DISSERTATION

In & Out of the Learning Community:

A Phenomenological Study of the Learning Community Experience

Of Adult Learners

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY BARBARA A. JACKOWSKI ENTITLED IN AND OUT OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LEARNING COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE OF ADULT LEARNERS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

In & Out of the Learning Community: A Phenomenological Study of the Learning Community Experience Of Adult Learners

This qualitative study explored the lived experience of adult learners who had participated in a learning community. The phenomenon was examined through data collected by interviews with five students who had completed Associate of Art degrees through a learning community and then continued the upper division work towards a Bachelor of Arts in a more traditional setting.

The structures of connection, support, and sentiments provided the framework for the meaning and essence of the phenomenon. Connection describes the relational experience of the participants in and out of the learning community. The participants experienced connection in student-to-student, student-to-faculty, and student-to-institution relationships. The structure of support described the means and methods used in and out of the learning community to address the obstacles that threatened the success of the adult learners. The need for systemic support, academic support, and emotional support was shared by the participants. The third structure of sentiments emerged from the attitudes, thoughts, and judgments the participants had for their learning community and more traditional experience. Considered together these structures frame the essence of their experience, a subtle shift. As a result of exposure to a learning community, as the participants transitioned into the more traditional educational setting they experienced a

small but important shift in attitude or behavior reflecting their new situations. Each participant experienced a subtle shift as they proceeded from the learning community into the more traditional environment. Each experienced a shift in how they perceived themselves as students, a shift that redefined their meaning of the roles and responsibilities of the system and their participation with that system.

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DEDICATION

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1

Out of the ashes: Mattie's Story 1
A Dream Denied 1
Looking Back 2
A Different Experience 3
Vignette Summary 3
Personal Reflections 4
Dissertation Organization 8
The Situation of Higher Education 9
The Adult Student Population 10
Educational Reform 13
The Need 13
One Reform Effort 15
Gaps in the Research 17
Significance of this Study 18
Purpose of this Study 18
Research Questions 19
Definition of Terms 19
Researcher Perspective 20
Conclusion 20

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW 22

Learning Communities 22
Background 22
The Many Faces of Learning Communities 24
The Learning Community Learning Environment 26
Value-added Effects of Learning Communities 30
Summary 36
Adult Learners and Learning 36
Adult Learner Profile 37
Adult Learning Theories 39
Barriers to Learning 42
Summary 46
Conclusion 46

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY 48

Introduction 48
Research Design 48
Theoretical Background 48
Method of Inquiry 50
Site and Participants 52

Data Analysis and Form of Results 56
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis 56
Trustworthiness 60
Evaluation 60
Summary 61

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS 62

Overview 62
The Participants 62
Susan 63
Malik 64
Katherine 64
Roya 65
Weena 66
Summary 67
Structures 67
Connection 67
Support 77
Sentiments 83
Summary 89
A Subtle Shift 89
Summary 94
Conclusion 95

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions 96

Introduction 96
Findings in Relation to the Research Questions 97
Researcher Assumptions and Biases 98
Summary 103
Findings in Relation to the Literature 105
Literature on Learning Communities 105
Summary 111
Recommendations for Practice and Research 111
Recommendations for Practice 112
Recommendations for Further Research 113
Closing Reflections 114

Epilogue 116

References 120

Appendices 125

Appendix A 126

Examples of Coding Process 126
Appendix B 127
Interview Protocol 127
Appendix C 128
Letter of Recruitment 128
Appendix D 129
Memorandum of Understanding 129
Appendix E 131
Informed Consent Form 131

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Out of the ashes: Mattie's Story

She was excited. They had finally posted the position. She was finally going to get her dream job. It was right up her alley. After all, she was already doing much of the work. As a matter of fact that was why the position was being posted. It had been necessary to create a new position because she had been working outside of her classification for the last several months. After 10 years she was finally moving up the ladder. And it meant a much needed raise.

All of her coworkers were excited for her. They kept telling her there was no doubt that it was her job. She knew everything there was to know about it and everyone always came to her for the answers. And she knew she had nailed the interview. She was prepared for every question. She could tell the committee had been impressed. During the second interview the director had even asked her opinion and said he would look into implementing some of her suggestions. It seemed like it was just a matter of moving her things into the new office.

A Dream Denied

When two weeks had passed and she still had not heard anything, she approached the director. He hesitantly explained that the job had been offered to someone else; someone younger, less experienced and less knowledgeable. How could that be? She knew the job inside and out. She knew the people. She knew the policies and procedures. She knew the culture. All of this was true. But she didn't have a degree. He suggested she go back and get a degree so that the next time there was an opening she would be ready.

Looking Back

Mattie, a pseudonym given to a real student, had tried to go to the local community college right out of high school, but it seemed futile. She didn't know what she wanted to do so was just taking classes here and there. Some of them she thought she was supposed to take; some she took because she thought they might be interesting. This kind of hit-and-miss approach made her education feel very fragmented and disconnected with each class being discrete unto itself with no connection to other classes or disciplines. She was afraid to ask anyone for help because she felt like she was wasting her time and theirs since she didn't know what she wanted to do. She felt out of place because she didn't know anybody there and when she did meet someone in a class the two of them would end up in different classes the next term, so their connection would fade. And money was always tight. Not only did she need to pay for books and tuition, but the time she spent in classes and studying was time taken away from earning a living.

Getting married and having kids only compounded the problem. That meant there was even less time and money. Working full-time, she could only take classes in the evening. That meant she had a limited number of classes to choose from and sometimes it was impossible to get the classes she needed during evening hours. She also was limited by the number of classes she could take. With a family at home she couldn't take classes every night of the week and study all weekend. She was limited to one or two classes a term and at that rate it was going to take forever to get a degree. And besides, everyone in her classes was so much younger than she. When the other students would talk of going out after class or going to a party over the weekend, she was talking about helping her

kids with their homework or doing laundry and making the next day's lunches. The whole process had proven so overwhelming that eventually she just gave up.

A Different Experience

Losing out on her dream job had been enough to make Mattie try again. One day she heard a co-worker talking about school. Mattie knew she worked full-time and had kids, so she asked the co-worker how she was able to do it. Her co-worker told her about a program designed specifically for the full-time working adult. As the co-worker continued to describe the program, Mattie knew she had found what she needed.

The program that Mattie entered was based on a cohort model. This allowed her more time to get to know her fellow classmates and eventually form study groups with some. All of the courses were offered nights, weekends, or online eliminating the scheduling issues she had faced before. The courses offered each term were linked by some common thread making the curriculum more cohesive. And the curriculum was mapped so she didn't have to worry about whether she was fulfilling all of her requirements or what she should take each term. The relationships she established not only with her fellow students but with some of the faculty made her feel like she belonged there and caused her to gain confidence in her ability to succeed. As she was telling me her story she said when she first started she thought if she could just get her Associate of Arts degree she would be happy. But now she was thinking nothing less than a bachelor's degree and seriously considering a master's.

Vignette Summary

Mattie's story is just that, her story. However, as I have talked with adult learners over the years, I have found that her story is a common one. Students who find

themselves attempting higher education later in life often find it a daunting task. Their lives are filled with many obligations, each as demanding as the next. And they often have insufficient resources, be it time, money, energy or support to meet all the demands. For Mattie, the decision to attempt higher education again was fraught with issues surrounding her past experience, her current circumstances, and her future prospects. In her case the answer was a community of learners similar to herself. The program met her time and scheduling needs and provided the support she needed to stick with it.

The program Mattie joined was a learning community. Learning communities are becoming more commonplace on college campuses across the country. So too are adult learners. Learning communities are designed to meet the needs of specific groups of students. Adult learners have needs that are much different than traditional college students. It is my hope to share the knowledge I have gained from this research project to increase the effectiveness of learning communities and reduce the obstacles for adult learners seeking higher educations.

Personal Reflections

My first exposure to an adult learner was my mom. In the late '60s she decided she needed to return to school. In order for her to advance in her profession she needed a degree and for her own edification she enjoyed learning. So she started taking classes at the local junior college. It was obvious from the beginning that she was not a "typical" student. First, mom's family circumstances were much different from her fellow classmates. She was a mother and a grandmother, so her life experience was much different. That experience included caring for us kids still at home and her elderly parents.

Mom also worked full-time outside of the home. That meant she could only take classes in the evening which significantly impacted her educational experience. First, it meant there were limited class offerings and that required classes were harder to come by as they were not offered as often in the evenings and when they were, fewer sections were offered. In addition, being an evening only student meant she couldn't go full-time. With her work and family obligations she simply could not attend class four nights a week. It was daunting when she realized how long it was going to take to complete her AA degree. And to add to an already complex situation fewer services were available for the evening only students. For example, mom would have to arrange to take time off of work to meet with an advisor as there were no advising appointments after 5:00 pm.

Mom was not a traditional student. She was the proverbial square peg in the round hole. Her classes were directed to a more traditional audience but her age and life circumstances brought a different perspective to the classroom. Working limited her time, her opportunities, and her access to resources. She was often challenged to the breaking point. But she did manage to persist for 6 years finally achieving her AA.

Fast forward 20 years. In the late '80s I was the reentry adult. I was back for a master's degree. While I faced some of the same challenges as my mother, what I remember most was the intimidation I felt when I walked into my first class and realized how different I was from everyone else. They were so much younger. They had so much more energy than I did. Fresh out of their bachelor's degrees, they knew the academic lingo. They seemed so much more confident and more at ease than I did. I didn't know if I could make it. My insides were jelly. I just knew that eventually someone was going to realize there had been a mistake; I really should not have been accepted into the program,

and I would be asked to leave. The feeling that I did not belong to and was not a real part of the group was often overwhelming.

At the end of my last quarter I was given the departmental "Spark Plug" award. I was always the one forming the study group or heading up the class project. I was the one the other students would look to for guidance and advice. I was the one always seeking to bring our little department together formally and informally and to include everyone. As the department chair was saying these things about me, I finally realized that the very qualities that set me apart from my fellow classmates imbued my educational experience with a richness not otherwise possible.

Upon completion of my master's degree I started teaching in several community colleges. Early on I learned that being adjunct meant you got the leftover classes, those with which the full-time faculty did not want to be bothered. In one case that meant I accepted an assignment teaching a very large class on a very unusual schedule. It was clear from the beginning that this assignment was unique in many ways.

First, the students were different. The entire class was made up of full-time working adults. The average student was a 48 year old African American female. Ninety percent of the students had children still in their homes. Sixty-five percent were single parents. Many were caring for elderly parents. Most had tried to go to college while they were younger but for a plethora of reasons had been unsuccessful. Most were concerned whether they had the academic ability or stamina to be successful this time.

Even their characteristics were different from most traditional students. Class discussions were lively with a great deal of interchange between students and the students and me. There was even discussion bringing in elements from the other classes they were

taking that same semester. These students were excited about what they were learning. They read the material. They participated in class. They would stay after and talk to me. They talked with each other in and out of class. They engaged the material often bringing relevant personal examples or experiences bearing on the subject matter. Going to school was a big sacrifice for them, and they were going to get the most out of it.

The approach to education was also different in this program. It was based on a cohort model. My class consisted of 90 students who were all taking the same three classes together. I had half of the class every other Monday (A group one Monday, B group the next) and the whole group six Saturday afternoons throughout the semester. It was also different from my other assignments as I was expected to work in collaboration with the instructors from the other courses the students had during that semester, three English instructors and one Humanities instructor. We were to use this time to discuss pedagogy, assignments, student issues, policies and procedures, curriculum, anything relevant to student success. We also worked in collaboration with student services. The program had a dedicated counselor who also participated in the student success discussion meetings. And the administration was cooperative and supportive making the entire program possible.

Even though these students were similar to my mother and me, their educational experience was very different from our experiences. What I came to realize was that the difference in this program was not the schedule or the group or even the faculty, although these were significant. But the real difference was that this was a community of learners. They had a vested interest in the success of each other. These students had the opportunity to interact with each other more frequently and in more ways than students in

traditional higher education settings. They wrestled with the material together and with me, in class and out of class and between classes. And they were given the support they needed to succeed. They felt connected to each other and to the institution. A sentiment often expressed was that this was learning at its best to which I responded with a sense of pride and accomplishment. But at the same time it left me wanting more. I have become increasingly interested in learning communities for adult learners and so am pursuing my doctoral dissertation focused on that group.

Dissertation Organization

My dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter 1begins with the story of Mattie to provide an introduction to my subject. Her story is typical of many adult learners coming into higher education. I continue with my personal reflections giving background and insight into my own experience and my interests in the subject matter. In addition, I discuss how the literature led me to the problem I chose to study. Following this I state my research problem, my research questions, and define relevant terms. Chapter 1 concludes with my researcher's perspective.

Chapter 2 consists of a review of the literature used in this study. I cover literature pertinent to my research questions. First, I look at learning communities. Then I consider adult learners.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology I chose for pursuing my research and the rationale behind that choice. I then discuss the site and population I selected for this study. Chapter 3 continues with details on sample selection, data collection, data analysis, and the strategies I employed to ensure the trustworthiness of my study.

Chapter 4 presents the results of my study. Through the voices of the students who participated, I explore the lived experience of adult learners in and out of the learning community. I consider the structures and essence of the experience as related by the participants.

In the fifth and final chapter I summarize my findings, considering them in relationship to my research questions and the literature. Further, I provide some recommendations for improved practice and future research. I conclude with some final reflections.

To understand the need for this study I started with stories and examples from my personal and professional experience that heightened my awareness of some of the issues impacting student satisfaction and success. Completing the picture I situate the need for this study within existing literature on adult learners and educational reform efforts including learning communities.

The Situation of Higher Education

It becomes clear that consideration must be given to the way higher education is conducted when one is made aware that "nearly half of the nation's college students drop out after their first year" (Smith, 2003, p. 19). The call for curricular change and innovation echoes down the halls of academia. This should not be surprising as the current system is still reminiscent of the early colleges in America. Our original system of higher education was founded to provide a liberal education to upper class White males (Hawthorne, 1997). As the system evolved emphasis was placed on the professor and his area of research and expertise (Fuhrman, 1997). Gaff and Ratliff (1997) describe the evolutionary process and its eventual outcome.

> The history of the undergraduate curriculum is marked by the growth of specialization and proliferation of programs and courses, and while this specialization has generated a vast richness of scholarship, it has often led to disconnected bits of information, fragmentation of the learning experience of students, and disintegration of the academic community. (p. xiv)

They go on to explain that this trend is changing as more and more of the stakeholders in higher education find it dissatisfactory.

A key element forcing the change in higher education is a student body radically different from the traditional 18-24 year old, White, middle to upper class male student. It is a more ethnically diverse student body. "College enrollments for African Americans, Asian, American Indian, and Latino students increased by 57.6 percent from 1983-1993" (Rendon & Hope, 1996, p. 21). Rhoads and Valadez (1996) are even more specific when they state "over half the students who attend community colleges are non-white" (p. xi). There are now more women on higher education campuses. According to Garcia and Ratliff (1997), "women of all ages, colors, and classes have entered higher education in large numbers and represent 55.2 percent of the undergraduates enrolled on our campuses" (p. 119). There has also been an increase in the number of students working while going to school (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). And most pertinent to this project, Kiely, Sandmann, and Truluck (2004) state "the strongest growth in educational participation in the past two to three decades has been in part-time enrollments of students over age twenty-five" (p. 17).

The Adult Student Population

In his overview of the adult degree movement, Maehl (2004) reports almost half of the students are adult learners. But the issue becomes even more acute when we consider the population not in higher education. Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl,

Levin, Milam, and Turner (2007) explain in their report for the Lumina Foundation for Education, entitled *Returning to Learning*, there are 54 million adults in our workforce lacking college degrees. Even more astonishing, 34 million of those have no college at all. So the issues surrounding adult learners are of significance to institutions of higher education and are not apt to go quietly away.

Adult learners are different from traditional students in many ways. First, they tend to have more roles they must balance (Pusser et al., 2007). They work. For many these are not casual throwaway jobs. Adult learners are usually on a career path that demands a high level of commitment. They are often parents, entailing the myriad responsibilities necessary for growing, running, and maintaining a family. Many have social obligations including religious commitments, community organizations, or volunteering their time and talents to help others. And then they are students, often part-time students due to the many other time commitments they have prior to seeking an education.

Another difference of importance to the adult learner lies with the institution. The curriculum, the student services, and the schedules are designed to meet the needs of 18-24 year olds (Pusser et al., 2007). This means that adult learners often lack sufficient or appropriate resources necessary for success. And the resources that are available are usually not designed specifically for the adult learner but rather are adapted from systems designed for younger, full-time students (Pusser et al.). For example, a significant proportion of adult students are first generation students (Pusser et al.). Those students start their college careers with at least two strikes against them. Combining the two attributes of "adult learner" and "first generation" means they are at a higher level for risk

of failure and in greater need of support services (Pusser et al.). While most institutions have resources for first generation students, the concern is whether these resources are available to and sensitive to the adult first-generation student.

A third area of difference between adult learners and traditional students has to do with the mean and the method of the adult returning to higher education.

> Whether enrolled in community colleges or four-year institutions, adults often follow nontraditional pathways, such as continuing-education and extension programs, contract education arrangements and programs offered online, at satellite campuses, or at for-profit colleges (Pusser et al., 2007, p. 3).

Often these programs do not lead to the security of an associates or bachelor's degree. Pusser et al. further note "Rarely are adult learners' higher education enrollments continuous; such students may enroll in courses to meet short-term goals . . . withdraw for a period of time, and then re-enroll" (p. 11).This can impact those responsible for setting policy as they tend to stereotype adult learners primarily as "displaced workers and homemakers seeking to enter the job market, a group in need of relatively short-duration job training" (Pusser et al., p. 16). Thus, policy tends to be more in support of groups considered more substantitive, students who start and continue the whole way through the system as it was intended, the traditional student.

Bringing all of this into perspective and relationship, John S. Levin of University of California, Riverside, developed a continuum for considering the characteristics of adult and nontraditional students (Pusser et al., 2007). Some of the characteristics of this group of students include lack of skills, lack of resources, parenthood, single parenthood, first generation college student, part-time enrollment, lower socioeconomic status, employment of 20 hours per week or more, limited institutional support, intermittent attendance, poor self-image, minority status, financial need, participation in a program

outside of higher education. The purpose of the continuum is to identify "the degree to which a given adult learner is at risk of failure in the postsecondary environment" (Pusser et al., p. 5). The continuum starts at minimal risk and continues through ultra-high risk. Students at minimal risk would have one of the aforementioned characteristics such as minority status or single parenthood. A student at moderate risk would demonstrate two or three of the characteristics such as minority status and single parenthood and financial need. A student at high risk would demonstrate many characteristics such as the three previously mentioned and part-time enrollment and lack of skills. The student at ultra-high risk demonstrates many of the characteristics already considered as well as participation in programs outside the mainstream of higher education such as continuing or contract education. The relevance of this is understood when considering Levin's statistics on adult learners. He states "of the 6.2 million students in credit programs in community colleges, 3.5 million are estimated to be at moderate or high risk. This figure does not include the estimated 5 million community college students not registered in credit-bearing programs" (Pusser et al., p. 7).The needs of adult learners are many and institutions of higher education are challenged to meet them.

Educational Reform

The Need

Smith, MacGregor, Matthews and Gabelnick (2004) speak to the need of reforming higher education when they state "A widespread national consensus is emerging about the issues we face. It is clear that we are on the edge of nearly universal higher education while we are still operating with an infrastructure built for a more selective, homogeneous student body and more generous financial resources" (p. 9). That

"more selective, homogeneous student body" is a relic of the past. Clearly when "only 16 percent of the student population may be described as 'traditional'" (Smith et al., p. 6) the academy must reconsider who it serves and how to serve them.

Today's student body is unlike the traditional student in ways beyond age, race, and gender. And meeting the needs of this population presents new challenges such as addressing different attendance patterns. Many more students are "commuter" students and fewer are attending only one college for their entire education (Smith et al., 2004). Thus issues surrounding transfer and inter-institutional articulation are more prevalent and more complex. "There is substantial lateral movement across four-year institutions and considerable reverse transfer between two-year and four-year schools" (Smith et al, p. 6). The academy is further challenged by the growing demand from business and industry, as well as some within the academy, to provide a new kind of education, a more practical education that emphasizes "teamwork and collaboration and developing problem-solving skills rather than memorization and the accumulation of facts that will soon become obsolete" (Smith et al, p. 7). These student-related elements alone are sufficient to cause us to reconsider our system of higher education. That will involve considering the structures and practices of higher education.

"In spite of the calls for reform . . . much about higher education has changed but little in the last hundred years" (Smith et al., 2004 p. 15).The practice remains of assessing "education" by the number of credit hours and assigning grades with little attention being paid to deep learning (Smith et al.). The bottom line is all too often based on "the most bang for the buck" rather than on best practice (Smith et al.) The common discipline based delivery by academic departments creates an atmosphere of autonomy

not conducive to cooperation or collaboration. This can lead to the perception of a fragmented, non-cohesive series of seemingly unrelated courses (Smith et al.). These structures and practices can become obstacles to the success of today's student.

From these student and structural considerations three themes in restructuring emerge. The highest priority is to provide an education that is both effective and accessible to a growing and increasingly diverse student population. The second theme for effective restructuring involves recognizing the differences between learners and developing and utilizing new and different approaches to education in order to reach all students. And third is the need to demonstrate an integral relationship between higher education and society at large by providing an education "that is squarely rooted in the twenty-first century and addresses local, regional, and increasingly global issues" (Smith et al., 2004 p. 10). Altogether institutions must get beyond "business as usual."

One Reform Effort

The contemporary concept of learning communities as an undergraduate reform effort emerged in the late 1980s. Smith et al., (2004) label it as a "compelling strategy" (p. 19) and note that it is a restructuring effort that meets the needs of students as well as institutions. To address student needs, a reoccurring discussion within the academy is that higher education must become more student and learning centered (Matthews, Smith, MacGregor, & Gabelnick, 1997). Institutions need to provide effective education while still meeting "the bottom line." "Learning communities can simultaneously address the issues of enhancing student learning and building the quality of our academic communities in a cost-effective manner"(Smith et al., p. 20).

Some basic assumptions underlie efforts to reform undergraduate education. The first group of assumptions focuses on knowledge and learning. Reform efforts recognize that knowledge is subjective and value-laden. Further, experiential learning and practice can deepen knowledge. In addition learning occurs inside as well as outside the classroom meaning it is socially constructed. And reflection is essential to the learning and meaning making processes (Smith et al., 2004).

A second group of assumptions redefine the focus and roles of faculty and students. Instead of being the "sage-on-the-stage" imparters of wisdom and knowledge, faculty are redefined as designers and managers of the learning process. The focus then shifts from the area of faculty research and expertise to the needs of the students (Smith et al, 2004).

Reform efforts also assume that the structure of the system must be improved. Building curriculum with an interdisciplinary focus relieves the perception of fragmentation many students hold. Also organizing the delivery differently in terms of time, credit, and learning validation provides for strengthening student engagement and learning (Smith et al., 2004).

Taken together these assumptions create an environment to foster deeper learning, shift from a teacher centered to a student centered classroom, and enhance student involvement in the educational process. These assumptions provide for a much different educational experience than in the more common traditional higher education setting.

Learning communities can provide an opportunity to put these assumptions into practice. Learning communities change the dynamics of the learning process by restructuring courses and disciplines and the roles of teachers and students. Learning

communities are adaptable to address specific curricular needs and/or specific student needs. And learning communities provide a means of strengthening student learning by allowing for the development of key practices important to education. These practices of community, integration, active learning, diversity, and reflection and assessment are more fully developed in learning communities by the restructuring of the curriculum to provide more space and time for student learning (Smith et al., 2004).

> At their best, learning communities embody an analysis of what is needed to reform higher education (curricular restructuring), a theory of learning (based on current research), a commitment to certain educational goals (putting student learning at the center of our work), and a commitment to the importance of community (a necessary condition for learning)" (Smith et al, p. 22).

Learning communities provide a more holistic approach to the educational process by addressing core values, structures, and practices and meet the bottom line by being "resourceful in a time of limited resources" (Smith et al., p. 23).

Gaps in the Research

Learning communities have long been considered a significant tool for increasing student engagement and enhancing student success. Adult students have long been considered a group at risk of disengagement and in need of strategies and support to increase their success. However, I find very little research specific to the learning community concept as it relates to the special needs and circumstances of adult learners. Further, there is no research on the long term or lasting affect of learning community participation on the educational experience of the adult learner. If we are to heed Tinto, Russo, and Kadel's (1994) call for effective educational settings for all students then further research is needed.

Significance of this Study

According to Smith et al. (2004) learning communities can now be found in "hundreds of colleges and universities, including two and four-year institutions and public and private colleges and universities" (p. viii) across the nation. Adult students are making up a greater percentage of the students served in those colleges and universities. The benefits received while participating in a learning community are well documented and impressive. However, the lack of research on adults in learning communities and the lasting effects of such participation should concern faculty and administrators seeking to provide more effective educational settings to a more diverse student population. For those who are responsible for implementing or administering learning communities a greater understanding of the potential impact of such a program over the span of a student's educational career could impact when, where, why, and how the learning community concept will be utilized within their institution. For those who are responsible for administering or implementing adult learning policies and practices a greater understanding of the potential for student engagement and success through learning community participation could impact the restructuring of entire adult learner programs.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is an attempt to contribute to the existing knowledge on learning communities and adult learners by examining the extent of their impact. This is accomplished by exploring the lived experiences of adult learners who have participated in a learning community and then continued their education in a more traditional educational environment.

Research Questions

The overarching question of this phenomenological study is: how does participation in a learning community affect post learning community educational experience for an adult learner? To that end the following research questions are posed:

1. What is the lived experience of adult learners in a learning community educational environment?
2. What are the opportunities, benefits, advantages experienced by adult learners in a learning community environment?
3. What obstacles do adult learners perceive in a traditional educational environment?
4. What affect does early learning community experience have on the post-learning community educational experience of the adult learner?

Definition of Terms

In this study the following definitions apply:

Learning community – a purposeful attempt to restructure the curriculum so as to provide greater integration of content and skills across disciplines and to engage students in a more active role in their own education by promoting more interaction between faculty and students, and students with other students over a longer period of time than in the traditional delivery of higher education.

Adult learner – a student 25 or older or having significant responsibilities beyond the traditional student including full-time employment or family, and are financially independent.

Researcher Perspective

I have been an adult learner. I have taught adult learners. I have been a faculty member in a learning community for adult learners. My personal and professional experience lead to biases directly related to this study. As I reflect on my own educational experience it is obvious to me that my most satisfying educational experiences were a result of some of the common characteristics of learning communities. As I reflect on my professional experience I find the greatest satisfaction working with adult learners. My personal and professional experience with learning communities has been most gratifying. It is my assumption that the adult learners involved in the learning community subject to this research have similar feelings. However, as they were in a much different role within the learning community than I was their experience would necessarily be different. I have a strong bias in favor of the learning community model, especially for an at risk population such as adult learners. Restraining that bias so as to hear the voices of the participants, to better understand their experience, required constant vigilance.

To insure trustworthiness in this study it was essential for me to reflect on and clarify these and any other biases. So I continually worked to identify, understand, and bracket my biases. It was important that I set aside my own perspective to hear more clearly the perspectives and experiences of the adult learners who have had the experience of participating in a learning community.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided the context for my research. I have included my personal and professional experience leading me to this research project, the overall organization of my dissertation, background information pertinent to the research I

propose to do, the purpose and significance of the research, and my perspective as the researcher. This is all to serve as an introduction to the remainder of my dissertation. Chapter two will continue with a review of literature relevant to adult learners and learning community participation.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Moustakas (1994) recommends that researchers provide context and rationale for their research questions. In this chapter I follow Moustakas' recommendation by providing a preliminary review of literature addressing the context and rationale for my research on the learning community educational experience of adult learners. This chapter is organized in three sections. The first section is an overview of the literature on learning communities including early conceptions and their champions, structural forms, key characteristics, and research on the impact of learning communities on various student success indicators. The second section highlights literature on adult learners. The final section summarizes these two main themes.

Learning Communities

Learning communities are not a new concept. To better understand their significance I first explore their pedagogical underpinnings and the initial attempts at learning in community. Then I move to the evolution of the contemporary learning community.

Background

The roots of the concept of learning communities can be traced back to Alexander Meiklejohn and the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s (Hugo, 2002; Killacky, Thomason, & Accomando, 2002; Minkler, 2002; Mlynarczyk & Babbitt, 2002; Smith, 2001; Spear, 2003). Meiklejohn's program focused on democracy in ancient Athens and contemporary America. His learning community "stressed an interdisciplinary, integrative experience, with a seamlessness between students and faculty, knowledge and practice, thinking and doing, analysis and action" (Spear, 2003, p.

7). He shunned disciplinary specialty, utilizing instead, classic books and open, interactive discussion between teacher and learner (Hugo, 2002). This resonated with Meiklejohn's contemporary, John Dewey. Dewey's (1938) philosophy was that learning should be active and student centered. He held that there is an "organic connection between education and personal experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 25) that experience is developed through interaction. "When education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes that of leader of group activities" (Dewey, p. 59). So Dewey saw education as a social process and learning as active rather than passive. He believed it is *the exchange* between students and between faculty and students that is critical if learning is to actually take place. Meiklejohn's concept of the learning community put Dewey's educational philosophy into practice.

Meiklejohn's experiment was abandoned after five years. However, the concept lived on as Joseph Tussman, a student of Meiklejohn's implemented the ideas of his mentor in a more contemporary setting at the University of California, Berkeley. Tussman's contribution to the evolution of the learning community was to develop a community around a specific theme, in this case "education for democracy." "Individual courses gave way to an interdisciplinary community of scholars who structured their work around a two-year, thematically-driven program . . . where members sought to understand and integrate the ideas, challenges, and practices of democracy " (Spear, 2003, p. 9).

The learning community concept continued to grow and evolve through the 1960s and 1970s due to the work of many dedicated practitioners as Mervyn Cadwaller at San

Jose State, SUNY – Old Westbury, and the Evergreen State College, and Patrick Hill at SUNY – Stony Brook and later at The Evergreen State College, as well as others (Spear, 2003). And in the late 1970s LaGuardia Community College became the first community college to offer learning communities.

The Many Faces of Learning Communities

Today learning communities may take many forms. A review of some of the more common structures indicates that learning communities may vary in duration, in purpose, and in scope.

A learning community may last one quarter or semester, one year, or for an entire degree program. Linking a skills class with a content class is a common form for a short term learning community. For example, at LaGuardia Community College an English composition or research writing class provides direction and guidance for the skills necessary to enhance the work in a social science or humanities class (Matthews, Smith, MacGregor, & Gabelnick, 1997). One year learning community programs are also common. These are often found in freshmen or first year programs such as the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program at the University of Washington (Smith, 1993; Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993) or the Freshman Year Experience (FYE) at California State University, East Bay (Taylor, 2003). Both of these programs offer clusters of courses linked by a theme. Moorpark College offers extended learning community opportunities in the form of four-semester course sequences leading to certificates, associates degrees, or transfer readiness (Fogarty & Dunlap, 2003).

Institutions create learning communities to serve a variety of purposes. "At their best, learning communities are delivery systems designed to achieve a variety of clearly

stated education goals"(Matthews, Smith, MacGregor, & Gabelnick, 1997, p. 462). The FIG program previously mentioned was designed to address the issue of retention of first year students (Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993). Learning communities also are used to provide coherence to an often fragmented general education. For instance, the QUANTA program at Daytona Beach Community College is a two semester learning community that is part of the general education requirements for transfer (Fogarty & Dunlap, 2003). Attrition rates in gateway courses such as introductory math or science have been turned around by learning communities "designed to foster student success in these critical courses' (Matthews et al, 1997, p. 463). Learning communities have proven successful for developmental or basic studies. The Learning in Communities Program (LinC) at DeAnza College serves under-prepared and under-represented students (Fogarty & Dunlap, 2003). Honors programs such as the one at the University of Maryland, College Park, may also be enhanced by the learning community concept (Matthews et al, 1997).

Learning communities also serve a wide variety of students. Learning communities can be designed for groups of students sharing a common academic need (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999). For example, communities of under-prepared students or under-represented students have been successful at LaGuardia Community College, Delta College, and the previously mentioned DeAnza College. And Western Michigan University created learning communities for students enrolled in their Honors program (Matthews et al., 1997). Learning communities can also serve students with common academic or curricular interests such as the Women In Science and Engineering learning community at the University of Michigan (Lenning & Ebbers) or the Intensive ESL

Program at Kingsborough Community College (Mlynarczyk & Babbitt, 2002). Or community can be built on other common factors such as students with disabilities as at Leeward Community College (Lenning & Ebbers).

Learning community can have different meanings for different people. "Learning communities can range all the way from loosely structured programs that offer students the opportunity to take a set of courses in common to heavily structured programs of integrated courses that are team taught by faculty from different disciplines, to a cohort of students who may even live together in residence halls" (Cross, 1998, p. 4). Whatever the duration, purpose, or scope some common denominators are that learning communities are a purposeful attempt to structure the curriculum so as to provide greater integration of content and skills across disciplines and to engage students in a more active role in their own education by promoting more interaction between faculty and students, and students with other students over a longer period of time than in the traditional delivery of higher education. The ultimate goal of such innovation is to provide for greater student success. However, all of the curricular and structural planning of a learning community will be for naught if the learning environment is not also considered. "Just putting students together in classes does not, in and of itself, stimulate learning or guarantee a positive experience of either learning or community"(Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 97).

The Learning Community Learning Environment

In their book, *Learning Communities; Reforming Undergraduate Education* (2004), Barbara Leigh Smith, Jean MacGregor, Roberta S. Matthews, and Faith Gabelnick provide a "state-of-the-movement" address. In it they lay out some of the key

forces shaping higher education today and relate these to learning communities by examining the movement's historical roots, some of the primary learning community structures, some institutional contexts for which learning communities are well situated and the challenges of implementing, maintaining, and sustaining learning communities for continued success and progress.

Of particular importance are five core practices the authors believe echo the research on teaching and learning, and provide for an effective learning environment. It is their belief that the learning environment is as important as the curricular structure. Further, when the structure encourages combining student development theory and practice, diversity, pedagogies providing for active learning and inclusivity, and reflective assessment these elements will work together synergistically to create powerful learning environments. The authors contend that it is the five core practices of community, diversity, integration, active learning, and reflection/assessment that enable a learning community to be such a powerful learning environment. All these elements are complementary and interrelated. But each is discussed separately.

The first of the core practices, community is both a process and an outcome. "In learning communities identified as successful by both students and teachers, *learning* and *community* have been highly interrelated" (Smith et al., 2004, p. 99). In other words the success of one depends on the depth of the other. So the practice of inclusion produces the outcome of shared identity. Thus, community embodies a dimension of collaboration and interdependence. Community is created through the process of working together with the outcome that a collaborative effort is able to produce more than a singular effort can. In the learning community classroom then, knowledge is less an entity that must be

transferred to the student and more "a complex scheme of understanding that is socially constructed and reconstructed by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers" (Smith et al., 2004, p. 102).

Diversity is the second core practice put forth by Smith et al. (2004) as essential to successful learning environments. "In our colleges and universities, diversity is a multifaceted issue that relates to how different people learn, who participates (students and faculty), what the curriculum is, and how the formal and informal teaching and learning environments are structured"(Smith et al., p. 107). The core practice of diversity is implemented in learning communities in many ways. Diversity is practiced when learning communities are designed to serve special populations such as women, minority students, under-represented groups, developmental students, honors students, low income and/or first generation students, or discipline specific groups such as pre-law or Women in Science and Engineering (WISE). Diversity also is addressed as learning communities offer a more inclusive curriculum and pedagogical approach to learning. Including work by diverse ethnic groups and/or non-Western literature and accommodating the learning styles of other than traditional students can provide a safe place for contact and dialogue among diverse students, to enable them to cross borders and connect in ways they had never before realized or considered.

According to Smith et al., (2004) the concept of integration includes "an *integrated* curriculum, which provides learners with a unified view of knowledge, and an *integrative* curriculum, which motivates and develops learners' powers to perceive and create new relationships for themselves" (p. 112). So there are two dimensions to integration. The first dimension is in the form interdisciplinarity in terms of a coherent

and connected curriculum. The second dimension involves the integration of what the student learns with what the student already knows in order to construct new meanings and understandings. Learning communities provide an integrated curriculum when they link skills and content classes or build clusters around themes. Integrative pedagogies such as collaborative learning, multicultural education, and service learning are strategies often found on lists of best practices (Smith et al.) and are exemplified in many learning community initiatives.

Active learning environments include "community building, encounters with diversity and pluralism, and the integration of interdisciplinary and diverse pedagogies" (Smith et al., 2004, p. 117). These environments allow students to take what already is known or experienced and add new knowledge to come to a new understanding of themselves and the world around them. Learning communities utilize active learning strategies within classes, among classes, and across disciplines enabling students to "master the strategies more intensely and quickly than when they pick them up here and there in discrete classes" (Smith et al., 119). Students go from passive listener to active participant, from competitor to collaborator with fellow students, from a private classroom presence to a public one, from learning independently to learning interdependently.

Reflection and assessment bring together the other four core practices (Smith et al., 2004). It involves students demonstrating what has been learned, reflecting on their work and considering what mattered most in their learning community experience. Improvement in learning is the focus of assessment. Effective assessment requires providing clear expectations, clear guidelines for good work, opportunities to

demonstrate understanding, and timely and consistent feedback. "Learning communities are natural sites for developing assessment as learning: their multiple course linkages invite integrative assignments and performance occasions in which students can demonstrate their understanding in the context of broad learning community themes" (Smith et al, p. 124). Group discussions, peer critiques, and group projects encouraging collaboration between participants in the learning community promote communal reflection and help build the shared identity necessary for community.

Putting these core practices to use creates exciting and inclusive classrooms, rooms where learning can take place at the deepest levels. These five core practices are interrelated. When combined they are able to produce something greater than the sum of the parts. It is through these core practices that learning communities are able to achieve such powerful learning environments. This is born out in literature documenting the benefits of learning community participation.

Value-added Effects of Learning Communities

Learning communities have proven beneficial to students who have participated in them. The success of the learning community approach can be seen in student behaviors, student learning, student involvement, and student connectedness.

The first extensive study of the benefits of learning community participation was conducted on the University of Washington's Freshman Interest Group (FIG), the Seattle Central Community College's Coordinated Studies Program (CSP), and the learning community programs at LaGuardia Community College in New York. It was a longitudinal study focused on the academic and social experience of beginning college students. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to provide evidence and

understanding of the impact of learning community participation. The results of the research affirmed lower attrition and greater persistence rates (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, Goodsell-Love, & Russo, 1993; Tinto & Russo, 1994; Tinto, Russo, & Kadel, 1994). The data showed that learning community experience was an independent predictor of persistence and that students in the learning community persisted at "a significantly higher rate than did similar students in the regular classes" (Tinto, 1997, p. 607). The study found the persistence rates for the academic year fall to spring to be 83.8% for the learning community students versus 80.9% for the students who were not in a learning community (Tinto, 1997). The difference in persistence rates was more pronounced from spring to the following fall quarter, 66.7% versus 52% (Tinto, 1997). In a more current study of learning communities and academically under-prepared students, the focus is on persistence from the first to the second year, at two and four year institutions, comparing learning community to comparable more traditional classrooms. "In both cases, learning communities have significantly higher rates of persistence than do the comparison group students. Among two-year colleges the difference is 5.2% (61.8% versus 56.6%), while in four-year institutions the difference is 9.6% (80.6% versus 71.0%)" (Engstrom &Tinto, 2007, p. 37). The most dramatic difference was at four-year institutions in California with persistence rates of 83.9% for learning community students versus 57.8% for the comparison group (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007).

Johnson's (2000) study on retention programs at the University of Southern Maine (USM) is reflective of the work of Tinto and friends. The purpose of Johnson's study was to evaluate the effectiveness of two learning community programs and two other retention focused programs over a two year period. Results confirmed that retention

in the two learning community programs was "significantly higher" (p. 233) than in the other programs and the overall USM two year retention rate. Specifically, the two years retention rates for the learning community programs were 78.1% and 57.4% versus 49.4% and 49.5% for the two other programs.

As important as long term retention and persistence to a degree is the retention of a student for the duration of a course. Mlynarczyk and Babbitt (2002) considered the effectiveness of a learning community for ESL students. Noting that ESL students are at high risk for dropping out of school due to insufficient preparation for and poor performance in academic English, the authors report that "the retention rate for all courses in the program is close to 100%" (p. 83) due to the peer modeling aspect of the learning community. This is consistent with a benefit of the FIG program noted by Tinto, Goodsell-Love and Russo (1993) "the fact that the individual becomes known. Absences are more easily noted and students report skipping fewer classes" (p. 18).

But what of the students once they have been retained. Research in the area of student learning also supports the beneficial quality of learning community participation. In addition to student behaviors, Tinto et al's (1993) work also considered the academic performance of the learning community students versus students in more traditional educational settings. Results of the research indicated that students who had participated in the learning community earned on average higher grade point averages than students who had not participated (3.14 versus 2.98). The National Learning Community Dissemination Project, studying 19 two and four year institutions provides similar documentation that learning community participation resulted in the same or higher grades for cohort students than those in respective stand-alone course comparison groups

(Rings, Shovers, Skinner, & Siefer, 1999). Research on the Quanta Interdisciplinary Learning Community program considering cognitive development in students showed that compared to results from a study of national norms, the Daytona Beach Community College learning community students showed greater movement along the Perry Scale than did students in traditional classes (Rings et al.).

Another focus of research in the area of student learning considers the quality of the learning. Zhao and Kuh (2004) contend that learning communities "allow for the development of richer complex ways of thinking and knowing so that students learn at a deeper level" (p. 118). This is supported by the results of Tinto's research and that of the National Learning Community Dissemination Project. Student comments from the research on the Coordinated Studies program at Seattle Central Community College indicated that "the quality of learning was seen to be different, indeed deeper and richer" (Tinto, 1997, p. 614). Tinto quotes one of the student comments: "we not only learn more, we learn better" (p. 614). Students participating in the National Learning Community Dissemination Project reported that their learning in the learning community was inherently better than their experience in stand-alone classes and that their learning community learning experience had been very enjoyable (Rings et al.).

Research on student learning and learning communities reveals another important area of consideration: what students learn about learning. Students learn about their own learning as a result of the heightened interaction within the learning community setting. "While students are learning to listen to, respect, and evaluate each other's ideas, they are also learning to respect and evaluate their own ideas" (Mlynarczyk & Babbitt, 2002, p. 82). One of the results of the study of the Coordinated Studies Program revealed that the

learning community "encouraged students to consciously address issues of their own learning. The diversity of learning experiences challenged students' understandings of what it means to attend college and to learn"(Tinto & Russo, 1994, p. 23). In addition, Tinto (2000) notes "Students in these programs reported an increased sense of responsibility for participating in the learning experience and an awareness of their responsibility for both their own learning and the learning of others" (p. 12).

In his book *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited* Alexander Astin (1997) considers how undergraduates are affected by their college experiences. His work shows that the extent to which a student is involved impacts that student's academic and personal development. "Learning, academic performance, and retention are positively associated with academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups" (p. 394). Levine and Shapiro (1999) contend that learning communities foster student-centered pedagogical strategies and that these strategies support group identity and cohesion. This is particularly important for non-traditional students. "Learning communities are uniquely positioned to maximize the potential of student involvement. For commuter students, they also provide a home base on campus and a sense of interpersonal and intellectual connectedness often lacking in the commuter experience" (Levine & Shapiro, 2000, p. 21). Mlynarczyk and Babbitt's (2002) report on the Intensive ESL program at Kingsborough Community College notes that within this non-traditional group of students those in the learning community were "much more active and engaged in their learning than are students in regular, unlinked ESL courses" (p. 73). Moller, Huett, Holder, Young, Harvey and Godshalk (2005) studied the motivational effect of learning communities on another group of non-

traditional students: distance learners. Moller et al. defines motivation as "the length and direction of effort expended by the learners in pursuit of achievement" (p. 137). This study reports a positive cycle wherein learning community participation leads to greater motivation which leads to greater sense of involvement and understanding which increases participation in the learning community. The research on the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College provides further support.

> Our findings reveal that is it possible to promote student involvement and achievement in settings where such involvement is not easily attained...students in the nonresidential setting of Seattle Central Community College have to attend to a multiplicity of obligations outside of college. For them, going to college is but one of a number of tasks to be completed during the course of a day. (Tinto & Russo, 1994, p. 23).

This study provides empirical documentation that learning communities are effective for generating increased student involvement even in less than optimum circumstances.

The extent to which a student feels connected to others in the educational setting is significant, perhaps even foundational to all the other benefits of learning communities. "It is in the student-to-student connections that the true power of the academic learning community resides"(Mlynarczyk & Babbitt, 2002, p. 78). The authors note that these connections provide the academic base for further development. Tinto and Russo (1994) made a similar observation in the Coordinated Studies Program.

> Especially important was the emergence of a supportive community of peers that continued outside the classroom. Those friendships, that frequently fell outside prior social networks, provided important social support to student, especially those who had to juggle many competing obligations simply to attend class. For some, that support was critical to continued attendance. (p. 22)

Johnson (2000) conversely noted that isolation is an indicator of dropout. She contends the inclusive community nature of the learning communities result in students feeling less alone and isolated. Thus learning communities effectively address issues of isolation.

Students themselves are aware of the significance of relationships to their academic success noting that they are "important and valued" (Tinto, 1997, p. 609), were directly responsible for their "desire to continue in college" (Tinto, Goodsell-Love & Russo, 1994, p. 20) and helped them gain confidence in their academic ability (Mlynarczyk & Babbitt, 2002).

Summary

Learning communities were born out of the need to create a more effective learning experience. Many held the belief that learning was more than rote knowledge being passed from the instructor to the passive student. Rather, learning involves the creation of knowledge through participation with and reflection on interactions with others. That meant restructuring the higher education classroom to provide for greater interaction. The core practices of learning communities create such classrooms. The extent of their success is evident in key student success indicators supporting the positive potential of learning communities for creating more effective learning environments.

Adult Learners and Learning

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the learning community experience of adult learners. This is important because "For all of their individual and collective importance to American life, adult learners have typically been treated as an afterthought in higher education" (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007, p. 3). The authors go on to explain "Millions of adult students are seeking degrees in a system built largely for – and around – traditional students" (p. 3). To better understand adult learners I first explored who they are, then considered some of the

theories relevant to adult learning, and finally turned to some of the barriers adult learners face as they proceed through higher education.

Adult Learner Profile

As a group adult learners are the fastest growing population in higher education (Fairchild, 2003). Kasworm (2003) reports in 2000 there were over 6 million adult learners in higher education. "By the mid-1990s, persons over age twenty-five constituted almost 44 percent of higher education enrollments"(Maehl, 2004, p. 5). The increase is well documented. "From 1971 to 1991, adult students increased from 28 percent to 43 percent of total undergraduate enrollment"(Kasworm, p. 4). Maehl further noted that if the criteria defining "adult" were expanded beyond age to include adult characteristics, such as independent or family or work responsibilities, "the proportion of adults rose to well over 50 percent" (p.5). As our society continues to age the number of adults in higher education will continue to increase (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

That the needs of adult learners differ greatly from those of more traditional students is evident in the data and details used to describe them. Kasworm (2003) reports that 57% of adult learners are married and 53% support dependents other than a spouse. Pusser et al. (2007) adds that 60% of adult learners are in single-income households. Adult learners are predominantly part-time students usually because education is only one of the many activities they are involved in (Kasworm). Among other things adult learners are often employed full-time, are caregivers to children and/or aging parents, and are community leaders or volunteers (Fairchild, 2003). In addition, of institutions responding to the National Survey of Students in Continuing Education 25% "reported

enrollments comprising more than 45 percent first-generation college students"(Pusser et al., p. 9).

Adult learners also differ from traditional students by what they bring to the learning process. The adult learner brings more life experience to the classroom. "The comparatively richer life experiences of individual adults have been cited by nearly all writers as a key factor in differentiating adult learning from child learning"(Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 389). Thus as the adult learner reflects on previous experience during a learning activity the adult learners themselves become a resource for learning (Merriam & Caffarella). In his profile of the adult learner, Justice (1997) adds that along with greater experience adult learners also bring "a greater sense of themselves" (p. 28) an identity established and defined by family, work, and community, thus providing a more defined context for their formal education. This greater self awareness is often the impetus for adult learners returning to education. Feeling unfulfilled or incomplete, that part of their identity was put on hold earlier in their lives results in many adult learners returning with a much clearer goal or purpose for their education. In addition, the adult learner's greater life experience means they have "a more firmly established habit of learning" (Justice, p. 29). While going about their family, work, and community tasks they have had to gain new information, develop problem solving skills, and learn how to cope with situational dynamics. "Consciously or not, they have used a cognitive style in figuring out what to do and how to do it"(Justice, p. 29). These habits can be constructive for adult learners or may restrict their educational development. Fairchild (2003) points out that because most adults finance their own education "they protect their investment"(p. 11) by being achievement oriented. Educational behaviors, such as regular

class attendance, solid study habits, and integrating their education with their life and work experience, provide the greatest return.

Adult learners are a significant population in higher education. They differ from traditional students in many important ways. But what they bring to the educational setting makes it a richer experience for all.

Adult Learning Theories

My study focused on the educational impact of learning community educational experience on adult learners. Therefore an understanding of learning in adulthood is important. However, adult learning cannot be explained by a single theory. Various frameworks or models contribute to our understanding of the adult learner. Three major areas of study focus on adult learning as different from learning in childhood. The concept of andragogy provides guidelines for designing adult learning. Self-directed learning focuses on the process of how adult learning takes place and is the philosophical basis for andragogy. Transformational learning focuses on the change that occurs for the learner. A review of each of these follows.

The concept of andragogy was first introduced by Malcolm Knowles (1980). He defined it as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43). This is contrasted with pedagogy which is the art and science of helping children learn. Rather than distinction based on a life stage, Knowles considered pedagogy and andragogy to be on a continuum of teacher-directed to student-directed learning. Therefore andragogy being more student-directed, depends on the situation and can be appropriate for either children or adults but is more suited to adult learning behaviors. Since it does not explain adult learning, "it is as a guide to practice that andragogy has had its biggest impact"(Merriam, 2001, p. 8).

Acknowledging andragogy as a guide to effective practice for adult learning, Ross-Gordon (2003) summarizes the five assumptions foundational to Knowles' concept. The first assumption is that the adult learner has an independent self-concept and can direct his or her own learning. "The adult learner is responsible for making personal decisions in day-to-day life" and is "assumed to prefer self-direction in determining the goals and outcomes of their learning" (Ross-Gordon, p. 43). The second assumption is that adult learners bring a considerable wealth of experience that is a rich source of learning. The third assumption is that adult learners have learning needs related to their changing social roles. "Adults are presumed to become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or do something to perform more effectively"(Ross-Gordon, p. 44). The fourth assumption is that adult learners are task or problem-centered and therefore enter into a learning situation as a result of a perceived need in their life. The fifth assumption is that adult learners are more internally motivated to learn. What emerges from these assumptions is that meaning is constructed and knowledge is based on the learner's self-concept and prior experience (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Also learning tends to be more subjective that objective for the adult learner. Thus learners learn when they are ready, prepared, and motivated to learn. Pratt (1993) sums it up this way: "First, knowledge is assumed to be actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment; and second, learning is an interactive process of interpretation, integration, and transformation of one's experiential world" (p. 17).

One of Knowles' key assumptions of adult learning is that as they mature learners become more self-directed meaning they deliberately learn on their own. The concept of self-directed learning as a framework for adult learners refers to both a personal attribute

of the learner as well as a process of learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). A self-directed adult learner is able to plan, initiate, and evaluate his or her own learning. Three goals of self-directed learning are personal growth, fostering transformation learning, and promoting emancipatory learning (Merriam, 2001).

The concept of self-directed learning puts the individual at the center of learning. This is the result of three guiding principles (Caffarella, 1993). First, learning is self-initiated. A key element of self-directed learning is that the individual plans and manages his or her own learning. Second, there is a relationship between autonomy and self-directed learning. Independent thinking and self-responsibility are personal attributes of the self-directed learner. Third, self-directed learning, as a process, changes the role of the instructor from content expert to facilitator allowing the learner greater control over the learning.

The third area of focus in adult learning theory is transformational learning. "Transformational learning theory is about change – dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live"(Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 318). It goes beyond adding to what one already knows. The concept of transformational learning focuses on the cognitive process of learning rather than the characteristics of the learner as andragogy and self-directed learning do.

Three of the key concepts of transformational learning are life experience, critical reflection, and development (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The life experience of the learner is central to transformational learning. Merriam and Caffarella explain "if experience is seen as socially constructed, it can be deconstructed, acted on, and reconstructed" (p. 326). Thus experience is elemental to transformation. But experience

alone is insufficient to promote transformation. It is critically reflecting on the experience that brings about the transformation. Critical reflection involves examining the underlying values, beliefs, and assumptions that influence how the learner makes sense of the experience (Merriam & Caffarella). The third key concept of development is inherent in the transformational learning process and is an outcome of it. Being capable of thinking across and among ideas and concepts, then questioning the values and beliefs behind them, and from that, creating new forms of knowledge to better meet needs is the developmental process that fosters transformation (Merriam & Caffarella).

No single theory is sufficient to address all facets of adult learning. But when taken together, andragogy, self-directed, and transformational learning provide an explanation of the learning process and guidance for effective practice. Understanding these elements is necessary when considering the educational experience of adult learners.

Barriers to Learning

The overall focus of my research was on the impact of participation of adult learners in learning communities. There has been much research on reasons adults do not participate in higher education but for this study the interest was in the threats to success faced by the adult learner who already had decided to enter higher education. To that end literature on adult learners considered barriers that may impede participation in and completion of a higher education. The literature established three categories of barriers (Crowther, 2000; Fairchild, 2003; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The first group was institutional barriers: the system, services, practices of the institution that may hinder the development of the student. The second category was the situational barriers, that created

obstacles due to the student's personal situation. The final category were dispositional barriers: the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the student that directly impact success. These three categories are explored separately in greater depth.

It seems ironic but the very place to which the adult learner turns for help may present barriers that prohibit the student from progressing. Fairchild (2003) considers these to be elements within the institutional system "that exclude adults or make it difficult for them to successfully navigate through their higher education" (p. 12). The importance of resources and services geared for the adult learner is reiterated in the literature over and over again (Crowther, 2000; Kerka, 2002; Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, 2004; Pusser et al., 2007). However, this remains a barrier for many adult learners. For some the issue is a lack of services and/or resources. Pusser et al. report that most of the institutions surveyed for the Emerging Pathways project on adults success in college "did not provide academic services beyond regular office hours; nor did they offer them online" (p. 9). For others the barrier is that the adult learner does not know what services are available or how to access them. For example, of students surveyed for the Emerging Pathways project, approximately 30% were not aware of financial aid that was available (Pusser et al.) The report, noting that adult learners often experience an information deficit upon entering higher education, suggests "institutions should give adult learners easy access to information about all student services" (p. 10).

Curriculum can also be an institutional barrier to the adult learner (Crowther, 2000; Kiely et al., 2004; Patterson & Wolfson, 2001). Because adult learners are typically more self-directed than the traditional student the curriculum needs to foster greater independence and self-direction. Dinmore (1997) expands on this when he states "adults

are not concerned with disciplinary boundaries, because they do not view the world as a series of discrete subjects...Adults are concerned, however, with integrating their experiences in order to make sense of them" (p. 456). The disciplinarity of traditional curriculum becomes a barrier when imposed on the fundamentally non-disciplinary experiential learning approach of the adult learner.

Some of the greatest barriers for adult learners are those that have to do with their personal situations. Time is always an issue for the adult learner (Fairchild, 2003; Maehl, 2004). There are a few facets to that issue. The time of day that courses are offered can be a barrier to the working adult. Most can only participate in and complete programs that are offered entirely evenings, weekends or online since they must maintain their daytime employment (Pusser et al.). In addition since most adults are only able to attend school part-time the amount of time it takes to get through a program also can be a deterrent to the older student. Coker (2003) explains not just the amount of time needed to complete a program but daily balancing the time needed for job, social life, and school is a major situational challenge for the adult learner. Dinmore (1997) explains "the necessity to work and engage in all the other activities that being an adult entails, puts constraint upon the amount of time available to study" (p. 454). Family responsibilities such as being a single parent, raising grandchildren, or being the caregiver for elderly parents are situations often faced by the adult learner (Justice, 1997; Maehl, 2004). These types of situations can make it difficult for the student to give education the priority necessary to persist.

Another situational barrier centers on the adult learners' physical situation. The aging process means that adult learners have aging bodies and minds. Thus "their

cognitive processes operate differently. Often they have a fear of quantitative reasoning and mathematics, and they may have more trouble with short-term memory"(Justice, 1997, p. 30). The adult learner may have to work harder, spend more time, and utilize additional resources to obtain academic success.

The dispositional barriers are those associated with the adult learner's views and attitudes. Fairchild (2003) notes that these are intrapersonal and "include dissonance among role demands" (p. 12). For example high levels of stress, anxiety and depression are associated with adult learners as they take on the additional role of student and find greater demands on their time and their finances due to school (Fairchild).

The attitude of the learner toward being in a learning environment is another potential barrier. Justice (1997) suggests that "Adults who see the degree as an essential qualification for advancement in their career often bring some degree of apprehension, or even resentment, to the need for further academic study" (p. 28) In her study of African American female adult learners, Coker (2003) documented the dispositional barrier of self-doubt. She explains "Some of the women reported feeling anxious about their ability to do college work after being out of school for a number of years" (p. 668). This is directly related to Kathryn James' (2003) contention that before adults can be successful learners, they must be able to see themselves as learners.

Whether they are institutional, situational, or dispositional, barriers to learning impede or restrict the adult learner as they proceed with their educational journey. The degree to which barriers can be removed or minimized improves the ability of the student to persist in higher education.

Summary

Adult learners are a significant population within higher education. Not only do they make up a large proportion of the student body, they also constitute the fastest growing segment in our colleges and universities. However, most adult learners must make do with programs designed for a more traditional population. The adult learner population is far more diverse, has far different needs, and is at greater risk of failure than traditional students. To reduce risk factors adult learning theory explains the learning process and provides a guide for effective practice. In addition, being aware of, and thereby being able to minimize, barriers faced by adult learners enhances their chance of success.

Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was to provide context and rationale for my research. In the first section I covered the background of the learning community concept, the core practices of learning communities, and the value-added benefits of learning community participation. In the second section I profiled adult learners, theories of learning applicable to adult learners, and the barriers they face in higher education. While learning communities do exist for adult learners there is very little research specific to that population. And what is available focuses mostly on older adults in community lifelong learning courses rather than adults seeking college degrees, which was the focus of this study. However, given the research on both adult learners and learning communities, it is reasonable to assume that learning communities can create the type of learning environment that would allow for and encourage the success of adults in higher education. When considered together the core practices and benefits of learning

communities would provide for the process and effective practice of the adult learning theories while minimizing or removing the barriers to persistence.

But what of adult learners who experience academic success in a learning community setting and then must continue their education in a more traditional educational environment? Do they take the positive practices of the learning community concept into the traditional setting? Do they consciously or unconsciously learn something about learning that will enhance their chance of success even in a more traditional environment? Chapter Three frames a methodology for pursuing these questions.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Qualitative research centers on "meaning in context" (Merriam, 1998, p.1). In other words, qualitative research is interested in finding the meaning assigned to an experience by a person who has had the experience. The purpose of this study was to better understand the educational experience of adult learners who have participated in a learning community. Of particular interest was the post-learning community experience of those students. In this chapter I explain my research design, the site and participants chosen for this study, how I collected and analyzed my data, and the approaches I used to provide for the trustworthiness of my study.

Research Design

Theoretical Background

This research project studied the lived experiences of adult students who participated in a learning community and then continued their education in a more traditional educational setting. For this I used a research methodology that falls within the qualitative paradigm.

Prior to determining a specific methodology, qualitative researchers need to address the beliefs and assumptions they maintain (Creswell, 1998). Creswell discusses five specific assumptions. The first deals with questions of reality or ontological assumptions. This inquiry assumed reality is subjective. It is peculiar to each participant. The second assumption the researcher must address is the epistemological assumptions which deal with the relationship of the researcher to the topic of inquiry. I have an intimate knowledge of the subject matter through both my personal and professional

experience. And as the interviewer I was very engaged in the process of inquiry. The axiological assumptions involving the values of the researcher is the third assumption at issue. My values were present in the selection of the topic for inquiry, the participants selected for study, the analysis and write up of the research. I was ever aware of these throughout the inquiry process. The fourth assumption is rhetorical and leads me to the use of first person. The fifth assumption is methodological. This assumption defined the design and process used for the inquiry and revisions.

Creswell (1998) contends that qualitative research as a process of inquiry builds "a complex, holistic picture [by exploring] multiple dimensions of a problem or issue" (p. 15). The findings are reported in an elaborate narrative consistent with Merriam's (1998) concept of "meaning in context" (p. 1). That is, the research seeks to understand "the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences" (p.5). Willig (2001) adds the "qualitative methods can be used to access underlying cognitions, such as beliefs and attitudes, and that this may help us shed light upon a person's behavior and experience" (p. 68). Qualitative researchers then construct complex, holistic pictures that identify interrelated aspects of human experience in natural settings. It is through qualitative research that students can describe their experiences and the meanings they attach to them, their understandings, and the reasons behind decisions and choices they make (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2002). Detailed information such as this from students who share a common experience was needed to answer my research questions. My professional experience with adult learners and learning communities and my personal experiences as a non-traditional student both served to reinforce this perspective for me.

After a review of the qualitative paradigm (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994), I believed a qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study. It afforded a holistic approach that included interrelated dimensions of the human experience as it sought essence and meaning. It allowed for the study of human experience in a way that was not possible through quantitative methods. And, I believe it was the necessary methodology for addressing my research questions.

Method of Inquiry

All of this leads me to a specific qualitative methodology for this inquiry. For this study, I conducted a phenomenological inquiry. A phenomenological approach "includes entering the field of perception of participants; seeing how they experience, live and display the phenomenon; and looking for the meaning of the participants' experiences" (Creswell, 1998, p. 31). Using this methodology to gather the perceptions of several adult learning community participants allowed me the opportunity to begin deriving general or universal meanings of that experience.

A phenomenological study was appropriate for this research in that I was interested in what a learning community educational experience means to adult learners who have participated in one. Further, what does it mean when that student chooses to continue his or her education in a traditional educational environment, and what meaning do these students place on the traditional experience? According to Patton (1990) phenomenological research is based on

> the assumption that *there is an essence or essences to shared experience.* These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon, for example the essences of loneliness, the essence of being a mother, or the essence of being a

> participant in a particular program (p. 70, emphasis in original, as quoted in Merriam, 1998, p. 15).

This was pertinent to my study in that I was interested in the essence of the experience of adults participating in a learning community program. Moustakas (1994) explained that the aim of a phenomenological study is "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, the essences or structures of the experience" (p. 13). Thus, a phenomenological method allowed me to discover the essence of the experience shared by several who had participated in a learning community and to then coalesce that into meanings general or universal to that population.

Moustakas' (1994) approach to phenomenological methodology is based on the work of Husserl. Moustakas' approach to phenomenology involves four major processes; epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of composite textual and structural descriptions. The process begins with epoche. "Epoche requires the suspension of presuppositions and assumptions, judgments and interpretations to allow ourselves to become fully aware of what is actually before us"(Willig, 2001, p. 52). It allows the researcher to enter the interview with as unbiased a stance as one is able to attain, prepared to be receptive to the participant's experience. The process of phenomenological reduction enables the qualities of the experience to come into focus. We become aware of what makes the experience what it is. The constituents of the experience are identified through the descriptions of the physical and experiential features of the phenomenon. Imaginative variation is the process that derives "structural themes from the textural descriptions that have been obtained through phenomenological

reduction" (Moustakas, p.99). In other words, "imaginative variation asks 'how' this experience is made possible (i.e. its structure)" (Willig, p. 52). The goal of imaginative variation is to ascertain conditions related to the phenomenon and "without which it would not be what it is" (Willig, p. 52). Individual and composite structural qualities are formed that provide a universal structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced. The composite textual descriptions and the composite structural descriptions are then synthesized to develop the meanings and essences of the phenomenon. These processes are explained as they relate specifically to my project in the following sections on data collection and analysis.

A phenomenological methodology was appropriate for my study of adult learners who have participated in a learning community. A qualitative approach was called for given my response to Creswell's (1998) five assumptions. It is best suited to inform my interest in the essence of the adult learner's learning community experience. The methodology allowed me to derive general meanings of the phenomenon. Hence this research should contribute to a greater understanding of the experience to promote better practice.

Site and Participants

The site for the study was selected based on my interest in learning communities. The program selected is an exemplar learning community demonstrating all of the defining characteristics of a learning community including community, diversity, integration, active learning, and reflection/assessment as related by Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004). It is a five semester learning community designed specifically for the full-time working adult aged 25 or older. It leads to an AA degree.

Therefore, boundaries between the learning community and post-learning community experience are defined clearly. In addition, students participating in this particular learning community have long term exposure to the learning community concept and structure so can provide more in-depth experience. Furthermore, I have extensive knowledge of and experience with the learning community and its student population by virtue of having taught in the program for several years. However, I no longer have any affiliation with the program.

The individuals who were interviewed for this study must have participated in the five semester learning community described above. In addition, they must have pursued further education in a more traditional environment. From their interviews I gleaned what occurs for these students and what the implications are. Of interest is whether their learning community experience enhanced or inhibited their post-learning community educational experience. I was interested to learn whether the learning community experience added an element of academic development or if it diminished their success when they were no longer in an environment demonstrating the core practices of a learning community. However, since the purpose of a qualitative study such as this is to build "a complex, holistic picture" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15) of an issue, and since phenomenological inquiry attempts to enter the experience of the participants to see "how they experience, live and display the phenomenon" (Creswell, p. 31), I will also be vigilant for other non-academic impacts the learning community may have on the life of the participants.

I used a purposeful sample for this study. "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and

therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). In this research project the strategy I used for the purposeful sample was "criterion" sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each person in the sample must meet the same criteria. They had to be adult learners who had participated in the learning community selected for this study and have continued their education in a traditional classroom environment. The selected participants provided information-rich interviews to allow for in-depth analysis for answering my research questions. Further, it was a sample of convenience in that the sample was selected from a program that is local, available, and willing to work with me and the program clearly meets the criteria of a learning community. This is important since some programs that identify themselves as learning communities are simply programs based on a cohort model but fail to demonstrate other learning community characteristics such as integration or active learning.

Creswell (1998) identifies a gatekeeper as an individual who can assist the researcher in gaining access to a research site. In this project access to potential participants was through the director of the learning community program. Participation in the study was initiated by a letter of invitation sent to the students by the gatekeeper. It included a thorough description of the project and their role in it. The invitation specified that their participation was strictly voluntary and that they had to contact me directly if they chose to participate. Informed consent forms were presented for signature and participants were informed of their right to disengage from the project at any time of their choosing. Once a student accepted the invitation interviews were arranged.

Data Collection

In this study interviews were the method of data collection (Merriam, 1998). The timing of the initial interview was important. These interviews were conducted in the participant's second or third term out of the learning community and after completing a minimum of 12 credit hours in the traditional educational setting. This was within a timeframe close enough to the learning community experience for the participant to still have reasonable recall of their learning community experience while also having enough time in the post-learning community environment to be familiar with that. Specifically, I wanted to avoid the "transfer shock" experience of the students during their first term in a new environment. Interviews were face-to-face and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Broad discussion topics were used to guide the interviews with each participant (Appendix A). It was anticipated that additional questions would emerge from the initial interviews and these were used to guide subsequent interviews. At the initial interview the participants received a thorough introduction to the study, including expectations and time commitments, as well as an informed consent form. Interviews were audio taped. The tapes were then transcribed into typed manuscripts. To insure open and free exchange confidentiality was provided through the use of pseudonyms. Each participant selected his or her own pseudonym. Participants were provided with a transcript of their individual interview. I did not anticipate the topic of my project to be one to upset the participant, but I made arrangements for referral to counselors.

Follow-up interviews were conducted to add clarity and depth to the initial interviews. These were shorter in duration and conducted via phone.

Data Analysis and Form of Results

This research project was concerned with the lived experience of adult students who have participated in a learning community and then continued their education in a traditional higher educational environment. It was guided by the underlying assumptions and elements of a phenomenological study. These led to a model of conducting in-depth interviews with the participants. Willig (2001) supports this method of data collection for a phenomenology. Therefore, semi-structured interviews utilizing open-ended queries with adult learning community participants provided the data to address the questions of this study.

Prior to the interviews and throughout the research process, it was necessary for me to engage in the process of epoche. I bracketed my pre-conceived notions and beliefs about the phenomenon. The epoche process enabled me to clarify and set aside my biases and create an awareness in me that allowed me to suspend my presuppositions, assumptions, and judgments to free me to see the essence of the phenomenon. I began this process as seen in chapter 1 of this dissertation. The process continued by keeping a journal of my experience after each participant interview.

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed. I then immersed myself in the text of the interviews with the intention to "capture the quality and texture of individual experience" (Willig, p. 53).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

A feature that distinguishes phenomenological research is the way in which the data are analyzed. Willig (2001) draws a distinction between phenomenological contemplation and phenomenological analysis. Phenomenological contemplation is

reflecting on an event as it presents itself to the researcher. It "requires introspective attention to one's own experience" (Willig, p. 53). Phenomenological analysis on the other hand "involves an attempt to 'get inside' someone else's experience on the basis of their description of it" (p. 53). In phenomenological analysis the descriptions derived through the interview process become the phenomenon with which I engaged. I utilized a version of phenomenological analysis known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as presented by Willig.

IPA, as other phenomenological methods, explores the participant's experience from his or her own perspective. However, as the researcher is the tool of the exploration, IPA recognizes that the relationship and interaction between the researcher and the participant, and the researcher's world view is also present and active in the study. Therefore, the phenomenological analysis is an *interpretation* of the experience of the participant.

Willig (2001) describes four stages involved in the analysis of each case to be used in the study. Analysis begins with reading the text. Willig suggests deep familiarity with the text by reading and re-reading. Initial thoughts and observations are noted. "These could include associations, questions, summary statements, comments on language use, absences, descriptive labels, and so on"(Willig, p. 54). This is different from "open coding" in that these notes basically recorded issues that came up for me as the researcher initially with the text.

Having thoroughly read and re-read the text of the interview and made initial notes, the second stage was to identify and label themes that emerged (Willig). This resulted from a more systematic reading of the text. The labels epitomized the section of

the text and were conceptual in nature. The theme labels "should capture something about the essential quality of what is represented by the text" (Willig, p. 55). The intention of this stage was to denote what was characterized in the text through thematic labels.

In the third stage of phenomenological analysis, the themes derived from stage two were clustered together. In this way structure was introduced into the analysis as I consider the themes in relation to one another. The clusters of themes were then labeled with a label that captured the essence of the group of themes. These labels were terms used in the texts, descriptive labels, or quotes. Willig warns that "it is important to ensure that clusterings of themes identified at this stage make sense in relation to the original data" and that "the connections between themes identified on paper need to be reflected in the detail of the respondent's account" (p. 55). This involved a constant back and forth between the lists of themes and the text itself to insure consistency and accuracy, to insure that I remained true to the meanings of the participants.

The fourth stage was to produce a summary table of the structured themes and quotes from the text that supported them. "The summary table should only include those themes that capture something about the quality of the participant's experience of the phenomenon under investigation"(Willig, p. 55). So not all of the themes identified in stage two appeared in the summary table. The themes included in the table were directly related to my research questions. The summary table was comprised of the cluster labels along with their subordinate theme labels and quotes from the text or references to specific sections of the text supporting the theme.

Once each transcript was analyzed according to these four stages, it was necessary to integrate all of the cases. "Having produced summary tables for each individual

participant, the researcher may attempt to integrate these into an inclusive list of master themes that reflects the experience of the groups of participants as a whole"(Willig, p. 58). In this way I was able to capture the quality of the participant's shared experience of the learning community/post-learning community educational experience. This master list included the labels of superordinate themes and the constituent themes that made them up, as well as the participants that raised them and where. The analytic process continued until I was able to achieve full integration of the themes. In other words, analysis continued until all subordinate themes had "either been integrated into or dropped from the analysis" (Willig, p. 59).

The goal of the analysis of the research was to provide a realistic account of the nature and quality of the learning community/post-learning community experience of adult learners. Writing up the research consisted of presenting and discussing each of the master themes. Each theme was introduced and all of its various expressions across the participant pool were reviewed. Quotes from the participants developed the themes as expressed in the interviews. An additional mode of analysis included addressing the relationships between themes. It was crucial to clearly delineate the comments of the participants from my interpretation of their comments. It was my aim to present a thoughtful and accurate depiction of the learning community/post-learning community experience of the participants by focusing on and being open to their experience as they expressed it, by attempting to bracket my foreknowledge and searching for the invariant essential meanings in their descriptions.

Trustworthiness

The participants in this research were at the center of this project. I took steps to insure an ethical inquiry. First, I maintained a research journal that recorded my thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences with the interviews, the participants, and the relationship between us. I also was aware of participant confidentiality. I instituted practices to provide for and insure participant anonymity. Finally, I remained conscious of the representation of the participants' meanings in the final text.

Evaluation

Trustworthiness refers to the "truth value" (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 168) of a study. That is trustworthiness consists of "the credibility of the inquiry; applicability, which is the transferability of the results; and consistency, which is the dependability of the results" (Morse & Richards, p. 168). Several strategies are available to the researcher to insure trustworthiness including triangulation, member checking, peer review, clarification of researcher bias, and rich thick descriptions. It is recommended that a researcher utilize one or more of these strategies in checking the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2003).

I established the credibility of this study in several ways. I actively engaged in the process of epoch. This allowed me to clarify my biases and presuppositions related to the research. I also maintained a journal during data collection and analysis. This helped me to further monitor the research project. The third strategy I incorporated is member checking. This allowed the participants to review the transcripts for accuracy and to add clarification. I also sought participant feedback to allow me to identify inconsistencies or inaccuracies in the data.

I sought to elicit transferability through rich, thick descriptions of my findings. I cannot guarantee transferability. However, providing sufficient detail in the written descriptions resulting from the methodology utilized and the subsequent findings allows the reader to consider the applicability to other situations.

I established the dependability of my study through the process of peer review. I utilized my dissertation chair, my methodologist, my other dissertation committee members and a few trusted CCL cohort classmates as I proceeded through my research.

Reliability and validity have long been the standards used to evaluate a study. However, research conducted in a qualitative context has different criteria for establishing reliability and validity since truth and facts depend on an individual's perceptions. Therefore, evaluation of a qualitative study must be based on its trustworthiness. My research project insured, attained, and communicated reliability and validity by establishing the credibility, transferability, and dependability of the results.

Summary

My interest was in the significance participants placed on their learning community experience as it related to their post-learning community education. The inductive method of phenomenology allowed me to gain "meaning in context", to understand the experience from the perspective of the adult learner. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis method revealed the invariant essential meanings the student's placed on the experience.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview

My study explored the lived experience of adult learners who have participated in a learning community and then continued their education in a more traditional educational environment. Chapter 4 presents my findings as heard through the voices of the participants. The chapter is organized in 3 parts. Part 1 places the voices of the participants in context. I introduce each participant through a brief biography. I discuss his or her previous educational background, the reasons for enrolling in the learning community, and a brief description of the traditional environment they transferred into. In part 2, I present the 3 structures that emerged for the phenomenon as the participants described their experiences. The structures of connection, support, and sentiment tell the lived experiences of these adult learners as they navigated into, through, and out of the learning community and into a traditional higher educational setting. Appendix A provides example summary tables to explain the coding process by which my findings were derived. The third and final section of this chapter presents the meaning and the essence of the phenomenon, a subtle shift. The essence of the experience is derived from the weaving together of the structures both in and out of the learning community bringing new meaning to the educational experience of the participants.

The Participants

In this section I provide background information on each participant. While these are but snapshots, they do provide the reader the opportunity to become more familiar with the participants. When asked "what first attracted you to [the learning community]" and "tell me about yourself" the responses I received included descriptions of the

educational background, their perceived educational barriers, their reasons for enrolling in the learning community, and their current educational situations. I use this information to introduce the reader to the participants in the order they were interviewed.

Susan

Susan was a Caucasian female in her 30s. She was a first generation college student with no other higher educational experience prior to her participation in the learning community. At the time of her admission to the learning community she worked full-time as a grant writer.

Susan had been looking into going to college. She was first attracted to a local community college that had met the special needs of a disabled friend of hers, believing if it was able to meet his needs, it also could meet hers. Once there she found out about the learning community. "I started looking at what they had and ... I was interested because it looked like a cheap way to get general education requirements out of the way. I'd have a degree when I was done. The hours were after work, so I could keep working." She went on to say that the learning community "was just a natural fit for this wage earner."

Upon graduating from the learning community with her AA degree in Liberal Arts, Susan transferred to a small, private, all female, four year school. This decision was not as well thought out as the decision to enter the learning community. The actual decision to go there was reached at the graduation ceremony for the learning community when Susan found out that a fellow classmate was going to that particular school. Susan decided then and there to go also. It did offer a degree in creative writing which she wanted. She quit her job and immersed herself fully in a much more traditional educational setting.

Malik

Malik was an African-American male in his mid 30s. He was not married but "in a relationship." He lived with and supported his mother.

Tracing his educational experience prior to the learning community, Malik noted that he was not prepared for higher education as his high school was "more like a social club" than an educational training ground. Subsequently, he attended random classes at local community colleges and the adult school but came to the conclusion that his progress was "way too slow." But working full-time as a security guard in a local hospital limited his access to speedier solutions to degree progress.

While attending an orientation session at yet another community college, Malik discovered the learning community. He was very excited that it was a program designed for full-time working adults, to get them through an AA degree in as little as five semesters. Not only did it accommodate his work schedule, it also supported his timeline.

Malik completed his AA in the learning community and then transferred to a public, regional, four year university to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Sociology. This decision was based on his desired major, cost, and his personal and employment situations.

Katherine

Katherine was a "40 something" Caucasian female, married with kids. She was employed full-time by a local utility district as a plumber.

Through the Employee Development division of the Human Resources department at her work, Katherine found out "if you had 24 college credits, you could move up the rank and be an assistant superintendent, which made about four times as

much money as what I was making." She figured that was less than a year's worth of school. She already had started researching educational opportunities on her own when her employer sponsored a college fair. There she found the learning community. She decided "That's perfect. I can get in and get out; nobody will get hurt."

At the time she started the learning community Katherine had been out of school for over 20 years with no higher educational experience between leaving high school and entering the learning community. However, she did note that she believed her high school education had provided a solid foundation for entering the learning community.

Katherine chose to pursue her education beyond the learning community at a public flagship, nationally recognized university. Once she decided not to stop at the 24 units required for advancement at her job she decided to go "to the big leagues." The university had the major she wanted. In addition, she got a job as a plumber at the university enabling her to mesh her work and school schedules. This has allowed Katherine to continue to work full-time and still carry a full academic load in a very traditional educational setting.

Roya

Roya was the only participant who was not employed full-time outside of the home although she did a substantial amount of fund-raising for a non-profit organization from her home. She was married with two very young children. Roya was of Middle Eastern descent. She was proud of her Persian heritage but was also concerned that because English was her second language her educational progress had been impacted significantly. She noted that if her father were still alive he would be ashamed that she was 32 and did not yet have a bachelor's degree.

Before entering the learning community Roya seriously considered two different for-profit institutions because they offered online programs that would accommodate her family situation. But then she found the learning community to be a good fit for her. "This would be a great program...it was at night and weekends...I didn't want to leave my son with a babysitter...my husband took my son. I went to school at night and on the weekends. So I signed up."

Roya has continued her education at a public flagship university. This decision was based on several factors. The most important consideration was her desire to focus on human rights and peace and conflict. The prestige of the school was also important to her. She believed it would better facilitate her goal to work in the United Nations. And the final consideration was based on the fact that it was local and readily accessible.

Weena

Weena was an African-American female in her late 40s. She was single but engaged. Weena worked 40 or more hours per week at a public flagship university.

Weena's mother had instilled the need for education in Weena and her seven siblings. So Weena had wanted to return to school but could find nothing that accommodated her schedule. She had bounced around some attending a couple of different community colleges and even a public regional four year institution, but was never able to stick with it. "I wanted to finish something, and I just think I needed to be in the right place, and I needed support." She was pleased when she found that in the learning community "there were a lot of African Americans...It was a rainbow of people...it wasn't just one age. And it wasn't a bunch of kids. It was adults. And working adults that were seeking the same thing I was seeking."

Weena transferred to a public regional four year institution. She chose it because it offered the Health Education major she wanted. It was also convenient to her work.

Summary

The participants in my research represented diversity in gender, ethnicity, and age. They had different familial and employment situations. They came to the learning community for a variety of reasons but shared a common element. That was given their situations higher education was not readily accessible in an effective and efficient manner in a traditional educational setting. Their other commonality was having found a means of entering and progressing through an associate's degree each decided to continue their educational journeys even though their choices meant continuing in a very different environment than what they were used to. The next section of this chapter details the structures of the phenomenon that emerged through an analysis of the transcripts of their interviews.

Structures

Three structures emerged from the analysis of the transcripts describing how the phenomenon was experienced: connection, support, and sentiments. Together these form the framework of the phenomenon. As the participants shared their experience in and out of the learning community, they told how these structures formed their lived experience. An examination of each structure follows.

Connection

Connection was the first structure that emerged from the data. It described the relational experience of the adult learners in the learning community and the traditional educational settings. It illustrated the quantity and quality of the relational interactions of

the students and their environments. The participants' voices told of the need for connection and a sense of belonging and the value of connection. They also told of their struggles in gaining connection.

Three categories made up the structure of connection: student-to-student, student-to-faculty, and student-to-institution. The voices of the participants told of their experience of connection in and out of the learning community.

Student-to-student. The student-to-student connection was of great import to the participants. They spoke of this form of connection more than the others, and they spoke of it with greater affectation. In the learning community a democratic construct of their connection was heard in the simple statement "It was a community of working adults" (Malik). Others added depth to this description. Susan felt there was more to it than simply the fact that they were all working adults.

> And [the learning community] was more than shared background. I just felt so many points of commonality. Well it wasn't that it was many points that I had in common with people in [the learning community], but just that what we had in common meant a lot. That we were adults and we had never been to college, many of us. And everything that that can mean.

Roya explained "It was so much easier to be with your own age group. I mean, not just the same age. I was the youngest in [the learning community]. But it's nice to know that they have families and they're adults and they can understand where you're coming from." Because the students shared a common background they could connect on issues of the present. The connection was more than background and understanding. For Weena, that the other students were "seeking the same thing" she was meant that they also had an attitude of moving forward in common.

The learning community fostered connection, "about the second semester we got to know each other" (Weena). The greater opportunity for interaction served to promote connection, "the students were in every class, so you would get to know them; they would get to know you, and you have one-on-one class with them. And most of them were like me" (Malik). Katherine noted that she was reticent at first, "I did have some people that I studied with. It was a forced thing initially. But then, the next semester, we studied together still." For some the connections expanded beyond the institution, "I had a lot of personal meetings with the students. We would go to each other's house. We would go to [a restaurant], talk about assignments after class. We would go over each other's homework" (Malik). And for Weena, the connections ended up going far deeper, "She and I went through two years of [the learning community] together...so we ended up being friends, and we're still friends to this day."

As the participants described their interpersonal relationships with other students an affective construct of connection emerged. Susan noted "In the beginning, study buddies [in the learning community] were helpful because it helped me just get over being frightened about being in school and about being with other students." Once over her fear of others, Susan

> Loved being with the same people semester after semester. And it gave me so much energy to see other people succeeding, to see where we started from and where we were now. If I couldn't see my progress, I could look around and see someone else's. And that really kept me going.

Malik spoke in warm terms of the goodwill between the students as a result of their connection, "students leaned on each other to really pass because that was the idea, for you to succeed and pursue higher education, this was the way to do it." He added "I liked the camaraderie."

The participants noted some tangible, and some intangible, benefits resulting from their connections with the learning community. Weena spoke of a foundational benefit accomplished through the connections made within the learning community. "I needed a network; I needed other women that were close to my age, or at least mature and serious and not just there to screw off time and b.s. I needed someone to help me, basically – help me help myself." As the saying goes "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach the man to fish and he eats for life." Weena saw the same principle in action. She needed help but wanted help that would teach her how to help herself. Her connections with other students enabled her to do just that. On a more tangible note, Weena credits other students with teaching her how to take notes, how to read a textbook, and how to avail herself of institutional resources. On a deeper level the connections with other students in the learning community provided Susan with a measure of civility. Due to repeated exposure to and a close proximity with the other students "I learned how to talk to other people in the classroom. There was a lot of emphasis in [the learning community] on respecting the opinions of other people" (Susan). But Malik got to the crux of the matter on having a greater opportunity to connect with the other students.

> If you know something and another student doesn't know it, it's like the barter system. I need this, you need this. Well, maybe if we help each other, we could both pass. So it was kind of like that. As soon as class was over, or even during class, we would exchange numbers, get students' names, and that was encouraged in [the learning community], that network, work together.

There was a significant contrast in the voices of the participants when they talked about the student-to-student connections in the more traditional environment. Instead of the collegial, cooperative, collective connections the voices of the participants told of struggle; struggle for connection and with connections. Susan struggled with initiating

connections. "There's a sizeable percentage of women at [her private college]. But we're not clustered together. We have to find each other." Katherine noted that it was hard to make connections due to vastly different situations. "They were so young. They wanted to meet in the library. I wanted to go home." Roya expressed it this way "I've made only two friends at [the university] in a year and a half. For me that's not good because I make friends really quickly, really quickly. We have nothing in common. I can't study with them. Yeah, I don't have a peer group." Not only did the differing situations make connection difficult but the spirit behind the connection was vastly different in Weena's experience. "It was like a competition...I'm like, 'Aren't we a team?' You know, it didn't feel like we were a team." But probably the most profound objection to the lack of connection in the traditional higher educational setting was shared by Susan. "I didn't have a shared background with as many people as I did in [the learning community]. So I felt I wasn't as genuine in the classroom or socially as I was on this campus."

Student-to-faculty. The need for and satisfaction with the connection between the students and the faculty also was heard in the voices of the participants. It was interesting that the student-to-faculty connections in the learning community were spoken of in more personal and relational terms, while the participants' voices revealed a sense of striving for connection as they related their experience in the more traditional setting.

Connection at the most foundational level started with simple gestures of acknowledgement. Such gestures as remembering someone, or better yet, remembering her name can carry great significance. While describing what she liked about the learning community Roya explained "Teachers greeting you by first name, small classes. They paid attention, the kind of attention that I think adults who were out of school needed."

Connections on a deeper level carry even greater significance. Susan related an experience of deeper connection initiated by the instructor from her first learning community class,

> She said, "How many people in here are the first ones in their family to go to college?" And I was scared...I looked around. It was like almost everybody had their arm up. And she had her arm up. She did something. It still moves me to tears. That was the biggest thing anybody could have done. And it was really simple, but what she did was take down the division between the professor, the professional and the student.

In that one moment that instructor leveled the playing field and connected with those students in a deeply profound way. She became one of them. In a comparison of the learning community and the traditional educational settings Roya gives meaning to the gestures of connection each has afforded her,

> At [the learning community] it was like a family. At [the university], it's like neighbors. That's the best I can put it. They're nice. They'll say hello. I'll go to their office. Still, I don't think most of them know me by name. They might know me by face...But they're like a friendly neighbor who will say hi and walk away. At [the learning community] my teachers knew about my life. It was like a family. If I had stress, I remember, with all the miscarriages – I had five – all my teachers usually knew about it. They were so nice. I mean, they would hug me, talk to me, let me go sleep for a week, sleep it off. No, that doesn't happen at [the university].

In the traditional setting it was necessary for the participants to put forth serious effort to connect with the faculty. Susan found out early on that it was up to the student to engage with the teacher. That proved difficult for Roya, "[The university], you can't even find time to speak to your teacher. If you do, they don't know who you are. There's 2-300 students in a class, especially for undergrad classes." For Weena, connecting with faculty proved frustrating, "I felt like the teachers were a clique. You had to wait outside their doors to speak to them. They didn't make themselves available to you." Katherine actively pursued connection with the faculty outside of the classroom, "I go to office

hours. I get clarification on papers, clarification on information, because in a room full of 250 people, you don't always get to ask every question you want to." She noted a common form of connection in the traditional environment was electronic interaction, "instead of an instructor taking time in class, everything's online, and so they have chat rooms where the instructor will be helping people down out of their tree." For Weena, this more impersonal form of interaction left something to be desired. In her experience only one teacher returned her email. "She got right to the point with a one-liner. [Another instructor] would only return phone calls. [Another instructor] never returned anything." Weena clearly illustrated the significance of strong student-to-faculty connections.

> I remember one semester [in the learning community] I took 18 units. And I did well in everything because I was able to go to the teacher and say, "What do I do with this? I'm confused here. I can't figure this out." As to where at [the university] in the health ed department, students would sit on the floor outside of the teacher's office and the teachers would open the door and go, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. What's going on? What do you guys want? What do you want?" Well, they wanted to talk to the teacher because the teacher wasn't returning the emails or notes or wouldn't answer at all. It was complete ignoring."

Student-to-institution. While the connection of the student to the institution was the least personal, it was nevertheless significant to the overall experience of the student in the institution. The voices of the participants carried more negative connotations as they related their experience of connection to the post-learning community institutions. Katherine expressed her fear that she would not be able to connect because she didn't feel she was a part of the institution, "I was afraid. I didn't feel like I belonged there. I was afraid they were going to figure out that I was this 40 year old woman and wonder 'who let her in?'" Roya expressed similar concerns "You feel like you are competing with kids, like you are totally out of place." Susan conveyed a sense of a less intimate connection in the more traditional setting, "I'm just a [university] student, so I feel almost like I belong

more to just the broad umbrella of [university] student." That she described the traditional environment as feeling "really cold" illustrates Susan's experience of isolation and aloneness, her lack of connection to the institution. Katherine provided an example of "cold" behaviors denoting a lack of connection from her experience in the traditional educational setting. "Now I have an eight digit number. That is what they ask for when I call." To not acknowledge a person is very disconfirming. Such disconfirming behavior does not positively reinforce the participant's connection to the institution. Malik noted that his interactions with the non learning community environment were like a "rat race," people running here and there, somewhat chaotic, little or no personal connection, people only out for themselves. He further noted that to achieve connection "you have to fight. You have to be more aggressive...you've got to be persistent." While these behaviors may have provided for his needs, at the time they did little to make him feel a welcomed part of the institution. Many students would just give up. Weena expressed similar feelings about her connections with the post-learning community institution, "I was going in with my boxing gloves on. And I felt like I had them on the whole time, which is not good."

The connections to the institution afforded by the learning community stood in sharp contrast. Malik explained

> The [learning community] is a part of a bigger picture in the school. So once you're in that system then, you learn about other systems in the school as well, about the tutoring, about financial aid and so on and so on. But you're part of a system, so once you get in, you have this network.

The learning community actively promoted the student's connection to the institution.

> they didn't seem to let anybody slip through the cracks. And that was a big shock. I felt, "No one is going to be paying any attention to me in here. They have so many students." You know? You can't pay attention to everybody. But they knew

> if you didn't register. Or they'd send you a little email or they'd look at your academic plan. And they really knew what [the school] needed for you to graduate, and they knew how the [learning community] program worked. (Susan).

Katherine agreed with Susan, "being able to call [the secretary] and just tell her who I am, and she would straighten stuff out. That was nice." Susan had described the traditional environment as feeling 'cold' but when asked about the learning community setting, she said it felt "warm." The connections made through the learning community to the institution were inviting and inclusive and brought her into the fold of the institution as a whole. She spoke sentimentally about the connection, "I think between the administration, the faculty, and the students, it was so strong; the synergy between those three areas was like a net or a web. And I appreciate it. I'm nostalgic about it."

All of the participants noted the personal nature of the connections in the learning community environment. Malik observed that "even though a lot of people had different jobs within the school, they would lead you – if you had a question or whatever – they would lead you to someone who could answer it or help you with your problem." Katherine illustrated Malik's point,

> And [the secretary] – call her through the day and she'd get right back to me. But she knew who I was when I called. "Hi, I'm so and so, and I'm having this problem" and she'd like "Oh, let me look into that for you". She would find the answer or the person with the answer.

In contrast the connection in the more traditional environment was more impersonal. "They sent emails, all that kind of stuff. They give you your own page, but again, unless you know where to go to look for this stuff, you get to be like a deer in the headlights" (Malik). While an attempt was made to connect the student to the institution Malik expressed a continuing insecurity and a feeling of being on the outside looking in.

In Katherine's experience the post-learning community institution knew the importance of connection and understood that she might not feel the connection she was used to. They even tried to overcome that perception

> In the letter that they sent, the acceptance letter, there was a paragraph about, "you belong here; we wouldn't have invited you to come to our school if you didn't belong here. So just be aware that everyone feels the same way. I was like, "no you don't understand. You really don't know." So I'm kind of going, "Wow. I'm going to the big hill to the school that's internationally known. How did that happen?"

Roya received a similar letter but didn't feel any sense of connection until her third semester in the more traditional setting. "Thank God that I found the center now, the third semester in my school, and there's a lot of help. Now I see moms with kids, even, at the center, which is nice." Due to a high risk pregnancy Roya had to stop out for a term but upon her return plans to pursue a greater connection to the institution. "I have to make sure to go in and get to know people because they actually do have a center like [the learning community]."

Summary. The voices of the participants have given meaning to the significance of connections to the adult learner in and out of the learning community environment. They have drawn a sharp contrast between their experiences in the learning community and their experiences in the more traditional educational settings. The participants told of a greater quantity, a deeper quality, and more personal connections that were ultimately more satisfying at all levels in the learning community setting. In contrast they told of a lesser quantity, a shallower quality, more impersonal, and not as satisfying at any level with the traditional environment.

Support

Support was the second structure that emerged from the data. The adult learners face many obstacles as they pursue their educations. The voices of the participants' disclosed their need for support to overcome the obstacles. They divulge the presence or lack of support in their lived experiences in the learning community and the traditional settings.

Systemic support, academic support, and emotional support emerged as the components of support associated with the participants' experiences. Their need for mental, physical, and emotional support and the manner in which they received them were revealed in the interviews.

Systemic support. The participants expressed the need for support getting into the system and then staying in it. Gaining access and knowing and following the policies and procedures of an institution are areas the participants indicated they needed systemic support. Entering higher education was challenging for all of the participants. Adults have to make do with a system that was designed for 18-20 year olds. For the participants access was limited by their life situations. Most participants note they were initially attracted to the learning community because it accommodated their work situation. "The hours were after work so I could keep working" (Susan). "It fit nicely with my work schedule" (Katherine). Weena overheard some other students talking about the learning community. "It was for working adults. And, then the bell went off – ding, ding, ding, ding, ding." Weena realized she too could go to school and still keep her full-time job. Roya did not work outside of the home. But she had children at home and did not want to send them to a babysitter. The schedule of the learning community supported her life

situation. Her husband could watch the kids, in the evenings after work, while she attended class. Malik summed up the situation noting that everyone in the cohort was "either working, some had families, some had kids, some worked 40 hours a week, some had two jobs." Everyone in the learning community had life situations that made it difficult for them to participate in higher education. Having the support of a program that accommodated other significant roles in their lives gave them access to higher education.

Weena was impressed by an orientation she attended for the learning community students,

> I did an orientation...I was referred to [the program secretary], and she had the answer for practically any and everything, and I said "Wow, this is really great" because it seemed like it was a unit or a networking that was going on...you didn't have to stand in line and register...If you wanted financial aid, you didn't have to stand in line.

The one-stop-shop concept of the orientation was further support that diminished the obstacles that kept many adults from entering higher education. Katherine noted an attempt in the more traditional institution to address some of these same challenges, "You get an admissions officer and you get a financial aid officer. And they helped in dealing with transferring my information here. They contacted me through email." While it was not as personal as the learning community support it, seems to have been sufficient as she goes on to say "Everything slipped into place."

Navigating the system once a student was in the system was also a challenge. Roya spoke of the support she received from the staff of the learning community that helped with system issues. "The secretary was nice enough to send me my paperwork at home, or call me if there was something wrong." Katherine further noted that when she

needed help the secretary was prompt "getting right back to me," and she was pleasant and efficient, making Katherine feel like it was OK to ask for help.

One element in the system that could be particularly challenging was scheduling and registration. Katherine spoke of her difficulties in scheduling and registering for a term in the traditional educational environment.

> I had some things mapped out until I went to register for classes, which is also not fun...They give you an appointment of 24 hours, and you can register for up to ten units the first go-around, and then you wait until the end of that section and then you get another appointment, and then you can register for more classes, and you have another 24 hour appointment, Well, what happens is it's all staggered. So you try and get into a class. Well, for my sociology class, there was 250 people accepted into the class. I was on the waitlist. I was number 17 on the waitlist. But what happens is that people sign up for classes and then drop them as they try and get other classes that they want instead. So it's frustrating because you're trying to register for classes. You're only allowed to register for so many at a time. And it's this whole juggling and jockeying.

This was very different from her learning community experience. "They come to class and enroll you for the next semester. They made it very easy, so I wasn't poring over catalogs trying to decide what to take." Malik also shared the difficulty he had with the system in the more traditional setting.

> It's a bigger school; there's more students, and the bureaucracy, I know, is very different. But I guess if anything you've got to be persistent in what you want and you've got to find a way to get to it, whether it's hard or not...Getting information at the school – if you don't know it, it's like pulling teeth because you have to go through a lot of bureaucracy in terms of getting any questions answered, how to get things and where to go.

Weena summed up the difference in support between her learning community and her post-learning community experiences,

> Stay with the program because [the learning community] does everything for you. In saying that, they do everything for you, they put your classes in order. All you have to do is go. And there's no university that says, "Here's your curriculum, and we're going to sign you up for this class. [The secretary] is going to come and sign everybody up and just sign this piece of paper and give your comments at the

> end of the semester and we'll see you next semester." No! No, it doesn't happen that way. It only happened that was at [the learning community].

Academic support. The need for academic support was also heard in the voices of the participants. Just as the needs of an adult entering higher education are different from those of the traditional 18-22 year old, so also their needs are different in the classroom. Katherine explained "I think for them, a number of them said that teaching adults that are working is different than teaching 18, 19, 20 year olds. She further noted "there was a mutual appreciation" when the faculty worked to provide academic support in the form of an adult centered classroom. One method of academic support then would be for faculty to adjust their presentation to the student group they are engaging. "It really worked that the teachers, the professors, were really used to adults" (Susan). She felt secure and empowered knowing that the faculty "respected everybody in the room."

Collaboration among the faculty in the learning community was a form of academic support noted by the participants. "I loved having the same faculty in that program. I felt that everybody had this mission. Everybody had a mission to get their students up and running" (Susan). Susan saw this "mission" as a group effort among the faculty. Roya expanded on this.

> The teachers were working with each other. Like [the English teacher] would tell [the critical thinking teacher] she has English problems or she has blah blah blah; this is where she needs help; she does work hard but English...grammatically she needs...And [the critical thinking teacher] would work with me then.

Faculty collaboration in the learning community environment enabled faculty to know the student better so to be able to better support the student academically.

The learning community also offered academic support in the area of the curriculum. Katherine spoke of the integration of the classes,

> Well, the classes were grouped together and they made sense together. And also, the instructors knew the other instructors and what was being taught. Like in my English classes, we would write a paper for the history class and have it be proofread and graded in English and you'd get a grade for history, so they were working together, particularly that first year, to kind of help people out because they haven't written a paper in 20 years. Yeah, the classes made sense together even later. Like I think I was taking critical thinking and maybe ethics at the same...and they just really worked together well. They're kind of along the same thought process.

This helped reduce the fragmentation most students experience. It also provided another benefit for the busy adult learner. "I loved the fact that...writing one research paper but using it for two different classes" (Roya). Being able to write one assignment but use it to understand a skill (English) and content (History) saved the students' valuable time.

Academic support was perceived in other forms as well. The availability of faculty in the learning community provided academic support. "I listened to the teacher and I would talk to the teacher and I would get help there. The teachers were there to help you, regardless of the time. I was never told, 'I've got to get home.'" (Weena) This is in contrast to Roya's and Katherine's experiences in the more traditional setting where the classes were so large that the opportunity to interact with the faculty was greatly diminished. Another form of academic support was provided when one of Weena's instructors encouraged the students to get a book on student success strategies. One other small extension of support from the learning community had a significant impact on Weena.

> I found out that they loaned the books at [the learning community]. And I said "oh, my goodness. This is a godsend. If I don't finish this, there's no reason why I shouldn't finish this program because they loan you the books." What school does that? There's no school that I know of that will loan you a book...So [the learning community] made me want to continue.

These resources proved to be of significant academic support to the participants.

Emotional support. The participants shared their experiences of emotional support with the learning community and the more traditional educational settings. The most profound form of emotional support in the learning community was found in their common/shared backgrounds. It provided an atmosphere and attitude of inclusion, "We were a community of working adults" (Susan). These same feelings of inclusion did not extend to the traditional environment. "But what I was expecting from [the learning community], I received at [the university] – a room full of kids, straight from high school, popping gum, gossiping, talking" (Weena). "I had to learn how to relax about being so much older than...you know, some of these students are young enough to have been my daughters" (Susan). Roya explained the significance of feeling so dissimilar to her classmates, "I'm 32. But most students that I had to take classes with were pretty much 18. And I didn't feel good emotionally. I don't want to be in a class emotionally." Due to the dissimilarity Roya experienced an emotional disconnect from the class.

Connection provides emotional support. The faculty in the learning community encouraged connection. "We were definitely encouraged to exchange numbers, to keep in touch, to study in groups and really work together and the teachers always offered their help" (Malik). The participants were able to receive emotional support within their own group, the group they were with for two years. The connections providing emotional support in the traditional educational environment came from such sources as the transfer center (Katherine and Roya), the women's lounge (Susan), and the learning center (Weena). While these were designed for groups with common concerns they were nevertheless institution wide. Therefore, the connections weren't as close and personal and did not provide the depth of emotional support found in the learning community.

> Sometimes if we felt we weren't going to make it, a student would come and tell you, "No, you could do this. You've just got to stay focused. You've just got to get together and just don't give up or try to do it by yourself." You know, there's a lot of behind-the-scenes, as soon as we talk among the students about that, making sure that they would succeed no matter what. (Malik)

Knowing they were in it together provided the emotional support necessary to get the participants through the learning community.

Summary. Support comes in many forms including systemic, academic, and emotional. Providing the physical support to get them into and through the system, the mental support to succeed and the emotional support to withstand the rigors of higher education were all revealed by the participants as significant structures of their academic experiences. In the learning community the participants portrayed a great deal of support in all three areas. It was readily available. As Weena put it "We were spoiled by [the learning community]." While the same types of support were available in the traditional setting the students were expected to be more self-reliant, to find them and utilize the resources on their own.

Sentiments

The third structure that emerged from the data I have called sentiments. The sentiments are the attitudes, thoughts, or judgments the participants had regarding their experiences in the learning community and the more traditional settings. Their sentiments were revealed in the emotive language used as they relayed their experiences. In this section the sentiments of each participant are presented separately and in the order they were interviewed.

Susan. Susan prized her learning community experience more than her post-learning community experience. She talked about the learning community more and in

more positive terms. She used strong, declarative terms as she described her learning community experience, "I loved it." "I loved being part of the cohort." "I loved having the same faculty..." It "felt warm." "I appreciate it." "I'm nostalgic..." Conversely, her strongest negative sentiment about the learning community was more tentative as she noted that the tool of study buddies "didn't work so well for me."

In contrast, the strongest positive sentiment she expressed in regard to her traditional educational experience was "it was helpful." The more emotive terms she used describing her traditional experience portrayed strong negative sentiments; "overwhelmed," "shocked," "enraged," "frightened," "there was shame," "it was awful," "most upsetting." Overall, Susan expressed greater esteem for her learning community experience that her post-learning community experience.

Much of Susan's experience centered on the connections she made. Connections were a vital component of her educational experience. She described her feelings regarding the learning community in more affirming terms: "[the learning community] protected me', there was a familial feeling," she felt "engaged," being part of a diverse population "really worked." Disconfirming sentiments are heard in her experience of the traditional setting. "I was so frightened I would be kicked out" when the institution realized who she was and how much older she was. "I wasn't as genuine in the classroom" because she was so different from the other students. It was "most upsetting" when the class shock and the institutional shock braided together" and marginalized her in the traditional setting.

Susan was very sentimental about her learning community experience. Her post-learning community experience has not been as positive. However, she does see herself

persisting in the traditional environment and believes "It's a worthwhile school to go to and I think it'll pay off when I'm applying to grad school because it has a good reputation."

Malik. Malik's sentiments regarding his learning community experience were on the positive side while not being effusive. He stated that his tenure in the learning community had been "a really good experience." He noted that his connections with the learning community had been "a big thing," that the support was "really helpful" and that the system was "good." He used more negative terminology in his description of his experience in the non-learning community setting: "I hated the long lines," "getting information...was like pulling teeth," "I wish it was more used friendly" and "the worst thing" is when people fall through the cracks. He expressed negative sentiments regarding the more traditional system only. Otherwise his feelings regarding his post-learning community experience were somewhat neutral: "I wasn't worried" describing his academic preparation for the university and "I wasn't intimidated" when it came to his experiences with the faculty in the more traditional educational setting.

Much of the sentiment Malik expressed centered on his responsibility as a student: "It was all about me," "I've got to do this," "I became accountable," "I refused to be a drain," "It's all about the student," "You really have to be ready to study. You have to be ready to make sacrifices...its really up to you in that sense." These sentiments remained consistent from the learning community into thepost-learning community experience.

Malik expressed positive sentiments in regard to the learning community. He enjoyed that experience. He also enjoyed his more traditional educational experience,

although he was less satisfied with the system. His strongest sentiments, however, were not focused on the learning community or the more traditional setting, positive or negative. His development as a student was what evoked his greatest attention.

Katherine. In general, Katherine used more moderately emotive language in her descriptions for both the learning community and her post-learning community experience. "I liked it" referring to the learning community, "it fit nicely" with her work situation. "It was a little different" comparing the learning community to the more traditional setting. She was "not impressed" with the registration system in the traditional environment, and the number of students was "a little daunting." While these terms express positive and negative connotations none are blatantly one or the other. She did express the exact same sentiment for both her learning community and post-learning community experience, "I liked it." She revealed her feeling on the relationship of the two different educational settings when she described the learning community as "a great foundation" and the traditional educational setting as being "the big leagues." There is little difference in Katherine's attitude toward the learning community and her more traditional educational experience. There was no strong emotion, either way, in either setting. Her sentiments have remained consistently on the positive side throughout her educational journey from the learning community into the more traditional setting; she "liked it."

The affirmative attitudes Katherine expressed toward her education were further revealed as she described her ability in the learning community as, "I managed to get through" while she is "managing and doing well" in the traditional setting. Katherine has developed as a student, progressing from getting by to succeeding. Further development

was disclosed when she described the workload in the learning community as "manageable" but found the amount of work she was able to accomplish in the traditional setting as "Just amazing." She also wouldn't want to "cheat" herself by not doing all the reading and getting all she possibly could out of a class. That she put time and effort into developing as a student spoke to her positive sentiments with regard to her whole educational experience.

Roya. Roya expressed only positive sentiments for the learning community. "I'm a [learning community] lover," "Everything worked for me." "Even the secretary was nice." Her sentiments surrounding the more traditional setting were generally more negative: "it was hard" fitting in, and "it's not good" that she has not made connections in her post-learning community experience. A notable exception to the negative sentiments for the traditional setting was when she described it as "a really good school," "a very smart school." She did see value in her experience.

Much of the sentiment Roya shared was focused on her experience with emotional connections in the two different educational settings. In the learning community, "they didn't make you feel dumb or that you shouldn't be there," "it felt so good" being paid attention to, she "didn't feel out of place," and the learning community felt "like a family." She revealed warm, inclusive, comfortable sentiments for the learning community. That was in contrast to her experience in her post-learning community experience where she "couldn't take the pressure,' "was competing with kids," "didn't feel good emotionally," and worse she "felt like a failure." These described a cold, exclusive, uncomfortable sentiment of the more traditional environment.

Roya respected the traditional educational experience while not having strong positive sentiments for it. She was much more at home in the learning community setting but realized enough of a positive value in the traditional approach to persist.

Weena. Two contrasting statements sum up Weena's sentiments about her experience in the learning community and the traditional setting. The learning community "made you feel like you were on top of the world," while in the traditional educational environment she felt like she had been "thrown to the wolves." In the learning community Weena "felt comfortable" because the other students were like her, she felt "very lucky" to have found a network of support. Her learning community experience made her "want to continue" her education and made her "want to do better." Her post-learning community experience was not as positive. Comparing the two she came to the conclusion "this is nothing like [the learning community]." She was frustrated, feeling like "you had to figure it all out on your own." She got "angry and felt like there was no support." There was resignation in her voice when she stated "the transition was difficult. I just made it work." Her sentiments about the learning community revealed feelings of inclusion, while her sentiments regarding the traditional educational setting revealed feelings of isolation.

Weena also expressed views of herself as a student in the two environments. In the learning community, "I was there to learn." "I was serious." "I was there to get my education and to figure out what was next." "I was going to finish." A change in attitude was apparent as she described her post-learning community educational experience. "I did the best I could." "I just had to keep the attitude that I was going to finish." She was acutely aware of the impact each environment had on her but was determined to continue.

Summary. Sentiments are the attitudes, thoughts, and judgments the participants had regarding their experience in and out of the learning community. Their sentiments were revealed as they described their experiences and through the emotive language they used in the descriptions. All of the participants expressed positive sentiments for their learning community experience. They were not as affirmative in their sentiments for the more traditional setting. While the sentiments expressed for the more traditional educational environment were not as positive, the participants expressed their respect for those institutions and realized the value the schools bring to their educations.

Summary

The structures of a phenomenon describe how the phenomenon was experienced. They come directly from the voices of the participants. In this study three structures emerged from the data: connection, support, and sentiments. The connection the participants experienced, the means and methods of support provided and the sentiments of the participants describe their experience of beginning their educational journeys in a learning community setting but then continuing in a more traditional educational environment. While these structures describe the experiences of the participants, their deeper purpose is to lead to an understanding of the essence of the experience for each participant. Upon closer observation it became clear that the essence of the experience for each of these participants involved a subtle shift. The next section explains the essence of the subtle shift for each participant.

A Subtle Shift

The essence or nature of the phenomenon of an adult learner beginning an education in a learning community and continuing in a more traditional educational

environment was a subtle shift in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of each of the participants. Each experienced a small but significant shift in his or her view of the role and responsibility of the student and the institution in the educational process as he or she transitioned from the learning community into a traditional educational setting. The impact of their learning community experience influenced their thinking, their ideas, and their practices as they engaged the traditional environment. For each student the shift involved movement along a continuum of autonomy and interdependence in an effort to find a position that was tenable. It was a slow process and at a deep level. It happened without the participant even being aware of it.

Each participant experienced such a subtle shift. It was different for each one. But all participants experienced a slow, slight alteration in the view they had of themselves or the system they found themselves in. In this section I explore the subtle shift made by each participant.

A Shift in Reality

Susan felt connected in the learning community, not just because the students were similar in age but because they shared a kindred spirit. There was a level playing field. She felt supported. She felt like she was not just in the system but an integral part of the system. When she transferred to the more traditional setting she perceived herself as marginalized by the system even though she assimilated more into that system by quitting her job and devoting more time and energy to her education. She did not feel a strong connection in the traditional setting and considered the support inadequate.

The subtle shift for Susan was in dropping the illusion of what she thought an educational environment should be and what it should look like based on her experience

in the learning community. She was disheartened by her post-learning community experience but she was not disinclined to continue. She had to consider the picture she had created and compare that to the reality of her new environment. In her case there was a subtle shift in her attitude to accept the reality of the traditional educational situation and continue on. While not the same type or level of connection and support she found in the learning community, Susan has found sufficient resources to sustain her.

A Shift in Priority

Susan was focused on the external elements of connection and support in her educational experience. Malik, on the other hand, was more focused on the internal impact of his experience in the two settings. Throughout his narrative, Malik related his progress as a student. He started as a student passively attending the system, to a participant in the system, to being fully immersed in the system. In the learning community he discovered structures such as connection and support that enhanced his journey. When faced with a situation that did not provide those structures he sought them on his own.

The subtle shift for Malik started in the learning community and intensified in his post-learning community experience. That was the level of responsibility he assumed for his own education. The learning community fit his needs. He utilized and appreciated that. As he moved into the more traditional setting his attitude shifted from how the system fit him to how he could better fit the system. As he stated "It is all up to the student." His focus is on the goal of tomorrow, graduation, not on what is lacking today. Malik is determined to be the first one in his family to achieve a bachelor's degree.

A Shift in Perspective

Katherine returned to school for her job. If she earned enough credits she could be promoted and earn more money. She chose the learning community because of her job. It was designed for the full-time working adult. It accommodated her work schedule. Once she got into the learning community she decided to go further than the minimum required by her job for promotion. She decided she wanted to go all the way through a bachelor's degree. Katherine continued to work when she entered the university for her upper division work. She switched to a job in the same institution where she is able to adjust her work schedule around her class schedule.

The subtle shift for Katherine was from going to school for work to work for going to school. In the learning community Katherine's primary role was as a working adult. Her other roles adjusted to accommodate that one. In her post-learning community experience education took on a more primary position. In that setting her role of employee adjusted to accommodate her role as a student. Katherine experienced the subtle shift of metamorphosis. She changed from an employee wanting a little education to a student needing a little income.

A Shift in Affiliation

Roya was thrilled to find the learning community. She fit in there. The other students were like her. They had families and similar life experiences to her. They needed an alternative to the traditional delivery of higher education. They had similar academic challenges having been out of the educational arena for many years. She felt included and involved in the learning community. She was part of the learning community family. That changed in her post-learning community experience. There she was not part of a

group with similar characteristics and circumstances. She tried to fit in by looking similar on the outside, putting her hair up in a ponytail, but soon realized it was the internal issues that really separated her from the other students. Her needs were different. Her goals were different. Her abilities were different. She could look the part, but she felt like she was on the outside looking in.

The subtle shift for Roya was in coping with the fact that she is a non-traditional student in a traditional setting. She didn't fit the profile of the student the traditional educational setting was designed to serve. Roya was a misplaced student. She was not the norm as she had been in the learning community. But misplaced did not mean lost. She admitted that the traditional experience was more difficult in many ways for her but it provided a means to an end that she could not accomplish elsewhere. So she continues to persevere.

A Shift in Ambition

Weena was very excited to start back to school. She had plans. She was moving forward. She was even more excited when she found the learning community. She had found a group of like minded folks. They supported her and encouraged her in her educational journey. They gave her the tools she needed to excel. The learning community was an enjoyable, pleasant, positive experience for her. Upon entering the traditional educational Weena felt the support and the connections that had sustained her swept away. She was on her own, often at odds with the other people and the system she found herself in.

When Weena started in the learning community, she had an upbeat, positive attitude. It was challenging, but she was going to make it. She could do it. She was going

to finish. That attitude changed in her post-learning community experience. There she did the best she could and did what she had to in order to make it work. The subtle shift for Weena was to being a survivor. Weena went from engaging the system, from enjoying the system and taking all it had to offer, to surviving the system, simply getting through it. Weena explained that it was the learning community that gave her a zest for education. Her experience in the more traditional setting nearly destroyed it. But she keeps her learning community experience in mind as she looks forward to graduate school.

Summary

The concept of the learning community was to overcome or diminish as many obstacles faced by adult learners as possible. However, given the changes in the environment when the students transferred out of the learning community into the more traditional setting, the students were forced to reconsider the paradigms used to guide their thoughts and actions. For Katherine and Malik, the subtle shift in their psychosocial development resulted in a self-definition more closely aligned with their role as students. For them it has been a reasonably successful transition. In Weena's case, the dissonance experienced in the traditional setting created a developmental crisis causing a subtle shift in her attitude about her role as a student. Susan and Roya experienced disequilibrium when the expectations created as a result of their learning community experience were not met in the traditional environment. For them, the subtle shift was in the form of modifying their expectations to accommodate the new circumstances in which they found themselves. All of the participants experienced a subtle shift as they proceeded from the learning community into a more traditional educational setting. The circumstances of the shift were different for each. But they all involved a shift in how they perceived

themselves in the role of student in the new and different educational setting. Each experienced a subtle shift that redefined his or her meaning of the roles and responsibilities of the system and their participation with that system.

Conclusion

In this chapter phenomenological research methods allowed me to hear the lived experience of adult students who started their educational journeys in a learning community setting and continued in a traditional setting. From their voices I have gained a more holistic understanding of that experience. Chapter Five will address how these findings relate to my research questions, to the fields of adult learners and learning communities, and to further research.

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of my study, *In and Out of the Learning Community: A Phenomenological Study of the Learning Community Experience of Adult Learners.* In this study, I examined the lived experience of adult learners who started their higher education in a learning community setting but continued in a more traditional educational environment. My research allowed me a holistic examination of their experience. From their interviews I was able to identify the obstacles they encountered in both settings and the means and methods of overcoming the obstacles in both settings. The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What is the lived experience of adult learners in a learning community educational environment?
2. What are the opportunities, benefits, advantages experienced by adult learners in a learning community environment?
3. What obstacles do adult learners perceive in a more traditional educational environment?
4. What affect does early learning community experience have on the post-learning community educational experience of the adult learner?

To address these questions I interviewed five adults who had completed their lower division work in a learning community and then continued in a more traditional setting. Each participant was in his or her second or third term out of the learning community. As I listened to the voice of each participant, he or she shared stories, thoughts, and feelings that made up the experience. Applying Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to the transcripts, I identified key elements of the experience. These organized into three major structures. Connection, support, and sentiments formed the framework of the lived experience of these adult learners in and out of the learning community. Connections and supports described the conditions, the how and what of the participants' experience. Sentiments described how participants responded to their learning community and post-learning community experiences. The three structures intertwined to form the essence of the study, a subtle shift. Therein I found the answers to my research questions.

Chapter Five is organized in four sections. The first section addresses my research questions. I start this discussion by stating some of my biases and assumptions as I approached this research. I continue in this section relating my findings to my research questions. Section two discusses the relationship of my findings to my literature review on learning communities and adult learners. Section three provides my perspective of the outcomes of my study. In this section I present my recommendations for practice and further research. I close this chapter in the final section with some concluding comments and my personal reflections.

Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

The overarching question that guided my research was "How does participation in a learning community affect post learning community education experience for an adult learner?" This study was designed with the goal of learning the opportunities and obstacles of the learning community and the traditional educational settings for adult learners. Further, I wanted to better understand the relationship of the learning community experience to the post-learning community educational experience. I begin

my discussion of my findings and their relationship to my research questions by first providing an overview of my assumptions and biases as I approached the research.

Researcher Assumptions and Biases

Reflection and clarification of the biases of the researcher is essential in phenomenological study. In qualitative methodology the researcher is instrumental as the means through which data are collected (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, it is important to be aware of the assumptions and biases of the researcher as the human instrument used to conduct the research and generate findings.

My personal and my professional experience led me to this research. I was an adult learner. I have first hand experience with the obstacles faced by adult learners. I also have experience with educational settings designed to address those obstacles. I taught in a learning community designed specifically for working adults for 13 years. In addition, I had several years experience administering a program for working adults. As this study progressed I became increasingly aware of assumptions and biases I held. Being intimately familiar with the complexities of designing and maintaining a learning community, with the practice guided by the theories addressing effective learning and adult learners in particular, I was sold on the value and benefits of a learning community setting for adults either entering for the first time or reentering higher education. As such, I expected to hear what a warm, wonderful, positive experience the learning community had been for each participant. I also expected to hear that the students understood and appreciated the structure of the learning community and felt prepared to face the rigors of upper division work in a traditional educational setting. I expected to hear elements of student development such as increased self esteem and confidence of a student as a result

of their experience in the learning community. I further expected to see a degree of self reliance and accountability for their own educations develop as a result of their exposure to various resources and student success strategies utilized in the learning community. I expected to hear of sudden, dramatic changes in the attitudes and behaviors of the students, something akin to an epiphany as a result of their learning community experience. Ultimately, I hoped that the students would see the elements of the learning community as foundational to their progress into the university and their further development as students in that setting. It is evident that my personal experience, my professional experience, and my study of the literature prompted several assumptions and biases. Through the interview process many of my assumptions came to light. Some were shown to be valid, and others not.

I was the research instrument. I selected the wording for the interview questions. Therefore, it is to be expected that that may have influenced participants' responses. However, I was ever aware of the need to set aside my assumptions and biases to better hear the participants' voices. Part of the phenomenological research methodology involves the process of Epoche (Moustakas, 1996). Epoche is the process I used to clarify my assumptions and biases as I met and talked with each participant. "In the Epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowing, are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (Moustakas, p. 33). Prior to meeting with each participant I would engage in the practice of Epoche. The process continued throughout the interviews and into the actual data analysis. Epoche is what enabled me to separate myself from my professional role so as to be able as a researcher to engage the participants with a fresh

perspective. This in turn enabled me to be open to their experience to better learn from them.

1. What is the lived experience of adult learners in a learning community educational environment?

This first question was designed to get at the experience of adult learners in a learning community at a universal level. The three structures explored in Chapter 4 address this question. The interweaving of the structures formed the participants' experience.

The three structures of connection, support, and sentiment emerged from the interviews with the participants as common elements of the experience. These structures formed the framework of the experience. All of the participants experienced vital connections in the learning community. That they were a cohort that moved together through a five semester curriculum allowed for greater opportunity to connect with other students. The more contact made between the students also provided greater opportunity to build awareness and trust, thus enabling the student-to-student connections to go deeper and be stronger. The learning community also provided greater opportunity to interact with faculty. And learning community faculty went to greater lengths to facilitate student-to-faculty connections. The participants also perceived stronger connection to the institution as a whole in their learning community experience. The participants also experienced more support in the learning community. They shared consistent and wide ranging means and methods of support going into and through the learning community. In general, their sentiments toward the learning community were positive. Some were more effusive, while others were more moderate. But overall, the lived experience of the

adult learners in the learning community setting was a positive, nurturing experience that allowed for their development as students.

2. What are the opportunities, benefits, advantages, experienced by adult learners in a learning community environment?

The second research question was designed to elicit the participants' knowledge and understanding of the learning community. I was interested to find out if the students recognized value in the core practices of learning communities. The accessibility of the learning community was an often mentioned advantage by the participants. It was a fully evening/weekend program making higher education accessible to population that had daytime jobs or other responsibilities that prevented them from being able to attend the more traditional day classes. Beyond the issue of access the participants saw the learning community as being inclusive. They were all non-traditional students. They shared a common background. They could relate to each other and they supported each other. Another benefit of the learning community expressed by the participants was the sequencing and scheduling of the curriculum. Each of the participants noted that the integration of the classes and the collaboration of the faculty helped the students understand the material better. It also gave the faculty a better understanding of each student and how to help him or her.

The learning community provided the opportunity for more connections and stronger connections between students, faculty, and t he institution. A significant advantage of the learning community was the extensive support it provided systemically, academically, and emotionally. That the learning community provided opportunity for access and success pervaded the stories of the experiences of the participants.

3. What obstacles do adult learners perceive in a traditional educational environment?

The participants noted several obstacles in the traditional setting. One obstacle was limited access. Each participant was aware of his or her non-traditional presence in a more traditional setting. Each noted an experience of having to adjust other roles around school rather than being able to adjust school to accommodate their other roles. The participants also voiced their lack of connection in the traditional environment as an obstacle to be overcome. Because the participants were significantly different from the other students in the traditional classroom they didn't have the same grounds for connection as in the learning community. Nor did they have comparable connections with the faculty in the traditional setting. The participants noted that large classes, time constraints, and less student-centered attitudes restrained connections between students and faculty. The participants also expressed their awareness that they were not the profile of student that the traditional system was designed for. Therefore, they felt a general disconnect with the institution. However, each participant noted some step or steps that the institution had taken to improve in these areas.

Another significant obstacle noted by the participants was the systems of their various post-learning community institutions. All of the systems were bigger and more complex. Navigating them proved difficult and frustrating. Closely aligned with this was a lack of awareness of the resources available to the participants in the traditional setting. Each has become aware of various resources through various means. The resources are there. They may be different from those in the learning community but still they are available. The issue seems to be making the students familiar with what is available and how to access it.

4. What affect does early learning community experience have on the post-learning community educational experience of the adult learner?

A significant finding in response to this question is that all of the participants credited their learning community experience with instilling in them the desire to continue their educations beyond the Associates degree. All acknowledged in one way or another that they felt privileged to have been a part of a learning community. It strengthened them mentally and emotionally giving them the confidence to go on and the ability to succeed. All of the participants accredited the learning community with preparing them academically for the rigors of upper division work. Although, some of the participants noted that they would have preferred a little more flexibility in the learning community so as to be able to prepare more specifically for their further educational pursuits.

The participants also expressed their discomfort proceeding from the learning community into the traditional environment. For some it was moderate, for others extreme. They expressed fears, self-doubt, anxiety, intimidation, and reluctance. But all found ways to manage the discomfort and continue in their educational pursuits. Along these same lines each of the participants noted something they felt was lacking in their post-learning community experience as compared to their learning community experience. In other words, the learning community had provided more fully for them. But for none of them was what was lacking sufficient to stop their progress.

Summary

My findings represent the lived experience of adult learners beginning their higher educations in a learning community and continuing in a more traditional

educational setting. For the most part, the responses I received were expected. The participants were fond of their learning community experience. They thrived in the learning community. In the traditional setting they are striving. It is not designed around them and their needs and so they must put more personal effort into accomplishing their goals. The responses I received led to an understanding of the essence of the experience, the subtle shift that each participant experienced. I did expect the student to experience a change in attitude or behavior as a result of his or her exposure to the learning community. However, I expected it to be more profound and more compelling. I expected the adult learners to be more aware of their development, to embrace the opportunities and advantages of the learning community and to tenaciously carry those forward into their post-learning community experience. While this happened to some extent, it happened more slowly and on a more unconscious level than I had anticipated.

I was disappointed to find that some of the participants have allowed the struggles in the traditional educational environment to overwhelm them rather than falling back on strategies learned in the learning community that had proven successful. They are allowing the fact that they are different from the traditional student to separate them rather than finding common ground on which to build supportive relationships.

I was surprised to hear of the number and types of strategies the traditional settings are using to reach out to these non-traditional students. It seems that much of the struggles the transplanted learning community students are experiencing are of their own making. They want the new system to adjust to them rather than being willing to adjust to the new system. Two of the participants were more willing to make the necessary

adjustments and overall they seem more satisfied with and successful in the traditional setting.

Findings in Relation to the Literature

In Chapter Two I reviewed literature addressing the context and rationale for my research on the learning community educational experience of adult learners. The following section considers the relationship of my findings to that literature.

Literature on Learning Communities

That learning should be more than rote knowledge being passed from instructor to student and that it involves the creation of knowledge through participation with and reflection on interactions with others are basic tenets found in the literature on the educational environment created by the learning community concept. The positive potential of learning communities is further supported by research on key student success strategies reported in the literature.

Core practices. According to Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) the core practices of community, integration, diversity, active learning, and reflection and assessment are the elements that account for the powerful learning environments attributed to learning communities. These practices are all interrelated and it is in their combination that they create dynamic learning environments that are exciting and inclusive and that take learning to it deepest levels.

The participants recognized that the learning community environment was different than a more traditional environment. The participants all spoke of the power that the practice of community provided. The inclusive practices of the learning community produced a shared identity that allowed for collaboration and interdependence. The

participants also realized the importance of practice of integration although, some of them realized it after-the-fact rather while they were immersed in it. The practice of diversity was recognized more in the physical fact of it rather than as a value taught. However, two of the participants referred to the same incident, realizing that they had learned something about diversity. The practices of active learning and reflection and assessment were not reflected in the experiences of the participants.

One of my underlying questions was whether the participants would recognize the core practices of learning communities. My findings reveal that they recognize some of them but others are not as obvious. I also wondered if they would continue to practice the core practices on their own once they left the learning community environment. All of the participants continued the practice of community in their post-learning community experience though to a much lesser extent. For many this was the impetus for the subtle shift that they experienced. But from their previous experience in the learning community they did realize they needed at least some element of community. One participant also spoke of the integration she perceives in the classes she was taking. The practice in the learning community carried over for her to her post-learning community experience. But the integration was a product of her own learning rather than a product of collaboration in the curriculum. The other core practices were not related as part of the experience of the participants in the more traditional educational setting.

Value-added Effects. Student success is addressed in terms of positive student behaviors, quality of learning, and depth and breadth of involvement. The literature provides evidence that learning communities can be beneficial to students in these critical areas.

Such value-added effects as higher GPAs, greater retention, enhanced quality of learning, greater involvement, and less isolation are reported in the literature on learning communities. While none of the participants spoke specifically about their GPA, they all mentioned their surprise at how well they performed academically in the learning community. This was a significant factor in Katherine's subtle shift. She doubted her ability when she entered the learning community, but soon realized she was "doing well". From that she began to see herself as a student first. But most of the participants also mentioned receiving lower grades in the more traditional setting. All of the participants persisted through an Associate of Arts degree in the learning community and all indicated that they plan to continue their educations through Master's degrees. However, my research did not produce any data specific to retention. Most of the participants noted the integration of classes and the collaboration of the faculty in the learning community. They felt these elements provided for better learning. There was no indication of the quality of their learning in the traditional educational environment. All of the participants indicated a high level of involvement with each other and the faculty in the learning community but not necessarily with the institution as a whole. In the traditional setting involvement was diminished and what involvement there is includes the entire university making it more generic and not as close or intimate as had been experienced in the learning community. The participants revealed no feelings of isolation in the learning community but all reported feelings of isolation in their post-learning community experience, some more acute than others.

Literature on Adult Learners

Adult learners are non-traditional students but often must make do with a system designed for traditional students. Therefore, they are of greater risk for failure. The literature on adult learning theory explains the learning process and provides guidance for effective practice to reduce the risk factors. The literature also addresses the barriers minimizing the adult learners' chances of success.

Adult learning theory. Andragogy as defined by Knowles (1980) is "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43). Andragogy does not explain adult learning but is rather a guide to effective practice. The scheduling of classes to provide better access to higher education, the integration of the curriculum to relieve the fragmentation often experienced by adults, and the community practices of the learning community are all manifestations of andragogy experienced and reported by the participants in this study. It was not an aspect of their post-learning community experience as that setting was not designed for non-traditionally aged students.

Self-directed learning as a form of adult learning theory is both a personal attribute of the learner and a process of learning. The self-directed learner plans and manages his or her own learning. This was one of the few complaints voiced by the participants concerning the learning community. Each participant mentioned they would have liked greater flexibility to adjust the program slightly so as to have made it more specific to their educational goals. All of them also mentioned that they realized that would be difficult given the structure of the learning community. Several "directed" their specific situations by adding classes above and beyond those of the learning community. Their experience was entirely different in the traditional educational environment. There,

it was the participants' perception that students must be self-directed to survive. In their post-learning community experience they were more self-directed in picking their classes within their majors to better reflect their interests. However, one of the biggest issues for all in the transfer from the learning community to the traditional setting was the need to become more self-reliant and self-responsible for their own educational journeys. This was a significant factor in the subtle shift for Weena and Susan. To survive in the more traditional educational setting required getting by with less support causing them to find their own means of support.

The theory of transformational learning focuses on the cognitive process of learning. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) explain that it is about learning that causes us to see ourselves and the world in a new and different way. That is a big part of the experience of the participants in the learning community. The structure of the learning community, the connections between the students, and the students and the faculty, and the support provided allowed for the three key concepts of transformational learning; life experience, critical reflection, and development. The process was evident in the subtle shift each of the participants experienced leaving the learning community for a more traditional environment. As each reflected on his or her learning community experience and considered the more traditional environment of the university, there was a shift, a transformation, bringing to each a new understanding of his or her role or identity as a student.

Barriers. Adult learners face several threats to their success in higher education. The literature defined three major categories of barriers that impede adult participation in

and successful completion of a higher education. These are institutional barriers, situational barriers and dispositional barriers.

Institutional barriers are those elements within the institution "that exclude adults or make it difficult for them to successfully navigate through their higher education" (Fairchild, 2003, p. 12). It was the experience of the participants that the learning community met most of the institutional barriers. Participants spoke of the learning community easing their entry into the system and helped them navigate through the system by addressing scheduling and registration issues, integrating the curriculum, and through a wide variety of support resources that were made readily available and of which the students were made fully aware. Although, the participants mentioned ways in which the traditional environments tried to diminish institutional barriers, the issue became more a matter of the students not being familiar with what was available. Further, several participants revealed they felt intimidated because the resources that they were familiar with were for university-wide participation meaning that they were not as intimate as in the learning community. Institutional barriers were the impetus for the subtle shift for Roya. The learning community met her institutional barriers while the traditional setting required her to find her own means for addressing them.

Situational barriers are those obstacles in place due to the student's personal situation. All of the participants indicated that they were initially drawn to the learning community because it accommodated their personal situations. They could all maintain their other responsibilities, jobs, families, etc, and still go to school. Their post-learning community experience was that it was too big to address such specialized situations. Each participant relayed an experience of having to adjust to the university since it did not

accommodate their needs specifically. Katherine and Roya shifted to being day students. Susan shifted to being a student only. As each experienced a subtle shift in their priorities they each changed their situations accordingly.

The dispositional barriers are the views and attitudes of the adult learners that become obstacles to their progress. In the learning community all of the participants related being anxious about coming back to school after a prolonged absence. All experienced an increased confidence as a result of participating in the learning community. However, that confidence eroded as each participant expressed high levels of anxiety and self-doubt after entering the the more traditional educational setting. For many, if not all, of the participants this was the "moment of truth" that precipitated the subtle shift. Each had to answer the question "am I going to make it?" As each responded to that query, each shifted attitudes or behaviors to enable them to continue on.

Summary

My findings support the literature on learning communities and adult learners. The literature supports the reasons for the subtle shift each participant experienced and the relative success of each participant in accomplishing the shift. Further my findings support the potential for learning communities to address the best practice and process for adult learning and to diminish the impact of institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers on adult learners. It was gratifying that the participants' sentiments regarding their learning community experience were similar to my own.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

As I reflect on my own personal and professional experience, the literature, and my findings in this study, it affords me the chance to offer recommendations toward

increased effectiveness of practice and further possible research. In this section, I turn my attention to those areas.

Recommendations for Practice

It is interesting to me that while the traditional educational setting could easily be characterized as lacking when it comes to attending to adult learner's, I find the onus for many of the recommendations falls to the learning community. Following are five recommendations for improved practice:

1. Develop stronger relationships with the four-year institutions their students most frequently transfer to. This could involve specific transfer agreements, perhaps faculty exchange programs could be arranged, and /or dual registration could be arranged in the later terms of the learning community to provide for a smoother, more informed transfer experience.
2. Provide "exit orientations" for students planning to transfer from the learning community. This could be a session designed to increase the self-efficacy of the transferring student, to begin making them aware of resources they may need and want to find at the university level.
3. Promote greater self-reliance and self-responsibility during the learning community educational experience. This requires a delicate balance as most adult learners come to the learning community in great need of help but should be weaned off of heavy reliance on the faculty and staff to locate and facilitate the use of resources.
4. Form alumni groups at the universities most frequently transferred to by learning community participants. The learning community could facilitate the

establishment of such groups. These groups could act in mentoring role to new students coming into the foreign traditional educational setting.

5. Identify adult transfer students, to arrange an orientation session specific to them, to continue the process of making the adult students aware of resources available to them in the traditional educational setting.

These recommendations are just some of the ways the learning community and more traditional educational settings could improve their practices for the adult learner. Each of these would serve to forge stronger bonds between the adult learners and traditional setting so as to increase their potential for persisting to a Bachelor's degree.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings for my study indicate a need for further research. Following are four recommendations:

1. There is a need for more qualitative studies of adult learners and learning communities. Such studies would add to the existing knowledge of the impact of learning community participation on post-learning community educational experience. There needs to be more studies utilizing a greater number of adult participants from a variety of learning communities.
2. There is a need for longitudinal studies covering the educational experience of the participants through to achieving a bachelor's degree. Such studies would create a more extensive picture of who persists, who doesn't, and what factors play into the decision to persist or not.
3. There is a need for quantitative research on adult learners and learning communities to provide a cost/benefit analysis of the effectiveness of such

programs. These studies could provide data for more efficient and effective resource allocation.

4. There is a need for well documented research on students who stop-out of learning communities to better understand their experience and to consider new and better ways of overcoming the obstacles they encountered.
5. There is a need for more research focused on issues of gender and ethnicity as they relate to the population of adult learners and learning communities. My study was composed of four women and one man, three people of color and two whites. My extensive experience with adult learners is that the population is predominantly women of color. Issues related to gender and ethnicity need to be explored in greater depth.

Closing Reflections

The learning community concept is important for the adult learners who participated in my study. This is heard in the voices of the participants as they shared their experiences in and out of the learning community. Susan actually began her interview with the following:

> In case I forget later, I just wanted to thank you for picking this for a topic, because it was a significant event for me and I think for everybody in my cohort. And the sensation of graduating into the ether is kind of disconcerting. So I'm glad somebody is paying attention.

In one short paragraph she cut to the heart of the issue I was focused on; what of the student who starts their journey in a learning community and then continues without the learning community environment.

My journey with this research began long ago. As an instructor in a learning community I wanted to do best by my students. I saw the potential of the learning

community. I saw many positive results of learning community participation. But I also wondered about those students that I wasn't seeing. I wondered about those who made it through the learning community only to confront marginalization, unfamiliarity, and more bureaucratic attitudes and policies in a traditional educational environment. Now I find myself in such a setting and I am still trying to do best by my students. I am now responsible for a program that is to facilitate adults getting into and proceeding through a system to which they are relative strangers. Hence, while this formal research project comes to a close, my personal and professional curiosity and need to know and understand how to better serve my students will continue throughout my tenure in higher education.

Epilogue

I remember the day I was interviewed for a teaching position in the learning community. The committee spent a great deal of time explaining the philosophy of the learning community with its underlying practices of collaboration and integration. I was so excited. I remember thinking "this is the way education should be." It combined both sides of the house, instruction and student services, to create an environment conducive to retention of the adult learner. It was evident to those of us who taught in the learning community that this was a model that was very effective for the adult student population. The retention rate for learning community students was far better than the school average even for a highly at risk population. The majority of students making the Dean's or Honor's list for the school were from the learning community. And the learning community had a higher graduation rate than any other program or major within the school. But there was always a lingering question in my mind of how the student fared in educational endeavors following the learning community.

As I entered this research project I expected to find that the students had the same attitude about the learning community as I had. I expected that they would realize the strengths and benefits of the learning community and also think "this is the way education should be." In that way I expected the learning community to act as an educational "incubator," an apparatus designed to control the conditions to allow for the growth of the students. As we, the faculty and administration, engaged in "best practices" it was with the intention of giving birth to well developed students. Students ready and able to handle the rigors of further education and the system that would provide it.

The learning community and traditional educational settings as I have discussed in this project are very different environments. Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito (1998) list several environmental factors that influence student development. They note that the conditions of challenge and support are important factors in development. "The amount of challenge a person can tolerate is a function of the amount of support available. The range of optimal dissonance for any particular person varies, depending on the quality of the challenge and support that the environment provides as well as the characteristics of the individual" (Evans et al, p. 26). Involvement is the amount of energy the student devotes to the educational experience and is another environmental factor in development. Marginality and mattering are also important to development. "Feelings of marginality often occur when individuals take on new roles, especially when they are uncertain about what a new role entails. Marginality can be defined as a sense of not fitting in and can lead to self-consciousness, irritability, and depression" (Evans et al, pg. 27). Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito finally note that validation is highly important to the development of non-traditional students who often have doubts about their academic ability. Validation can be found in and out of the classroom, can come from instructors, fellow classmates, administrators, or relatives and friends. These factors; challenge and support, involvement, marginality and mattering, and validation were all elements that influenced the experiences of the students in the learning community and more traditional settings.

What I found in this research was that 3 of the 5 participants were less able to tolerate the challenges of the traditional setting, believing they were not getting the support they needed (or were used to). Also, all of the participants were more highly

involved in the learning community and were not as involved in the more traditional environment. In addition, all of the participants felt like they mattered in the learning community. Most of them felt marginalized in the traditional setting; some more than others but all, to at least some extent. And finally, all of the participants experienced various forms of validation from multiple sources within the learning community but noted much fewer expressions of validation in the traditional setting.

The students did like the learning community and were very satisfied with the experience. But the "incubator" effect was limited. Two of the participants exhibited signs of progressive development as they redefined themselves in the new context of the traditional environment. The other 3 did move along the development continuum but their progression has been inhibited by the tension created through the dissonance they experienced in the traditional setting. Discussing development Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito (1998) state: "Resolution of developmental tasks is influenced by how successful the individual is in developing appropriate coping skills. An optimal balance of challenge and support in the environment facilitates such development" (pg. 33). They further note:

> Successful resolution of the dissonance and anxiety associated with each developmental crisis leads to the development of new skills and attitudes. Inadequate resolution, however, can lead to stress and inappropriate behavior, contribute to a negative self-image, and decrease the likelihood that future developmental crises will be successfully addressed...Regression to earlier stages, readdressing of developmental tasks, and relearning of coping skills frequently occur when individuals are placed in new and stressful situations (pg. 33)

The participants in this research have shown both "successful resolution" and "inadequate resolution" of the dissonance experienced when they transferred into a more traditional educational environment.

This research has resulted in a dilemma. No doubt the support and connection experienced in the learning community was effective for retention, persistence to graduation, and academic success, while the students were in the program. However, the learning community may not adequately prepare students for work outside of such an environment. The balance of challenge and support is at the heart of the issue. There must be enough challenge to promote an active participation. But there must be sufficient support to sustain active participation. Too challenging and adult students will give up. Too much support and those same students become unable or unwilling to address challenges as they come up. Ultimately, the support provided by the learning community for these adult learners played a significant role getting them into higher education and encouraging them to go further. However, the students must be weaned from such extensive support and taught to be more self-reliant in order to give them adequate tools for the less supportive, less connective experience in the traditional setting. The subtle shift the students experience need to be deliberately addressed by the creators of the learning community early on in and throughout the learning community experience to insure adequate and progressive development of the student to ease the transition into a more traditional setting. It is in the best interest of the students to not only get them into higher education but to give them the tools to succeed throughout the whole process including education outside of the learning community environment.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Examples of Coding Process

Theme Label	Stud-to-Stud	Stud-to-Fac	Stud-to-Inst
Energized	28-31		
Paid attn			91
Maintained contact			94-95
Synergy			100-102
Lack shared bckgrd	132 (NLC)		
Respect	153		
How others wrkd	183-184		
Overcome fright	207		
Looking for	216 (NLC)		
Community	254		
Not clustered	266 (NLC)		
Must engage		291 (NLC)	
Took down barriers		324	
Cold			349 (NLC)
Warm			355
Wldn't hv made it	363(NLC)		

Above is a summary table of the master theme of connections for Susan. Once a table similar to this was created for each participant, the cases were integrated. Following is an example of the integration of Student-to-Institution cluster across the cases.

Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
Must engage 291 (4)	Maintain contact 54 (2)	Electronic con 156 (4)	Confirming 23 (1)	Commun. Prob 401 (4)
Took down barr 324 (1)		Limitations 185 (4)	Accommodating 45 (2)	Fac clique 533 (4)
		Takes time 270-272 (4)	Individual attn 47-49 (2)	Contact 535 (4)
			No familiarity 110 (3)	Comparison 570-574
			Prof vs TA 202 (4)	
			Family 219 (1)	
			Neighbors 221 (3)	

(1) = Learning community: relational/emotional
(2) = Learning community: availability/accommodation/methods
(3) =Traditional setting: relational/emotional

(4) =Traditional setting: availability/accommodation/methods

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

I. Tell me about your experience in the PACE Program.

A. What attracted you to PACE?

B. What did you like and dislike about the curriculum and the way it was presented?

C. What did you find effective in the PACE Program?

D. What was it about the structure of the program that did or did not work for you?

E. What types of support were built into the program?

II. Tell me about your transition from the PACE Program to a more traditional educational environment.

A. What was your greatest fear?

B. How well prepared did you feel for the transition?

C. How well prepared did you feel for the rigors of upper division work?

III. Tell me about your experience at UC Berkeley.

A. What do you like or dislike about the curriculum and the way it is presented?

B. What about the structure of the course work you are pursuing works or doesn't work for you?

C. What types of support are in place for you now?

Appendix C
Letter of Recruitment

Colorado State University
Knowledge to Go Places

School of Education
1588 Campus Delivery
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1588

Dear Former PACE Student:

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study through Colorado State University's School of Education. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of adult learners who participated in the Program for Adult College Education (PACE) learning community at Berkeley City College and then continued their educations in a non-learning community setting.

If you agree, you will be a participant in a one-on-one interview. The first interview will last approximately 90 minutes. You will be asked to describe in detail your PACE experience, your transition to and experience in the non-learning community setting. A 15-30 minute follow-up interview may be conducted by phone, email or in-person. All interviews will be conducted at Berkeley City College or at a near by meeting place. The interviews will be digitally recorded and then transcribed.

You will receive a transcript of the interview once it is transcribed. You will be asked to review the transcript for clarity.

The records of this study will be kept private. All transcripts will be maintained in a locked file cabinet. Recordings will be stored in a password protected digital file on the researcher's personal computer. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings which will be erased at the end of the study.

You will be asked to select a pseudonym for yourself. Your pseudonym, rather than your name, will appear on all transcripts and study write ups. Any writings that are published will not include information that will make it possible to identify participants.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and there are no known risks or benefits from participating. If you decide to become a participant, please contact the Co-principal researcher, Barbara Jackowski by telephone or email using the information shown below.

Barbara Jackowski
Co-principal Investigator
510-885-3274
barbara.jackowski@colostate.edu

James Banning, Ph.D.
Principal Investigator
Professor
Community College Leadership Program
970-491-7153

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Appendix D
Memorandum of Understanding

Colorado State University
Knowledge to Go Places

School of Education
1588 Campus Delivery
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1588

Memorandum of Understanding

between

Berkeley City College

and

Barbara Jackowski

The purpose of this Memorandum of Understanding between Berkeley City College and Barbara Jackowski is to establish a working arrangement between these parties for the collection of data for Ms. Jackowski's doctoral dissertation entitled *A Non-Traditional Versus a More Traditional Experience: A Phenomenological Study of the Post-Learning Community Experience of Adult Learners.*

The following is understood and agreed upon by both parties.

I. The scope of the project.
This research will focus on adult learners who have completed the Program for Adult College Education at Berkeley City College and have continued their educations in non-learning community programs at other institutions. Data will be collected for this phenomenological study through 60-90 minute interviews using open ended questions. The study will attempt to understand the essence of the adult experience in the learning community and non-learning community settings.

II. Protection of participants as human research subjects.
All participants will be given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. All participants will sign an informed consent form at the beginning of the interview. Data will not be collected from anyone who declines to sign a consent form. All interview materials will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office.

III. Subject participation
Letters of invitation will be sent to potential participants. Only persons responding to the invitation and meeting the criteria of completion of the Berkeley City College PACE program and continuing their education in a

non-learning community environment will be selected for the research. Participants in this study will be entirely voluntary. This will be stated clearly to all participants at the beginning of each interview. Participants will also be informed that they can turn off the recorder at any time, not answer any question, or withdraw from the study at will.

IV. Organization involvement

Berkeley City College will be a full partner in seeking to identify potential voluntary participants to be interviewed. The President of Berkeley City College and the Director of the Berkeley City College PACE program will serve as "gatekeepers" for this project. The gatekeepers will identify potential participants and initiate communication with them providing the potential participants with a letter of invitation.

V. Timeline

The proposed timeline for getting participants will be July – September 2008. Interviews will commence as soon as qualified participants are identified. It is anticipated that all interviews will be completed no later than October 2008. Data analysis will be ongoing, starting as soon as interview transcriptions become available. It is anticipated that the research project will culminate with the presentation of the dissertation in May 2009.

VI. Results

Barbara Jackowski will present the results of the research in an oral presentation to the President of Berkeley City College and the Director of the PACE program at Berkeley City College and any other interested parties at such time as the dissertation is complete and accepted by Colorado State University.

VII. Acknowledgement

Berkeley City College will be acknowledged for their assistance and participation in this project in the acknowledgement section of the proposed dissertation.

Berkeley City College	**Barbara Jackowski**
_____	_____
Signature	Signature
_____	_____
Title	Title
_____	_____
Date	Date

Appendix E
Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: "In & Out of the Learning Community: A Phenomenological Study of the Learning Community Educational Experience of Adult Learners"

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. James Banning

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Barbara Jackowski, Doctoral Candidate

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You have been invited to participate in this research because you are an adult learner who has participated in the PACE learning community at Berkeley City College. My study involves research to better understand the experiences of adult learners who have participated in a learning community educational setting and then transfer to a non-learning community setting to continue their education.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University who is conducting this study to complete the requirements for my degree.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

I am conducting the study to better understand the learning community and post-learning community educational experiences of adult learners.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The study will take place at Berkeley City College in a conference room or nearby meeting place and will last approximately 60-90 minutes for each participant interview. Follow-up questions will take place by email or telephone and will take approximately 15-30 minutes.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

You will be asked to describe in detail your experience in the learning community and your transition to and experience in a non-learning community education setting. I will ask open ended questions to assist you in telling me of your experiences.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You should not take part in the study if you have not pursued further education following your participation in the learning community or if you continued your education in another learning community setting.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known or potential, but unknown, risks.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no monetary costs associated with your participation in this study. You will be asked to spend 60-90 minutes of your time in an interview and 15-30 minutes for follow-up questions.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?

We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researcher, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. You name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key. You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people.

CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?

If you fail to show up to your interview session or do not respond to follow-up questions, you may be removed from the study.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no compensation for participation in this study.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I AM INJURED BECAUSE OF THE RESEARCH?

The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact me, Barbara Jackowski at 925-686-3348 or email brbrjackowski@netscape.net.

I you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, IRB Senior Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing __3___ pages.

_____ _____

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study Date

_____

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in this study

_____ _____

Name of person providing information to participant Date

_____

Signature of Research Staff