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Blood, Sweat and Tears: Insights into the Lived Experiences of Graduates of an Accelerated Undergraduate Degree-Completion Program, A Phenomenological Study

Bonnie B. Flynn
National-Louis University

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BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS: INSIGHTS INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
GRADUATES OF AN ACCELERATED UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE-
COMPLETION PROGRAM, A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

In

ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

By

BONNIE B. FLYNN

Chicago, Illinois

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Dissertation Notification of Completion

Doctoral Candidate	Bonnie B. Flynn
Title of Dissertation	Blood, Sweat and Tears: Insights into the Lived Experiences of Graduates of an Accelerated Undergraduate Degree-Completion Program, a Phenomenological Study
Primary Advisor	Randee Lipson Lawrence, Ed.D.
Secondary Advisor	Thomas Heaney, Ph.D.
Committee Member	Claudia Miller, Ph.D.
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Dedication

I dedicate this research study to the memory of my father, Francis "Pete" Flynn who instilled in me a staunch work ethic and a "stick-to-it-ivness" which helped me succeed in life. Thank you for everything, Dad!

I also dedicate this research study to my grandchildren, Brendan and Keira Geraci. In your eyes, I see God's wonder and love. You are the future. Be the best you can be!

Acknowledgement

There are several people who need to be acknowledged and thanked. First, I would like to thank all the faculty in the Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) doctoral program at National Louis University (NLU). They are what I consider "knowledgeable facilitators" and helped me to achieve transformative learning as a result of my studies in the program. I am continually in awe at how brilliant these folks are and humbled to be in such esteemed company. I am also grateful to the fellow students in my cohort who helped me "hold up the rim" when the going got tough.

 I want to extend a special "thank you" to my advisors: Dr. Randee Lipson Lawrence, my primary advisor, who gently kept me on track and gave me great advice along the way; Dr. Tom Heaney, who was a wealth of knowledge and extremely patient with me; and Dr. Claudia Miller, my colleague and friend, who provided support and encouragement throughout the process.

I also acknowledge and thank the participants in this research study. Their willingness to meet with me and share their stories made this not only a painless process for me but also a valuable contribution to the field of adult education.

I acknowledge my dear husband, Ronald (Ron) Steffen, who stood by my side from beginning to end with patience and understanding; and my wonderful daughter, Shannon Flynn Geraci, whose help and kindness is without measure.

And finally, I thank God for giving me a "charmed" life rich with experiences and wonderful people to share the long and winding road.

ABSTRACT

BLOOD, SWEAT AND TEARS: INSIGHTS INTO THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
GRADUATES OF AN ACCELERATED UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE-
COMPLETION PROGRAM, A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

With the growing popularity of adult education programs in higher education, older

working adults have more options for completing their bachelor's degrees. Accelerated

degree-completion programs emerged in the 1970s and have gained popularity over the

years. These programs are an option for adults to complete their studies without

disrupting their schedules. The purpose of this research study was to understand the lived

experiences of adult learners in an accelerated undergraduate degree-completion

program. This was a qualitative study using a phenomenological research methodology

and the theoretical framework of transformative learning. The literature review discussed

relevant research addressing both accelerated programs and transformative learning.

There were fourteen participants in the study who were recent graduates of an accelerated

undergraduate degree-completion program. The research method included a combination

of semi-structured interviews and a review of reflection papers written by the

participants. The findings revealed the emergence of the following four themes:

motivation, value of collaborative process, pedagogy and self concept, with related

subthemes identified. The findings indicated that many participants experienced

transformation as a result of their educational experience. Since accelerated learning in

higher education is not confined to undergraduate students, future research studies might

focus on graduates of an online accelerated undergraduate program or an online or face-

to-face accelerated master degree program.

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Chapter One – What Led Me Here

Introduction

When I think of *learning* and *education*, I think of a *labyrinth*. This is not to be

confused with a *maze*, which has many paths with dead ends and frustrations; rather, a

labyrinth is often a circuitous route which can have twists and turns, but leads one to the

desired destination with rich experiences and deep reflections along the way. I relate that

metaphor to my own educational experiences, which have had many twists and turns, but

never a dead end. Those experiences helped me to grow and learn not only about the

outside world, but about myself and my relation to the world.

At the time of the study, I held a full-time faculty position at a Midwestern

university where I was employed for four years. I was an adjunct instructor at various

universities and colleges for the five previous years. In addition, I have experience in the

private not-for-profit sector working in health care, instructional program design,

management, and accreditation.

However, my journey started many years ago. I was brought up in the suburbs of

Chicago in a blue-collar family. My father was raised on a farm in the Midwest and never

graduated high school. When he moved to Chicago, where he met and married my

mother, he got a job in a factory where he continued to work until his retirement many

years later. While that does not seem like an auspicious beginning, I remember my father

preparing for the General Education Development (GED) test. I do not believe that he took any GED preparation classes. I remember that he studied from a book and prepared for the test on his own—and passed on his first try! That really impressed me. I realized that while he was not a highly educated person, he must be very intelligent. I am not sure why he chose to get his GED at that point in his life since I do not believe he needed it for his job, but it must have been important to him. Whatever his motivation might have been, it left an impression on me. I realized that education and intelligence are not necessarily mutually inclusive; however, it became apparent later in life that education gives a person opportunities and options that might not be there without the education. While my father did not complain about his life or his job, I know it must not have been easy. I sometimes wonder how his life—my life—would have been different if he would have had the resources to go to college and attain a degree. My mother's story was a bit different. She also grew up on a farm in the Midwest, but graduated high school before she left for the "big city." My brothers and I are first-generation college graduates in my family.

In my case, my pursuit of education can be traced back to the early 70s. I graduated from a Catholic high school in the suburbs of Chicago and was not sure what sort of a career path I wanted to follow. I went to a local community college where I took several courses and eventually accumulated the maximum number of credits at that level. In those days, there were generally two reasons a woman went to college—to be a nurse or a teacher—and "teacher" meant grade or high school teacher. I did not feel that I wanted to be either at that time, so I dropped out of college and got a full-time job as an office worker. I eventually moved on and got hired at the telephone company where I

made a rather good salary for someone without a college degree. Even though I stayed there for ten years, I had the nagging feeling that I really did not belong there. Over the next few years, I got married and had a child. In the mid 80s, my then husband, daughter and I relocated to the West Coast where I transferred with the telephone company to Concord, California. About a year after I moved, my office closed and I took an "early retirement." I was too young to actually retire so I ended up getting hired at a job that I enjoyed but did not pay very well. My options were limited since I did not have a college degree in a pretty competitive market. I felt my "salvation" and key to success was to finish my bachelor's degree. However, I was afraid that if I went the traditional route, it could take me several years and I may not finish due to boredom, frustration or other external factors.

Being in my mid thirties, I enrolled in an accredited, but non-traditional program to finish my bachelor's degree in business administration. This was an accelerated program with classes that met one night a week for five weeks per course at a convenient location near my work. I met with an advisor and most of my credits were accepted from the community college I had attended several years earlier. I was able to afford college with a combination of tuition reimbursement and school loans. I took a few College Level Examination Program or "CLEP" tests and had to take some electives, but I realized I could finish college with my bachelor's degree in business administration in approximately 18 months. I could see the "light at the end of the tunnel" in a relatively short amount of time. I remember hearing one of the faculty saying jokingly, but with a modicum of truth, that if you (i.e., the student) *don't* like the class, it goes by fast, and if you *do* like the class, it goes by even faster.

Initially, it was about getting the "degree" and finishing something I started many years earlier; however, during the course of my studies, it meant much more to me. I found the courses enjoyable and refreshing. For me, it stimulated a love of learning, a desire to continue my educational pursuits and the confidence that I could do so.

I feel that the cohort model was one of the keys to my success. In the cohort model, a core group of students go through the program together, offering each other support along the way. When things got tough, I had the support of the other members of the cohort to keep me going. My cohort members and I spent a lot of time during and outside of class working on projects, meeting in study groups, and helping each other make meaning out of what we were learning.

The instructors were more like facilitators than traditional instructors who may spend the majority of the class time lecturing to the students. While the classes had knowledgeable instructors, we spent a lot of class time in discussion sharing our perspectives and experiences rather than hearing lectures. We also had an opportunity to share what we learned through written assignments, presentations, and group projects rather than taking traditional paper and pencil tests. I felt like I was treated like an adult, respected for my experience and knowledge. We formed study groups and engaged in "healthy discourse" discussing the assignments and projects. In addition, there were plenty of individual out-of-class assignments and time spent in personal reflection. While it was challenging going to school with a full-time job and family, I felt energized. I graduated with a decent grade point average. Right after I finished with my degree, I moved back to the Midwest with a degree in hand, ready to start a new life and a new career.

Since completing my bachelor's degree, I went on to get two master's degrees. As noted earlier, at the time of this research study, I was a full-time university faculty. The program in which I taught was an accelerated cohort-based bachelor's degree-completion program similar to what I experienced during my own undergraduate program. Teaching in that program ignited the "fire in my belly." I felt that I had come full circle—the student had become the teacher. I chose this research study because I was interested in hearing the lived experiences of students in similar programs to understand to what degree their program had impacted their lives and if and how they have changed because of their experiences. I felt "called" to do this research; when I finished my own program over twenty years ago, I would have appreciated having the opportunity to "tell my story" and relate how it affected my life. I hoped to give others the opportunity to do so.

Background

Accelerated learning seems to be a buzz-word phrase of the 21st century. However, the concept of accelerated learning in higher education can be traced back to the 1970s. If one does a word search on the term, "accelerated learning," many references emerge. Sometimes such programs are referred to as "nontraditional" or "alternative." Accelerated learning programs are structured for students to take less time than traditional programs to complete university credits, certificates or degrees (Wlodkowski, 2003). For instance, a typical fifteen-week, three-hour-per-week semester course may be compressed to between four and six weeks, with four hours per week of student-teacher contact. Often the courses are taught in a cohort model, which means that the same group of students generally moves through the program together. The typical

student is a thirty-something working female, often married, but sometimes divorced or single and may have children living at home (Wlodkowski, 2003).

According to Husson and Kennedy (2003), "Corporations were seeking new ways to improve the knowledge of their workforce to create competitive advantages. When colleges met this need by creating accelerated degree programs, corporations supported adult students with tuition benefits, which acted as an incentive for them to return to college" (p. 51).

According to Kasworm (2001, p. 1), "Created to meet adult learner needs for convenience, access, and relevancy, these accelerated degree offerings represent 'fast-tracking' credential options for part-time adult undergraduates." Kasworm further stated, "Accelerated formats for learning have been crafted with the assumption that adults require and can respond to an abbreviated time frame for course learning process. These formats also have implicitly suggested that adults, because of prior life experiences and because of relevancy of coursework to their current lives, can learn and demonstrate proficiency in a shorter-period of time" (p. 1). Some of the keys to the success of accelerated cohort-based programs are the recognition of prior life experiences of the students and the instructor-facilitated learning, which allows for students to share those experiences with the other cohort members and apply them back to their professional and personal lives. In addition, the cohort model offers a supportive environment as students "plow" through the program.

Another key to the success of this model is that the pedagogical methods used in accelerated learning lead to more out-of-class work by the students to account for the

reduced seat time. The assignments are generally individual or group projects, which promote students to research, study, discuss, write and *reflect* on their learning.

Purpose of the Study and Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of adult learners in an accelerated undergraduate degree-completion program. Through my preliminary search, I found there was much literature addressing accelerated education by such authors as Stephen Brookfield (2003), Joe Donaldson and Steve Graham (2002), Carol Kasworm (2001), and others; however, as Kasworm (2001) stated, "There has been limited research examining the experience and impact of accelerated degree programs on adult learning" (p. 4). Kathleen Taylor's dissertation titled "Transforming Learning: Experiences of Adult Development and Transformation of Reentry Learners in an Adult Degree Program" was conducted in 1991 and addressed adult learners in non-traditional settings. There are some elements of similarity with my own research, however, the focus of my study was conducted 17 years later, and focused on a different population in a different setting.

Guiding Questions

The following questions guided the study:

- How do students make meaning of learning beyond the curriculum?
- To what extent has involvement in the program changed how the students conduct themselves professionally and/or personally?
- To what extent do students view themselves differently as a result of the program?

- How do the students describe their learning that was incidental to the expressed curriculum?

- To what extent do students experience transformative learning in an accelerated program in higher education?

Assumptions

There were three assumptions related to accelerated, cohort-based learning in higher education that were part of this study. The first assumption was that students bring to the learning environment a plethora of real-world experiences. These experiences ranged from the inauthentic (formal schooling) to the authentic (work, family, community member) (Donaldson & Graham, et al, 2000). The second assumption was that accelerated programs have the potential for transformative learning. Students enter such programs for different reasons. It could be that they are looking for job advancement or to enter a new career. However, what they actually experience may be different than what they originally set out to learn. In my case, I found *education* to be synonymous with *empowerment.* I had a new-found self confidence that led me to further my education after graduating with my bachelor's degree. While all graduates may not feel that way, there may be some who do. The third assumption was that students in an accelerated program are more motivated than those enrolled in traditional programs. The students are generally older and not attending school because they are "doing what their parents want" but are there because they *want* to be there. Many bear the full financial responsibility. Those who are working at jobs with tuition reimbursement often are bound by certain constraints such as attaining a certain grade or having to pay for the course before being reimbursed.

Importance to the Field

Accelerated programs are becoming more and more popular. According to Wlodkowski (2003), "Estimates are that 25 percent or more of all adult students will be enrolled in accelerated programs within the next ten years" (p. 5). Accelerated programs offer another option to people to further their education. These programs give opportunities to people who would not have had a chance to complete a degree in a more traditional program. I do not believe that my experience is unique. This was an opportunity for graduates of such programs to tell their stories. I felt that it was important for faculty and program developers to understand how adult learners learn beyond the curriculum. Such an understanding can impact how we design, deliver, and teach programs for adult learners. It can also be a vehicle to bridge theory and practice or *praxis* and help educators understand how we can foster transformative learning in our students.

Theoretical Framework

The lens that I viewed my study through was *transformative learning.* As noted in my Literature Review chapter, transformative learning is different from information learning which changes *what* we know. Transformative learning, on the other hand, changes *how* we know (Kegan, 2000). Cranton (2006) noted that the change in habit of mind could be as a result of one dramatic event or a gradual cumulative process. Mezirow (2000) referred to the one dramatic event as a *disorienting dilemma.* For me, it was gradual, with occasional "ah ha" moments that caused me to pause, reflect, and revisit how I saw myself in relation to the rest of the world.

According to Cranton, "transformative learning is a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revisiting our perspectives" (2006, p. 23). The image that comes to my mind is that of a cartoon character with a light bulb going on above the character's head. For me, some of those "light bulb" moments were exhilarating, some humbling, and some scary. It was not always about learning the assignments per se, but learning about *me*. When I was in class (and I mean "class" holistically, in other words, not just the "class*room*" but the whole experience), I started to see myself as an intelligent, capable human being and a valuable contributor to society. I also saw myself as a role model to women who felt marginalized because of their lack of education. In other words, "if I can do it, then so can you." I also realized that not only was I capable of finishing a college degree, but I could very well go on to graduate school, which I did.

Baumgartner (2001) noted that "transformational learning is not an independent act but an interdependent relationship built on trust" (p. 19). As stated earlier, I feel that the cohort model was one of the keys to the success of the accelerated programs not only in learning outcomes, but with transformative learning. I do not think my transformation would have been so dramatic without the help of my cohort members that I relied upon and trusted to provide support when needed.

My research focused on to what extent (if any) the students transformed as a result of the accelerated program they were in and how. I did not assume that all students experienced transformative learning to the same degree. Some may not have experienced it all.

This was a qualitative study that utilized a phenomenological research methodology. Its purpose was to focus on the lived experiences of the participants.

My Values and Beliefs

    ▸ What I value

I value people's right to be heard.

I value people's right to earn a comfortable living (whatever that means to them).

I value lifelong learning.

Many professions in our current society require some form of post-secondary education in order to get, retain, or advance in a job. Years ago, on-the-job training (OJT) and a desire to learn were often all that was necessary to advance in a profession. Nowadays, the world of work is more competitive, so the uneducated, or undereducated, are at a disadvantage. As noted earlier in this chapter, I experienced that in the mid-80s when I was unemployed. I had enough credits for an associate's degree from a community college, and had been working at the telephone company where I had a fairly good salary at the time. I was feeling unfulfilled in my profession so when the opportunity came for me to take an early "retirement," I took it. However, I was in for a shock when I realized that I could not match or even come close to my previous salary. I realized that it was important for me to finish my bachelor's degree, and perhaps even go further if I were to accomplish my employment goals. As time went on, I realized that advancing my education was one of the keys to affording me opportunities in the workplace.

What I Believe

I believe that everyone has a right to be educated if he or she desires, no matter what his or her financial constraints happen to be. I believe that education is one way for

people to find their voice; however, I also believe that there is more than one way for people to be educated. I believe that people continue to learn formally or informally throughout their lives. I believe that, while it is not ethical for educators to <u>force</u>, or even <u>expect</u>, their students to transform as a result of their adult education experience, educators should provide the <u>means</u> for the students to allow them to be transformed as a result of their educational experience. Transformative learning is the change in assumptions, view of life-world, and/or view of self. Transformative learning changes *how* we know, not *what* we know (Kegan, 2000).

Due to my experiences with learning and work, adult education became very important to me. Not only would I not be where I am today without the combination of my education and work experience, I would not have had the employment and/or advancement opportunities in my previous positions. I used to think that education was either for the very rich or the very smart, and frankly, I did not think I was either. When I decided to go back to school to complete my bachelor's degree, I was not in the position to attend the "traditional" university. I considered myself lucky that I happened upon an accelerated degree-completion program that was in a convenient location, at a convenient time, and that I could afford through student loans and tuition reimbursement from my employer.

In our complex world, the traditional university-based education catering to the 18-22 year olds should not be the only form of adult education. I feel that we should provide a variety of means for adults to accomplish their educational goals. Educators need to listen to the public and strive to offer potential students what they need. We need to be aware of who the public is that we serve. Many of them wish to complete a

bachelor's degree in the quickest way possible with the smallest burden of debt when they are done. People should be able to pursue an education and not be hindered by access or money. That is not to say that they should have it handed to them; rather, it should be available for them if they are up to meeting the challenge.

While access and affordability of education for employability are important in my philosophy, I also believe that the internal changes that occur which lead one to experience transformation are important aspects of adult education. I feel that what one starts out pursuing may not be what one ends up getting. In other words, a student may believe that he or she is pursuing a degree to get a job, but in the meantime, may start feeling differently about other aspects of life, such as relationships, personal commitments and spirituality.

One of my purposes is to create a learner-centered educational environment, similar to the progressive education philosophy. I feel that learning is reciprocal and that all assume the dual role of teacher-learner in the classroom. I try to employ a variety of educational methods, mixing lecture with class discussion, small group activities, individual activities and reflection in the classroom. I feel that adults have different learning styles and I strive to appeal to a broad range of those styles. My goal is to help keep the students from getting bored, keep them engaged, and allow them to be responsible for their own learning. In addition, from a practical aspect, I want the students to be able to use what they learned in their workplace and/or personal lives. I want these activities to have *value* to them, not just be activities to satisfy their course requirements.

In the liberal philosophy, one would expect to see a combination of wisdom, moral values, spiritual dimension, and an aesthetic sense. This philosophy has been a part of my education. It has given me a well-rounded view of life and exposure both to new things and different perspectives on life. One of the attributes of adult education is the intellectual stimulation. The benefit of such stimulation, I feel, is to open one's eyes to different aspects of the world, and being able to critically reflect on the learning. According to Brookfield (1997), in critical thinking, adults recognize and research assumptions undergirding their thoughts and actions. Those assumptions are the taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it and give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do.

According to Elias and Merriam (2005), "…the goal of humanistic education is the development of persons—persons who are open to change and continued learning, persons who strive for self-actualization, and persons who can live together as fully functioning individuals" (p. 124). They also stated that "…the student is the center of the process, the teacher is a facilitator, and learning is by discovery" (p. 124). I have always thought of myself as a "knowledgeable facilitator" similar to that of the humanistic education philosophy. I encourage the students to bring their experiences to the classroom, and give those experiences the credence they deserve. The humanistic philosophy takes into account adult development. In addition, I tend to use term "andragogy" made popular by Malcolm Knowles, when referring to adult education, as opposed to "pedagogy," which I feel more addresses the education of children. Accelerated programs in higher education generally strive to employ methods of andragogy in their programs.

The social action aspect of the radical or critical philosophy is, at least indirectly, an important part of my personal philosophy. Being able to give educational opportunities to anyone who aspires to become educated, and not just a privileged few, is a way to balance power, yet gives people the opportunity to take the road they choose and exercise free will.

My Commitments

I am committed to helping others achieve their educational pursuits to help them find their voice and be successful in their lives. I feel I can relate to the participants of the study because of my experiences as an adult learner. For me, the learning went beyond the learning outcomes set by the university. I feel that I "changed" in the way I viewed myself and where I "fit" in the world around me as a result of my education. I have also acted on those feelings by pursuing graduate education which qualified me for higher positions at my places of employment. I would have appreciated being able to share my experiences, my voice, with a researcher. I wanted to give students a voice and let them tell their stories, because I believe they are worth hearing. By giving voice to the experiences that graduates of the program have had, I hoped to provide insights as to how their educational experiences may have affected their lives.

Chapter two will discuss the relevant literature related to accelerated learning in higher education. It also discusses literature addressing transformative learning.

A Peak into the Past

Literature Review

Accelerated Learning

Introduction

With the growing popularity of adult education programs in higher education, and, in particular, accelerated programs, older working adults have more options for completing their bachelor's or master's degrees. The number of adult students has increased in higher education due to historic and public policy events such as veterans using the GI Bill, the women's movement and the civil rights movement (Kasworm, 2003a). Accelerated programs in higher education are often considered "non-traditional" programs; however, they are becoming popular for returning adult students.

History

Accelerated education programs started in the mid to late 1970s to meet the needs of adult learners who had interrupted their education due to work, financial reasons or family commitments and realized the importance of finishing their bachelor's degree. Classes were offered once a week not only at college campuses but at locations convenient to the students' home or work, such as hotel conference rooms or places of employment. Books were often "bundled" in the price of tuition and delivered directly to the student or to the classroom to eliminate the need for them having to drive to the campus bookstore (Mealman & Lawrence, 2000).

Some colleges and universities developed a holistic approach, changing the focus of the programs to the degree rather than on the individual course. In addition, the programs were time-compressed, such as twenty hours versus forty-five hours of class

time. Until that time, adults who wanted to finish their degrees often faced as much as eight years of evening classes (Husson & Kennedy, 2003). This combination proved successful. Since then, any postsecondary program marketed for working adults has either begun or considered starting an accelerated learning program (Wlodkowski, 2003).

Benefits

According to a study by Kasworm (2003b), one of the elements that attracts students to such programs is the quasi-family relationship with fellow learners. The typical accelerated degree program is cohort-based. In other words, the same groups of students that start the program together generally take the same classes together until the program is finished. In the cohort-based learning, the students develop deep and often lasting relationships with some or all of the other students in the cohort. The students become a support system for one another, helping each other, and encouraging one another along the way.

The adult student generally desires a quality education that can work with his or her schedule. This is why the time compression of the courses is so appealing to the students.

Another issue is that, while adult learners may appear to have the financial resources to complete their education, many are staff workers or lower- to mid-level managers with modest incomes that are already committed to other financial obligations. In those cases, financial aid and/or tuition reimbursement offered by their companies offer attractive options for adult students to pay for their education. In addition, the student may be able to attain the skills needed to move up to a higher-level and/or

management position. Using real-life experiences, the instructor can demonstrate how a

concept can apply directly to the student's goals (Bowden & Merritt, 1995).

Critique of Accelerated Education Programs

Accelerated programs have been under criticism and scrutiny due to their reduced

seat time. Critics of this model feel that increased contact time is necessary for rigor and

depth of analysis. The reduced contact time is a deficit that questions the validity of the

program. According to Brookfield (2003), "this position is vastly oversimplified and, in

some instances, plain wrong" (p. 73). He further stated the following:

Educational formats such as accelerated learning programs that involve

substantial amounts of independent study, self-directed learning, or on-line

education and that emphasize periods of learner isolation and separation from

institutional services and peer interaction, could actually be considered to offer

more, not fewer opportunities for the development of critical awareness (pp. 75-

76).

Due to the fast pace of the program, there are rarely paper-and-pencil tests that are

popular in the more traditional programs. Rather, much of the grading is by such methods

as oral and/or written group projects, oral presentations, class participation, and written

papers. This gives students a chance for out-of-class reflection and an opportunity to take

responsibility for their own learning.

Bash (2003) stated some of the problems facing adult learning programs are low

status, lack of institutional support, the "cash cow" syndrome, lack of faculty investment,

and the philosophical differences of "traditional" vs. adult students. Faculty is often

adjunct or part time. In addition, the reduced maintenance costs, such as the shortened

classroom time and the fact that students are typically commuters who do not need

dormitories or recreational space, make these programs cost effective for the college or

university. Thus, the program can be perceived to be the institution's "cash cow," in

place to satisfy the institution's financial rather than philosophical needs. These factors

can lead to a lack of respect and investment by full-time faculty.

Overcoming Barriers of Accelerated Education Programs

One key to overcoming these barriers is to ensure a quality accelerated

educational program. Student learning is a major test of quality, whether it is a traditional

or accelerated program. One way to do this is to employ best practices. While the list of

best practices can be quite long, Swenson (2003) suggests the following related

questions:

- *Does instruction require learners to be actively involved in their own learning?*
  Treating learners like adults and encouraging active involvement in the learning
  process taps into the affective realm. This keeps the learners interested and deepens
  their learning context and experience.

- *Does instruction make use of the learner's life and work experience?* As noted earlier,
  the adult learner comes to the classroom with a wealth of experience that needs to be
  tapped into by the instructor. In addition, adults tend to learn best when they can
  relate new knowledge with past experience.

- *Does instruction allow adequate time for reflection?* Different methods can be used to
  foster reflection in and out of the classroom: journaling or writing reflection papers
  on the current subject matter; placing assignments and activities in the context of
  learners' current occupations; designing small group breakouts so learners can reflect

together; and allowing learners to reflect for several moments before starting

discussions. However, it is important that the faculty using this approach need to not

only be trained in these techniques and able to model them in the classroom, but

subscribe to this philosophy of teaching.

- *Does the program individualize instruction to the greatest possible degree?* If

  possible, designing a specialized course of study for each learner by identifying his or

  her preferred learning style, assessing the entry level of knowledge and skills, and

  even attempting to make a judgment about the interest level in the subject would

  provide an individualized instruction. However, the reality is that it is not usually

  economically feasible. Often, the number of students in a class would make such a

  venture a logistical and record-keeping nightmare. Measuring the knowledge and

  skills of learners upon entry to the program would assist in assuring that they are

  qualified to participate successfully in the program of study.

Assessment of Accelerated Education Programs

As noted by Walvoord (2003), assessment can be used to improve students'

learning in accelerated programs as well as traditional programs. Assessment needs to

address student performance, the relationship between performance and other factors, and

improvement of student performance. The assessment information needs to be reasonably

valid and reliable and feasible to collect given available knowledge and resources.

Future of Accelerated Learning Programs

With 73% percent of all college students considered nontraditional learners

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), the need for accelerated programs as one

way of accommodating adult learners in the future is obvious. According to Wlodkowski

& Kasworm (2003), "Accelerated learning signals a tidal wave of change for higher education" (p. 96). The authors also stated, "Probably a role being played less intentionally by accelerated learning is that of a reformer. There is evidence that accelerated learning programs are more effective with nontraditional learners, operate at significantly lower costs, and have similar or better learning outcomes" (p. 95). Leaders in adult education can ignore the contributions accelerated learning has made to the field of adult education or be responsive to the need for innovative support for adult learners of the future through further research. According to Donaldson and Graham (2002), besides just making accelerated programs available, there needs to be "a continued experimentation with accelerated programs, a focus on learning, and an openness and commitment to using research to determine their impact on the adults served" (p. 12).

Returning Adult Students

Adult students are returning to school in increasing numbers. According to Choy (2002), the "traditional" undergraduate is the exception rather than the rule. The traditional graduate is typically defined as one who graduated high school and started college full-time right after high school, is dependent on his or her parents for financial support and works no more than part time during the school year. In 1999-2000 only 27 percent of undergraduates met all of the above criteria. Traditional undergraduate students can usually focus their energy on their studies. However, the older students often have work and family responsibilities that compete with school, taxing their time, energy and financial resources. The older student may have put off attending college because he or she did not feel academically ready and may struggle with the coursework when he or

she attends later. Unfortunately, the nontraditional student is more likely to leave without

a degree, even dropping out the first year.

According to Bowden and Merritt (1995), there are four characteristics of the

typical adult learner: age, needs, desire, and goals. Since the typical student in an

accelerated program tends to be an older working adult, many of them come to the

classroom with much practical experience. To be successful, the instructor needs to be a

conduit of that experience, drawing it out of the student, and using it in classroom

activities, discussion and assignments. The instructor should also be aware of the needs

of the student. Long, didactic lectures are not advised for such a group. They prefer to see

a concept in action supported by examples and activities. It becomes important for the

program goals and objectives to be learner centered rather than teacher centered

(Mealman & Lawrence, 2000).

According to Aslanian (2001), adult students have strong and steady career goals

and are going back to college because they are looking for additional competencies to

advance or change careers, or to keep up with their current jobs. Often an event triggers

the need to return to school. Such an event could be an opportunity for a promotion or

loss of a job that determines the need to learn. The adult students view education as a way

to move from one status in life to another. Careers tend to be the leading reason that

undergraduate adults return to school.

<div align="center">Transformative Learning</div>

History and Definition

This research study focused on transformative learning in accelerated education

programs. *Transformative* learning has been a buzz phrase in education since Jack

Mezirow published his seminal findings in 1978 regarding women returning to

community college after being out of school for many years. This pioneered

transformative learning through powerful consciousness-raising of the women.

Perspective transformation was identified as the central learning process that occurred in

the personal development of the women in the study. They became critically aware of

their beliefs and feeling about themselves and their societal role and were able to change

their assumptions and expectations (Mezirow, 2000). A few definitions have emerged

regarding *transformative learning.* Mezirow (2000) defined transformative learning as

the following:

> …the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference
>
> (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive,
>
> discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they
>
> may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide
>
> action (pp. 7-8).

Elizabeth Kasl and Dean Elias (2000) have expanded the definition as follows:

> Transformative learning is the expansion of consciousness in any human system,
>
> thus the collective as well as individual. This expanded consciousness is
>
> characterized by new frames of reference, points of view, or habits of mind as
>
> well as by a new structure for engaging the system's identity. Transformation of
>
> the content of consciousness is facilitated when two processes are engaged
>
> interactively: the process of critically analyzing underlying premises and the
>
> process of appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of the
>
> unconscious. Transformation of the structure of consciousness is facilitated when

a learner is confronted with a complex cultural environment because effective engagement with that environment requires a change in the learner's relationship to his or her or the group's identity (p. 233).

Patricia Cranton (2006) noted that, "Transformative learning theory is based on constructivist assumptions. In other words, meaning is seen to exist within ourselves, not in external forms" (p. 23). She defined transformative learning as "the process by which people examine problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (p. 36). The central word to all of the above definitions is *change*—change in assumptions, view of life-world, view of self. According to Kegan (2000), there is a difference between *informational learning* and *transformative learning*. The difference is that *transformational learning* changes *how* we know, not *what* we know.

Affective Components of Transformative Learning

According to Dirkx (2006), emotions are part of transformative learning in two ways. Since critical reflection is central to transformative learning, when learners reflect on their assumptions, various emotions could emerge such as guilt, fear, general anxiety, a sense of loss, or shame. In addition, unconscious emotional responses to aspects of the learning experience can manifest during one's journey which can be either difficult or self-affirming. In both of these instances, these expressions of emotions deeply involve the learner's psyche. Dirkx also noted that, "Affective issues influence why adults show up for educational programs, their interest in the subject matter, and the processes by which they engage the material, their experiences, the teacher, and one another" (pp. 15-16).

Often conflict can occur in adult education settings which can lead to the expression of strong emotions. These emotions can be over an issue as how to proceed with group projects. These feelings can lead to feelings of frustration or anger and can create an affect that can last beyond the initial curricular context. These so-called personality conflicts can have an effect on the learning experiences. For example, a learner may find another learner annoying and this feeling can manifest itself by verbally attacking the annoying student and/or blaming the teacher who it may be felt is doing nothing about the situation or the student's annoying behavior (Dirkx, 2008).

Central Themes and Causal Factors of Transformative Learning

Mezirow (2000) noted that transformations often follow some variation of the following ten phases:

1. A disorienting dilemma

2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame

3. A critical assessment of assumptions

4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions

6. Planning a course of action

7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan

8. Provisional trying of new roles

9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (p. 22).

Mezirow (2000) also noted that transformations could be *epochal*, or *incremental*. The *epochal* would be sudden, dramatic, and reorienting insight, while the *incremental*, would be a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that end up changing one's habit of mind. He cited the example of a woman with a traditionally oriented frame of mind who takes a late-afternoon adult education class. She may wonder why the other women in the class hang around to discuss interesting issues while she hurries home to make dinner for her husband. She may critically reflect on her point of view on this topic which may result in a transformation in her habit of mind related to her role as a wife. Mezirow (1997) defined *habits of mind* as "broad, abstract, orienting habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes" (pp. 5-6). He continued to note that these habits of mind become one's point of view, or "the constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation" (p. 6). Cranton (2006) also wrote that the change in habit of mind could be as a result of one dramatic event or a gradual cumulative process. She noted that, "Learning occurs when an individual encounters an alternative perspective and prior habits of mind are called into question" (p. 23).

According to Taylor (2000), an important characteristic seems to be that most transformation deals with *subjective reframing* versus *objective reframing*. Subjective reframing is critical reflection of one's assumptions while objective reframing is critical reflection of other's assumptions. Tennant (2005) noted that transformative learning promotes knowing oneself, and this lays the groundwork for personal change. However, knowing oneself alone is not enough. It is also important to act on those embedded habits of mind that work against transformative change to sustain it.

Facilitating Transformative Learning

According to Mezirow (1997), educators need to help learners become aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions to facilitate transformative learning. Also, educators must foster critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse that is participatory, learner centered, interactive, involves group deliberation and problem solving. He also stated that, "Transformative learning is not an add-on. It is the essence of adult education" (p. 11).

In addition, Taylor (2006) noted that transformative learning "demands a great deal of work, skill, and courage" (p. 91). Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006), suggested that it may be necessary for an educator to undergo some form of self-reflection and transformation in order to teach transformation. Self knowledge is a precursor to teaching transformation. However, transformational learning cannot be guaranteed or forced on learners and educators do not own the high ground of truth or righteousness. They also said, "… we try to provide a classroom setting where we engage with our students, our co-learners, in critical reflection, critical thinking, reframing questions, deconstructing issues, and dialogue and discourse. Often in this setting we and others are renewed and transformed in the struggle" (p. 56).

Summary of Transformative Learning

While we seem to have come a long way since Jack Mezirow (1978) first discussed transformative learning, the basic premise still remains—we transform those taken-for-granted frames of reference and view our life-world, and ultimately ourselves, differently. That transformation affects how we think and act in society. Critical reflection is the key to this transformative process enabling change to occur. While we, as

educators, may not always be able to facilitate transformative learning, we should be open to the possibility.

Chapter Summary

Accelerated learning programs have continued to be popular in higher education since its beginnings in the seventies. Such programs give adult learners options for completing their education. The compressed time frame allows students to be able to complete their degree in a relatively timely fashion. Other benefits, such as the cohort model and being able to utilize tuition reimbursement funds through employers, make this model attractive to the returning adult student. This study explored the possibility that transformative learning could occur in adult learners in such programs.

The next chapter discusses the methodology of the research study. This includes the discussion of phenomenology, information about the participants, and data collection methods.

Through the Looking Glass

Methodology of the Study

"There is nothing like looking, if you want to find something…You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after" (J. R. R. Tolkien, 1982, pp. 57-58).

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of adult learners in an undergraduate degree-completion program. This chapter discusses the methodology of the research study. This includes the discussion of phenomenology, information about the participants, and data collection methods.

Discussion of Phenomenology

This was a qualitative study. The basic research method that I chose for this study was phenomenology since it was my aim to capture the meaning of a phenomenon that many individuals share (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

What is Phenomenology?

According to van Manen (1990), "Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 9). According to Gray (2004),

> Phenomenology holds that any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people's experiences of that social reality. Hence, phenomenology insists that we must lay aside our prevailing understanding of phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them in order that new meanings may emerge. Current understandings have to be 'bracketed' to the best of our ability to

allow the phenomena to 'speak for themselves', unadulterated by our

preconceptions. The result will be new meaning, fuller meaning or renewed

meaning (p. 21).

A way to "lay aside" our understandings is by "bracketing" or "epoché,"

which is acknowledging what the researcher believes that phenomenon to be and

then suspending that belief, "putting it on the shelf," and being open to whatever

may come up during the study. While I believe it is helpful for the researcher to

have some understanding and even experience with the phenomenon, the

researcher still needs to be able to take a "step back" and try to understand the

phenomenon from the view of the participants. In addition, when conducting a

phenomenological study, the researcher needs to apply "reduction," whereby he

or she reflects on the lived experience as it was experienced as opposed to how

the researcher would conceptualize how it should have been (van Manen, 2002b).

In other words, reduction leads us back to the *essence* of the experience. It is what

it is. This will help the researcher to attain a truer understanding of the

phenomenon in question. Since I had my own experiences with the phenomenon,

I dealt with bracketing and reduction by acknowledging my own experiences and

then focusing on the participants' stories in as much depth as possible.

Phenomenology systematically attempts to discover and describe the internal

meaning structures of the lived experiences of the social group. In other words, it studies

the *essence* or the nature of a phenomenon. Phenomenology seeks to understand the

nature or meaning of something (van Manen, 2002a). For instance, if one were to try to

understand the *essence* of a guitar, one would need to ask what the attributes are of a

guitar vis-á-vis another musical instrument, like a piano or a ukulele. Without certain

attributes or properties the guitar would not be a guitar. The same principle can be

applied to the phenomenological research study. What is it about this phenomenon (i.e.,

accelerated learning in higher education) that makes it unique? What is universal in the

lived experiences of the social group (van Manen, 1990)? According to Bogdan and

Bilken (1998), "Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the

meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (p. 23).

Through phenomenology, the researcher attempts to understand the "life-world" of the

research participant.

It may be helpful to describe what phenomenology is not. Phenomenology does

not seek to prove or disprove a hypothesis. It is not the aim of phenomenology to solve a

problem or improve a situation. As with other qualitative research, it is not about

statistics, or using large samples, or focusing on facts. The researcher is not an

independent person; rather, he or she is close to what is being observed (Gray, 2004). The

phenomenological questions look for the *meaning* and *significance* of the phenomenon.

We attempt to gain insight on how members of a social group view their life-world and

identify the themes or "meanings" that are revealed (van Manen, 1990).

The theoretical framework for this study is transformative learning theory which

was discussed in more detail in the literature review. According to Mezirow (2000),

"transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-

granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make

them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective

so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to

guide action" (pp. 7-8). For me, my undergraduate education experience *was*

transformative. I was a different person before, during and after the experience. I

approached problems differently as a result of my educational experience. There was a

new-found strength within me that had been suppressed. I viewed myself and my life-

world differently. Since I felt I missed out because, at the time, I never got the chance to

relate my story, I was able to give the opportunity for others to tell theirs. Through my

interviews with the participants, I focused on how, or if, they have changed, or were

"transformed," as a result of their experience. As noted above, phenomenology does not

attempt to prove or disprove, so I acknowledged that there may have been participants

who did not experience *transformation* as a result of their experience. Even though I felt

that I was transformed as a result of my experience, I realized that not everyone may have

had the same experiences I did. While conducting my research, I had to put my own

experiences "on the shelf" or "bracket" those experiences and let the participants' own

stories unfold (van Manen, 1990). This study was more interpretive, focusing on how the

participants made meaning of their life-world experiences. The methodology of

phenomenology gave an in-depth understanding of the essence of this phenomenon as

related to transformative learning. This research study sought to hear each participant's

unique story which is why a phenomenological methodology was chosen.

Participant Selection

All of the participants chosen for the study finished an accelerated-degree

completion program within two years prior to the research study. I did not want too much

time to have lapsed since their completion of the program so that it would be relatively

fresh on their minds. They all graduated from the same institution, but not all were from

the same cohort group. The participants were former students of mine whom I contacted

personally, either by personal e-mail or telephone call. There were fourteen participants

in the study—twelve female and two male. All of the participants were Caucasian, ranged

in age from mid twenties to fifties, and were health care professionals, in both clinical

and non clinical disciplines of health care. I realized that since all the participants were

Caucasian, it was not representative of the diverse population which was a limitation of

this study. All of the participants were employed either part- or full-time outside the

home. An informed consent form was signed by each participant. Their anonymity was

protected by using pseudonyms instead of their real names.

Even though they all were finished with their program, they may not necessarily

have completed their bachelor's degree. Even though students typically enter such a

program with the equivalent of an associate's degree, it is not unusual that students may

still need additional credits to actually complete the bachelor's degree. However, the

focus is not the bachelor's degree per se, but rather their experiences with an *accelerated*

program.

Methods of Collecting Data

There were two sources of data collection—interviews and reflection papers.

There were ten interviews and four reflection papers.

Interviews

One of the data collection methods was that I conducted in-person interviews of

up to one hour in length with each of the ten participants at a location convenient to them.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow for additional impromptu questions. Since

the focus of the study was to hear the participants' unique stories, I felt it was important

to allow for spontaneity in the interview. The interviews were digitally taped. No second interviews were conducted.

 Some of my interview questions included

1. Describe a significant learning moment for you in the program.

2. What has changed for you since being in the program?

3. Did you find the experience transformative in any way?

4. What does *accelerated learning* mean to you? In what ways has it helped or hindered your learning?

5. What does it mean to you to be an adult learner?

6. Were you able to implement any of the class activities and/or class projects in your work or personal life? Were they successful projects?

Since the interviews were semi-structured, additional questions were asked, depending on answers to previous questions, or the dynamics of the interview.

But, due to the ostensible complexity of this issue, I wondered how to formulate my questions to determine if transformative learning took place. The students may not have studied the works of such gurus of transformative learning as Jack Mezirow. Transformative learning as a field of study is difficult, deep, and rather heady. Since the interviews were semi-structured, I found myself experimenting with my approach and would ask a participant if he or she felt the experience was "transformative" and, if so, how. The interesting thing was, I did not receive any blank stares. Due to their non verbal communication (such as nodding and lack of blank stares) and verbal communication, such as appropriate responses to the interview questions, I felt that the words were understood which allowed for further discussion and clarification.

Reflection Papers

The second data collection method was review of participants' written end-of-program reflection papers. At the end of the program, the students were asked to submit papers on which they "reflected" on their reactions to the program. The reflection papers were chosen as a data collection method to give additional insight as to their experiences during the program and how those experiences affected their lives. These reflection papers were purposely chosen from a sample of end-of-program writings. The papers were chosen based on whether or not the writing indicated that participants experienced transformation as a result of their being in the program. These papers were not prompted by the above-mentioned interview questions. A separate consent form was developed for the use of the reflection papers. There were four reflection papers used as part of the data collection. The participants were all Caucasian females and different than those who participated in the face-to-face interviews. I realized that since all the participants were Caucasian females, it was not representative of a more diverse population which was a limitation of this study.

Methods of Analysis

Themes were identified from both the transcribed interviews and the reflection papers. According to van Manen (1990), we can generally take three approaches to uncover or isolate themes in text related to phenomenological research: 1) the holistic or sententious approach; 2) the selective or highlighting approach; and 3) the detailed or line-by-line approach. I chose the second approach where I read text in the form of transcripts or reflection papers several times and asked myself, "What statements or phrases seem particularly essential, or revealing about the phenomenon or experience

being described" (van Manen, 1990, p. 93)? These statements were then highlighted and grouped into certain themes that recurred as possible commonalities. From those themes, subthemes emerged that related to the main themes. For instance, one of the themes that emerged was in the area of "motivation." From "motivation," the subthemes that emerged were career development, sense of accomplishment and deeper sense of commitment, shift in motivation, and accelerated pace and structure of the program. The theme of "motivation" and the subthemes were based on the lived-experience descriptions of the participants relating to either what drew them to the program and/or why they completed the program.

I put aside my own attitudes and beliefs by "bracketing" or suspending my own beliefs of the phenomenon to study its essence as reflected in the life experiences of the participants. In other words, their experiences may have been different than my own (van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, as in quantitative research, trustworthiness, or ensuring believability in the research study, is important. To help ensure credibility of the research, I purposefully did not choose all the participants from one cohort or core group. The fourteen men and women in the study represented eight different cohort groups. Even though they all studied the same core curriculum, they did not all interact with the same students and faculty offering the possibility of a wider range of experiences. In addition, the participants were a wide range of ages (from twenties to fifties) which also opened the possibility of representing different perceptions and perspectives relating to the lived experiences of the participants.

One of the steps I used to ensure trustworthiness was to do a member check. A member check takes the data collected from the participants in the study along with the researcher's interpretations and then sends the findings back to the participants to verify if the researcher's interpretations "rang true" with them (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). I sent the findings of the research study where I quoted or cited the participant to each of the fourteen participants for review before finalizing the study. Ten of the fourteen participants responded to my inquiry with either confirmation or changes to the wording.

Another step I used to ensure trustworthiness was triangulation (Merriam & Simpson, 1995) or the use of multiple sources of data to confirm the findings. In this case, I used two data sources (i.e., interviews and reflection papers from different participants) as a way to triangulate the data and provide a richer base and depth of experiences.

In addition, during the course of the study, I had frequent contact with my primary advisor, Dr. Randee Lawrence, who reviewed its plausibility. She frequently raised questions and comments prompting me to "dig deeper" when needed.

The next chapter discusses the findings from the data. The findings include the identified themes and subthemes.

The Inside Story

What I Found

All of the participants discussed at length their experiences in an accelerated bachelor's degree-completion program. The interviews were semi-structured and conversational, and interview questions were used to set the tone for the interview. In addition, end-of-program reflection papers were reviewed. These papers offered additional insights of the participants' experiences.

After analyzing the data, the following four major themes emerged: *motivation, value of collaborative process, pedagogy,* and *self-concept.* The findings below are categorized into the above themes. Each of the themes had subthemes that further illustrated the participants' experiences.

Motivation

Motivation was a recurring theme in many of the participants' discussion. They talked about how much more important going to school was as an "adult" learner versus when they were the "traditional" college-age student. It was more important for them to do well and succeed in their studies. They realized the value of an education. Sometimes the value was extrinsic—hope of career advancement and more money. Other times the value was intrinsic—a sense of pride in accomplishing a personal goal or the mere enjoyment of learning. Sometimes it was both. The following subthemes were identified related to motivation: career development, deeper commitment and sense of accomplishment, shift in motivation, and accelerated pace and structure of the program.

Career Development

The importance of career development as a reason to obtain a degree is understandable. Since education is an investment in both money and time a return on investment or *ROI* would be expected. As Aslanian (2001) noted, careers tend to be the leading reason that undergraduate adult students return to school.

For Charlene, her motivation was different as an adult than when she was younger. She had a different focus and reason for being there. Education became a means to an end—career advancement and more money.

> It means more to me now. It didn't mean as much when I was a traditional college age [student] because it wasn't as important at that time. It was more important to make money, meet guys, you know. Now I realize the importance of having the education, to get a better position…I want as many tools as possible to make as much money as I can and an education is the way to do that... I also found out that I was a little bit smarter now, too.

Some participants stressed that their *focus* was different. Debra felt that, as an adult learner, she was not only more focused, but goal oriented and in school for a specific reason. In her case, the reason was to advance in the workplace.

Ross felt that working toward a degree was also a motivator. Even though he may not need a degree for his line of work, it may help him with career advancement in the future. Even though he knows that there are people smarter than him, the fact that he took the time to go to class, spend the money, and read the literature may give him an edge over others competing for a job. As he noted, "It's almost like we've done our time."

Deeper Commitment and Sense of Accomplishment

Some participants felt that a sense of accomplishment was what kept them motivated. That sense of accomplishment can be personal and not necessarily related to career development. In addition, the motivation for going to college is often "different" as an adult than as a younger student. As an older, non-traditional aged adult student, it becomes more of the individual's decision to return to school, as opposed to the parents' decision.

For Ross, the value of the education went over and above just getting good grades. He noted the following:

When I went to college for the first time, I was like, 'okay, this is a different experience,' and I think I got caught up in the environment…As a younger student, I was a typical student. But coming back…it was a whole different experience. I think my mindset was different…I don't know why, maybe it was due to maturity…I just got caught up in party mode. Being an adult was a lot different…It wasn't even about the grades anymore. It was just reaching my capacity. Seeing what I could learn. Grades didn't matter. If you study, grades will come. Not focusing on GPA. In high school it was about the GPA. But this time I was like, what am I learning and how can I use it?

He also felt like this was a second chance for him. He added, "I'm going to do it for myself. There's no one there to say, 'did you do your homework?' like in high school. You're an adult. You either do it or you don't."

Carla felt that she enjoyed the challenge. She said, "You don't just do the work. You want to go over and above because it's interesting to you. It's what you're focused

on. It's what you want in life. That's why I enjoyed it so much." She also made special arrangements to her schedule so she would be able to be off that one day a week. She went from working five days a week to a four-day, ten-hour work week so she could concentrate on her studies and still have time to take care of her house and family.

Diana felt that even though she was always a serious student, this time it was different due to the level of commitment."It's now or never type of feeling. It's very serious." She felt that it was a big financial and time commitment. She would be in class one night, take one day off, do her readings on the weekend, write on Monday and Tuesday, and look over her notes on Wednesday in case there was a presentation due for the next class.

For Joan, the goal was personal as well as professional. In her case the education meant a lot to her, and not just about getting the degree and a job. Even though she took classes when she was younger, it did not have as much meaning as when she was an adult student. She was the first college graduate in her immediate family so the personal accomplishment was important to her. She also felt that she could be a role model to younger family members, especially the females in her family, and that if they did not go to school when they were the "traditional" age, it was okay to go back later and reach that goal.

Since the classroom seat time is more compressed in an accelerated program, often learning takes place outside of the classroom. Students have to be responsible to keep up with their studies and get the most out of their learning. There are papers to write, group projects, and presentations which usually require research on the part of the student. For Kayla, that was an important revelation. She noted the following:

Although it took me a while to understand, I realize now that most of the learning

I experienced was outside of the classroom. The reading, research, and writing

enhanced the concepts reviewed in the class. I strongly believe that what you put

into [your program] is what you get out of it. If you did the bare minimum or

skimmed chapters, than you only robbed yourself of the education you were

paying for. Although at times it required discipline, it was well worth it. I feel I

am now armed and prepared to face difficult tasks.

In addition to the sense of accomplishment, the motivation for going to school can

be "different" for an adult than for a younger, more traditional-aged student. As an adult,

it becomes more of the individual's decision to return to school, as opposed to the

parents' decision.

Carla noted that when she was younger, schooling was more of a forced

situation—she was there because someone told her that she should do it. So, as an adult,

it was her choice to be there and she was more committed to her schooling.

Shift in Motivation

Sometimes what draws a person to the program and what motivates him or her in

the beginning may not necessarily be what keeps him or her motivated, interested and

wanting to do well. Peggy experienced such a shift in motivation. While at first it was

about getting the extrinsic reward (i.e., job security) the reward became more intrinsic

(i.e., enjoyment in learning). When she started working several years ago, it was not

necessary to have a degree. She got promoted to a management position because she was

in the right place at the right time and a good worker. However, as years went by, she

realized that it became necessary to have a bachelor's degree, and desirous to have a

master's degree in her field. Many of her colleagues already had bachelor's degrees. And, if she wanted to advance in the workplace, she needed a master's degree. Even though she had been out of school for twenty-some years, she had a great desire to return to school to get her bachelor's degree because she knew that she needed it to maintain her position at work and to provide the stepping stone to go on for her master's degree. However, once she was in the program, the need became a want, a desire. It was not just about going to school to accomplish a professional goal, which was her original intention. She realized she looked forward to her class sessions. Her classes were interesting, enjoyable and stimulating. By the time she was done with the program, she decided she wanted to move on and eventually pursue a master's degree. The master's degree appealed to her because she realized that she liked the challenge and being in a "little over her head." She wanted to go on to school for the sake of learning and not just to keep her job or get ahead in the workplace.

Accelerated Pace and Structure of the Program

For some participants, the "fast pace" of the accelerated program not only attracted them, but kept them motivated. As Bowden & Merritt (1995) noted, the adult students find the accelerated programs appealing because it can work with their schedule. In Carla's case, the fact that she could finish it in a year was important to her. Also, the fact that it was one night a week made it doable for her. She felt that she would not have been able to do it if it met more often. In addition, since she had a lot of experience, if she would have gone through a more traditional program, it would not have been as interesting and she would not have been as focused. "I could be focused and this is why I liked it. I could study and get as deeply involved as I wanted to or not." Ross also felt that

he would not have been able to do it if it were not an accelerated program. As an older student, he had financial obligations that he did not have when he was younger, and could not afford to go to school every day, all day, like in more traditional programs. "At the same time just being in an accelerated program, on the days we met, it gives you free time to study and do your homework for the class. I thought it was perfect. The timing was good."

For one participant, David, it was not the acceleration of the program that attracted him, but the convenience of the location and time. "The fact that it was a year had nothing to do with it. I could flunk out within a year, you know." However, as time went on, he came to the realization that because it was accelerated, it worked well for him. "To me, I'd prefer it to be accelerated…I know there's a due date coming within a week. I got to start. I would start that night after class. I would start actually, as [the teacher was] talking. I was already formulating in my head what I was going to do."

<div align="center">Value of the Collaborative Process</div>

Typically, the accelerated bachelor-degree completion programs are run in a cohort model. That is, the students progress through the program together. As Kasworm (2003b) noted, the quasi-family relationship is what attracts students to such programs. The classes tend to be rather small, and can vary from six to fifteen students. Occasionally, a student may drop out and have to rejoin another group, but, generally, the students begin and end the program together. Students work a lot in small groups during their classes. There are group activities, projects, assignments, and presentations that are required as part of the program. Generally, but not always, the collaborative process was well received and felt to be beneficial. The following subthemes were identified related to

value of the collaborative process: increasing comfort level, support system, diversity, contribution of different skill sets, frustration with group process, impact of "visiting" students, and collaboration with instructors.

Increasing Comfort Level

In accelerated programs, many of the assignments, projects and activities are done in groups. Sometimes students were apprehensive of the group process in the beginning but appreciated it as time went on. Working in groups can be daunting at first. However, many participants felt as they got to know one another, they became more and more comfortable, feeling more open and freer to express their opinions with one another. Not only did their comfort level increase but they actually appreciated what they were able to accomplish as a group. In other words, the whole became greater than the sum of its parts. In Ross's case, he felt that he did not like it as much in the beginning but that changed over time. He was worried about having to work with someone else on projects and assignments.

In the beginning I don't think I really liked it as much. I was more scared. Now I have to meet with this person's time schedule. But I think it helped a lot because the reality of it is, in the real world that's what you're dealing with…You learn to work well with people. And that helped me a lot.

Ross gave the following example of an epiphany he had regarding the collaborative process:

We were doing some sort of test and we broke up into [groups of] three. I remember me thinking, 'this idea is so good.' And I remember both of them thinking, 'have you ever thought of this?' And I remember thinking, 'he makes a

lot of sense.' Each individual has a good idea. Let's combine it and make it a great idea.

Over the course of the program, Ross's comfort level increased with the other cohort members. In the beginning he did not really know everybody, so he was more reserved in his opinions. But over time, he became more at ease and comfortable with the other members of the cohort. He became more open with the others, knowing that he was not going to offend anybody in terms of certain views. He went on to say:

When you have different classes and different people there is no connection. With these people, with my classmates, I kind of felt like we're all going through the same goal. We have this many more days or a countdown. It was that common goal. Whereas we wouldn't be talking as much if it was a new class and you didn't know anybody. You'd be a little more reserved.

Another revelation for Ross came through the collaborative process. "The biggest thing for me was just figuring out not everyone thinks like you. You can't convince everyone to think like you." He realized the importance of listening to what the other person has to say.

Susan also felt an increase in comfort level as the time with the cohort went on. She compared her experience with the more traditional college programs:

I never thought I would learn as much about my fellow classmates. All my other classes I had taken at previous colleges had different students each semester. I like having the same cohort group better. When classes started back in September I was nervous and very hesitant to express my opinions. Now that has changed. I feel comfortable expressing my opinions and participating in class.

She felt that the most important aspect she will take from class was the people she met and the experiences they shared during class. "I truly believed I learned a lot from my fellow classmates. I enjoyed discussions on controversial issues and current issues going on right now."

Support System

Often the students form a bond with other cohort members. Sometimes that bond would form between two people within the cohort or the group as a whole. Joan felt that the cohort was good because she did not have the anxiety of having new people coming in all the time. She felt more at ease and freer to express herself. It also was helpful to have others to talk to outside of class. "We fed off each other a lot. Never even thought about cheating or sharing work, but 'is this what you think it meant?' or 'is this what you think she means?' We did a lot of that." Amy had a similar experience. She said that she definitely liked that model. She recounted her experience:

> …getting to know each other helped us as we went into the larger projects and having to work with each other we became more comfortable and it was easier to talk about everything and it was easier to make decisions as a group. Where I think that if you just stepped into a classroom and it was a new class every semester you wouldn't have that level of comfort with each other.

David also had a support system with a fellow cohort member outside of class. According to David,

> I knew exactly where she was and anytime—any given time of the day I knew exactly where she was. 'What do think about that?' Oh, and it was nice of her. It

really worked out really well. Not that we're plagiarizing off each other or

anything like that. You just need to get that initial spark to get that fire going.

Debra's classmates exchanged telephone numbers. If they had questions about

anything, they would help each other.

Charlene thought the cohort experience was important to her success as a student.

The group as a whole supported each other outside of class. It was not only chatting

about assignments, it was sometimes even about survival. "That was very helpful because

all of us relied on one another outside of class even when we were put in our little sub

groups. We would meet outside of class and we'd call each other on the phone, 'how you

doing?'" She felt there was camaraderie and they cared about one another. If somebody

was thinking about quitting, they would gather and support and encourage one another.

"We're like, 'we're no losers, and you're not a loser either, so you're not quitting.' And

they stayed in. So that was how we survived."

The cohort experience was positive for Diana both inside and outside of the

classroom. "I also love the cohort. It's more motivating." She went on to say, "For us it

would take a whole quarter to know someone and then next quarter you know them better

and the next quarter you know them more and, all of sudden, you're asking them

questions, you're discussing things together." She also felt that it was great because they

were brainstorming a lot and it was a relaxed atmosphere. She added the following

insights:

You can get back to the heart of the matter. We e-mailed each other questions.

'What do think about this? Will you look at my paper?' You worked on things

together. So, I think you benefit from working with others. Obviously, you benefit

from learning from other people. And I think with the cohort it's even more,

right?

Abby expressed how she had the opportunity to be a part of a group of people who

shared with her a similar outlook on life and met teachers that had a passion for providing

a high quality education to their students. The fact that her teachers had real-world

experience in her field of study and that some of them were in the process of obtaining

their higher education made her feel understood and that she fit in.

The value of the collaborative process can also extend beyond oneself to others. It

becomes not just about the individual's accomplishments, but also the accomplishments

of others become important. Because students in cohort-based accelerated programs are

usually together for the entire program and not just one class, they can see each other

change and grow. For Debra, watching everybody, including herself, progress gave her

much joy. As she noted:

> It was enjoyable to come because you want to see the next step that everybody is
>
> going to go there and how everybody's going to get there. You know, we're all in
>
> it together. It wasn't just an individual thing for me, either.

Diversity

Kayla's cohort experience was not only positive, but it left a lasting impression

that no doubt will enhance her future, both personally and professionally. It was not just

the similarities, but the differences of the group, that she found most enduring. She

related her experience:

> I feel truly blessed to have had a cohort with such a diverse background. Each
>
> person brought such a colorful outlook and different perception that only

enhanced my understanding of concepts. As I begin to look forward in my career, I know that this diverse group of people will help me handle conflict, listen effectively, and charge forward with better understanding.

Charlene was also in a cohort with members that were younger and less experienced, but she was okay with that. In fact, she felt that she was a role model for them. She noted that she saw a change in them as the group progressed through the program. She felt that, at first, the other students did not want to test authority or rock the boat at all. In her mind, college is the place to test authority, not to be overly argumentative, but to bring up the different points of view and different perspectives. When she would speak up, they would just sit back and get really quiet. Over time, however, she felt they started to feel comfortable speaking up, too.

Contribution of Different Skill Sets

The participants also found value in the cohort experience because, in addition to being a support system for one another, they could draw on each other's strengths. Each member contributed different skill sets. For instance, one area some adult students may feel weak in is computer skills, at least when they first go back to school. Usually by the time they are finished, they become more confident in that area. Along the way, they would often get to know who to call upon within the group for help when needed. Diana recalled one incident where she was going to give a presentation in class and brought a disk for the laptop which contained her PowerPoint presentation and her notes. When she got to class, the computer disk did not work and, because of her fear—fear of computers, fear of failure, she forgot everything. Luckily, there was a student in class who had a technical background and was able to save the day by helping her retrieve her

information and turn a very stressful situation into a successful presentation. Debra also felt very lucky having someone in her cohort with advanced technical skills that she could call on when needed. She felt that there were certain people who had specific abilities that you could use to your advantage to get through the program. "We all supported each other very well and it was a strong support. We got to know each other and anytime anybody showed a weakness, I always tried to help them whenever I could. You develop a bond I think between people and I think we helped each other a lot."

Frustration with Group Process

Not everybody's experience was always positive, though. Some students felt that there were pros and cons being in a cohort. Sometimes those cons can lead to frustration with other group members. As Dirkx (2008) noted, conflict can occur in adult education settings which can lead to such feelings of frustration. These conflicts can have an effect on the learning experience. Karen said the following:

> The pros being you've got a steady group of people and you're always going to
>
> make a few friends. And you can rely on those people if you miss a class to get
>
> notes and things. But I think even with our cohort, towards the end we were about
>
> done with each other. There were certain people and certain personalities that I
>
> had enough of and I was glad to be done…It takes a certain amount of civility and
>
> restraint sometimes to just not say 'will you shut up?' because you wanted to.

She went on to say it was frustrating when doing group projects and that often work would not get spread out evenly.

> It was difficult because there were worse procrastinators than me. And when
>
> you're doing a group project and say I was the one putting the final paper or

PowerPoint together and if people weren't getting you their stuff until the night before, I was lucky to have a job flexible enough where I could work at work.

She went on to say the following:

It got to the point where we knew not to give those people very much to do because we couldn't afford the time it would take the day the stuff was due to incorporate very much. And group projects for me are difficult because my standards are different from other people's standard. Some other people were like, 'it's good enough.' Well, it's good enough for you but it's not good enough for me. And group projects were hard that way because everyone's level of 'good enough' is different. And the commitment is different.

However, even with her negative experiences with the cohort, Karen found that, when she took a class after her program was finished that was in a more traditional college setting, she admitted there were limitations to the non-cohort classes. "Having come from the cohort I would have liked to have someone else to bounce ideas off of. There was a study group that formed that met before class but I wasn't asked to participate." Because she viewed herself as an independent person, she was okay with that, but that still illustrates the lasting impression the cohort model had on her.

Some of the participants had higher level management positions than other students in their cohort. For those students, they sometimes felt frustrated with the other students. Carla said, "Sometimes I liked it. Sometimes I didn't. Sometimes I felt, and I know this sounds bad, but sometimes it was difficult listening to people who weren't at the same level as you." She would be more stimulated with people who were at her same level. She also felt it was difficult when doing projects because there were people that

didn't have the same dedication as her. Peggy had a similar experience. Many of the

other students in the class were younger and not managers like her. She felt she did not

get much out of what they said and that the enjoyment was from the people that were

teaching the program.

Impact of "Visiting" Students

On occasion, a non-cohort student may join a class in the event he or she needed

to make up a course. A few of the participants talked about their reaction to having a new

student join the class. Peggy's experience was positive. "You know I didn't realize that

having different people in class would have been a great benefit until we did have

someone from another class come in and it was very refreshing to have her in the class."

She went on to say that having a different person in class was an asset. She especially

appreciated having this student in the class, because the student was older and more

experienced than many of her classmates. She brought in a different perspective on things

and Peggy was able to relate to her more than the other students. David also felt that

when a student joined the cohort for one course, she brought a lot of different ideas and

thoughts.

Charlene found herself joining another cohort for one class she needed to take.

She also thought it was a positive experience because she got to see different points of

view and different perspectives on things.

Collaboration with Instructors

In accelerated programs, it is not unusual for the collaborative process to be not

only between students but also between students and teachers. Since the students are

generally older, they often come to the classroom with quite a bit of life experience. This

experience is valued and will be discussed in more depth in the following *pedagogy*

section. For Kayla, this was a turning point in her learning.

> One of the most rewarding experiences was when I mentioned that role-playing
> would be a welcomed technique of learning. To my surprise, the following
> session the instructor did incorporate this method. I found it be a useful way of
> engaging students as well as a change from our routine. It also encouraged me to
> be open and honest and I felt recognized for voicing my opinion.

Pedagogy

A third theme that emerged had to do with the *pedagogy* of such a program, or

how the students learned. In accelerated programs, the emphasis is less on test-taking and

more on written assignments and group projects. Since "seat" or in-class time is less than

a traditional class (four or five week sessions versus ten or eleven weeks in a typical

quarter term), students are expected to spend more time outside of class reading,

researching, and working on assignments than in the more traditional programs. Often

students get together outside of class to work on group projects and assignments. They

may even form study groups.

In addition, there is less lecturing by the instructor. The instructor ostensibly

becomes more of a knowledgeable facilitator, leading the discussion and presenting

material in a more collaborative format. As noted in the section above, classroom

activities may take the form of class discussion where students are encouraged to relate

their professional and personal experiences related to the course topics. There are often

group or individual activities during class. The activities tend to be experiential and often

simulate what would be done in the "real world" to give students the opportunity to

bridge theory with practice or *praxis*. As noted by Bowden & Merritt (1995), by using

real-life experiences, the instructor can demonstrate how a concept can apply to the

student's goals. The subthemes identified related to pedagogy were the following: shift in

preference of learning, incidental learning, and the wish for more time.

Shift in Preference of Learning

Some of the participants found, especially over time, that the model of education

used in accelerated programs was a preferred way to learn for them. For Karen, it was a

mind shift in her preference.

> Until this semester I would have thought I would have rather taken a test than
>
> write the papers. Now looking back the papers were easier because it was writing
>
> about something. You always knew what the faculty were looking for if you
>
> understood the theories in the papers.

Peggy was surprised at how she adapted to the writing process. Being in a

management position, it was helpful because she has to do a lot of writing for work. She

found that the more she wrote the better she became at writing. "The first couple of

papers that we had to do were only two pages, and I thought, 'how am I ever going to

write two pages?' And then as we went on, it was no big deal to write four pages or five

pages. It really wasn't. Once you organized your thoughts…it helped."

Amy had a similar experience. She was initially nervous about the writing that she

heard students in such programs have to do. She recounted the following:

> Coming to it, I was nervous about all the writing because it had been a while for
>
> me to sit down and actually put my thoughts down on paper or reflect on
>
> something that I've read, but I think that was an excellent way to absorb the

information because you're not only reading it and regurgitating it. The part where you related it back to your life just really brought it all together. So, I would much prefer to write after having gone through this program than to take a test.

Incidental Learning

Sometimes learning is indirect, or incidental. According to Kerka (2000), "Incidental learning is unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities" (p. 1). Mealman (1993) defined incidental learning as "planned, unplanned and unanticipated learning outcomes not identified as part of the formal curriculum that students obtain while participating in the program" (p. 1). In other words, the students take away learning that is not an expressed part of the curriculum. Due to the nature of accelerated programs in higher education, a lot of the work is done outside of the classroom. The activities are intense, with reading, group projects and many written assignments.

For Janet, she was able to gain valuable life skills that she felt prepared her for a leadership role. She related the following:

I have never read or written more papers in all my life. I'll admit at times the paper writing was tedious, busy work, but I get it. We are expected to work hard and complete assignments as busy, working adults. This program taught me how to prioritize my time, organize my life and thoughts, and will mold me into a great leader.

Peggy not only liked the writing portion of the program, but felt it helped her since she is expected to write a lot for work. She felt that since she had to write a lot for

her classes it helped her become a better writer for her work. It even expanded to her helping her daughter with her homework. "I've become real good at doing outlines. I teach my daughter that, too." She also got better at doing presentations for work because of doing presentations for her classes. She also felt she was getting pretty good at presentation software such as PowerPoint.

While class projects are generally "simulations," there were occasions when the participants were actually able to use some of the projects in their work or personal life. Susan designed a workshop in one of her classes and presented it to her manager. Peggy's organization went through a major software system upgrade and she was able to use the tools she developed in her classes when she had to train her staff on the new system.

For Karen, it changed how she pursued her tasks. She went on to say the following:

> It makes much more sense and some of those tasks that I didn't understand or know how to do I would procrastinate or do later and now I'm not so afraid to tackle them and go, 'okay now I know what I'm doing; now I can take this on.'

Due to the assignments and activities in class, Abby's eyes were opened and she was able to view the world as a manager even though she held a technical staff position at a hospital. She felt that most of the techniques used by her supervisors at work actually had a purpose to which she was oblivious before she started the program.

Joan found that studying strategic management in her program helped her in her personal finances and investing. She felt she had a better understanding of how the strategic planning process could apply to other areas of life outside of the classroom.

Amy, whose husband runs his own business, was also able to take information from the same class and relate it to how her husband runs his business.

Charlene felt that her communication skills improved. She is now more to the point and uses more "intellectual" words than she did in the past. She felt that was a result of her educational skill that she attained. Debra also felt that her communication, management, and team building skills improved. She did not have as much group interaction prior to coming to the program, but, as a result of the program, she felt it taught her to communicate with other people and helped her to get others to do the things she needed them to do and to work together.

The Wish for More Time

There were some participants who felt "cheated" by the accelerated pace of the courses, especially when it came to courses they really enjoyed. However, it sparked the interest for some to deepen their learning on their own. They took responsibility for their learning. According to Amy, she enjoyed the one course at a time, one night a week format and felt she learned more that way. But there was one particular subject that she would have liked to have delved deeper, but there was just not the time to do that. Rather, the basics of the subject were covered. "I still learned a lot from it. Because I enjoyed it so much I really wanted to go further into it. So maybe eventually someday I can take more."

Carla had a similar experience. "My only frustration was that sometimes I really wanted to dive a little deeper into some of those topics and you can't because your next week's coming up and you're starting into a new thing."

Karen wondered if she was "cheated" in her learning because she did it so quickly. "Would I have learned more because it was so short?"

Self Concept

A fourth theme that emerged was that the participants experienced a shift in how they viewed themselves and their world. For some, it was subtle, and for others it was more obvious. The following subthemes emerged related to self concept: self development, view of self as learner, and self confidence.

Self Development

For Diana, it was being able to overcome her fear of speaking in front of groups of people. She felt comfortable talking one-on-one. "But get me in front of a group and I almost pass out in fear. That fear factor of giving a presentation is absolutely overwhelming to say the least." She went on to say, "Speaking of learning, that's my learning. It was being able to be in front of a crowd and be able to relay information and be able to deliver information in some kind of meaningful and effective manner."

Carla found that she was asking *"why"* a lot more and took a look at the bigger picture more than in the past. She realized that she was dissatisfied with her position at work. She said, "I'm thinking very seriously now of what's next and I know that this program had a lot to do with that." She went on to say that the program opened up her eyes to a bigger world and made a big difference in the way she thinks. While she generally looked at problems on a smaller scale, she found herself giving advice to a director at her organization about structural changes in her organization.

Joan felt that she was a better person because of the program. She felt she was different and that she changed as a result of the program, but was not sure how. The one

thing she did realize is that she is more understanding and tolerant of people than in the past, and not so judgmental or narrow minded. She came to the realization that people are who they are and she was not going to change them. She attributed that partly to "maturity" but also admitted that while she was not sure if she could attribute that to being in the program and learning, she did not know how it *couldn't* play into it.

Sometimes the revelations were not always pleasant. For Debra, one of the biggest discoveries in her self-concept was learning her weaknesses in her leadership style. She never had a manager in the past that made her aware of those weaknesses. As she noted,

> Learning my weaknesses in my leadership style was a significant change for me because until I sat down and learned what my leadership style is and where my weaknesses lie I had no idea really…because as far as I was concerned, I never had any weaknesses. Pretty shallow to say, but I wasn't aware of them.

While it was not easy to learn about her weaknesses, this realization gave her the insight to move forward and improve on the areas she felt she was lacking.

View of Self as Learner

For David, there was a big transformation in how he viewed himself as a learner. In grade school, he did not do well as a student. He passed to high school with low grades. In high school, he found he was good working with his hands so he entered a worker's program. After that, he went on to an associate's program and he recalled that, while he did well overall, he never took a book home to study, "I never took a book— they sat in the back seat of my car. I think I sold the car and the books were still in the back seat of the car." While he had the ability to retain information well, he was still

nervous about coming back to school years later. He was not concerned about the time that it would take. He was more concerned about the work. He thought it was going to be a struggle for him. Although he was initially nervous about entering the program, he found he exceeded his expectations. He started taking more pride in his work. He gave the example of an e-mail he sent years earlier where all the words were capitalized. He recalled, "I tend to take my time with them…I'm not capitalizing everything like I'm angry. It's not that I wasn't knowledgeable. It was just that I didn't take the pride in it. Now after [attending the university] I'm taking pride…" He went on to say,

> After the first month or two after I got over the initial shock—Wow! Look at all this work! I mean there was a lot of homework and trying to squeeze that in time. I stopped doing some things to just compensate for that and I started enjoying it then. I say, oh, 10 pages [to write], why do I have to stop at 10 pages now, and that carried on after the first two months. I could type away. I got a laptop just so I could carry it with me everywhere I went…I don't remember exactly but I became a lot more concerned about the quality of work. I thought it out a lot more. Where any time before that, I would just print it out.

Self Confidence

For many, their self confidence increased as a result of their experience in the program. In the past, Karen always felt intimidated by some coworkers and higher ups in her organization. After being in the program, she felt that she was a slightly different person from when she started. She stated, "And now I feel I have come up a level. Maybe it's just the initials after the name but I feel like I can converse with them better. I feel like more of an equal than I was before. Definitely."

Charlene noted that, in the past, as a student, she was known as "funny," the "class-clown," and "spacey." But when she went through her accelerated program and got good grades, that told her that she was a lot smarter than people gave her credit. That was an important revelation to her.

Kayla's experience in her program also increased her self confidence. As she recounted,

It is hard to believe a year ago I was sitting nervously in my seat pondering the decisions I had made to put myself in that very chair. Even though I had a history of being a good student with a strong work ethic, I was lacking the confidence to believe I could truly finish my bachelor's. Things were different when I was a student in the past. I wasn't a wife, a mother, or an employee as I was now. All of those things took more of my time and I struggled with the idea that I might not succeed. Today, as I sit to reflect on the program, I realize I learned the curriculum but also more. I learned about gaining knowledge from others experiences, communicating effectively, time management, and believing in my own ability to overcome barriers to succeed.

Her shift in her self-confidence was palpable as she related the following:

In the end, I feel confident that what path I go next, I will be successful. I know I have the ability to draw on my own conclusions and ideas, gather information from many sources, and apply concepts and ideas with confidence. I know I will be successful because I have practiced all of these many times and have not only my trail of hard work stashed on disk drives and graded folders, but a degree with my name on it to prove it.

Chapter Summary

The insights gained from the participants were powerful and represent the importance of their educational experience. It was holistic in the sense that it went beyond the obvious—the attainment of a degree—but how they viewed themselves and their life-world. The theme of *motivation* addressed the difference in the drive of going to school as an adult versus when they were younger. Along with *motivation*, participants, for the most part, valued the cohort model, or the *collaborative process* and felt it was central to their successful completion of the program. The *pedagogy* of the program emphasized the difference in how these programs are designed compared to the traditional, non-accelerated models and how it impacted how they learned. And, the participants experienced a change in *self-concept,* which indicated how participants viewed themselves differently during and after their completion of the program. The next chapter discusses the conclusions, implications for the field, and recommendations for further research.

Bringing It Full Circle

Discussion of Findings, Implications to the Field, Recommendations for Further Research

and Final Thoughts

Discussion of Findings

This chapter contains the discussion of findings, implications to the field, and recommendations for further research. As noted in the introduction, the questions that guided the study included the following:

1. *How do students make meaning of learning beyond the curriculum?* and

2. *To what extent has involvement in the program changed how the students conduct themselves personally and/or professionally?*

There are some similarities in these two questions so I chose to address them together. Many of the participants in the study indicated ways in which they were able to actually use what they learned in "real life" outside of the classroom. This made the learning more valuable to them. Some participants even used projects they designed in class in their workplace. For others, it may have been being able to relate better to their managers and see the "big picture."

3. *To what extent do students view themselves differently as a result of the program?*

For many, it was a change in self concept resulting in increased self-confidence. For one participant, it was even learning about her weaknesses in addition to her strengths. Another participant felt that she was more of an equal to the higher ups in her organization. Still another came to the realization that she was not the "spacey class-clown" that she was labeled as in the past, but rather she was a lot smarter than others gave her credit.

4. *How do the students describe their learning that was incidental to the expressed*

   curriculum?

Some participants related how they learned and/or enhanced important skills like how
to work well with others, general communication, research skills, time management,
better writing skills, management skills, and increased comfort with computers and
software programs such as PowerPoint. There were instances when participants indicated
ways in which they learned important skills and behaviors that were not part of the
expressed curriculum. Some examples would be taking more pride in work, better time
management skills and prioritization, and believing in self and in one's own ability to
overcome barriers to succeed. The design of the program had a lot to do with those skill
enhancements. The collaborative nature of the cohort model, the group projects,
classroom activities, class discussions, writing assignments, and presentations seem to
directly impact those skills that the students can carry into the workplace. Those are
important to note and should continue as part of the curriculum.

5. *To what extent do students experience transformative learning in an accelerated*

   program in higher education?

Many of the participants indicated ways they were changed or *transformed* as a result of
the program. This transformation often came in the form of "ah-ha" moments. It may
have been in the way they viewed school, or realizing that not everyone thinks like him
or her (also realizing that is not a bad thing), or becoming aware of one's weaknesses to
be able to move forward and overcome those weaknesses. Over all, many participants
indicated—both directly and indirectly—how they became more confident as a result of
their experiences. This new-found confidence can positively affect how they conduct

themselves in their work and personal life and how they view their life-world. These examples show that students can achieve transformative learning as a result of their experiences in the accelerated programs. This study indicated that transformative learning can occur in an accelerated class. However, instructors also need to be familiar with transformative learning to promote it in the classroom. While it may not be ethical to *expect* our students to experience transformation, instructors should provide the means for students to be transformed and encourage students as they move forward with their educational pursuits.

The three assumptions related to accelerated, cohort-based learning in higher education rang true. Assumption one, students *do* bring a plethora of real-world experiences to the learning environment. This was evident in the collaborative nature of the program along with the pedagogy and program design. The instructor, as a "knowledgeable facilitator," encourages the students to share their personal and professional experiences related to the course topics with the members of the class.

The second assumption that accelerated programs have the potential for transformative learning is also correct. As noted above, many of the participants indicated ways they were changed or *transformed* as a result of the program. For many, it was an increase in self confidence as a result of their experiences.

The third assumption, that students in an accelerated program are more motivated than those enrolled in traditional programs was also confirmed. Motivation was identified as a theme in the findings. Many of the participants talked about how much more important going to school was as an "adult" learner versus when they were the

"traditional" college-age student. It was more important for them to do well and succeed in their studies and they realized the value of an education.

Implications to the Field

In all probability, accelerated programs are not going away in the near future. While there may be different delivery modes gaining popularity, such as online programs, the fact remains that people are looking for alternative ways to further their education. It is important to higher education institutions to value such programs and the students who attend these programs. While non-traditional programs should not be "dumbed down," instructors and administrators need to be aware of the needs of the non-traditional student that may also be feeling pressures that traditional students do not. Many non-traditional adult students have full-time jobs, family commitments, and financial obligations which might affect their ability to focus or fully be present. We cannot always assume that their jobs or families are supportive of their educational aspirations. We need to be understanding of their individual issues to help them achieve.

On the negative side, there were some participants who felt frustrated with the reduced class time, especially if they were in a course they really enjoyed. However, it also enticed them to take some responsibility of their learning and seek out information on their own. Based on that, I think that there could be some happy medium. This particular accelerated program was four weeks per class. Maybe a not-so-accelerated schedule, such as five weeks for courses would give some more class time but also accomplish the speed-to-degree need that many students desire. In addition, some students felt frustrated with other students in class for various reasons; however, they still gained an overall appreciation of the cohort model.

In addition, I believe, in the future, that the programs will not only appeal to the "older" student (i.e., over 35), but also younger students in their early to mid twenties as well. Years ago, many professions did not require a bachelor's degree. As the research indicated, the bar continues to be raised to require at least a bachelor's degree for one to be marketable in the work force. Instructors of such programs need to be aware of issues such as generational diversity in the classroom. There may be a class of Generation Xers,Ys, or Millenials along with Baby Boomers. The younger students may not have the real-life experience that older students have. However, that does not make their contributions or perspectives on issues any less important or less relevant than the older students. Instructors, then, will need to be adept at bridging those gaps. According to Diana Oblinger (2003), the life experiences of students of previous eras are different than today's students. Baby Boomers grew up with the space race, civil rights movement, Watergate and Vietnam. The Generation Xers saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of the Web and AIDS. Oblinger further states that Millennials, who were born after 1982, are different than their siblings a few years older. They exhibit the following characteristics:

> Millennials gravitate toward group activity, identify with their parents' values and feel closer to their parents, spend more time doing housework and less time watching TV, believe it's 'cool to be smart; are fascinated by new technologies' are racially and ethnically diverse; and often (one in five) have at least one immigrant parent (p. 38).

While I do not believe there is one formula to address all learners, the first step is to understand the learners, along with their needs and expectation, and be able to adapt program design and teaching techniques.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research only touches the surface of the relationship of transformative learning and accelerated programs. For a future research study, I would be interested in addressing a wider range of students in different professions other than health care. In addition, I would like to include a more diverse group of participants, for instance, African American and/or Latino male or female participants.

With the proliferation of online education programs as an option for students to complete their bachelor's degree, I would like to conduct a similar research study addressing transformative learning in that type of setting. In addition, accelerated degree programs are not merely confined to undergraduate education. I would be interested in conducting a study addressing graduates of master's degree accelerated programs, either in face-to-face or online formats.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, I felt that this research study was successful by providing insight into the lived experiences of graduates of an undergraduate degree-completion program. It illuminated the transformative potential for adults in accelerated programs. Many of the participants indicated that they did experience change and growth as a result of their involvement in such a program. There were those who indicated that they did not look at education in the same way as they did before. From my perspective, it was rewarding to be able to give the participants in the study a chance to tell their unique stories and to be

able to finally tell my own.

Epilogue – Allegory

My Journey

I started my journey along a labyrinth. As labyrinths go, this journey had many twists and turns, but no dead ends. Along the way, I had some interesting experiences and met some interesting people. The first person I met was a child who was skipping along. She was skipping relatively fast for such a young person. I greeted her with a nod and she stopped and smiled. "Hello," I said.

She giggled and said, "Hi. My name is Alena."

I told her my name, and said, "Alena is a very pretty name, and unusual."

She said "It means 'rock.' In fact, that reminds me. I have something for you." She reached into her bag and handed me a rock. It was purple and glistened in the sun.

"Wow." I said. "Thanks. What's this for?"

"It's an amethyst." She said. "It will remind you of your inner strength. Keep this for as long as you need it." She smiled and said, "Well, I have to go. It was nice meeting you. Enjoy your journey."

"Good to meet you, too, Alena. I hope to meet you again." I answered.

"You never know. You just might. Bye." And off she skipped away.

I watched her leave and started thinking about the present I received. It was heavy, but not too heavy. It was beautiful but could probably inflict some damage if I threw it. I decided to hang on to it and put it in my pocket. I started thinking about how rocks and stones must have been around since the earth was first formed. There are even references to rocks and stones in the Bible—David and Goliath, for instance. Talk about strength! David was able to slay a giant with a rock in a sling shot.

I must have been so deep in thought that I lost track of time. I started to feel thirsty. I did not pack any food or water (which wasn't too smart of me). I decided to take a break from my walk and assess my situation. I sat down on a bench under a tree. I noticed a water fountain next to the tree. Oh, wow. This is my lucky day, I thought. As I bent down to drink the water from the fountain, I noticed a sign that said, "Fountain of Wisdom. Whoever drinks from this fountain will be wise beyond her years." I chuckled to myself and mumbled, "Yeah, right." But, as someone who likes to hedge her bets, I filled a small bottle I had in my pocket. If nothing else, at least I'd have some water for later.

Refreshed from my drink, I kept walking. The path was winding and twisting and sometimes the path would get so narrow I would have to put one foot in front of the other and hope that no one else would want to pass me. As the path narrowed, along came a large group of people behind me. They were talking and laughing and seemed to be having a good time. They greeted me warmly. "Oh, another traveler," one of them said. "Why don't you join us?"

"Well, um, I don't know. Where are you going?" I asked.

They laughed and said, "We're going to the same place you are." So, I shrugged my shoulders and agreed to join them. The group proved to be an interesting lot. They told stories. Some stories were happy and some were not. But they each had an adventure to tell. One person was named *Sadness*, another *Joy*, still another was *Frustration*. I really seemed to enjoy *Humor*, because he kept me laughing. My favorite, though, was *Love* because her smile was so radiant and her aura so calming.

Before I knew it, it started getting dark. I was nervous because I did not know where I was going to eat supper or stay that evening. *Practical* said that there was a place we could stay up the road which would have food and plenty of rooms. But *Impetuous* said that she didn't want to stay there because it was boring and that she heard of another inn that was off the beaten path. I immediately felt a little scared. Off the beaten path?! *Impetuous* said, "You know, it's okay to veer off the path once in awhile. In fact, it can be good for you. You may find something you weren't looking for." *Practical* didn't look too happy but I shrugged my shoulders and followed *Impetuous* off the beaten path along with everyone else.

We were walking and walking and there was no inn in sight. I started cursing to myself for not listening to *Practical* when, all of a sudden, the inn appeared. We went inside and there were food, music, dancing and plenty of rooms with comfortable beds. I was feeling pretty good when *Worried* nervously whispered, "This place must be expensive." I started fearing that he might be right when *Impetuous* rolled her eyes and said, "We'll deal with that tomorrow. I'm sure it'll be fine."

Over dinner, the innkeeper told us about a wonderful man named Al. I asked if "Al" had a last name. The innkeeper laughed and said, "No, silly. "Al" is short for Alchemist." He went on to say that Al had all the answers in the world. In fact, he could turn base metal into gold. And he's happy to share it with whomever he meets along the way.

Wow. I thought. I've got to meet this guy. That sounds better than winning the lottery. "Where can I meet this 'Al'?" I asked.

The innkeeper just shrugged his shoulders and said, "If it's meant to be, I'm sure you'll meet him when the time is right."

The next morning we had a hearty breakfast and were on our way back to the path, when the innkeeper gave us the bill. It was much more than we anticipated (and *Worried* was quick to say "I told you so.") Even *Impetuous* looked a bit panicked. I reached into my pocket to see if I had extra money and instead I pulled out the amethyst that Alena gave me the day before. I showed it to the innkeeper and, although he looked rather skeptical, took the amethyst as payment for the food and rooms.

I felt relieved but mad at the same time. Now how am I going to have *strength* when I need it?

We got back on the path and the rest of the group decided to go another way. I was kind of glad because I needed to be alone with my thoughts for a while. The path, the labyrinth, started to twist and turn. The sun started beating down. It was hot. Along the way I saw a man lying on a bench, moaning and breathing heavily. At first I was scared but realized that he looked like he was sick. I stopped to ask him if I could help. He said he was thirsty and that the heat was getting to him. I remembered that I had the small bottle of water and offered it to him. He drank some of the water and splashed the rest on his face. He seemed to be feeling better, so I bid him farewell and wished him luck. He thanked me and I went on my way.

While I was glad I helped that man, I was again berating myself for having gotten rid of the amethyst (my *strength*) and the water (*wisdom*) and promised that if I got any more gifts along the way that I would never give them away. I would be more prudent with my gifts.

I kept walking and started to tire. Up ahead I saw a beautiful gazebo. It had places to sit inside and was surrounded by the most beautiful garden of wildflowers and a pond with small fish. It looked so peaceful that I decided to stop there and rest for a spell. I picked a nice spot to sit and just started getting lost in my reverie when someone sat next to me. I was startled and when I turned around I realized it was the man that I met earlier. This time, though, he was alive and vibrant, and not sickly looking. He started to talk to me and asked me what I was doing there and where I was going. I told him that I was on a path and I wanted to meet "Al" the Alchemist. He started laughing and said, "I'm Al and I'm pleased to meet you, water lady."

I was nonplussed. I thought if he were the smartest person in the world, why was he lying on a bench all thirsty and sickly looking earlier? He must have read my thoughts because he said, "That was a nice thing you did back there for me. I think people overestimate me. Even smart people get thirsty. We can get sick, too." He smiled a warm and loving smile.

Although I felt comforted by his presence, I told him that I was sad because I gave up two gifts that were important to me. I gave up *strength* and *wisdom*, all within one day of receiving them!

"My dear child," he answered. "Don't you know that *strength* and *wisdom* are within? Just because you used them to sustain and nourish yourself, or help a fellow traveler in need, doesn't mean you've given them up. You have more inside."

"Okay," I said. "That's cool. Thanks. But I do have one question. You're Al, the Alchemist. Can you help me to be smart like you? Can you teach me how to turn base metal into gold?"

He smiled and shook his head. "No."

I suddenly felt sad and a little mad. "What do you mean?"

"My child," he answered gently. "You're an alchemist, too. You have all the potential in the world to turn base metal into gold. But, it's not an external gold. The "gold" is internal. It's your own potential to be transformed into anything, or anyone, you want to be. And, you have the power to help others experience transformation, if they allow you in. I do have a present for you, though. It's something to remind you of your power." He handed me a kaleidoscope. He told me to look inside. "The crystals inside are just random light catchers, but when you shake the kaleidoscope, it turns those crystals into beautiful images. And those images change every time you shake them up. I want you to remember that you have the power to "shake things up," both for yourself and for others you meet along your journey and transform them—and yourself—into something beautiful."

I thought about what he said and realized he was right. The people I have met along my journey have helped me to transform into something more precious than gold. I also have dedicated my life to helping others transform, if that's what they want—and need. Human beings have the potential for greatness. I will keep that kaleidoscope as a symbol to remember my mission in life. I will keep it, at least, until I need to share it with someone else along my path.

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