accomplishment 1	Loss 1
Age 2	Making assumptions 1
Anticipation 1	Moving forward 1
<b>Anxiety 8</b>	Nervous 1
<b>Belonging 8</b>	Newness 1
Caution 1	Panic 1
Clarity 2	Past experience 1
Confidence 5	Planning 1
Connection 3	<b>Positivity 8</b>
Classroom culture 3	Positive classroom experience 1
Connections with classmates 1	Preparedness 1
Connecting to friends 1	Pride 1
<b>Connecting with teacher 16</b>	Relationships 1
Continuity	Retrospection 1
Comfort 2	Self-sustaining 1
Community 2	Shame 1
Comparison 1	Sharing 1
Developing coping strategies 2	Social 1
Difference 3	Strength 1
Disability 1	Success 1
Discomfort 2	Uncertainty 2
Energy 1	Worry 1
Embarrassment 1	
Expectations 2	
Fear 5	
Growth 1	
Hesitation 1	
Intimidation 3	
Isolation 3	
Labeling 2	



## LH 1 Ashton's Coding (Research Subject Coding)

- 1 - My experience with English in high school was mostly social, meeting up with friends and students out side of class, having fun and not learning much. *positive, social, fun*
- 2 - My experience with English 0500 was very positive and I had a lot more focused going in to the class. *Positive, different experience*
- 3 - My teacher was fabulous, I almost think of her more as a mentor. *Positive, fabulous teacher, mentor*
- 4 - She taught me self confidence, and made me believe in myself. *Positive teaching experience, confidence*
- 5 - After the 0500 class I was more prepared for coming into English 0600. *Confident and prepared*
- 6 - One the first day of English 0600, I was very nervous, scared and a little bit intimidated, as well as excited. *Emotional*
- 7 - I was also assuming that the class would be very similar to the last class that I had, *positive*. *positive*
- 8 - When I sat down in the class room I looked around at all of the students, I noticed that a lot of the students seemed really smart, as they talking about their grades from the last semester, A's B's. *Intimidating, Absent*
- 9 - I received an A in my last English class, so I was feeling confident. *Positive*
- 10 - Then the teacher Susie walked in, she seemed very nice. *relieved*
- 11 - I was a little nervous because I had a letter for her to sign from student services regarding my disabilities. *nervous*
- 12 - I didn't want anyone to see the letter, because it is a little embarrassing for me. *embarrassed*
- 13 - Also, I may look young, but I am not as young as some of the other students in the class, so that was a bit uncomfortable for me as well. *uncomfortable*
- 14 - When listening to Susie I started feeling like this isn't like the other class that I just had. *scared, worried*
- 15 - It seemed a lot more intense and I started to realize that it was nothing like my last class. *scared, nervous*
- 16 - Susie seemed to be very structured and didn't take any excuses from anyone, which made me wonder how she was going to treat me with my disabilities. *insecure*
- 17 - We went over some papers and information about this year semester. *reviewing*
- 18 - I was still a little nervous, but felt like I could handle it. *confident, strength*
- 19 - I sat there wondering how Susie was going to be as a teacher, was she to tough, was she fair, how dose her grade assignments. *questioning*

20 - The other students were very outspoken and seemed very confident as well, which did intimidate me too, I heard some of the students talking about other people in the class, and it kind of gave me the high school vibe.  
*Intimidated*

21 - I didn't give Susie my letter that day; I made an appointment with her after class.  
*found solution*

22 - Susie seemed to be quite happy with that made me feel more comfortable.  
*positive*

23 - She seemed quite open with allowing the students to make appointments with her, which made me feel happy that I was going to be able to find out more about her and she was able to find out more about me.  
*happy, positive*

24 - After I left class I wasn't feeling as confident as I did when I walked in, I was actually feeling more worried.  
*worried*

LH2

25 - This week I am having a lot of mixed feeling, I feel like someday are going very well and other days seem more difficult to get through.  
*Mixed emotions*

26 - I feel that with it being so close to the end of the course, there is a lot more pressure and very little time to do anything.  
*Stress*

27 - I have three essays, a research project, pulse homework, worksheets assignments ect to do by the middle of April, it is becoming very stressful.  
*Stressful*

28 - On some of the other days I feel good like my teacher is on the same page and the class is communicating well, everything seems to run smooth.  
*good day*

29 - The most difficult part of the course for me was the midterm.

30 - I felt that with all the pressure and stress of it, made me do more poorly then I am capable of doing in a more comfortable setting.  
*Test Anxiety  
Anxiety*

31 - I also thought that with a lot of the work sheets that we were suppose to study off of weren't corrected with the right answers, so I couldn't use most of the material that I had for studying.  
*Observation*

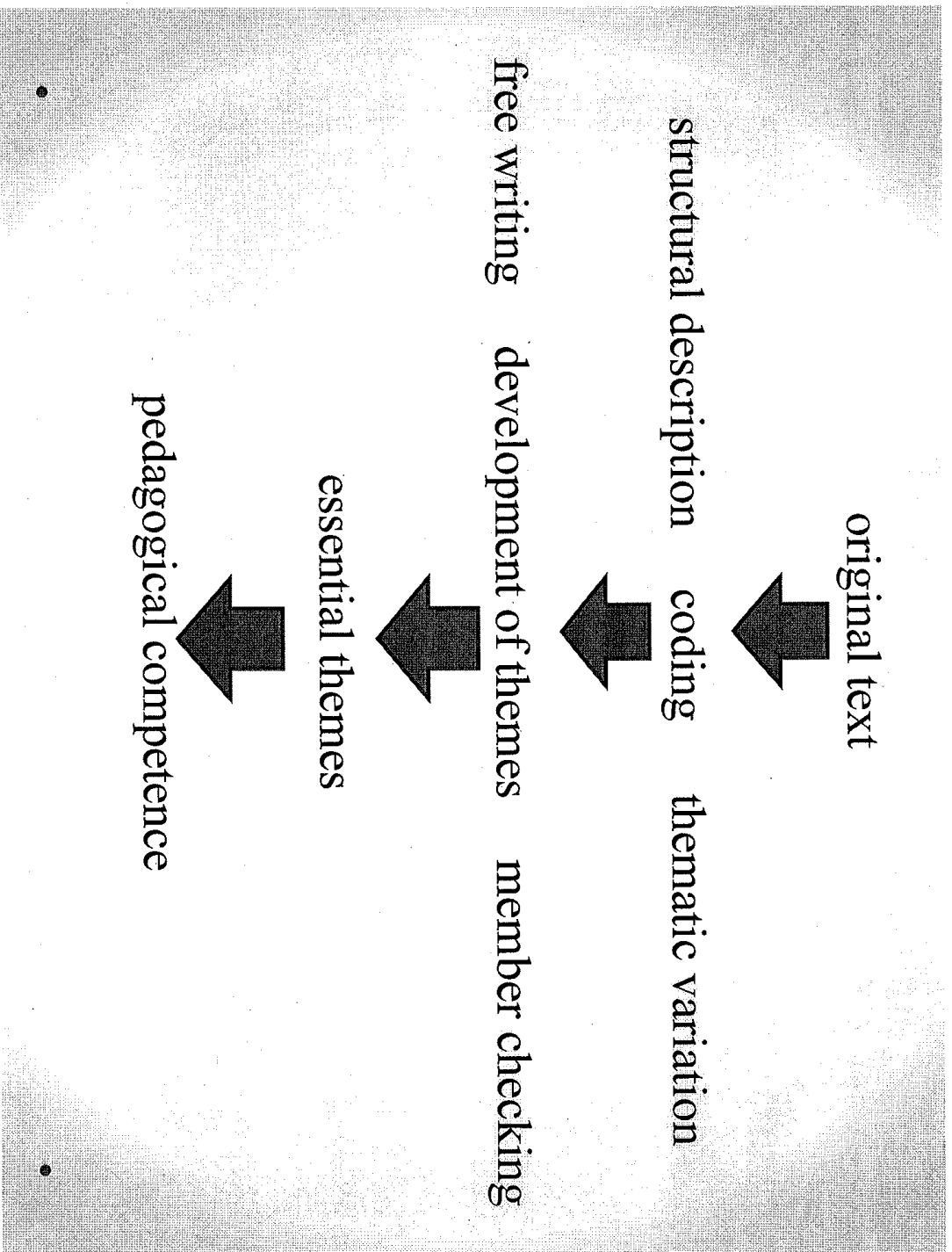
32 - I also felt that there was quite a large amount of writing and very little time to complete all the answers that she wanted in paragraph form.  
*complaining*

33 - The way that I have dealt with these difficulties, are trying to stay calm, positive and focused.  
*Positive*

34 - I would take deep, big breaths and think to my self its okay, stay calm.

35 - I would also keep telling myself that I am going to do well, and just go through it the best that I can  
*calming strategy  
positive*

36 - I even tried picturing the times in the class that we went over some of the questions, hoping that I would remember some of the answers.  
*remembering*



The following is a commentary on the process of phenomenological reduction (diagrammed on the previous page) that was employed in my study.

I began by reading several times over a single journal entry. After many readings I divided the journal entry into manageable sections of usually about 8-10 sentences. Many of the participants' journals were already divided into paragraphs by the authors themselves. I proceeded to do a reading of each "section" and arrived at a structural description or a "paraphrase" that summarized the main themes of each section.

The entire journal entry was then divided into the smallest meaningful units (i.e. sentences) and each individual sentence was read and re-read and coding was applied. I then cross checked the structural descriptions with the codes to develop a more complete structural description.

I also used the strategy of thematic variation, which involved doing physical diagramming on large sheets of paper in an attempt to combine potentially similar codes into "families" of daughter nodes and then further mother nodes. Single codes were removed and added in imaginative variation to determine the essential qualities of each mother node or emerging theme. The diagrams looked like reverse family trees, in that a large number of codes were lined up at the bottom of a diagram and then connected to a daughter and possibly a mother node in an attempt to arrive at larger themes. Reflection on the preliminary findings in the form of free writing was also employed, allowing for exploration of possibilities that diagramming did not reveal.

Preliminary findings were shared with the research participants to determine if the emerging themes were plausible or possible interpretations of the experience under investigation. Research participants were invited to engage in their own process of coding, to add to the understanding of the experience and to allow participants to "try out" phenomenological reduction for themselves.

All forms of analysis were then considered and cross checked and ten themes emerged as viable. A further refining of these ten themes revealed the three main themes of motion, emotion and connection. The research participants were again invited to review these findings and these three themes then formed the basis of the study's results.

