Exploring the Learning Experiences and Sense of Readiness of Adult Students Who Participate in a Prior Learning Assessment Portfolio Program

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to someone whose unconditional love, encouragement, and commitment to me and my success continue to be unwavering throughout my life. You always believed in my ability to achieve great things and never let me live in the past. You give me someone to look up to because of your wealth of knowledge, patience, and lovingness toward others. You have a big heart and are my rock. Thank you for being in my life, Sue Fay.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS........................................................................................................iv

ABSTRACT..........................................................................................................................xiii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.......................................................................................1
  What is Prior Learning Assessment?.................................................................................2
  Background of the Study.................................................................................................4
  Statement of the Problem...............................................................................................6
  Rationale for the Study...................................................................................................7
  Purpose of the Study.......................................................................................................8
  Research Questions.......................................................................................................8
  Theoretical Framework..................................................................................................9
  Definition of Terms.......................................................................................................10
  Scope and Delimitations..............................................................................................11
  Limitations...................................................................................................................12
  Significance of the Study.............................................................................................12

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.................................................................14
  Prior Learning Assessment..........................................................................................15
    Historical Background...............................................................................................15
    Portfolios..................................................................................................................16
    Benefits.....................................................................................................................18
    Opposition to Portfolios..........................................................................................20
    Assessment of Rules and Methods/Outcomes of Method........................................23
  Transformative Learning Theory..................................................................................27
  Adult Learning.............................................................................................................36
Theories and Models

Knowles – Andragogy...37
Concept of the Learner...40
Role of Experience...41
Readiness to Learn...43
Orientation to Learning...44
Motivation to Learn...46
Implication for Practice...47
Jarvis...48

Types of Learning...51
Self-Directed Learning...51
Brockett & Hiemstra’s Model...53
Transformational Learning...57
Life Experience...58
Critical Reflection...59
Development...60

Experience and Learning...61
Models of Experiential Learning...61
Kolb...61
Dewey...63

Motivation...63
Concluding Remarks...67

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Design...70
Social Constructivist Perspective...71
Phenomenological Qualitative Research Approach...74
Assumptions...76
**Confidence** .................................................................119

Theme Four: Writing Critically .......................................121

Theme Five: New Perspective ........................................125

Concluding Remarks ...................................................133

**CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS** ........134

Summary of the Study ..................................................134

Discussion of the Findings ............................................136

Implications and Recommendations for Educators .............141

Recommendations for Future Study ................................143

Concluding Remarks ...................................................145

REFERENCES ...............................................................147

APPENDIX A: Introductory Letter ..................................160

APPENDIX B: Confirmation Email .................................161

APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Form ..............................162

APPENDIX D: Participant Interview Questions ..................164
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Tinto’s 1975 Model of Student Retention……………………………………..5
Figure 2. Spanard’s Model of Adult Problem Solving in Higher Education……………..6
Figure 3. Mezirow’s Critical Reflection……………………………………………………33
Figure 4. Transformation Of The Person Through Experience…………………………51
Figure 5. The Personal Responsibility Orientation Model………………………………54
Figure 6. Garrison’s Model of Self-Directed Learning………………………………….57
Figure 7. Kolb’s Model of Experiential Learning………………………………………62
Figure 8. Dewey’s Model of Experiential Learning…………………………………..63
Figure 9. Ambrose’s Expectancy and Value Model……………………………………66
Figure 10. Brehm’s Theory………………………………………………………………67
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Six Steps for Assessing Prior Experiential Learning…………………………..27
Table 2. Participant Demographic Information…………………………………………92
Table 3. Findings by Theme…………………………………………………………..105
Table 4. Comparison of University’s Essay Rubric……………………………………112
Table 5. Participant Transformational Learning Phase………………………………127
ABSTRACT

Prior learning assessment (PLA) portfolio programs have been around for over 30 years; however, they continue to be underutilized in spite of a known success rate. Such programs can be the answer for adult students who want to earn a degree at a savings of time and money. By 2020, more than 65% of jobs will require some type of education; and finding ways for adult students to complete their degrees will be critical. The PLA portfolio option has the potential for increasing the number of adult students returning to school. Research regarding PLA has demonstrated numerous benefits but, heretofore, has lacked the students’ own voices. The primary goal of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the learning experiences and sense of readiness of adult students who completed a minimum of three essays as part of their portfolios at a Midwestern university. Findings from this study suggested the following: (a) students are more apt to choose a school that has a PLA portfolio option once they become aware of this program, (b) students should have a choice about when they will participate in PLA, (c) transformative learning will occur regardless of the timing, (d) a student’s confidence to take on challenging collegial and non-collegial tasks increases as a result of writing, and (e) a forum to help students connect their learning outcomes to program objectives should be in place. The study concludes with theoretical and practical implications along with recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Deciding to return to school after a 12-year hiatus was mixed with many emotions, specifically feeling terrified and lacking confidence. I could not possibly imagine entering into a program, particularly a doctoral program, and embarking down the path of intensive reading, writing, and research. My bachelor’s program was fairly typical, although I was a couple of years older than my classmates. I then moved right on into a master’s degree without pause. I had the time, motivation, and lifestyle that supported me in my persistence to complete the programs and obtain degrees. Even 12 years later, the barriers I encountered were less around my lifestyle and more having to do with internal confidence. The inspiration for studying adult learners came from the opportunity to work with them at a private, urban, Midwestern university during an internship in which I helped to create an online adult orientation program. It was in this internship that I was connected to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and became better acquainted with the issues adult students face in returning to school and the role that prior learning assessment (PLA) plays in assisting with their persistence. The Midwestern university had recently begun to implement a PLA portfolio process, conducted in part by CAEL, but was having difficulties in student participation and faculty accepting learning outside the classroom. These difficulties raised questions
regarding the use of PLA portfolios. If PLAs were known to be successful and the university had made a commitment to implement them, why was there resistance among faculty but, more importantly, lack of participation among students? Was it plausible to assume that students were deciding whether or not to participate in the PLA process based on their own fears of what it might encompass, or did they not understand the advantages of participating in PLAs? If they recognized that they would receive more than credit earned, including strengthening their critical reflection skills and ability to be more self-directed in their learning, would they choose to partake in a PLA program, especially those incorporating a portfolio?

**What is Prior Learning Assessment?**

According to CAEL (2015), Prior Learning Assessment is, “the process of earning college credit for college-level learning acquired from other sources, such as work experience, professional training, military training, or open source learning from the web.” To earn college credit for PLA, students can complete and submit portfolios to be assessed or choose to take certain exams, such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) or DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST) Credit by Exam Program.

Secondary institutions may not offer PLA as an option for students; or, if they do, they may not have all types available. For the purpose of this study, the researcher chose an institution that provided the portfolio option within the PLA program. Students in this study were required to participate in a PLA portfolio course where they completed an analytical resume, autobiography, and two essays on topics chosen from an essay topic list. These three elements made up a student’s portfolio and additional essays that
students chose to complete following the course were added to the portfolio. Students submitted their essays to their instructor who sent them on to faculty to be evaluated for credit. Students were not required to submit their entire portfolio including their resume and autobiography. Each essay topic came with its own set of instructions on what needed to be included. A typical length for an essay was around 10 pages.

The essays used in this study required that students demonstrate prior college learning outside the traditional classroom. According to the Midwestern university, prior knowledge stemming from any of the following can be assessed:

- Professional development
- Community work
- Family life
- Military Service
- Personal growth

Students had the option of completing the course either online or in a traditional classroom setting. Students also had peer and instructor assistance in completing their portfolio during the course. Following the course, they were expected to work on their own with regard to any additional essays. These essays were submitted to the instructor who reviewed them to make sure they had all the components necessary for the evaluator before that person sends it on to the faculty member. The students received a PLA Handbook, syllabus, essay topic list, information on how to choose an essay topic, essay writing guide, and an essay rubric as part of their materials for the class. A maximum of 60 quarter hours could be evaluated; and assessment fees ranged between $140 and
$2,080, depending on the number of essays assessed. Students could submit their essays and revise up to two times if the essays were sent back without a pass. CAEL and American Council on Education (ACE) guidelines were used by faculty to assess completed essays.

**Background of the Study**

Adult students are less likely to earn a degree within five years and more likely to drop out of school within their first year than traditional students (Horn & Carroll, 1997, p. ii). Barriers tend to get in the way and impede them from pursuing their goal. These barriers can include financial constraints, family responsibilities, working full time, and supporting dependents (p. 1). Research has shown that adults learn differently from traditional age students and that they require academic and student affairs resources that vary from those offered to students in general. Educators need to understand some of the barriers that these students encounter. Woodley (1987) summarizes reasons for withdrawing in the following categories (pp. 159-160):

1. **Course factors:** e.g. course found to be too difficult, insufficiently rigorous, too demanding, different from expected, uninteresting, badly designed and/or taught.
2. **Institutional factors:** e.g. inadequate facilities, equipment, accommodation, etc.; administrative inadequacies; student required to leave by the institution.
3. **Study environment factors:** e.g. unforeseen changes in personal, domestic, or working life; “chronic factors” such as lack of time, energy, money, or support (from family, employer); or transport problems.
4. Personal blame: e.g. self-perception of being disorganized, not clever enough, lacking in study skills, lacking self-confidence, etc.

5. Motivational factors: e.g. original goal achieved or changed; realization that goal will not be achieved or could be achieved better elsewhere; other goals given priority.

In Tinto’s 1975 theory, decisions to “drop out” arise from a combination of student characteristics and the extent of their academic, environmental, and social integration in an institution. Figure 1 illustrates this interactive process: Students' entry characteristics influence their goals and institutional commitment; the latter affect the extent of their social and academic integration within a learning institution; and the extent of their integration, in turn, has an impact on their goals and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1975, p. 95; McGivney, 1996, p. 86).

Figure 1. Tinto’s Model of Student Retention

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Figure 1. Tinto’s Model of Student Retention. Adapted from “Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research,” by V. Tinto, 1975, Review of Educational Research, 45(1), p.95. Reprinted by permission from the Copyright Clearance Center, Danvers, MA.
When deciding to return to school, adults have full intentions of completing their programs. In Figure 2, Spanard (1990) identifies the “path of adult problem solving that leads to reentry, retention, and degree completion” (p. 337). What we see is that educators need to find ways in which to assist students in overcoming obstacles and life changes that may get in the way of completing their programs.

*Figure 2.* Spanard’s model of adult problem solving in higher education

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**Statement of the Problem**

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) programs in some ways can be the answer for adult students by providing them a path through which to enter (or reenter) a program and persist through graduation. They have been around since the 1930’s, although according to Travers, PLAs are not extensively utilized even with a known success rate. Program time decreases when students avail themselves of PLAs; thus financial savings are
attained. Institutions benefit from an increase in retention and graduation rates. Students who participate are more self-aware and self-regulatory; they tend to problem-solve, study, and use reflection skills better than those who did not partake. Although there are benefits to PLA programs, these programs are not often seen by faculty to have academic substance; and faculty raise questions regarding how to assess the work, especially with portfolios (Travers, 2012a).

There is an abundant amount of research conducted on persistence; however, there remains ambiguity around why some students are able to persist while others stop out. PLAs are known to provide the confidence and motivation needed for students to persevere as seen in part by a CAEL study, conducted in 2010 and described by Nan Travers. The study reported that adult students who participated in PLA programs graduated at higher rates than those who did not. They had higher grade point averages and earned more credits even if they did not complete their degrees (Harris, Breir, & Wihak, 2011, p. 266); however, there needs to be more participation among students and acceptance among institutions for its use.

**Rationale for the Study**

The primary research that exists on PLA speaks to student persistence, motivation, and program assessment. According to Tinto (1975) persistence is institution-specific related to environmental factors within that institution. This is not to say that, simply because a college has a PLA program and a student participates in it, he/she will automatically continue. There is more to a student’s ability to persevere than participating in PLA; however, PLA has been shown to play a part in this area and in providing students additional benefits beyond classroom credit. What the research has
missed is an understanding of the student’s experience in participating in the PLA portfolio process. There needs to be greater clarity in the assessment of what students learn, their preparedness to take future courses, and their ability to think and reflect critically, which factors into transformational learning (Lamoreaux, 2005; Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010). Although Houston, Hoover, and Beer (1997) recognize that thinking critically is part of the portfolio process, they also acknowledge that students do not tend to have this skill initially. Even if students are able to develop this ability, is it something that they will be able to recognize within themselves or is it simply recognized by their faculty?

By reflecting on the impact, learning experiences, and sense of readiness that PLAs have on adult students and how they affect students’ progress and success, a research study could generate issues surrounding the implementation of PLAs and serve as the basis for future research in this area. The primary research conducted on the impact of PLA and the learner thus far has been anecdotal (Thomas, 1995), and there is a lack of evidence in what adults find meaningful from their experiences with PLA.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the learning experiences and sense of readiness of adult students who participated in a prior learning assessment portfolio program that supported persistence and academic success in a private, non-denominational university in the Midwest.

**Research Questions**

QUESTION 1: How is a student’s sense of readiness to participate in college classes affected by completing a portfolio for earned credit?
QUESTION 2: What do students experience as barriers and accomplishments in completing a portfolio?

QUESTION 3: How does completing a portfolio affect a student’s perception of his/her ability to think and reflect critically?

QUESTION 4: How does the student perceive his/her success in the portfolio process?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that grounded this study was transformational theory as defined by Jack Mezirow. Transformation Theory’s focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). The theory involves transferring authority from educator to learner so that adults become self-directed or self-authoring (p. 66). Students control this shift and the time it takes for it to happen; and, in doing so, they engage in critical thinking to examine the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way in which they see themselves and their relationships. Transformation is not merely the accumulation of new knowledge but rather a change, through the process of learning, in the basic values and assumptions under which a person operates (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 129). In a mindful transformative learning experience, a learner makes an informed decision to act (immediately, delayed, or reaffirmation of existing action) on his/her reflective insight (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 23-24). As Mezirow (2000) states, critical reflection is not
something that simply takes place in the classroom; rather it exists in the real world. Adults need constantly to bring to the forefront and reflect on what they know to be true and any new discourse to determine if any new knowledge will shape their current beliefs and assumptions.

**Definition of Terms**

1. Adult learner: The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines a nontraditional student as meeting one of seven characteristics. He/she has delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full-time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

2. Critical reflection: A deeper, more probing form of reflection on the assumptions (epistemic, systemic, individual) that are foundational to one’s being (Brookfield & Holst, 2011, p. 35).

3. Prior learning: Learning that a person acquires outside of a traditional academic environment and before college enrollment. This learning may have been acquired through work experience, employer training programs, independent study, noncredit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, or non-college courses or seminars (Hart & Hickerson, 2009, p. 2).

4. Prior learning assessment (PLA): The process by which an individual’s experiential learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting credit,
certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training (Hart & Hickerson, 2009, pp. 2-3).

5. Portfolio/Essay: Formal communication presented by the student to the college as part of a petition requesting credit or recognition for learning outside the college classroom. The portfolio must make its case by identifying learning clearly and succinctly, and it must provide sufficient supporting information and documentation so that faculty can use it, alone or in combination with other evidence, as the basis for their evaluation (Lamdin, 1992, p. 84).

6. Self-directed learning: Activities where primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating a learning endeavor is assumed by the individual learner (Brockett, 1983, p. 16).

7. Transformational learning: The process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (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 (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).

Scope and Delimitations

The study took place in fall of 2015. The location was at a private, non-denominational university in the Midwest. Students in the study ranged in age from 25 to 65 and were both male and female. The form of PLA that was used for this study was the portfolio format. Students in the study had participated in an actual course and completed, at a minimum, two essays and received college credit for their submissions.
Limitations

The limitations in this study included the time frame in which it was conducted and the responses of participants reflective of their opinion at the time of the interview. Only six students were interviewed, which did not present an opportunity to generalize the results. In addition, students interviewed had received college credit from submitting essays, and those who submitted essays but did not receive credit were not in the study. The timing of when students participated in the PLA course varied. Two students took it prior to the beginning of their program; two students took it in the middle of their program; and two students took it at the end of their program. Finally, not all students have the ability to be self-directed in their learning (Mezirow, 2000); or their own assessment of their ability may in part be based on their time management. In other words, the amount of time they were able to invest in their educational studies and their ability to ascertain what it means to be self-directed in their learning may have factored into their responses in their interviews.

Significance of the Study

Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl (2013) note that by 2020, 65% of jobs will require some type of postsecondary education. Although more than 46% of Americans ages 25 and older are taking classes, they are not part of conversations pertaining to the purpose and mission of higher education (Stokes, 2006). This is critical as adults tend to “stop out” within the first semester (Horn & Carroll, 1997) and often do not return. Yet, graduation brings about many benefits, including financial savings to the student and the institution, along with an increase in tax-payer revenue (Schneider & Yin, 2012). It also contributes to President Obama’s Goal 2020, which aims to increase the proportion of
Americans with high quality degrees and credentials to 65%. PLA programs assist adults in returning to academia by using their experiences to obtain credit, thus providing financial savings to them and enabling program completion in a shorter period of time. CAEL has done a number of studies on the benefits of PLA to students and institutions, but what the research does not reveal are experiences students have in participating in these programs. If we can understand from the student perspective what they encounter, from the application phase through any occurrence of transformational learning, then educators may be able to use this information to improve their planning, implementation, and assessment of PLA programs, thereby improving participation among students and institutions.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Prior learning assessment (PLA) programs have been around since the 1930’s, and there has been quite a bit of research conducted on their benefits to the student and institution. Although these programs have been proven to aid in retention and graduation, institutions are still reluctant to implement them. Policies and procedures for doing so, along with their assessment, remain inconsistent. When an institution does implement them, there tends to be low participation from students (Travers, 2011). What remains unclear are the experiences students have in participating in PLA programs from the application phase, to creating relationships with their classmates, to course preparation, readiness in continuing their studies, and their assessment of their development of critical thinking and reflection skills. In some ways they are essentially transfer students coming into a program at a different time than that of their peers. Through understanding their experiences with the PLA process, educators may be able to make changes to their PLA programs, thus increasing student participation and providing a better experience for them.

The review of the literature will explore PLA programs through three main sections beginning with the historical background, benefits, and opposition through to assessment. The second section will discuss Jack Mezirow’s Transformative Theory that
guided this study; while the final section will delve into concepts and theories that support adult learning and means by which learning and persistence can take place.

**Prior Learning Assessment**

*Historical background*

As far back as the 1930’s, PLA programs existed in some form or another. Assessment of university-level learning using college examinations began around then. In 1955, there were Advanced Placement (AP) programs; and in 1967, College Level Examinations Program (CLEP) was created. Military experience became evaluated for college-level learning in 1945 by the American Council on Education (ACE). The Educational Testing Service (ETS) was founded in 1947 to provide standardized exams for college entrance; and from there, other standardized exams emerged, such as the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) and Thomas Edison College Examination Program (TECEP) (Hoover, 2010; Kamenetz, 2011; Klein-Collins, 2006; Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009; Travers, 2012a). In 1974, a three-year research project called the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning was launched to identify ways in which work experience and community service could be evaluated and built into instruction for nontraditional students. Following the project, the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning became its own nonprofit organization and changed its name to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) with the goal of assessing learning gained from experience through quality means (Harris et al., 2011; Travers, 2012a). Post-secondary institutions began to recognize the legitimacy of bringing outside experience into the classroom and that this experience could be
evaluated at a college level. As the practice of PLAs increased, so did the awareness of these programs (Travers, 2012a, p. 45).

**Portfolios**

In 2006, CAEL surveyed colleges and universities and found that the majority were accepting CLEP exams and AP exam credits with only 66% using portfolios (Klein-Collins, 2006; Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009). However, in its 2010 study, CAEL found that exams were offered and utilized (94%) by the participating institutions and portfolios came in second at 88% (CAEL, 2010). In all, institutions made available more than one or two types of PLA methods, citing that there are different ways for adults to learn (p. 18). One of the more innovative methods of assessing learning has come from the use of student portfolios. In an article published by CAEL, assessment by portfolio described as the process through which students make a case for prior learning credit by “identifying learning achievements clearly and succinctly, and by providing sufficient supporting information and documentation so that faculty can use it, alone or in combination with other evidence, as the basis for their evaluations” (Hart & Hickerson, 2009).

According to Bamford-Rees (2009), this learning may have been acquired through work experience, employer training programs, independent study, noncredit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, or non-college courses or seminars. “Mr. Nienow, a biology professor at Valdosta State University in Georgia, who was not confident that portfolios offer benefits, came around by stating, ‘Even students who have no formal training presumably have learned something. I'm strongly in favor of giving students a chance to explore what they know’” (Hoover, 2010, p. 1). If we can find ways
to inform faculty and administrators not only of the benefits of PLAs but the ways in which they can be assessed, there may be more acceptance in integrating them into a program or college.

Not only is the United States recognizing the role portfolios make in a student’s learning but the European Union also promoted the personal development of a portfolio by each of its citizens by 2010 (Conrad, 2008). Portfolios enable professors and students to assess the students’ knowledge of course material through an entire program and, at the same time, provide students an opportunity to reflect on the process of their experiences rather than solely on the knowledge base that was achieved. It can do this in the way that it takes on a constructivist view in that, “the portfolio process allows learners to begin at a point of their own choosing and to select and reflect on learning that is important to them. Their learning challenge is to integrate that knowledge into the knowledge asked of them by the institution” (p. 143). In Canada, there is a four-step phase that universities use in the portfolio process. Students are asked to do the following: reflect, select, connect, and project. Each of these stages can produce “aha” moments that promote learning. For example, within reflection, students will seek to interpret their experiences to generic levels of knowledge. A stay-at-home mother may find that her duties performed daily create a need and thus path for her to hone her multitasking and communication skills. The select phase will have students choosing specific experiences that tie into an essay question, which will have them working hard to relate the two. The connection stage works subsequently with selection and has the student associating their experiences to meaning. There are a number of theories that detail this process, including Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning and Mezirow’s
Transformation Theory. The final phase is the project whereby students assemble their information to create a portfolio according to the guidelines of their institution (Conrad, 2008). A general theme that can be seen in PLA programs, not only in Canada, is the belief that students who participate in the portfolio process will be able to reflect on, assimilate, and think about what they have learned and how it fits into their future goals (Kamenetz, 2011).

Dagavarian, Walters, & Hull (1993) state that the student outcomes for a portfolio method need to include creating a forum in which students can investigate the structure of college-level learning, engage in setting educational objectives, gain a new sense of self, and certify for themselves that they have the ability to move on to further education. **Benefits**

It is widely known that students who participate in the portfolio process come away with an appreciation of their life’s work and personal skills. They are more confident in their ability to persist and achieve their academic goals; and there is a positive impact on their self-awareness and discovery, problem-solving skills, knowledge organization, and personal empowerment (Kamenetz, 2011; Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009).

CAEL conducted a multi-institutional study on PLA and adult student outcomes by examining the records of over 62,000 students at 48 colleges and universities in the United States and two institutions in Canada. They were able to conclude that students who participated in PLA programs had the following benefits (CAEL, 2010, p. 7):

- Higher degree earning rates
- Higher persistence in earning credits even if they did not attain a degree
• Reduced time to degree completion

The 2010 CAEL study is not the first conducted on PLA that can cite the benefits of these programs to students and institutions, but it does show the impact to this day of the important role PLA plays in higher education. In addition, CAEL was able to observe that the greatest impact on a student’s progress toward degree completion took place when an institution was able to use PLA credit toward the following (p. 8):

• to obtain advanced standing at the institution
• to waive course prerequisites
• to meet general education requirements
• to meet program/major requirements

Similar to credit for internships and field research, PLA credits bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world; like independent study, they allow for customization of the curriculum (Kamenetz, 2011). Students who utilize PLA methods do not have to start at the beginning and are more likely to complete their program at the same institution. According to Flagel (2010), more than one third of students attend more than one college during their college years (Kamenetz, 2011). If students, through customization of their programs, can incorporate their current knowledge and experience, which will enable them to complete a program in less time and with fewer costs, they will be more likely to take the necessary steps to enroll in a program.

Research on PLAs has been conducted primarily through dissertations (Lamoreaux, 2005; LeGrow, 2000). In conducting research for her chapter, “United States of America: Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) research in colleges and
universities,” Nan Travers discovered 30 dissertations; six peer-reviewed, research-based journal articles; 10 CAEL research studies; and seven institutional research studies that focused on PLA in the United States between 1974 and 2010 (Travers, 2011, p. 249). She did identify studies by Horn and Berger (2004); Hoffmann and LeMaster (1996); Hoffmann, LeMaster, & Flickenger (1996); and Fonte (2008) that demonstrated there was an overall greater rate of persistence and retention among students who participated in PLA. Fonte (2008) found that over a 10-year period, at one institution, students who completed a portfolio assessment graduated at a rate of 88% (p. 265). In a University of Maryland University College study, graduation rates for 24,753 students were examined over a four-year period. It was concluded that students in the PLA program had higher graduation rates, higher grade point averages, and more completed credits (Hoffmann et al., 1996).

*Opposition to Portfolios*

It is important to understand that opposition does exist and, depending on the specific issues, institutions may be leery of providing PLA as an option to their students. Portfolios specifically challenge the traditional idea that learning occurs only in a formal classroom setting, whether online or on campus (Hoover, 2010; Hull, 1993). Some faculty believe that portfolios are a way for students to side-step course taking or fast track through university credentials.

While PLAR’s more thoughtful opposition cite reasons of social justice and control, there is even greater opposition from those who cite issues that center around finances, credential integrity, and academic standards. Promoting PLAR to these critics depends, at a meaningful pedagogical level, on being able to demonstrate a system that is rigorous, sound, and capable of initiating self-reflection and critical thinking (Conrad, 2008, p. 142).
Some view PLA programs as actually lowering the standards of teaching and learning or that they cost the institution tuition dollars by enabling students to graduate faster. This does not have to be the case, especially if there are guidelines for programs that include assessment of the programs and then the students’ participation in classes. Empire State College does not give credit for life experiences but rather what students have learned from their experiences. In addition, this institution recognizes that it costs less to have PLA assessed by faculty than having the faculty instruct a class (Kamenetz, 2011). Research in the 1990’s indicated opposition to implementing PLAs based on faculty’s concern with academic integrity, lack of institutional criteria for PLA, the need for communication about the program, and lack of awareness regarding how assessed credits could be used. One study discovered that faculty and staff in the liberal arts and sciences programs were not as supportive of PLA programs as those in the career and applied arts. Gaerte (1996) surveyed 89 institutions and found that over half were opposed to PLAs at the level of philosophy and principle. In 2001, Lee-Story conducted a multi-institutional doctoral study and found that most accepted formal testing over portfolios due to the difficulty in documenting students’ learning outcomes and the faculty’s role in assessing them. Private institutions were more accepting of portfolio assessment (Travers, 2011).

Since 1975, there have been a number of studies conducted on all aspects of PLAs, including policies and procedures, benefits and barriers, implementation, and assessment to name a few. Answers derived from these studies could assist institutions in overcoming their concerns regarding PLAs and how to go about incorporating them
into their programs (Travers, 2011). Educators have a better idea now regarding the issues than they did in 1975, and they can also say with confidence that students who have participated in PLA tend to be retained, persist, and graduate at higher rates than those who do not (p. 257). Future research can draw on understanding the students’ experiences with the PLA process, determining how prepared they felt to either continue or begin new classes, and examining various forms of transformational processes (p. 273). By understanding these aspects, educators might be able to connect this research to the benefits and help pave the way for institutions to justify providing these programs to their students.

Not only are faculty and administrators sometimes opposed to the portfolio process, but students are not flocking to it because often there is a concern that it is a high risk assessment. In most cases, creating a portfolio is time intensive and, if done correctly, requires students to ascertain how they acquired knowledge in a specific area by way of critical self-reflection. This is typically a challenging task, as students do not always know how to write an academic description of their knowledge (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). Students’ confidence in understanding what is being asked and recognizing their ability to complete the task can sway them one way or another in moving forward to participate. There is no guarantee that a student’s portfolio, when assessed, will receive credit; yet, at the same time, institutions could be providing in depth instructions on portfolio criteria upfront and support throughout the process to better ensure success.

In their 2011 article regarding Capella University’s PLA process, Leiste and Jensen note that there needs to be more information regarding what motivates students to continue through the portfolio process and what discourages them from even beginning. They
provide a step-by-step method to work with students at the initial phase to see if they are good candidates for the program and then provide instruction and support for each stage as a student moves through the program.

Assessment of Rules and Methods/Outcomes of Method

When institutions decide to take on or consider taking on a PLA program, they need to reflect on their overall goals and desired outcomes for their students, faculty, and school. Creating and assessing the objectives are no different for PLA programs than that which would be expected for any academic course. Training among faculty and staff are necessary, and students need to be informed regarding policies and procedures along the way (Hull, 1993). Taking on and promoting PLA programs within an institution involves more than the immediate faculty working with the students. Everything needs to be considered in the initial setup, from marketing the information to advisors on how to promote it to students (new and continuing) to ensuring that the program aligns with the mission, vision and, strategic plans of the institution, (Hull, 1993; Klein-Collins, 2006). It is not enough to create a program within a college and hope that it thrives solely on its own with the support only of the program faculty. PLAs provide opportunities for nontraditional students who might not be able to attend college otherwise to receive an education and thus a degree. Will the institution have the resources to take on nontraditional students or possibly an influx of them? Will the admission process allow for nonacademic credits, or is it more traditionally based? Will the mission be compromised by taking on this type of program, or can the two align nicely? These are some process goals that need to be answered prior to determining a program’s outcomes
The process objectives need to include those listed below (pp. 6-8):

- Well-defined and easily-understood procedures that can be conveyed clearly by staff.
- Clearly and easily understood print materials for students.
- Reasonably extensive, appropriate, and useful feedback from assessors.
- Requirements that are not too difficult or not without challenge.
- A program that is appropriately priced.

Once the process objectives have been fulfilled, outcomes for students, faculty and the institution can be discussed and take shape. For instance, with students, some desired outcomes might be to provide them with a forum for investigating the structure of college-level learning; setting educational objectives; gaining a new sense of self; and, through assessment, certifying that they have the ability to move on to further education (pp. 7-8).

Conrad (2008) notes that, when institutions choose to take on portfolio methods, they need to provide criteria around which these will be accepted; however, these criteria should be guides rather than hard-and-fast rules. In this way institutions are not telling students what they must know, rather they are allowing students to organize their thoughts around their own learning (p. 142). Providing the flexibility for students to learn in a different format can assist them in the PLA process. CAEL (2010) noted in its study that, on average, there were better academic outcomes for students to persist when PLA credit was used to (p. 8):
• Obtain advanced standing at the institution.

• Waive course prerequisites.

• Meet general education requirements.

• Meet program/major requirements.

To determine whether to award college credit to students for prior learning, CAEL suggests following these standards by Fiddler, Marienau, and Whitaker (2006, p. xi):

1. Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning and not for experience.

2. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.

3. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.

4. The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.

5. Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.

6. If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.

7. Policies, procedures, and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process.
8. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.

9. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.

10. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and the state of the assessment arts.

The assessment of prior experiential learning is different from assessing learning from structured or sponsored events; and yet, it is what creates credibility in a PLA program. In their book, *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures*, Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker (2006) describe six steps in for assessing prior experiential learning and relate these steps to the ten standards listed above (pp. 47-48).
Table 1. Six Steps for Assessing Prior Experiential Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Relevant Standards</th>
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| **Identification**: Review experience to identify learning that is potentially creditable or appropriate for credentialing. | Standard 1  
|                        | Standard 3         |
| **Articulation**: Relate proposed credit to academic, personal, and professional goals. | Standard 2  
|                        | Standard 5         |
| **Documentation**: Prepare evidence to support claim for credit. | Standard 1  
|                        | Standard 2  
|                        | Standard 3         |
| **Measurement**: Determine the degree and level of competence achieved. | Standard 2  
|                        | Standard 3  
|                        | Standard 4         |
| **Evaluation**: Determine the credit equivalency. | Standard 2  
|                        | Standard 4         
|                        | Standard 5         |
| **Transcription**: Prepare a useful record of results. | Standard 4         |


**Transformative Learning Theory**

From faculty assessing students’ portfolios, the next piece to consider is the experience of students who take this route and submit portfolios for credit. Travers (2011) states that studies report a transformative effect that students experience after having engaged in PLA (p. 267). Included in such transformations are greater development in critical thinking and self-awareness skills, problem-solving skills, study skills, self-direction, and higher tactical knowledge than in those who did not participate (pp. 267-270). Transformational effects can take place in various ways and at a range of levels (p. 267).
Transformation 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. Transformative Theory’s focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others-to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision-makers (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 8).

Transformation theory describes a way in which adults learn to negotiate meaning, purposes, and value critically, reflectively, and rationally instead of passively accepting social realities (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006; Mezirow, 1990; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Stevens et al., 2010). It has both individual and social implications that what a person brings to the table, based on his/her experiences and assumptions, may in fact impede his/her ability to “unfreeze” and take in new information. It takes on more of a constructivist view in that people make meaning from their experience. A constructivist will be more self-directed, rather than passive, since, according to Candy (1991), the constructivist emphasizes the combined characteristics of “active inquiry, independence, and individuality in a learning task” (Merriam et al., p. 293). Transformation does not occur on its own, but rather between a point of connection between the person and dialogue with others. The person’s life experience is both a resource and stimulus for learning; constructivism, too, begins with the learner’s interaction and experience (p. 293). Although Kolb’s experiential learning theory also begins with experience and builds on constructivism, it requires the person to have the following abilities: openness and willingness to be involved in new experiences, reflective skills, analytical abilities, and decision-making and problem-solving skills
whereas, Mezirow’s cycle includes the following ten stages (Jarvis, 2004, pp. 131-132; Mezirow, 1990):

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Critical assessment and a sense of alienation
4. Relating discontent to the experiences of others
5. Exploring options for new ways of acting
6. Building confidence in new ways of behaving
7. Planning a course of action
8. Acquiring knowledge in order to implement plans
9. Experimenting with new roles
10. Reintegration into society

A person does not need to go through all stages to experience transformation (Kitchenham, 2008) but rather the “form” must change (Mezirow, 2000). First of all, there are two types of learning: informational learning and transformational learning (p.48). Informational learning is where a person increases his/her fund of knowledge or adds to existing knowledge. Reading books on history to expand on what he/she currently knows, for example. This would produce changes in WHAT the individual knows (p.48); whereas, transformational learning reconstructs the frame of reference and increases one’s capacity for abstract thinking. This would produce changes in HOW an individual knows (pp. 48-51). Epistemology refers not to what we know but to our way of knowing, and it consists of two processes: meaning-forming (activity by which a meaning is shaped by raw material of our outer and inner experiencing) and reforming
our meaning-forming (p. 52). In reforming our meaning-forming, we not only create our meaning-forming but change the very foundation of it in transformational learning. A change in a person’s form of knowing is what constitutes a transformational change. A person’s ideas and beliefs about a matter will change from “subject to” (unawarely identified with external sources such as family and friends) to “have them as object.” This person will reject the assumptions made by others as truths that will move aspects of his/her knowing from subject to object. It is not simply that a person will have new ideas and beliefs but that they in turn are assumptive (p. 58).

Through transformation, the person is not lost; rather he/she sees things differently and has a new perspective.

“Our old life is still there, but its meaning has profoundly changed because we have left home, seen it from afar, and have been transformed by that vision. You can’t go home again--or rather, the home to which you return is not the one you left” (Daloz, 1999, p. 27).

Learning may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action (Jarvis, 2004, p. 134; Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). It is not possible for a person to make sense of an experience without utilizing a set of assumptions that guides his/her frame of reference. Mezirow (1990) distinguishes two types of dimensions for making meaning: schemes and perspectives. Meaning schemes take place as a cause and effect of if-then sequence. For example, we expect food to satisfy our hunger. Meaning perspectives refer to the structure of assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one’s past experience during the process of interpretation (p. 2). They are acquired through cultural assimilation and can determine the different
stages of moral, ethical, and ego development and different stages of reflective judgment (pp. 2-3). Both schemes and perspectives define what is learned in childhood through the process of socialization. For instance, a child witnessing an intense, argumentative relationship between his/her parents will draw conclusions and use them as a frame of reference in moving forward. The more charged the relationship is, the more it will be embedded and intractable to change. Mezirow (1990, 2000) notes that these are “habits of expectations.” These habits have the ability to change; but change can be difficult, especially if the individual’s assumptions and beliefs are deeply ingrained. Habits of expectations can fall into two categories (Mezirow, 2000, p. 21): epochal (sudden or dramatic change) or incremental (progressive series of transformations to a person’s point of view that change a person’s habit of expectation). Brookfield (2013) describes the discourse as often being explosive, as if psychological dynamite is laid down and lit. The questioning of assumptions that a person has carried around for years and with which he/she may even strongly identify can be agonizing and painful. Instructors need to be “demolition experts,” guiding with care and sensitivity. To shake a person’s foundation and leave him/her hanging without support to find meaning and understanding can produce harmful consequences to the classroom activity or persistence through the course (Mezirow, 1990, p. 178).

In order for individuals to make meaning of their experiences and thus challenge their commonsense beliefs, taken-for-granted ideas, and self-evident rules of thumb that inform their thoughts and actions, they need to go beyond “thinking” and delve into critical reflection.
To make meaning means to make sense of an experience; we make an interpretation of it. When we subsequently use this interpretation to guide decision making or action, then making meaning becomes learning. We learn differently when we are learning to perform than when we are learning to understand what is being communicated to us. Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1).

Critical reflection is differs from thinking in that it involves a critical assessment of an action, belief, or assumption that, in turn, will propel an action that may go against a previous notion. For example, Mezirow’s Critical Reflection in Figure 3 illustrates the difference between thinking and reflecting. The ex post facto may involve looking back on prior knowledge or experience that is bringing to light or affecting the way a person is reflecting on a problem. Reflection on presuppositions is what is considered critical reflection (p. 6).
Reflection often resides in a person’s need to solve a problem. From an infant’s problem on how to get fed to an adult’s problem in how to understand the meaning of life, a person will use all tools at his/her disposal to find an answer and move on to the next issue. The tools used will include making inferences, generalizations, analogies, discriminations, and evaluations, as well as feeling and remembering (p. 5). It will include an assessment of how best to perform an action based on prior learning. In other
words, individuals will not just think about a solution and take that route, but rather they will review all aspects of the issue and their knowledge, thereby opening themselves up to accepting new information that will guide them to a different solution. Stephen Brookfield described the process of critical reflection as being comprised of three interrelated phases (Conrad, 2008; Mezirow, 1990, p. 177):

1. Identifying the assumptions that underlie our thoughts and actions.
2. Scrutinizing the accuracy and validity of these in terms of how they connect to, or are discrepant with, our experience of reality (frequently through comparing our experiences with others in similar contexts).
3. Reconstituting these assumptions to make them more inclusive and integrative.

One method used in challenging a student’s assumptions is to have him/her become aware by using critical incidents. These are brief descriptions of an event in the life of the student. Typically, the event is something that has made a substantial impact on his/her life; but the professor can also provide instructions allowing for students to explore any event, noting specific details such as description of event, time, place, people involved, and reasons why the event was chosen. This method is rooted in a phenomenological tradition in that it assumes students can draw from their memories that are embedded, can be inferred from and describe particular events. The purpose of this research is to get into another person’s frame of reference in order for the researcher to experience and understand the student’s interpretive filters. Essentially, educators need to be able to see the world as the student sees it. Once this takes place, educators will have an idea of what tools they will need to encourage students to move beyond their
beliefs to opening up their minds to consider different possibilities. In addition, educators may have better insight into how students will react to the process of critical reflection and what they can do to assist students in coping with any anxiety (Conrad, 2008; Mezirow, 1990, p. 180).

Travers (2012a) concluded that transformative learning can occur from students utilizing PLA. These programs can increase students’ self-awareness and self-regulation; problem-solving, study, and reflection skills; use of tacit knowledge; and understanding of the role of faculty and mentors (p. 45). In using the portfolio method, students are able to critically reflect on their assumptions and beliefs and, through a distorted or incomplete meaning perspective, be able to transform that perspective through a reorganization of meaning (Stevens et al., 2010). Students tend to “try on” the perspectives of others and essentially mull over how these perspectives sit within them. According to Mezirow (1990), discourse always takes place in this process and can be profound if the new information strikes a person in ways that are strongly opposed to his/her beliefs. Through discourse, there is an emotional piece that can affect whether students are able to move through the process, thereby freeing themselves to take in new information. There is not only one way in which individuals can travel in order to find their way through the discourse. It is not a paved path, and often students find themselves lost and frustrated (Daloz, 1999, p. 26). Various factors that may influence a student’s persistence have to do with feedback received by the instructor (and peers if applicable), relationship between the student and faculty, and motivation. A student who has a strong connection with his/her professor and who is receiving feedback in a timely manner that is supportive of his/her learning process may be more motivated to continue
working towards unfreezing his/her mind, taking in new information, and thus coming away with a new perspective of his/her experiences (Stevens et al., 2010, p. 9).

**Adult Learning**

Adult or nontraditional students are difficult to define. Whereas, once their age was used, educators have discovered that this sole classification does not capture all of those who have taken on adult responsibilities. Knowles (1980) suggests that people who behave as adults and take on adult roles (social definition) and those whose self-concept is that of an adult (psychological definition) belong in this classification (p. 24). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines nontraditional students as those who meet one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full-time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma (CAEL, 2005; p. 2, Ross-Jordon, 2011). Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) define adult students as those who are full-time students in college and who engage in the “ordinary business” of life as workers, parents, and citizens (p. 8). According to NCES, one-third of students ages 25 and older are participating in post-secondary education (2002).

Adult education has been around for centuries; but, according to Knowles (1980), it was not until the founding of the American Association for Adult Education in 1926 that adult education was considered a delineated field in this country. It quickly became one of the fastest growing aspects of our national educational enterprise, reaching a greater and greater proportion of our adult population (p. 25). Although there have been a number of studies conducted in order to generate theories on adult learning, one general
theory has yet to be produced because of the nature of adult learning (Brookfield, 1986).
The concept of adulthood is complex and broad because adults function in different ways based on their cultural backgrounds, personalities, and physiology. There have been attempts to generalize principles of adult learning to include the role that experience plays in a student’s ability to take on new information. Sometimes it is the experience that aids or hinders an adult’s ability to persist. “It is through such experience, however, that individuals construct the meanings and value frameworks that in turn determine how they code new stimuli and information” (p. 29).

Theories and Models

Knowles - Andragogy

According to Knowles (1980), until fairly recently there was only one model of learning and the characteristics of learners on which educators could base their curricula and teaching practices. It evolved in Europe between the 7th and 12th centuries, with an emphasis on reading and writing, until its expansion in the elementary schools in the 18th and 19th centuries. Educational psychologists began studying this type of teaching, known as pedagogy, which means the art and science of teaching children; but it was not until after World War II that the knowledge about learning (in contrast to teaching) regarding adult learning began to appear. Teaching centered on fact-laden lectures, assigned readings, drills, quizzes, rote memorization, and examinations. The pedagogical model viewed the learner as dependent on the teacher for full instruction on what is learned, how it is learned, and if the learning took place. There was little experience from the student brought into the classroom, and their readiness to learn was typically based on age as they progressed to the next level or grade. Their orientation to learning
was subject-centered with content units sequenced around the content matter. Finally, motivation to learn centered around external pressures by parents and teachers regarding competition for grades and consequences for failing. It became noticeable, as drop-out rates were high, that adults wanted and needed more than this type of teaching (Knowles, 1980; 1984). The Journal of Adult Education, published by the American Association for Adult Education, carried articles written by teachers who were finding success with their adult populations through different teaching methods. There was some concern that they might be violating academic standards, but they went on their intuition nonetheless using no theory to support their practices (p. 41). Knowles mentions that in the 1950’s, books began appearing that analyzed the teachers’ methods; but it was not until the publication of Cyril O. Houle’s The Inquiring Mind in 1961 that scientifically designed research was conducted on the internal processes of adult learners. Houle discovered through 22 in-depth interviews that adult students fell into one of three categories (p. 42; Knowles et al., 1998):


2. Activity-oriented: Students who take part because they find in the circumstances of the learning a meaning which has no necessary connection, and often no connection at all, with the content or the announced purposes of the activity.

3. Learning-oriented: Students who seek knowledge for its own sake.

Knowles defined the term “andragogy” as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p.43). Although Knowles at first described a difference between adults and
children, he came to recognize that in many instances their learning and teaching styles were similar. For example, children need to feel valued as much as adults and will falter if they are being rejected. Both groups bring to the classroom different needs and experiences, but how they are taught may be more alike than previously thought. Instead of two different types of learning, there really are only two types of pedagogy: one is more didactic in instruction style, and the other enables students to be self-directed and take control of their learning. It is not as though children cannot be self-directed; but when they are faced with new information or uncharted territory, they may need more of a hands-on, direct approach in how they are taught rather than expecting them to tackle the information by themselves. Children also bring experience into the classroom; however, the experience, how it is verbalized and integrated into their learning, is different from that of an adult. Once realizing that Knowles’ ideas appeared to have as much application in childhood as in adulthood, the reason for using the term “andragogy” seemed to disappear (Houle, 1996; Knowles, 1980; 1984). Andragogy appears to be more situation-specific than pertaining to the adult (Merriam et al., 2007). It is important to note that Knowles describes andragogy as a “model of assumptions about learners” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43) rather than an empirically based theory of learning painstakingly derived from a series of experiments resulting in generalizations of increasing levels of sophistication, abstraction, and applicability (Brookfield, 1986, p. 91). Jarvis (1984) recognized the appeal of andragogy but said it has “acquired the status of an established doctrine in adult education, but without being grounded in sufficient empirical research to justify its dominant position” (p. 32; Brookfield, 1986, p. 91). Harttree (1984) was unsure whether Knowles’s assumptions, “can be read as descriptions of an adult
Lindeman (1927) was known to have declared *Andragogik* as the “true method of adult learning” (p. 3) with adulthood marked by a growing awareness of self and by a readiness to make existential choices (Brookfield, 1986, p. 91). Jarvis (2004) suggested that Knowles’s assumptions were not based on extensive research findings’ and, as a result, Knowles was forced to consistently rethink his position. For instance, Jarvis argued that children could have the same readiness to learn and motivation as adults and therefore, could be educated in similar ways. Knowles did update his position to acknowledge that adults and children could be taught using pedagogy and andragogy techniques based on the situation.

Knowles identified four main assumptions that differentiated andragogy and pedagogy (Brookfield, 1986, p. 92; Jorgensen, 1998, pp. 131-134; Knowles, 1980, p. 44; Knowles, 1984; Knowles, 1998; Merriam et al., 2007, p. 84): concept of the learner, the role of the learner’s experience, readiness to learn, and orientation to learning.

*Concept of the Learner*

As children grow, their self-concept of dependency on adults to manage their world changes to that of having the capacities to make decisions for themselves. They become self-directed as they take on more responsibilities; and, through their experiences, they find that their self-fulfillment is based on their performance as workers, spouses, parents, and citizens (Knowles, 1980, p. 45; 1984). The problem that tends to arise is that, when adults re-enter an educational setting, they are inclined to revert back to their childhood dependency, conditioned by their previous schooling, where they were
passive and relied on instructors to teach. There is an inner conflict with the student who is conditioned to be passive but now, as an adult, strives to be self-directed. Adults also bring into the classroom any previous notions of the type of student they once were and challenges they faced with subject matter. Once they realize that they can take control of their learning, they often discover a release and even exhilaration (p. 46; 1984; 1998).

Later, Knowles expanded his view in this area of andragogy to the core principle that adults “need to know” what factors into their ability to engage in learning and that there should be shared control over the program planning and facilitation. He identified three dimensions to the need to know: how learning will be conducted, what learning will occur, and why learning is important (Knowles et al., 1998). This seems to contradict his earlier work in which adults walk into the classroom with total dependency on their instructors and do not participate in the teaching process.

*The Role of Experience*

Unlike children, adults have lived longer and therefore have accumulated a greater volume of different kinds of experiences. They understand what it is like to marry, take on financial responsibilities, raise children, and fall on hard times. Children can only observe these things in their families and on television. Another difference is that children self-identify according to the world around them; whereas, adults self-identify according to their experiences. As Knowles sums up, “Adults are what they have done” (1980, p. 50). What this means is that adults need to feel that their experiences are being utilized and valued since, if their experiences are rejected, adults feel rejected as people. Children, as well, may feel rejected if they are not feeling valued; however, they tend to take on the self-identity of what is being told to them by outsiders.
and, rather than internalize, may become frustrated with those that provide this information and react outwardly. Jarvis (2004) would argue that children may feel rejected and act in a manner similar to adults; so, in essence, there is little, if any, difference between the two.

Knowles notes that the differences in experiences between adults and children have three consequences for learning (1980, p. 50; 1998, p. 139):

1. Adults have more to contribute to the learning of others; for most kinds of learning they are themselves a rich resource for learning.

2. Adults have a richer foundation of experience with which to relate new experiences (and new learnings tend to take on meaning as we are able to relate them to our past experience).

3. Adults have acquired a larger number of fixed habits and patterns of thought and, therefore, tend to be less open-minded.

To have experience is not enough since a student needs to be able to critically reflect on it and discover the learning attained within, essentially make meaning out of it.

Fenwick (2003) notes that understanding of experiential learning is based on, “reflection of the experience and that the learner will reflect on concrete lived experience, interpret it, and generalize to form mental structures. These structures are knowledge, stored in memory as concepts that can be represented, expressed, and transferred to new situations” (p. 22). The constructivist learning theory described here recognizes that adults are able to construct their own knowledge, not just passively absorb already existing concepts, through interaction with their environments (p. 23). Colvin (2012) confirms that experiential learning requires the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and
abilities; and Fiddler, Marineau, and Whitaker (2006) add that this takes place only if reflected upon. The portfolio method requires students to critically reflect on the experiences attained and identify what was learned in accordance to the learning objectives of a specific course. Learners might have the capacity to recognize if the material they have mastered meets or exceeds what they should have learned. In addition, Colvin (2012) mentions that reflecting on experiential learning enables students to become more aware of future learning opportunities and essentially go looking for learning (p. 88).

**Readiness to Learn**

Knowles (1998) discusses the role of “developmental tasks” as they pertain to adults. It is recognized that, in order for children to advance from one phase of development to the next, they have to master the first phase. For example, babies may need to learn to crawl prior to walking. He states that there is a “readiness to learn” produced from developmental tasks that gives a child the ability to work on advancing. Adults experience this too but in the evolution of their social roles (1980, p. 51; Brookfield, 1986). As individuals move through their lives, their “readiness to learn” changes with the phase of their adult life. According to Knowles (1980), Robert J. Havighurst, one of the pioneers in identifying the evolution of social roles in adults, illustrates the changes in developmental tasks during the three periods of adulthood (p. 52): early adulthood (ages 18-30), middle age (ages 30-55), and later maturity (ages 55 and over). Knowles lists his own “Life Tasks of American Adults” but cautions that, in general, these lists are for middle-class Americans. Adults do not coast through stages
of their lives but go through continuous developmental periods that include crises, transformations, and transitions.

Adults’ readiness to learn can be situational in that an adult may be confident in one area and will be less dependent on an instructor versus coming in contact with content of which he/she is unsure and relying more on the instructor for assistance. Pratt (1988) notes that some adults may have different needs in each learning situation. For example, an adult may find that he/she is seeking emotional support from a professor; whereas, another is looking for directions in mechanics and logistics of learning (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998). An educator needs to understand within which dimension the need exists for a learner. Is he/she seeking assistance in competency of a subject matter or rather wanting encouragement in the learning process regarding his/her ability?

Jarvis (2004) suggests that readiness to learn does not solely lie with adults and that children may be as motivated when faced with phenomena they regard as relevant and problematic.

*Orientation to Learning*

Adults and children enter into education with different perspectives. Children have a *subject-centered* frame of mind where they see their acquired knowledge useful in opening the doors to the next level, such as high school or college. Adults, on the other hand, have a *problem-centered* or *performance-centered* frame of mind where education is seen to assist them in coping with life’s problems. They engage in learning in response
to pressures from their own lives and current situations (1980, p. 53). What an adult may seek from an educational experience is an answer to a current problem he/she is encountering (Brookfield, 1986). In his new perspective on andragogy, Knowles (1998) expands this problem-centered approach to recognizing that the need for an adult to relate new information to real-life context is deeply rooted in experiential learning; and he discusses David Kolb’s (1984) learning model. How one takes in new information is not by rote and memorization in adulthood but in interaction between content and experience. An educator’s role, then, is not only to transmit new ideas but also to modify old ones that get in the way of new ones. This again goes back to assisting a student with unfreezing their minds in order to accept or even consider a new way of thinking. Orientation to learning may get the student in the door of an educational program, but educators need to recognize there is more to this area if they are to assist students in transforming their way of thinking. PLA provides a way, especially through the portfolio method, for adults to critically reflect on their life’s experiences, connect them to what they have learned, and give them more clarification on what issues they want to solve and what educational guidance is needed. In other words, through understanding an issue in depth, adults may be able to take more control of their learning going forward. In all actuality, they are interacting between the content of the subject matter and their experience in order to find meaning. This process also enables an educator to observe where the missing links are for a student if the student is unable to connect the two in a way that demonstrates learned knowledge.
Motivation to Learn

In 1998, Knowles discussed an additional assumption that addressed motivation as a key component in the learning process. He stated that adults tend to be more motivated when they are attempting to solve problems and that there is an internal need for satisfaction rather than external (Knowles et al., 1998). In other words, receiving an increase in salary may be a potential motivator to work harder; however, quality of life, self-esteem, and satisfaction may be more motivating to continue down a certain path. Students want to be successful in their endeavors, especially when it comes to their learning; and educators are hopeful that students will be driven to put forth the effort to complete the work and be successful. If students find that they are unable to comprehend the material or experience success in their work, their motivation to continue may very well subside (Wlodowski, 1985). The experience that a student has in the PLA process may make a difference as to whether or not they continue in a program. If their expectation upfront is to be successful in their portfolio assessment and then discover that they were unable to attain the necessary credits in the end or even struggle throughout the process to extract knowledge, their motivation to enter into or complete a program may diminish. Similarly, following completion of a successful assessment, if students are unable to achieve their expectations in making connections to peers or feeling prepared for the advanced course, their motivation may be affected. The expectation that a student seeks in their learning process is not simply in mastering a subject but being able to take control and be part of the planning and facilitating process, enjoying the experience, and finding it to be meaningful and worthwhile (Wlodowski, 1985).
Implications for Practice

Following each of his assumptions of the adult learner, Knowles identifies implications for practice. Some of which include the following (1980, pp. 46-54):

- Establishing a learning climate (physical and psychological) where the adult student feels at ease to learn.
- Diagnosing needs of adult students so that they are able to rise above the conflict of their experience with traditional practice of learning and their self-directivity.
- Conducting learning experiences where students take responsibility for their learning with the teacher’s role redefined to become more of a resource than an instructor.
- Providing self-evaluation of learning.
- Emphasizing experiential techniques that may include case studies, role playing, simulation exercises, field projects, and community development.
- Unfreezing and learning from experience where the practice of an educational activity assists adults in looking at themselves more objectively and freeing their minds from preconceptions.
- Timing learning to match a student’s developmental tasks rather than around an institution’s needs.
- Grouping learners together according to their developmental tasks.
- Organizing the curriculum so that it is centered on problem areas rather than subject areas.
Brookfield (1986) points out that James and Sunmali developed similar principles, in 1983 and 1981 respectively, for what an educator should do in order to enhance the capability of a learner to function as self-directed.

While the assumptions of andragogy have been accepted by some, others feel that it is unfounded and should be treated as an ideology (Day and Baskett, 1982). Jarvis (2004) considers that Knowles’s concept of andragogy was unfounded, lacked a psychological analysis of the learning process, did not describe why specific aspects of experience are relevant, and did not generate a learning sequence for adults (p. 129). Jarvis does contend that Knowles’s work is based on humanistic ideals of education and while, not a theory, the assumptions in andragogy are profound for the practice of teaching adults (131).

*Jarvis*

Another theory of adult learning that speaks to experience as part of the foundation of learning comes from Peter Jarvis with regard to transformational learning. He defines learning as "the process of transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, feelings, etc." (Jorgensen, 1998, p. 138). His theory is that learning takes place through experience, which is in many ways similar to Knowles (1980; 1984; 1998). Knowles (1984) recognizes that adults are the richest resources for one another because of the experiences that they bring into the classroom. Jarvis focuses on the disjuncture between a person’s biography (all that a person is at that particular moment in time) and a particular experience that a person is unable to handle. He links the whole person (body, mind, self, and history) with an experience encountered in the person’s
social context; whereas, Knowles’s assumptions are on the isolation of the individual learner from the learning context (Merriam et al., 2007).

There is little or no awareness that the person is socially situated, and to some extent, the product of the sociohistorical and cultural context of the times; nor is there any awareness that social institutions and structures may be defining the learning transaction irrespective of the individual participant (p. 88).

Jarvis, on the other hand, brings the whole person into the experience that is socially constructed, which then aids in the transformation of the learner. Where the readiness to learn begins is similar to Knowles in that it starts at the inability of a person to cope with their current situation. There is a problem that needs to be solved and a person uses all five senses--sound, sight, smell, touch, and taste--in order to figure out what steps to take and in what order. It is not through genes that learning is possible; but rather, by using our senses, we uncover and explore unfamiliar situations. For example, if I need directions to a new doctor’s office, I might call the office and/or use an electronic means such as GoogleMap to figure out where to go and the best route. Initially, I may be uncomfortable not knowing where I am going; but, once I have the information and arrive at my destination, I will feel accomplished and will have learned what route to take. When the need arises to visit the office in the future, I may still need to look up the address, but I will have a better sense of the direction and location of the facility.

Jarvis (2004) notes that experience occurs in the person’s world, which is ever changing (p. 101). If you think about how many unfamiliar situations an adult will encounter in a week and the process by which he/she goes about to understand them, this makes sense. When a person encounters a situation, he/she brings to it his/her biography
which is made up of his/her history. This will be a factor in how the person reacts to an unfamiliar situation. In Jarvis’s model (Figure 4), we see that a person will encounter a situation with his/her whole self and may dismiss the situation, which will result in no learning, or move to the next level of thinking, doing, and feeling. He explains that there are different types of learning that can occur here: critical thinking, problem solving, reflective learning, action learning, and so on (p. 102).

It is perhaps through emotions that thought can be transformed into action. However, either of these two can dominate in the process of learning and a number of different types of learning can occur: contemplation, rational thinking, desiring, planning, action learning, and so on. In addition, the emotions can have a considerable effect on the way we think, on motivation and on beliefs, attitudes and values (p. 102; Jarvis, 2006, p. 11).
Figure 4. The Transformation Of The Person Through Experience

As a result of the learning, a person is changed by being able to make meaning of the world or has the ability to manage their situation. According to Jarvis’s model, people learn through a social context rather than the isolated internal process that is primary in Knowles’s work.

Types of Learning

Within the work of Knowles and Jarvis, different types of learning were discussed. Three specific types influence the process of adult learning: self-directed learning, transformational learning, and critical reflection.

Self-Directed Learning
The idea of adults being able to learn outside the classroom continues to be explored, not only to ensure credibility but also in determining how this might affect the business of higher education. Adults function by learning and building on an uncomfortable experience or current situation; this was identified in the theories above. As a result, educators need to recognize that learning does not only take place in the traditional classroom setting and that adults may not need to complete a course if they can demonstrate that, through prior experiences, they have achieved the learning objectives.

Self-directed learning can be seen in Houle’s work in 1961 where he studied 66 people and discovered that learning takes place all around, with outside influences, such as family, friends, co-workers, initiating the efforts, whether or not the person is aware (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 106; Tough, p. 3). The three main goals of self-directed learning are (p. 107):

1. to enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed in their learning;
2. to foster transformational learning as central to self-directed learning;
3. to promote emancipatory learning and social action as an integral part of self-directed learning.

This type of learning can take place in formal and informal settings and is viewed as a person’s ability to be self-taught by taking control of the mechanics and techniques in teaching him/herself in a particular subject. The portfolio process in many ways is a self-directed approach as students are required to connect their knowledge to course objectives in a particular subject. The setting is informal and in most cases involves little, if any, assistance from an educator. If students’ work is independent, what happens
if they do not possess the ability to make the necessary connections? Where Brookfield (1986) and Candy (1991) recognize the importance of a student being self-directed, questions remain whether this is a characteristic of adult learners or should be a goal of adult educators to help all adult learners become self-directed (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998).

*Brockett and Hiemstra’s Model*

Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) created what they identified as a personal responsibility orientation model (Figure 5) that described how, in taking personal responsibility for one’s own learning, a student could take a proactive approach to the learning process (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 25; Merriam et al., 2007, p. 107; Merriam & Brockett, 2007).
Within Personal Responsibility, students take control over their learning and how they respond to situations. They have ownership for their own thoughts and actions, and it is their ability and/or willingness to take control of their learning that determines their potential for self-direction (pp. 26-27). Educators should not assume that all students will have the capability of being self-directed or having control over their destiny (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998); so an educator’s role may be to help learners to be able to assume personal responsibility for their own learning. It is also important to note that the
point of departure for having a want or a need to learn lies solely with an individual; but, following that decision, there is a social context in which the learning takes place.

In Self-Directed Learning, according to Brookfield (1986), an adult is able to take learning, disposition, or capabilities that make permanent behavioral change and combine them with education, managing external factors of the learning environment. In other words, self-directed adults manage the external factors in order to produce internal changes. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) refer to this process as a teacher-learning transaction where the focus is on factors that are external to the individual such as needs assessment, evaluation, learning resources, and facilitator roles and skills.

Learner Self-Direction is where the emphasis is on the characteristics of the learner or factors internal to the individual. Earlier I described how Knowles (1980) differentiated an adult from a child in his first formulation, wherein adults are self-directed and make a path for themselves based on internal, rather than external, factors. They are independent and use their autonomy to propel them in certain directions. There is a predisposition in how the adult will take responsibility for his/her learning that is no different from the way in which the adult takes responsibility for choices regarding non-educational aspects.

In Self-Direction in Learning, students use the external forces of education and their internal characteristics and personalities to direct their learning. Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) suggest that the optimal conditions for learning results when there is a balance between the internal characteristics and external factors of teacher-learner. Frustrations arise when, for instance, a student’s desire of how and what the student wishes to learn are not able to thrive in the learning environment.
The Social Context for Self-Direction in Learning is the circle in Figure 5 that encompasses the elements. It is important to know that self-direction does not solely encompass the individual but rather a combination of the person and the social context in which learning takes place.

Self-directedness can be seen in Grow’s (1991) stages of learning autonomy, which are similar to Brockett and Hiemstra’s model, except that he views learning to occur in stages to which the teacher connects his/her students based on their ability. For example, Stage 1 is where the student is dependent and the instructor has authority/coach. The teaching style is coaching with immediate feedback, drill, informational lectures, and helping the student to overcome deficiencies and resistance. In the Stage 4, a student is self-directed with the instructor’s role being more of a consultant/delegator. The student is engaged in internships, dissertation, individual work or self-directed study groups (Knowles et al., 1998). PLAs, or specifically the portfolio process, are typically a Stage 4 initiative, where the student is working independently to complete the project. Where it appears that Grow assumes students have the ability to work independently by Stage 4, having completed a couple of other stages, this is not the case with portfolios as they are completed prior to the student’s entry into a program or very early on in the program. Not every student who completes a portfolio will “pass” or attain the credits he/she was anticipating; therefore, understanding the experiences of students who have undergone this assessment is critical to assisting students upfront as to whether or not they possess the skills required to embark down this road.

Garrison (1997) captured a multi-dimensional view of self-directed learning in his model (Figure 6).
In the first dimension, students take control of their learning through interaction in formal or informal settings. They take control of their learning to reach their objectives. In an educational setting, the three dimensions interact to create self-directed learning. Similar to Brockett and Hiemstra’s model, Garrison’s involves learners’ use of resources within their learning context. His model is based on resource use, strategies use, and motivation to learn (Song & Hill, 2007, p. 29). “Self-monitoring is synchronous with responsibility to construct meaning…[and] is very much associated with the ability to be reflective and
think critically” (Garrison, 1997, pp. 24-25). The motivational piece has to do with what keeps a student participating in an activity or task (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 115).

Transformational Learning

“Transformative or transformational learning is about change--dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 130). Three key concepts emerge from this field: life experience, the nature of critical reflection, and the connection between transformative learning and development (p. 144).

Life Experience

As Knowles (1980) pointed out, andragogy is taking the experiences of adults and using them in the classroom to assist with their learning and serve as a resource to other students. Tennant, as noted in Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), describes three uses for this type of learning (pp. 144-145). It can be used by teachers to link their explanation and illustrations to the student’s prior experiences; teachers can attempt to link learning activities to learners’ current work, home, or community; and finally, teachers can create activities such as simulations, games and role plays, which all lead to learners’ critical reflection of assumptions. It is recognized that not all experiences trigger learning; some add to a student’s prior knowledge, while others produce a fundamental change in their perspective (p. 145). Jarvis (1992) notes that this “disjuncture” of an adult questioning why learning has occurred and what it means is at the core of human learning (p. 15).
Critical Reflection

“Reflection is a cognitive process. We can think about our experiences--muse, review, and so on--but to reflect critically, we must also examine the underlying beliefs and assumptions that affect how we make sense of the experience” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 145). Reflection is a natural process and one that we tend to do automatically. In order to make sense of our experiences, we will take stock of our actions and share others’ ideas who may have had the same or similar experiences. This can take place in formal or informal settings with group/roundtable discussions, mulling over notes, or discussing recent events or issues. Reflection in a classroom setting is often overlooked by the instructor because it is difficult to assess who is engaging in the action and those who are struggling or choose not to participate (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985).

“Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which beliefs have been built….Learning may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action” (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 1). There are three types of reflection that can lead to transformational learning: content reflection, thinking about the actual experience; process reflection, thinking about ways to deal with the experience; premise reflection, examining one’s one beliefs, values, and assumptions about the experience (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 145; Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 21). In trying to find their own voices and free themselves of their own beliefs and assumptions, adults go through reflective discourse where they struggle with their prior learning and that of
new experiences or information through critical reflection assessment. They will have
the ability to participate fully if they are able to break through (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11).
Mesirow (1992) states, “…only in adulthood that we arrive at ‘reflective judgment,’ that
is, come to accept rational discourse as a means of validating beliefs” (p. 1).

In identifying how adults can become critical thinkers, Brookfield (1987) speaks
to a model that consists of five phases. The first stage consists of the trigger event,
something unexpected happening. The next stage, appraisal, is a self-examination of the
problem, wherein an adult will “brood” over the discomfort and attempt to find others
with similar problems. In the third stage, examination, there is an exploration of
explaining or accommodating the discomfort of the experience. The fourth stage is
where an adult will develop alternative perspectives on thinking of the experience or
problem; and finally, the fifth stage, is more of a roleplay. In this stage, new confidence
has been gained based on the new perspective, and there is the ability to integrate the
changes into one’s life.

Development

What are transformed through the processes of transformative learning are
several capacities of mind or consciousness. First is the development of a
“conscious I” capable of exercising critical reflection. Second is a
transformed capacity for thinking, transformed to be more dialectical or
systemic, thinking (for example) that perceives polarities as mutually
creative resources rather than as exclusive and competitive options and
that perceives archetypes as partners for inner dialogue. Third is the
capacity to be a conscious creative force in the world, as expressed, for
example, as the capacity to intervene in and transform the quality of
discourse in a group or learning community.
(Elias, 1997, pp. 3-4)

Adult development relies on individuals to understand and make meaning of their
current situation and rise above their old ways and what is sometimes viewed as a
societal norm. Mezirow (1991) states that we need to be able to “name” our reality, which is often taken for granted. There needs to be an active role in pursuing meaning and purpose, rather than accepting societies’ norms. Elias speaks to this in his first stage of identifying the “conscious I.” The broader goal of adult education is to help students obtain liberation in their thinking and become autonomous learners (p. 30). Kegan’s (1994) constructive-developmental theory describes the differences in which people are able to make meaning from their lives by living in a rapid changing, diverse society versus the same town, where they were born and raised, with less diversity. Mezirow (1991) acknowledges that students will have the capacity to critically reflect and ultimately make changes if their learning environment is conducive of opportunities to expand on one’s beliefs and assumptions in a supportive setting.

**Experience and Learning**

In experiential learning, the notion is that learning is not a single process but rather complex and both active and passive.

**Models of Experiential Learning**

**Kolb**

Through his four-stage cycle, Kolb has “integrated the abstract and concrete as well as the active and passive characteristics of learning and problem solving into a single process that describe how it is that people generated from their experience, concepts, rules, and principles to guide their behavior in new situations, and how they modify these concepts in order to improve their effectiveness” (Hunsaker, 1981, p.145). The model in Figure 7 is circular, repeated; and learning experiences are determined by individual needs and goals.
Dewey also has a cyclic model in that a person’s impulse drives his/her observation, which drives knowledge and thus judgment (Figure 8). The new knowledge serves as a base for new experiences and, again, new knowledge.
**Dewey**

*Figure 8. Kolb’s View of Dewey’s Model of Experiential Learning*

Malcolm Knowles (1980) states that adults learn through experiences rather than transmittal techniques such as lectures, assigned readings, and canned audiovisual presentations. He goes on to say that the more active the learner is in the process, the more he/she will learn (p. 50).

**Motivation**

Motivational theories can be traced back prior to the Middle Ages, and some are defined using doctrines such as Hedonism and Stoicism. The hedonic approach in the 17th century suggested motivation was achieved by the pursuit of pleasure. In the 19th century, motivation was viewed as an unconscious act thriving on instinct. Drive theory, defined by Hull, is based on the premise that motivation is derived from deprivation of a necessary commodity or strong stimulation, essentially external influences (Geen, 1995, p. 7). The final theory to note was Tolman’s 1932, incentive or expectancy-value. This
had to do with the *expectancy* that a person has in reaching a goal with a *value* of that goal for the person (Geen, 1995, pp. 6-21).

The main premise or definition of motivation, according to Geen (1995) refers to the initiation, intensity, and persistence of behavior. It is embedded with a complex process of choosing a goal, devising a strategy for reaching the goal, and carrying out the planned course of action. The goals for action satisfy either a personal need or situational demand (p. 20).

First we need to understand what it means to have a goal and reasons why this would take place. In our daily lives, we are constantly moving from one direction to another; or in other words, there is a beginning and end. For example, individuals preparing to go to work will go through a process of getting out of bed, showering, eating breakfast, etcetera until they leave their house and transport themselves to work and into their office. The goal, whether they consciously know it or not, is to arrive in their office and, in most cases, by a certain time. Simply because a person may be thinking of what he/she will prepare for dinner that night, while going through this daily process, it does not diminish the fact that the person is unconsciously trying to achieve an end or goal. Maslow (1987) describes this phenomenon as a means to an end and observes that people will make many choices throughout the day in order to achieve an end result. By the same token, it is through a goal (again, whether derived consciously or not) that a person will ultimately decide what action needs to be taken in order to achieve it and sometimes provide deeper analysis of the problem and route to solution. Geen (1995) states that a goal is a wished-for end that is considered attainable (p. 23) and can be defined as, “any end state that the person has in mind while putting out effort to reach that state” (p. 24).
Similar to Maslow, Geen (1995) notes that creation of a goal is dependent upon two conditions: one is the need in the person; the other is a condition that arises in the environment (p. 25). He offers the example of a starving person whose need is to eat and who passes a fast-food restaurant whose aroma has caught his senses. The person’s need is to eat and the restaurant offer the environment in which to satisfy his need. These two conditions thus produce the goal of entering the restaurant, ordering food, and consuming it. He notes that, if another goal of rushing to make an appointment, for example, is not at hand, then fulfilling his need to eat will be his primary goal (p. 25).

Alongside goals are incentives which lead to striving that involves movement toward goals at every level. Incentives are a “complex goal state” that can be reached by achieving smaller goals (p. 27). For example, a person whose goal is to lose 20 pounds might use incentives to celebrate weight loss increments of five pounds. Incentives can be whatever will motivate a person to continue down the path of losing weight, which will lead to the ultimate goal of being 20 pounds lighter.

We recognize that not always is it easy to reach the goal without encountering obstacles; so inferring a person’s motivation comes in as a way of identifying to what degree they will overcome the obstacles (p. 23). In setting a goal, a person will evaluate whether or not the goal will be attainable; this is considered as utility, which is the expectancy of success and the value of the outcome (p. 28). Research shows that people will have better performance when they set more of a difficult goal than an easier one, but it is imperative for the person to know how far he/she can extend in order to be successful. For instance, a high school student who wants to be a doctor but who is terrible in math and science may want to aim for completion of these courses in an
associate’s degree to see if he/she has the ability and motivation to pursue a medical path. Ambrose et al. (2010) also describe how expectancy and value interact to affect the level of motivation in Figure 9.

*Figure 9. Ambrose’s Expectancy and Value Model*

![Ambrose's Expectancy and Value Model](image)

*Figure 9. Ambrose’s Expectancy and Value Model. Adapted from Human motivation: A social psychological approach, by R. G. Geen, 1995, p.28. Reprinted by permission from the Copyright Clearance Center, Danvers, MA.*

Once a goal has been set, there are three processes that will influence the drive to overcome any obstacles and stay on the right path (Geen, 1995, pp. 28-29):

- Effort, affected by task difficulty and specificity;
- Strategy formation, influenced by goal complexity;
- Commitment to the goal, which is influenced by several situational and personal variables.

There are four specific mechanisms that are associated with maximum performance: effort expended in pursuit of the goal; persistence, which is effort expended
over time; attention focused on the goal; and adoption of strategies for attainment (p. 29). Geen describes an example based on Brehm’s theory in Figure 10 which notes how Student A will work as hard as Student B but only if the level of difficulty is easy; whereas, Student B will work hard only if the level of difficulty is high. Both students will, however, work to a point where they feel the task is impossible or unattainable and from there will cease trying.

Figure 10. Brehm’s Theory

Concluding Remarks

Research has shown that PLAs can benefit adult students in a number of ways. They can provide an improvement in critical thinking, transformational effects, and self-awareness. In addition, students who participate in these programs and receive college credit are more likely to be motivated and persist through to degree completion (CAEL,
2010; Travers, 2011). There tends to be a low participation rate among colleges and students with research stemming primarily from doctoral dissertations (Travers, 2011). What still remains unclear is the underutilization of PLA programs among college students, especially since benefits to assist them in achieving their goals are known. This study was conducted to delve into the experiences that students have in completing their portfolios and their assessment of transformational effects and development of critical thinking and reflective skills. Understanding these aspects can assist colleges in assembling and marketing their programs to prospective students in order to increase student participation.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Adult students are known to “stop out” and “stay out” and we know that their use of PLA programs assists in providing them the motivation to persist through completion. There is abundant research that speaks to the benefits of PLA; however, there is little that examines the experiences that students have in completing portfolios and their overall assessment of their development as a result.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the learning experiences and sense of readiness of adult students who participated in a prior learning assessment portfolio program that supported persistence and academic success in a private, non-denominational university in the Midwest. The study answered the main research questions:

QUESTION 1: What are students’ sense of readiness to participate in college classes following completion of a portfolio for earned credit?

QUESTION 2: What do students experience as barriers and accomplishments in completing a portfolio?

QUESTION 3: How does completing a portfolio affect a student’s perception of his/her ability to think and reflect critically?
QUESTION 4: How do students perceive their success in the portfolio process? This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach, specifically a social constructivist perspective, and semi-structured interview research design. This chapter outlines these research methods in detail, discussing the phenomenological, social constructivist, and transformative theoretical frameworks and offering a rationale for their use in this particular study. Additionally, this chapter discusses the following methodological issues: assumptions, role of the researcher, selection of research subjects, methods of data collection, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness of the findings, biases, and ethical considerations.

**Qualitative Research Design**

Qualitative research is useful for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon. In general, broad, open-ended questions are asked in order for the researcher to collect detailed views from participants and analyze the information for descriptions and themes. From here, the researcher interprets the data, drawing on personal reflections and past research (Creswell, 2012, p. 629). The focus of this type of research is to understand the meaning that people attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 4).

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), there are several reasons to support the study of qualitative research (Roberts, 2010, p. 143). They are to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known, to give intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods, and to elucidate the nature of the research problem. Creswell (2012) confirms the exploration of a problem and understanding of a central phenomenon as reasons to choose this method but adds
that a small number of individuals will be studied, there is the use of analyzing data to interpret the larger meanings of the findings, and the researcher's subjective reflectivity and biases are at play (p. 26). Merriam (1998) notes that qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences that have in the world—as experience as it is “lived” or “felt” or “undergone” by people (p. 6). Phenomenology is the philosophical orientation that focuses on people’s experiences from their perspective (p. 143). This study examined the experiences that adult students have had participating in the PLA portfolio process, and such descriptions of experience were unattainable by the use of any other research method.

A qualitative research method was chosen as it provides a flexible design, allows for purposeful sampling, positions the researcher as the primary instrument in the data collection and analysis, and provides findings from the participants that are comprehensive and richly descriptive (p. 9). This method also enables the researcher to obtain a complex, detailed understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2007). For this particular study, qualitative research is a better fit than a statistical approach because, as Merriam (1998) notes, “It is assumed that meaning is embedded in people’s experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator’s own perceptions” (p. 6). Quantitative studies examine component parts individually; whereas, qualitative studies examine how the parts work together to form a whole (p. 6).

**Social Constructivist Perspective**

A social constructivist recognizes that people seek to interpret and understand their experiences, developing subjective meanings. The goal of the researcher is to rely
on the participant’s views and construct broad, general, open-ended questions so that the participant can make meaning of a situation. The premise of social constructivism is that people make meaning by way of social interaction with others and not solely relying on themselves. There is a focus on how a person lives and works in order to understand his/her cultural and historical settings (Creswell, 2007; 2009, p. 8). “The researcher’s intent is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory (as in postpositivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” (p. 8). The idea of making meaning of an experience is what drives qualitative research.

Creswell (2009) discusses several assumptions identified by Crotty in 1998 in discussing constructivism (p. 8).

1. Meanings are constructed by human beings; as they engage with the world, they are interpreting. Qualitative researchers tend to use open-ended questions so that the participants can share their views.

2. Humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives. We are all born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture. Thus, qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally. They also interpret the preliminary considerations they find, an interpretation shaped by the researcher’s own experiences and background.

3. The basic generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community. The process of qualitative research is
largely inductive, with the inquirer generating meaning from the data collected in the field.

Social constructivism was introduced by a post-revolutionary Soviet psychologist by the name of Lev Vygotsky. He believed that learning was from a social context; whereas, Piaget emphasized the individuality of the learner. Piaget did not state that the social context was absent but rather that there was more to consider than this aspect (Pass, 2004). Susan Pass (2004) believes that these two men would have agreed that learning takes place in an individual/social context in that a student has the ability to learn on his own but can be aided by others. Learning involves integration into the learning community, rather than assimilation of knowledge by learners (Vygotsky, 1978). It is within a social context that learning takes place, whether students are collaborating with their peers, teachers, or staff. He recognizes two developmental processes:

The level of **actual** development is the level of development that the learner has already reached, and is the level at which the learner is capable of solving problems independently. The level of **potential** development (the “zone of proximal development”) is the level of development that the learner is capable of reaching under the guidance of teachers or in collaboration with peers. The learner is capable of solving problems and understanding material at this level that they are not capable of solving or understanding at their level of actual development; the level of potential development is the level at which learning takes place. It comprises cognitive structures that are still in the process of maturing, but which can only mature under the guidance of or in collaboration with others (p. 58).

When it comes to motivation, social constructivists recognize that there is behavioral motivation, which is extrinsic, and cognitive motivation, which is intrinsic. Vygotsky notes that extrinsic motivation comes from the rewards provided by the
knowledge community; whereas, intrinsic motivation is the learner’s drive to understand and promote the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978).

Participating in the portfolio program is not an independent approach. There is extrinsic motivation in completing it based on faculty assessment and an internal drive that leads to obtaining credit and achieving a level of success not thought of before. Participating in the portfolio program online or in class will allow the student to utilize faculty and peers. Even independently following the PLA course, students will need to have access to friends, family, and/or employers in order to obtain the information needed to demonstrate learning.

**Phenomenological Qualitative Research Approach**

“Phenomenology is understanding how a person ‘thinks’ about an experience; in other words, how consciousness is experienced” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 19). A researcher has the ability to understand how individuals interpret their social life by becoming aware of their experiences and how they process experience in their everyday lives.

The experience perceived can be lived in time, space, and in relationship to others. Researchers using this methodology may choose to conduct in-depth interviews along with looking at written accounts of experiences such as diaries (p. 19).

Phenomenology is a logic that investigates how *in fact* there is truth for us: experience, in the Husserlian sense, manifests this fact…In reality it attempts to extract the justification out of the fact…What phenomenology tries to do is, beginning with the true judgment, to descend again to what is *actually experienced* by the individual who judge (Lyotard, 1991, p. 74).
The truth that is experienced by the consciousness is not always the experience that took place; and we need to keep in mind that, in order to get to the truth, we cannot eliminate the person from the outset (p. 75). The central project of phenomenology is to understand what and how people experience their experiences.

The type of phenomenology studied is Moustakas (1994) transcendental or psychological which focuses less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on descriptions of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Moustakas also uses the concept, epoche (bracketing), in which the interpreter sets aside his/her experiences as much as possible in order to look at a new perspective of the phenomenon being examined (p. 60). The use of this type of phenomenology allows the researcher to study several participants regarding a phenomenon, bracket out his/her own experiences, and reduce the collected data to develop textual and structural descriptions in order to convey the overall essence of the experience (p. 60).

Phenomenology was an appropriate methodology for this study as the research questions posed sought to understand a small group of students’ experiences from their own perspectives in participating in a central phenomenon, which in this case was the PLA portfolio process at a Midwestern university. This type of approach was used in understanding common themes that emerge from experiences in a central phenomenon. The study examined the common themes, meaningful insights, and patterns that emerged from the participants. Identifying these shared experiences will assist institutions in developing practices and policies around PLA and provide a deeper comprehension about the features of PLA (Creswell, 2007).
Assumptions

The researcher was guided by the following assumptions:

- Students will be able to recall and articulate their experiences in participating in the entire portfolio process and associating it with their ability to be self-directed and persistent in their studies;
- Students will have the ability to articulate their level of preparation in their courses, having received credit for pre-prerequisite courses;
- Students will have the ability to understand and articulate the transformational learning that has occurred;
- Students will be truthful in their responses and feel comfortable asking clarifying questions;
- It is relevant for higher education administrators to comprehend the experiences of adult students in the PLA program so that revisions can be made in order to increase student participation and faculty buy-in;
- The portfolio process can be a successful strategy for colleges and universities in recruiting and retaining adult students and providing a pathway for them to achieve their goals, whether that is a certificate or degree.

Role of Researcher

As a student affairs practitioner and educator in higher education, I have had the opportunity to work with a diverse group of students over the past 15 years, primarily in the area of residence life. I have found that the definition of student success is quite different between traditional-age and nontraditional-age students. Traditional-age
students may be focused on building relationships with their roommates and making time outside of class to enjoy the city lights; whereas, older students may tend to keep to themselves and concentrate on their studies. This is not always the case, of course, but in residence life the needs of the two types of students vary greatly regarding conflict or judicial situations that staff handle. In our residence halls the majority of our population was around 18-21 years of age, and any older students were typically in graduate programs. I really did not find nontraditional undergraduate students living on campus, nor were residence life programs geared toward them.

It was following my role in residence life that I became cognizant of adult students and the tools they needed in order to succeed. This came by way of the university creating a Veterans Center and then Fast-Track programs for the adult population. As this population increased, so did the emphasis on providing them with resources. I had the ability to speak with colleagues who worked with adult students and the students themselves on their choice to return to school and challenges faced along the way. It was in my internship that I became more familiar with CAEL and PLA programs, especially how successful they can be if utilized by colleges and universities. The issue that arose, surprisingly, was the degree to which these programs were underutilized, even with a known success rate.

My greatest experience with adult students was in looking at myself. I entered my first program, conservatory in musical theatre, feeling out of place as I was at least four years older than my classmates and did not have the theatre experience that others acquired in high school. I was constantly comparing myself to my classmates and putting myself down for not exceeding expectations. In the general education classes, I also felt
less exceptional and underprepared. I had dabbled in some college credits prior to this program but did not have the academic skills (how to study, read textbooks, analyze readings, and write in certain styles like MLA) that were needed in order to be successful. As a result, I struggled to gain footing and felt quite alone in my attempts to what I perceived as needing to catch up. My biggest hurdle was overcoming the feeling of being out of place in and out of class, especially since co-curricular activities and events were geared primarily toward the traditional-age student. In my second degree program, business administration, the challenges again were not having acquired the experience of my classmates and the feeling of not measuring up. My age was not a factor, necessarily, but rather the material as I again came with few skills to master the classes in accounting, finance, economics, and statistics. The tutoring resources for master degree courses were limited, and I struggled to locate what I needed to overcome hurdles along the way.

Upon returning to school for my doctorate, several years had passed since the completion of my master’s program; and my challenges were more internal by way of recognizing my ability to be in such a program and building up my self-esteem and confidence.

Throughout all of the programs, I was still a step ahead of adults who enter into their first program in that I had the ability to work part-time, I had the support of friends and family along the way, I was not in a relationship nor did I have children or dependents to provide for, and I was able to balance my responsibilities in a way that enabled me to be successful in and out of the classroom. Some of my internal struggles with confidence in the ability to do the course work may have been similar to those that adults face, especially if they are entering years following high school graduation.
In identifying a research topic, I knew almost immediately that I wanted to focus on adult students--what their barriers were to complete programs and what tools and resources were needed to overcome hurdles. I had paved my way, even when resources were limited or nonexistent, and had been able to persist; but this is not always the case with nontraditional students. When faced with barriers, whether school related or in their personal lives, they may “stop out.” Educators hope that these students will return rather than “stay out.” I learned through my research and internship that PLAs have been a tremendous tool that generates the confidence to overcome obstacles and builds self-esteem; but the issue is that students are either unaware of these programs, or their use is limited due to faculty not buying-in. My role as a researcher in this study was, therefore, to dive deeply into the experiences of students who have been successful in the portfolio process and determine how this shapes their ability to continue to be successful in the classroom. Prior research had already revealed the role PLA portfolios can play in student persistence, but we still needed more data to reveal how students experience the process, how it affects their transformational learning and the ability to be a self-directed learner. By understanding these areas, colleges and universities may be more apt to provide PLA opportunities, especially with portfolios, and have better ways of making this option known to students.

Selection of Research Subjects

In this study, the technique used to identify participants was purposeful sampling, as it provides the best way to understand a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The chosen type within this sampling was homogeneous sampling, as it enables the researcher to choose people who possess a similar trait or defining characteristic (p. 208). In this
case, all of the participants participated in the PLA portfolio course in an adult education program at the Midwestern university. As part of their portfolios, they completed two essays in the course with the assistance of an instructor who guided them through the process. Following the course, the students submitted, at a minimum, one additional essay for review. Homogeneous sampling was used as the researcher had access to the participants that possessed similar traits needed in the study.

Unlike quantitative studies, where the researcher can make generalizations on his/her findings, qualitative research “aims to look at a ‘process’ or the ‘meanings’ individuals attribute to their given social situation” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 45). What the researcher sought to understand in this study were the learning experiences and sense of readiness that students had in participating in the PLA portfolio process, due to the nature of the participants’ backgrounds. In other words, the study drilled down to a level to understand individuality and uncover shared experiences in order to unearth issues to and improve the PLA process. “In qualitative research, a single case or small sample is selected because the researcher wishes to understand the particular depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam, 1998, p. 208). The three categories of selection studied were students between the ages of 25 to 65; students who had received college credit for completing the PLA portfolio; and students who had received a minimum of one semester of college completed following completion of the portfolio. It was the intention of the researcher to identify an equal number of male and female participants.

The participants attended the same university and participated in the PLA course either prior to the beginning, middle of, or upon completion of their degree program.
They may have entered into a program with prior credits from a different college or university or have chosen this university to complete all credits. A minimum number of three credits received from their portfolio were required to participate in this study.

To determine if students met these criteria, the researcher collaborated with the assistant director of the adult education program to identify eight to ten students, initially. The researcher sent the assistant director an invitation email to then send out to students who met these criteria. Students were instructed to contact the researcher directly if they wanted to participate in the study. The researcher asked the assistant director to resend the invitation email out to the group of students a total of five times within five months. Seven students responded and one student was unavailable at the last minute due to overseas travelling. The researcher responded to the students’ replies by email and phone in order to schedule interviews.

Prior to the interviews being scheduled, the researcher first obtained permission from the Midwestern university to use their student data for research and adhered to the college’s procedures in requesting data. The researcher then completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) form and submitted it to the university that was approving the study and supporting the researcher. Once approved, an introductory letter (Appendix A) was emailed by the researcher to the assistant director to send out to the group of students who met the criteria, inviting them to take part in the study. Once identified, the researcher explained to the students the purpose of the study, procedures of confidentiality, the purpose of an informed consent form, and the scheduling of their interviews.
When the interviews were scheduled, the researcher sent a confirmation email (Appendix B) and followed up with a reminder phone call the day before the interview. During the interview, the researcher asked the participants to read over and provide their signature on the informed consent form (Appendix C). Upon completion of the interview, the researcher gave each participant a thank you card in appreciation for their time and assistance with the study along with a gift card. The gift card was not an incentive and did not provide compensation to the participants, but rather was used as a thank you for participating in the study.

**Methods of Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to allow the conversation to flow more naturally and enable the participant to talk about what was of interest or important to him/her (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 102). This method revealed information that was not anticipated by the researcher. Students were guided by open-ended questions and had the ability to move the conversation in various directions. Open-ended questions enable participants to “best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings” (Creswell, 2011, p. 218). A semi-structured design allows the “conversation to develop, exploring new topics that are relevant to the interviewee” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, p. 102). As Merriam (1998) notes, less structured formats “assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (p. 74). In phenomenological research, two broad questions are asked that address the phenomenon. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher used a list of guided questions that
were asked in no particular order. This allowed the researcher to build on the conversation in a way that enriched what was being discussed, while exploring the topics that were previously identified. During the interview, probes were used as they allowed the researcher to elicit more information, clarify responses, and expand on ideas of the participant (Creswell, 2011).

The researcher conducted interviews beginning in fall 2015 in a location agreed upon by the researcher and participants. The interviews began with an overview of the study and how the interview would be conducted, the consent form, and confidentiality procedures. When the preliminaries were completed, the interviews began with general questions regarding the participants’ overall thoughts about the portfolio process and their level of success in the classroom before moving on to more concentrated or guided questions (Appendix D). The interviews were digitally recorded and lasted under 90 minutes. Following the interview, the recorded sessions were transcribed. Verbatim transcription was used as it provided the best source of information to code (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998).

**Data Analysis Procedures**

There are a couple of types of phenomenology methods that can be used to analyze data. Hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on the researcher’s interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences of participants; whereas, transcendental or psychological phenomenology’s focus is on a description of the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2007). This study is less focused on the interpretation of the researcher; rather, it focuses on the experiences of participants through their own lenses. In this study, the researcher used the transcendental approach and modified the van Kaam
method to analyze the semi-structured interviews. This particular method consists of twelve parts and four categories (van Kaam, 1966): analysis, translation, transposition, and phenomenological reflection. For this particular study, the method was modified by Moustakas (1994, pp. 120-121; Creswell, 2007) to include the elements listed below.

**Modified van Kaam Method of Analysis**

(Use the full transcription of each participant)

1. Listing and Preliminary Groupings: Horizontalization.

2. Reduction and Elimination.
   - Does it contain a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient for understanding it?
   - Is it possible to abstract and label it? If yes, it is a horizon of experience.

3. Clustering and Thematizing.

   - Are they expressed explicitly in the complete transcript?
   - Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed?

   (If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the participants experience and should be deleted.)

5. Construction of an Individual Textual Description for each participant of the experience - (Include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview).

6. Construction of Structural Description for each participant of the experience.
7. Construction of a Textual-Structural Description for each participant of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes.

8. Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole.

The initial coding began with “highlighting ‘significant statements,’ sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the person experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). Moustakas (1994) refers to this step as horizontalization. There is reduction and elimination following in order to then cluster the meanings into a theme, and then validation to finalize identification of themes. Textual description was then used to take the statements and themes and describe what the person experienced and structural description follows to identify how the person experienced it. There was also a description of the context or setting that influenced how the person experienced the phenomenon, called imaginative variation or structural description (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). Prior to viewing the group as a whole, Textual-Structural description takes in both the what and how a person experienced the phenomenon, incorporating themes. Finally, there was a description of the essence of the phenomenon, which is the common experiences of the participants (p. 61).

**Trustworthiness of Findings**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) affirm that trustworthiness of a researcher’s findings is crucial to establishing its worth. It involves establishing the following:

- Credibility: Confidence in the ‘truth' of the findings
- Transferability: Showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts
- Dependability: Showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated
- Confirmability: A degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest.

Techniques used to check the criteria can include triangulation, member-checking, peer debriefing, long term observations, thick descriptions, and auditing (Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). According to Merriam (1998), these techniques assist in determining the internal validity and reliability of a study. Researchers can use a variety of techniques or focus on one in order to address the trustworthiness of their study. Creswell (2007) identifies standards for assessing phenomenological research that consist of ensuring that the researcher has the following: an understanding of the tenets of phenomenology; a phenomenon that is clearly articulated; data analysis procedures such as those recommended by Moustakas (1994); the ability to convey the overall experience of participants, including a description of the experience and context in which it occurred; and reflectivity throughout the study.

In this case, the researcher chose to center on triangulation, which is “the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research” (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). Information is examined by multiple sources to support a theme. Creswell (2012) states that this form encourages researchers to develop a report that is both accurate and credible (p. 259).
In addition, the researcher used the form of “thick descriptions” to assist in external validity. This is “providing enough description so that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (Merriam, 1998, p. 211). Finally, the researcher conveyed a sense of reflectivity throughout the study, making note of any biases along the way and working to maintain neutrality.

**Biases**

In qualitative research, the researcher takes on the role as the primary instrument in gathering and analyzing data. As a human instrument, the researcher can take advantage of opportunities in collecting and producing meaningful information yet at the same time, enable personal biases to taint the information (Merriam, 1998). Within the interviews, researchers’ biases can interfere with how a participant responds and/or influences the questions being asked. The research, therefore, needs to ensure that the researcher is aware of what biases are brought to the table. Whether actual or perceived, this researcher acknowledged personal biases that might have existed in this study. In this study the researcher did not have any personal experience with participating in any type of PLA, including the portfolio; however, as an adult returning to college, there may have been prior notions of what it takes to be a successful student and how this could connect to participating in the PLA process. Another bias might have stemmed from the researcher’s personal life in that the majority of siblings went on to college as young adults and continued until degrees were reached. Their experiences may have been different from that of an adult, with or without any college credits, taking classes for the very first time. It was essential that comparisons between the personal life of the
researcher and that of the research participants stayed separated. The final bias comes by way of the experiences the researcher has had in working directly or indirectly with adult students at one Midwestern university and the preconceived generalizations of what their challenges might be. These generalizations could possibly influence how the participants were chosen and interviewed.

Having been employed at one Midwestern university, the researcher has had the opportunity to work with adult students in the areas of Residence Life and Graduate Enrollment in addition to assisting colleagues whose primary focus is adult students. The researcher’s doctoral internship was at the same university in the College of Professional Studies where the researcher created an online orientation program, drafted a new website, and identified support services for adult students. The researcher had ample opportunities to speak with faculty, staff, and students in Student Affairs and, within the College, to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced and needs assessed for these students. By the same token, the researcher had not had an opportunity to interview students who have participated in the PLA portfolio process; so this was a new area to explore.

**Ethical Considerations**

*Research ethics is a very challenging subject which the research candidate has to face, and which if not addressed correctly may cause the result of the research work to be considered tainted or even invalid.*

---Remenyi et al., 1998, p. 115

Ethical considerations are such an important part in research that professional ethical guidelines have been produced by various associations such as The American Psychological Association, The American Educational Association Ethical Standards,
The American Sociological Association Code of Ethics, and The American Anthropological Association’s Code of Ethics. In general, the standards that need to be taken into consideration when dealing with human subjects are confidentiality, coercion, and consent (Roberts, 2010).

Prior to working with the participants, the researcher obtained approval through the university’s Institutional Review Board. Once approval was obtained, the researcher worked with the Midwestern university to identify prospective participants. Upon finalization of the process and prior to the interviews beginning, the participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form (Appendix C) that discussed the procedures and any risks associated with being involved in the study. In addition, the researcher thoroughly reviewed confidentiality procedures with each participant. These include not using the participants’ names in the transcription and write up; changing characteristics, occupation, city, and ethnic background; reviewing audio tapes in the researcher’s home or private areas; and destroying audio tapes. Since the transcribing would take place using software, the participant was informed how his/her personal information would be kept confidential in using these resources (Roberts, 2010). Other ethical considerations that the researcher conveyed to participants were the commitment to remain unbiased, accurate, objective, and honest throughout the phases of the study. There was also an awareness not to generalize findings and to use verifiable methods.

**Concluding Remarks**

Research studies have identified benefits to students partaking in PLA programs; and yet many institutions still are not committed to implementing them; nor are students willing to utilize them (Travers, 2011). The methodology for this study, a qualitative,
phenomenological research design, was employed to identify factors that contribute to students’ assessment of their development and experiences in completing a portfolio. This study brought together data from adult students who have earned college credit for submission of a portfolio with a minimum of two essays at one Midwestern university. The data can then be used to assist institutions in reviewing their PLA programs from a different angle to increase the level of student participation and faculty involvement.
CHAPTER IV
PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS

This qualitative study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of non-traditional students who participated in a prior learning portfolio program. The main goal of this study was to explore the learning experiences and sense of readiness of adult students who participated in a prior learning assessment portfolio program. This chapter includes a profile and demographic information for each of the six participants interviewed and thematic analysis.

Introduction of the Participants

The six participants were identified as students who had completed the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) course, which included submission of a minimum of two essays. Students had been provided a Portfolio Handbook that laid out the guidelines for completing a portfolio. The portfolio consisted of a resume, autobiography, and two essays. Students had the ability to complete additional essays following completion of the course. The selection criteria included students who had taken the course and submitted at a minimum two essays at some point during their program. Two students took the course at the beginning of their program, prior to taking any college level classes; two students took the course midway into their program; and two students took the course following completion of their program requirements, leaving only general education
requirements. All but two students graduated from the university as early as June 2015, with the remaining students at the senior level. The majority of the students came from the same program, Applied Behavioral Sciences, with the exception of one student who was in the Management and Information Systems program. The participants of this research study were representative of the cultural makeup of the university. The ethnic makeup of the student body is 80% female and 44% African American/Hispanics/Asian-Pacific Islander/Native American. Out of the six participants, five were female, one was male, two were Black or African American, two identified as European, and the remaining two identified as White. Table 2 illustrates the demographic profiles of the participants.

Table 2. Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year of HS Grad</th>
<th>Level in College</th>
<th># of Essays</th>
<th>Took the PLA Course</th>
<th>Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Midway</td>
<td>Applied Behavioral Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashlee</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Af-Am</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>End</td>
<td>Applied Behavioral Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Beginning</td>
<td>Applied Behavioral Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toyia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Af-Am</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>End</td>
<td>Applied Behavioral Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Midway</td>
<td>Mgmt &amp; Information Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Eur</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Beginning</td>
<td>Applied Behavioral Science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To protect the participants’ identity, pseudonyms have been used instead of their actual names. I had the opportunity to sit down with each student to explore their lived experiences associated with completing their essays and understanding how these things connected to their college readiness and transformational journey.

**Maria**

Maria is a 53-year-old female and a senior student in the Applied Behavioral Science program. She has five classes remaining before graduating. Roughly three fifths of the way through her program, during a summer break, Maria took the PLA course. She mentioned that the intensity in the writing requirement did not enable her to take it during the semester when classes were in session. She wrote her portfolio essays on divorce, coping with trauma, volunteerism, and personal counseling. It was through writing her essays that Maria found the process to be “eye-opening,” “therapeutic,” “soul-searching,” and “relieving.” She relied heavily on feedback from her professor and peers in the PLA course and then from her sister. In doing so, Maria realized that at moments in her life, especially around a health scare, when she felt alone and afraid, there had been people around her who could have provided comfort.

My sister, who's the nurse, was also the one who was helping me with the proofreading and things, and she was also saying things as she was reading it, like why didn't you just say something? Why did you just assume the worst? You know, we could have quickly put your mind at ease.

In addition to feedback, Maria focused a great deal on time and her age when relating to her life circumstances. She felt that she needed to move quickly, as she was not “getting any younger,” and PLA could move her through swiftly. “Cranking out these credits, knock it out and be done” and feeling as though an advanced education is
out of reach because “... be real, I’m 53,” these were words that continued to be expressed.

She did feel, however, that her age gave her an advantage in that it enabled her to write more clearly and succinctly on the essay topics that she had chosen. It was through the writing that she was able to reflect critically on decisions that were made in her past and how she made it through tough times.

   You really start to think deep inside. I have a little different perspective now on my marriage than I had when it was happening, right? Because now I’ve had more relationships, I’ve had time to view other people's relationships, read some books, and now it's more like, hmm, it's a different perspective on it.

In part, this reflection mirrored a change in her self-worth.

   How much easier it was to allow myself to realize that what I did then was because of what I knew at the time, and you know, also how other people reacted at the time, whereas it would be totally different now because I know more, act differently, understand that what other people do is not a direct reflection on me.

   The take aways that were uncovered for Maria were not simply the credits or financial savings, as she had expected, but rather a more profound personal transformation that will carry her throughout life. When asked if she would participate in the PLA process again, she said “absolutely.”

   Ashlee

   Ashlee is a 38-year-old female and a June 2015 graduate of the Applied Behavioral Sciences (ABS) program. She completed her core course work for the program in 2011 but still had some outstanding general education credits that had to be fulfilled. She spoke of her appreciation for the ABS, proudly pronouncing her straight-A status; however, she said that she had become “burned out” and had left without
graduating from the program. It was during a time of turmoil at her place of employment with her supervisor that Ashlee decided enough was enough and that she needed to return to finish her degree. Prior to re-enrolling, Ashlee was not aware of the university’s PLA program; but, following re-admission, she was told by her advisor that this might be a better way to complete her remaining credits. Ashlee could not fathom that she would be able to write papers instead of sitting in classes, and she felt confident in her writing abilities. So, “anything to avoid seeing the classroom” and “receiving credit” were her only take aways. The difficulties that followed emerged in the way of identifying topics on which to write, needing to “expose yourself” when writing, and learning to connect the learning objectives of each topic with what she gained from the experience. Although she highlights the usefulness of receiving others’, especially faculty, feedback, Ashlee continuously draws on her insecurities in how the feedback is interpreted by her peers and sometimes herself. Since she took the PLA course solely online, one of her initial concerns was the ability of her classmates read the professor’s assessment of her paper.

I didn’t want anybody to know that I need to really work on this paper because I felt like she had a lot to say.

Yeah, so initially, I was like, ‘Oh my God, like everybody can see that I have to like really work on my paper?’ Her approach wasn’t inappropriate. I think I’m just like so private. . .

The essay topics that she chose, with the assistance of her professor, were unemployment, social services, and self-awareness/self-esteem. There were moments in her writing that emotions emerged due to the connectivity at that moment with the particular topic. For instance, when recalling events for her unemployment paper, it was at a time that she was still in a “battle” with her employer. Similarly, with the self-
awareness/self-esteem, Ashlee had discovered insecurities beginning at an early age when she was placed in kindergarten with her younger sister and forced to move through the grades together. The comparisons made between the two over the years became too much and by high school, her “insecurities were magnified.” Ashlee withdrew from classes in hopes of beginning college early in order to be one step ahead of her sister. What came next was a personal embarrassment of completing a General Education Development (GED) and then floundering in and out of junior colleges. It was only when she discovered the ABS program at the Midwestern university that she uncovered her niche and truly found what she had been searching for.

Clare

Clare is a 29-year-old female, and a senior student in the Applied Behavioral Science (ABS) program. She was enrolled in the PLA course in the summer prior to her ABS classes beginning. Clare is a stay-at-home mom who, until the completion of her essays, saw herself as a failure with little experience. She had gone to school for a number of things, including occupational therapy, physical therapy, business, photography, and marketing but had changed her mind “a million times.” As she summed it up, “I never really applied myself because I was never really passionate about anything. I was always between a different idea.” Clare is adamant that her family comes first and being a mom is a full-time job; however, she wanted to keep her “brain fresh” and sought out something that would engage her in “adult activities” one night a week. When she came across the ABS program, Clare was quite concerned that this might be another fad, so-to-speak, though the consequences could be greater due to it being a “big commitment” and “big financial burden.” Her fears in returning to school
might sound similar to those of nontraditional students going back after several years out. They consisted of fear of not fitting in, being the oldest student in class, “feeling stupid,” and wasting money and time if not successful. She had not known about the PLA program prior to enrolling at the university but did take a CLEP exam and participate in the course in order to get her feet wet before embarking on more difficult subjects.

Clare’s only anticipated take away for the course was receiving college credit, since she could not envision what else might have been gained. Once enrolled in the PLA course, Clare had a “horrible” time choosing her essay topics, mainly due to all the experience she had. She said that she could have written at length on the majority of given topics but that, this time around, she wanted to “gain more from the experience,” “gain knowledge,” and “learn.” Those phrases continuously emerged throughout the interview in one way or another; and it appeared to be this drive to learn something that, once achieved, gave her the confidence to move forward. Her three essays consisted of the following: marriage and family, coping with illness, and mental health. Part of the challenge for her in writing on these topics had to do with her inability to speak on an expert level, such as with mental health, in relation to her family’s addiction; or it was something that, on an emotional level, touched too close to her heart, such as her son’s illness. The success in having explored areas that she had to research and think “outside the box” became huge “confidence boosters” when they passed on the first try. The word “confidence” also emerged quite often, and Clare discovered that she had the ability not only to succeed in the PLA course but also the fear of taking difficult classes in the future, such as statistics, subsided.
In any other math class I would have been so scared, I wouldn't have even tried. I got a 98% in a really hard class for me, but it motivated me. I'm never going to use this again, I know that, but it's not a waste of time. I'm going to get what I can out of it. It was just this different perspective that it gave me about every experience that I encounter. It made me realize that every experience, you learn from it. And I didn't realize that before [prior to writing her essays].

It was with this confidence that Clare realized that her previous experiences had value and that her ability to succeed in the ABS program was intact, mainly because her perspective in taking on college courses had changed.

So many people go back to school with this, "I just want to finish." I just want to finish, that's all they care about is that end. What about everything in between? That's where you're gaining and I think that if I didn't have that, I would have been like everybody else and I would have just gotten by.

**Toyia**

Toyia is a 52-year-old female who graduated from the Applied Behavioral Science (ABS) program. She found her way to the university after a career as an X-ray technician in a hospital and then insurance agent. After being a stay-at-home mom for some time, she was seeking something different to do and made her way to a college fair where a recruiter introduced herself and offered information on the Midwestern university’s programs. Toyia held on to the information for a number of years and went to volunteer in the community high school for special needs. She was just shy of an associate’s degree in order to be employed and decided to look into the information given to her by the recruiter a number of years previously. Toyia sought out the recruiter, who still worked at the university, in mid-August and began taking classes less than one month later. She had not known (or remembered) about the PLA program until after she enrolled and had anticipated taking the course early on or throughout her ABS program.
Due to personal illness and the fear of writing large papers, Toyia choose to take the course at the end of her core classes when she could focus on it and one math class. One of the reasons she decided to participate in the PLA program was that it “eliminated her from going into the classroom.” Through feedback from her instructor and peers, she went from stating that writing is “scary” to “therapeutic.” She was able to gain confidence in her ability to express herself on paper and found that she “pushed” herself past comfort zones in the process.

I like that it pushed me and the way that it pushed me is that, it made me uncomfortable, it helped me to go to a place that I probably would've never taken myself. Now that I did, I'm really happy.

Toyia’s essay topics were on marriage and family, economics, and race and racism.

When speaking of her economics paper, she said:

I never even knew what the light or gas bill was, or I don't know what the household bills are. This class helped me to know to push myself to know. I was self-directing myself to go because really I never had to, I never wanted to and I think it was because I just didn't want to know financially what goes on in the house, I don't know. I just never wanted to know it.

It is through challenging herself that she now does not fear the unknown but rather goes to the library to check out books on the topic. She does not speak by way of opinion on a subject but rather by facts that she has retrieved in “books, not Google.”

Toyia stated that she was brought up in a cocoon, sheltered from much of the racism that she feels encompasses most African Americans in the United States. When the subject of gender-neutral restrooms for transgender students at the high school was discussed, Toyia was a bit mystified. In the past she would have shied away from understanding the
discussion and need for new restrooms, but now she plans to learn everything she can about transgender identity.

Nathan

Nathan is a 34-year-old male who graduated from the Management and Information Systems (MIS) program. He had attended a different university for two and a half years before leaving without graduating; he then worked for 10 years before deciding to go back to school and complete his degree. He had only come to know of the PLA program through one of his online classmates who was writing his own essays. Once learning about it, Nathan decided to go head first into it and take as many tests and write as many essays as possible to save time and money in completing his degree. He stated that, by doing so, he “…saved 42 weeks, almost a full year of school and full year of tuition.” Had he known that he could use his experience to gain college credit, Nathan said he would have returned to school much earlier. He chose to go the PLA course route, rather than take additional tests because, “I knew I could write the essays based off of experience.” Some of the tests that he might have taken would have required a good amount of studying compared to writing on familiar subjects. The essay topics he chose were program development, self-awareness/self-esteem, interviewing, and sales and marketing.

Nathan is very confident in his writing, but his concern was the new writing format that was spelled out in the Handbook.

I think the structure of the essay was the toughest. Not how to show what I had learned but to show how I learned in the format they were looking for…it was a different means of communicating something, a different style of not just saying here's what the facts are but actually explaining here's why I believe the facts are what they are and what I have learned in
the process...I knew program development, but I didn't explain what the decision process along the way was, why I came to that decision. It was just “here's the decision.”

In order to learn how to write in the new style, Nathan stated that the PLA class was very helpful. The professor handed out sample essays from previous classes, and there were explanations of how to write in the new format as well as interactive discussions from his classmates on the website. Once he understood what the professor was looking for in his essays, Nathan said he completed the last two on his own without any assistance from faculty, friends, or classmates. Regarding the assessment of his essays, he stated:

It makes me question more why are you doing it that way? Why wouldn't you do it this way? Just to see, especially if it's something I'm not familiar with instead of just taking someone for their word, and it's not that you don't trust them, but it's more of a you want to understand why. If I have to transfer that knowledge to somebody else, it's not just, “this is what someone else told me and they're the expert on it.”

I'm more reflective if anything, whether it's just for the essays I wrote or in general. I think I look at things a little bit differently as well when I'm doing something. I think more about why am I doing it that way and what did I go through in that process to reach that determination? I never really thought of it before.

Nathan’s take away from having submitted and passed his essays extends beyond simply gaining college credit and saving time and money. He prides himself in recognizing that what he has learned from his experiences is recognized by others as meaningful. “This wasn't just my experience, but my experience was what they would have been teaching someone if they went through a full class.”

Julie
Julie is a 65-year-old female who graduated from the Applied Behavioral Science (ABS) program. She began her ABS program and PLA program at the same time, obtaining credits for CLEP and DANTES exams, along with completing four essays in the course. Her essays were on death, project management, gerontology, and genealogy. Julie had a lot of confidence in her writing abilities; so writing was not a concern; nor was choosing topics, as she felt that she could speak on virtually all topics. The difficulties that came were in the way of the writing format or style required by the evaluators. Two of her essays, death and genealogy, were “kicked back.” Julie did ultimately recognize that what turned out to be emotionally charged subjects led her to writing too long and wandering off course. Julie spoke at length regarding her disapproval of the PLA program, especially the assessment of essays. She has a wealth of experience that she had been told would be given credit; but, after being admitted to her program, there appeared to be backtracking; and she received fewer credits than expected. She did not understand why certain experiences received credit but more substantial ones did not. For instance, she has a pilot’s license, was a ham radio operator, worked as a contractor in rehabbing her house, and was in project management for a number of years. The pilot’s license was not accepted, but her cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) certificate did gain credit. “Well, a pilot's license isn't really college level work,” they said. I'm like, “Well, the next time you sit back on an airplane and go somewhere, you might want to rethink that one.” One of the issues with not being able to accept some of her experiences, a university official said to her, was that the university did not have people with that experience to evaluate her work. “I could get bogged down in a big fight about this or just persevere and get it done.” She did just that and turned
her attention to the discoveries made in her genealogy essay. Her research uncovered four great-grandmothers, one of whom had a daughter who was kidnapped into the circus in 1902. Julie continued to dig and found the kidnapper along with some other interesting ancestors who made some incredible marks on the world. She lit up when talking about what she found and how she continues her research in this area. Julie was quite frustrated when the findings in her essay were not what the evaluators were looking for.

I don't know, I put in a few touchy-feely in the first two paragraphs and I literally whacked it in half. I just went and then went delete, delete and turned it in within an hour. It was good. Truthfully, it wasn't read, the first or the second version and I don't care, because I don't know who was reading it. She wasn't even a faculty member at my school.

Although she struggled with the assessment, Julie found the course and writing the essays to be helpful in changing her perspective. “I learned in a whole new area, and it isn't just new information. It's a whole different style of looking at things. Whole different paradigm of how we look at the world.”

**THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

All of the individuals interviewed continue on their own journey, one in which they travel slightly differently than prior to taking the PLA course. One of the underlying themes that emerged throughout was a change in perspective in how they see themselves and the world around them. It is within understanding who they are that they can move forward, viewing the world through different lenses. For Clare, she states:

It was just this different perspective that it gave me about every experience that I encounter. It made me realize that every experience, you learn from it. And I didn't realize that before.
This chapter is about exploring the individuals’ lived experiences having completed the PLA course that involved creating a portfolio, including a biography, resume, and a minimum of two essays from a list of topics. Following the course, students could continue writing essays and submitting them to evaluators for credit. All participants chose to submit between three and four essays in total. This chapter will shed light on how they perceived their experiences in writing the essays and any personal transformation that resulted from going through the process. Commonalities across the individuals’ experiences, along with themes and subthemes will be explored.

Following the conclusion of individual interviews and transcribing the audio recordings, the process of thematic analysis began with first reading over the interviews without looking for anything in particular. Next, identifying code words and phrases, along with potential themes, based on the research questions was developed. From there, an Excel sheet was used to record the words and phrases and potential themes. A second Excel tab kept a record of commonalities within potential themes that emerged between the individuals. The potential themes were refined further after reviewing all of the transcripts. The development of themes that emerged were from Moustakas’ (1994) method of analysis modified van Kaam. The analysis of data for each transcription involved seven steps: horizonalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, validation, individual textual description, individual structural description, and textual-structural description. From there meanings and essences of the experience were constructed to represent the group as a whole (pp. 120-121). The analysis seeks to answer the questions of what the person
experienced, how it was experienced, and the overall essence in which it was experienced.

**Document and Instructor Analysis**

In addition to coding the interviews, the researcher performed document and instructor analysis. This included the analysis of the website, Portfolio Handbook, course syllabi, and an interview with the assistant director of PLA and one of the professors of the PLA course.

**Findings by Themes**

The analysis of data was reviewed, and the findings are listed below in Table 3 as they pertain to each research question. This chapter will discuss the findings as they relate to the literature per each theme and research question.

**Table 3. Findings by Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Relevance to Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>QUESTION 1: What are students’ sense of readiness to participate in college classes following completion of a portfolio for earned credit?</td>
<td>CAEL (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wlodowski (1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA Process</td>
<td>QUESTION 2: What do students experience as barriers and accomplishments in completing a portfolio?</td>
<td>Kolb’s Learning Model in Fiddler et al. (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Perspective</td>
<td>QUESTION 4: How does the student perceive his/her success in the portfolio process?</td>
<td>Kamenetz (2011), Colvin (2012), Mezirow’s Ten Phases of Transformative Learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme One – PLA Process

A theme that emerged pertaining to research question two, **barriers and accomplishments in completing a portfolio**, was the PLA process. The subthemes included admission process, essay structure, and assessment.

*Admission Process*

The participants were asked how they heard about the PLA program and their experiences in the admission process of the program. All but one of them mentioned that it was their enrollment advisor who discussed the option after they were admitted into the university. The remaining individual heard about it from one of his classmates in an online course. The classmate was taking PLA online and completing his essays. Maria had known about it prior to enrolling because her sister had gone through the program years earlier, and it had been one of her deciding factors for attending the university.

Upon admission, she was given more updated information than her sister had when she attended. Other than Maria, the participants did not think that knowing about the PLA program would have been a factor in which school they attended, at least initially.

A couple of them did say that, had they known, they would have received great benefits as a result of attending the program; and it would have factored into their decision as to where they went to school. Since the marketing piece came after their admission into the university, participants said they only had vague ideas on what they would gain and did not really have any expectations other than to receive college credit. In addition, all six participants said they expected to save money, and four mentioned a savings in time.
“I did try to take as much advantage of this as possible, just from a dollars and cents point of view…This is a very small amount of money for a lot of credits when you consider the value,” said Julie.

“I was able to get that much in, you know, the short period of time with the least amount of money,” said Maria.

“It saved me 42 weeks, almost a full year of school and almost a full year of tuition,” said Nathan.

“I didn’t want to prolong being in school. I really wanted to be done with it,” said Ashlee.

Nathan said that, had he known about the PLA program earlier in his career, he might have returned to school earlier to finish his degree.

**Essay Structure**

A subtheme that continuously surfaced was difficulty in writing the essays.

Students received a list of topics from which they could choose for their essays.

The list of topics, which is included in the PLA Handbook, was given to the researcher by one of the participants. There is an overarching guideline on how to write the essays, and then each topic comes with its own instructions on what is needed to be included in the essay. There was a component of supporting documentation that needed to be submitted alongside each essay. Participants discussed having difficulties choosing topics because the supporting documentation piece was difficult to prove.

For the counseling paper, I needed to prove that I actually went to a counselor. My counselor is no longer, you know, I had her home phone number. I wasn't going to call her at home, she's retired, you know? So two of my sisters had to write letters saying that they knew that I had seen a counselor. You know, so gathering all this proof was tedious. (Maria)
First I would say that for me it was a little challenging trying to figure out what topics to write on. I don't have any kids, I've never been divorced, so it was like those things weren’t an option for me. You need supporting documentation so that made it more challenging because I needed something to support what I was talking about. (Ashlee)

Each essay topic contained examples of documentation that a student could submit. Although there were some concerns regarding the supporting documentation, students had a choice of seven fields, each with its own topics. The fields at the time of this study were communications, humanities, quantitative reasoning, fine arts, physical and life sciences, social sciences, and behavioral sciences.

The instructions included in the PLA Handbook for choosing an essay topic state that a student should have “significant adult life experience in this area.” Kolb’s Learning Model is used to instruct the student on what should be included in the essays (See Figure 7). The student should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What did you do? (Concrete Experience)

2. What did you notice? (Observations and Reflections)

3. What did you conclude as a result of what happened? (Abstract Conceptualization)

4. How did you apply your learning to future situations? (Active Experimentation)

The model of using one’s experiences to learn from is in line with Malcolm Knowles’ (1980) notion that adults learn in this way versus transmittal techniques. An Essay Writing Guide was included in the packet that listed ten steps to think about when writing an essay (personal communication, September 16, 2015). The ten steps are as follows:
1. State the purpose and provide background in an introductory paragraph. Include a summary of what learning concepts will be addressed in your essay.

2. Identify what you have learned from the experience. Some people find it helpful to make a list of what they have learned, or a graph or a web map to visually see the learning before they begin writing.

3. When addressing the learning you have acquired, state what you have learned, determined, acquired, surmised, etc. All learning items must be supported with personal reflection, comparing past and current learning situations and any shift or changes that have occurred in your way of thinking or doing as a result of what you’ve learned.

4. Use critical thinking and identify how the knowledge or skill was acquired. (Self-reflection, workshop, self-directed learning, observation, direct involvement, reflection on the experience, trial and error, reading discussion with someone, personal changes or shifts in the way you now view or think about a situation, etc.)

5. List the choices you made in your learning experience and why you made them.

6. Identify the positive and/or negative aspects that resulted from your choices.

7. Based on the learning from your experience, indicate what you would do differently or what you would change, if anything.

8. Indicate how your learning applies to other areas of your personal life or career (the application of new learning acquired).

9. Identify the relationship between each general concept and specific learning experience.
10. Conclude by summarizing your overall learning experience and any personal changes that have occurred.

Although there appeared to be mechanisms in place to instruct students specifically on how to write their essays, there were barriers in their ability to do so. That was difficult for me actually take learning outcomes and demonstrate what I know on paper. I thought that would be the easier thing to explain and I found that that was challenging. I knew I had a learning outcome but for whatever reason I had a difficult time trying to convey it on paper. (Ashlee)

Nathan stated, “I think the structure of the essay of the portfolio was the toughest (figuring out) not how to show what I had learned but to show how I learned in the format they were looking for.”

In order to learn how to write in the required format, the instructor provided examples of essays that met the criteria, had students read and comment on each other’s essays in class, and worked closely with students to provide feedback on their essays prior to submitting them for evaluation. In some ways, this seemed to help students comprehend what was needed in writing their essay.

The class itself was very helpful with it [understanding the writing format] in that regard. We got sample ones [essays] from previous classes. That was the first part to that class was explaining what the prior learning program was and getting samples of essays written and providing feedback and the interactive discussion on the website, on the class website to know what were other people reading. (Nathan)

The second paper I did after class went even faster because I knew the structure, the style, that they were looking for, and for me, it was more I had to make sure I didn't go off on too many tangents or go too deep into something. It wasn't a research paper. It wasn't that you have to explain every little detail of it. You have to explain what you learned and why. You don't have to explain the tiny little nuance behind something if it didn't really affect the outcome. (Nathan)
Assessment

The PLA course required students to complete two essays. The instructor assisted the students by providing feedback and peer feedback. Once the essays were completed, the students gave them to the instructor who then sent them to evaluators who were experts on the topics to be assessed. Students did not know the evaluator but did receive comments from that person when the essay was returned to them. The essay would either pass and receive credit or would be given back to the student with comments on how to revise and resubmit. Students could submit their essay to the evaluator up to two times. In the students’ handouts, they were provided an Experiential Essay Rubric used by the evaluators (personal communication, September 16, 2015). The topics being assessed were as follows:

1. Example of Involvement: Student thoroughly demonstrates personal involvement in the essay. Significant learning situations are addressed.

2. Reflection and Application: Student demonstrates the ability to analyze his/her personal experience and communicates what was learned and how that learning occurred. Student also connects knowledge from one experience to later personal application.

3. Learning Outcomes: Student demonstrates both the breadth and depth of learning competencies equivalent to a college-level course. Concepts related to the specific course content are identified and discussed.

4. Written Presentation: Paper has few spelling, grammatical, or usage errors that impact understanding. Formal college language is used, and composition is clearly organized.

The evaluators can check “Agree,” “Somewhat Agree,” or “Disagree” for each of the topics and then can indicate that full credit should be given or no credit should be given.

Recommendations include:

- No credit at this time. Possible credit with additional development or
verification per evaluator’s evaluation.

- No credit and no revision recommended (lacks substantial experience).

The evaluator also has room to type comments at the end.

The assessment used by the university coincides with CAEL’s suggestion in using the 10 standards in Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker (2006, p. xi) to assess prior learning. Fiddler et al. provide six steps that relate to the 10 standards for assessing experiential learning (pp. 47-48). The six steps fall in line with the rubric that the university is using to assess the essays.

*Table 4. Comparison of University’s Essay Rubric*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Six Steps that Relate to Assessment Standards</th>
<th>University’s Experiential Essay Rubric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identification:</strong> Review experience to identify learning that is potentially creditable or appropriate for credentialing</td>
<td>Example of Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Articulation:</strong> Relate proposed credit to academic, personal, and professional goals</td>
<td>Reflection and Application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Documentation:</strong> Prepare evidence to support claim for credit</td>
<td>Required to support student’s learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measurement:</strong> Determining the degree and level of competence achieved</td>
<td>Learning Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation:</strong> Determining the credit equivalency</td>
<td>Full credit/No credit Credits range from 3-5 depending on the topic of the essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transcription:</strong> Prepare a useful record of results</td>
<td>Takes place per month</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four participants had their essays pass on the first try. One student had to revise two papers. All six students did say that, if they had been required to revise their papers, they would have persisted and resubmitted again. The reason for this was they were
determined to complete their program. There were mixed reviews on the essay assessment process. Nathan stated, “There was some of that satisfaction that knowing not just that I'd get credits but someone who works in that field and understands that field agrees with what I've learned along the way.” Ashlee appreciated the feedback from her evaluator and felt that it validated her decision to enroll in the counseling program in order to stay in her current field.

  Actually the feedback from that evaluator was lovely because she recommended that I enroll in NLU counseling program which I was thinking about doing. I had talked to someone about it but I was still like in the balance. When she reviewed my essay and gave me that feedback, it kind of validated, like maybe I should have stayed in this field because she obviously saw something within the paper. (Ashlee)

On the other hand, Julie felt that the evaluators were less interested in her work, most likely did not read the essays, and were from different universities (which meant not experts in the field).

  …so when it [death essay] got kicked back, I put in about ...I don't know, I put in a few touchy-feely in the first two paragraphs, and I literally whacked it in half. I just went and then went delete, delete and turned it in within an hour. It was good. Truthfully, it wasn't read, the first or the second version and I don't care, because I don't know who was reading it. She wasn't even a faculty member at my school. (Julie)

Theme Two – Feedback

  Another theme that emerged regarding research question two related to barriers pertaining to feedback. When the students spoke about feedback, some concerns that emerged were fears of being judged by others and personal emotions that arose from the feedback. Nonetheless, there was also appreciation for the feedback as it assisted students in tackling their own additional essays following the conclusion of the course.
All of the participants said they used their instructor and peers for feedback while in the PLA course. Five students stated that they worked solely by themselves on additional essays after the course ended; however, Ashlee did say that, as a result of mismanaging her time, she should have utilized her professor. She still managed to submit her essays on time, and they passed on the first try; but Ashlee felt that this resource was available and could have assisted her along the way instead of trying to go it alone. In total, the students felt that the course gave them the groundwork to go off on their own in completing additional essays without the assistance of the instructor. Julie said that, although she worked on her own with the exception of research assistance from nonacademic people, she could have asked her instructor for guidance if needed. Maria was the remaining student who stated she utilized assistance from her sister, who primarily helped with proofreading. For the most part, there was a tone of confidence in the students’ decisions to work on their own, especially since they seemed to have had an overall good experience with their professor. Clare said, “My instructor was awesome. I felt like I didn't even need anyone else because she was so on her game.”

Feedback from peers and the instructor in the course had mixed reviews. Maria, Ashlee, Clare, and Toyia said they were private people who did not want to share the feedback they received from the professor on their essays with the class. Since they were taking the online course and using an online system, the professor had students post their papers for other students to comment on. The professor then wrote comments on the students’ essays where other classmates could see. This format was to assist students in the learning process by sharing their thoughts on others’ papers and seeing comments from the professor for other students that they could then use to help themselves. The
fear of having classmates view their work and professor’s comments about their work was that they would be judged. “Just being a private person I just felt like, Oh God, now I’m going to be judged, or something like that,” said Toyia. Ashlee sums it up by saying “Yeah, so initially I was just like, Oh my God, like everybody can see that I have to like really work on my paper. Her [the professor’s] approach wasn’t inappropriate. I think I’m just like so private.” Maria, on the other hand, thought that having her classmates and their instructor view her essays and provide feedback was helpful. “In writing the paper, having other people read it, having my sister [read it], now that I can talk about it [health scare] without feeling like I'm going to be looked at in a different way, that's helped a lot.” Nathan also was at ease with the process of peer and instructor feedback. In reviewing those others [classmates’ essays] and seeing what other people reacted to and think. I was really looking at the essay from this perspective, and someone else looked at it from a completely different viewpoint. When I write my essay, I've got to make sure I cover both of those. I think learning that, that helped a lot. (Nathan)

One of the learning objectives/outcomes in the course syllabus instructed students to, “Read and review essays submitted by classmates, providing feedback and demonstrating the ability to communicate effectively and discerning a respect for diversity.” The Class Introductions segment on the same page reiterates students’ responsibility for posting questions and answers as well as giving feedback to one another. It is not to say that, although students should have been previously made aware of the criteria for online discussions, they would not still have had concerns about them. Other than Clare and Julie who took the PLA course at the very beginning of their programs, the remaining students had been familiar with online course work from previous classes. At the same time, the argument could be made that this particular
course required students to “expose themselves,” per Ashlee, with sensitive subject matter.

I think I was able to do [express the learning outcome on paper] in other classes but the difference was the topics wouldn’t be so sensitive. I think that’s what it was. That because I really am talking about sensitive topics and that was more the challenge than other papers that I had to do before. I don’t recall my other papers being like so sensitive. (Ashlee)

Ashlee mentioned that, to her, the PLA course was a sensitive class that required students to expose themselves. As a result, this might be a class where emotions could run high due to fear of being judged by peers, instructor feedback, difficulties with the writing format, and even the assessment process. It is not to say that students would not feel the same emotions in non-PLA classes, but as Nathan mentioned, “With tests, it is more straight-forward.” The PLA Handbook talks through the differences between experiential and classroom learning, where one is deductive (traditional learning) and the other inductive (experiential learning). The traditionally educated student has a larger breadth of theory and smaller depth of application than the experientially educated, who is the opposite. The goal is to have a balance of theory and application. The student in an experiential classroom has a breadth of the application of concepts in real life and a “deeper understanding of how a particular concept is applied.” One could deduce that, with the depth of knowledge on a particular subject and how it is applied in real life, it may produce some reaction, especially if the subject is emotionally charged. In Maria’s case, bringing up and sharing a health scare was difficult but also helpful in sharing it with others.

I practically cried when I wrote the paper because as I thought about it, more and more memories came to me about how I really felt, and how I truly didn't want to live, and what if I had infected my daughter, which
was even worse than if I was sick. You know, being able to write about things like that, was helpful, and helpful if I was going to counsel someone else because now I know how I did behave, and how I should have behaved.

Theme Three – Perception and Confidence

In research question number one, What are students’ sense of readiness to participate in college classes following completion of a portfolio for earned credit?, the main themes that emerged were students’ own perception of their readiness and confidence in the course.

A student’s readiness to take on college course work and persist through to completion in a shorter amount of time is in line with CAEL’s 2010 study. The participants were able to complete their requirements faster and with fewer costs. At the same time, the literature speaks to students’ ability to persist in college course work; however, two participants participated in the PLA course at the end of their program. They needed additional credits, which the PLA program took care of; but according to their responses, they would have persisted because of their determination to get their degree. All participants mentioned their initial take aways in going through the PLA program was to receive credits in a shorter amount of time. Once again, this is in line with what CAEL (2010) discovered.

Three students cited their age as a factor in persistence as they were not getting any younger. “You know, my expectations were, I'm going to crank these credits out, you know, and not spend too much more time or money because I'm 53,” said Maria. “I was told basically by an enrollment specialist that it would be very hard to do things
online and it was hard to come back into school and I should take it slow…As I mentioned before, I'm 65 years old. I have no interest in taking it slow,” said Julie.

In addition, five students did not know that PLA existed at the time of their choice in attending a school. Their determination to take on college courses and persist initially did not have anything to do with PLA. “Yeah, especially at my age. For sure knowing about PLA would’ve made a difference in school choice,” said Toyia. Ashlee completed her ABS program in 2011 but still had some remaining general education requirements to fulfill. She became burned out and left school without knowing about the PLA program and the potential advantages in completing her requirements faster than she expected. It was only following discord in her life relating to employment that she decided to re-enroll and take the additional classes in order to complete her requirements. Upon re-enrolling in 2014, she was informed of the PLA option and chose to go that route. To what extent, then, did PLA play a role in the persistence of the participants?

*Students’ perception of readiness*

The six students had a perception that PLA did not assist in their preparation to take college course work. At the same time, Clare declared that participating in PLA helped prepare her for upcoming classes.

What if I fail...that was just a waste of all these resources. Telling my husband I was going to go back to school...that's a big commitment, it's a big deal, it's a big financial burden. I had all of those fears combined together. I think when I first took that [PLA] course over the summer, it empowered me. I felt like I can do it. Instead of just jumping right into the program, I think I would have been fine, but I think it would have taken a lot longer, instead of just one summer.

There was an air of confidence in that students felt that they came into the PLA program already motivated and able to persist regardless of the hurdles they might
encounter. Ashlee said that, if she had taken the PLA course on the front end, she would have been overwhelmed due to the writing requirements; whereas, Nathan said that, if he had known about the PLA on the front end, he would have been able to “knock out more classes in a shorter amount of time.” Again, he tended to mention the savings of time and money rather than the gains of PLA beyond these two elements. On the other hand, some participants did state that PLA had a hand in developing their ability to be self-directed, improve writing skills, and be less fearful of upcoming classes that were perceived as challenging. “I think this is a great way to get back into academic writing, because it forces you to discipline your critical thinking, to hone it,” said Julie.

….it gave me the perspective. Even the Econ class that I'm in, I had to take, I hate. Statistics was that one Gen Ed that I needed to take. That class scared the crap out of me, but because I had this different perspective of, you know what, this will pass, and what I'm going to gain from it is going to be huge. Even though it sucks and I hate it, I'm going to know how to do this now and I'm going to be confident. I had this different...it's just a different perspective that I've had. (Nina)

Maria said that the class is structured in such a way that a student has to be self-directed in order to be successful.

This whole program has been, very self-directed, very much, you know, where the professor says, you know, there's really no studying, test-taking. It's pretty much, read these pages in the book and write a paper on this. We're going to discuss this in class, you need to be able to...You know, that kind of thing, so the difference between myself and some of the other students, some of the other students have never even bought the books, never read the books.

Confidence

Previously it was spoken about the confidence students had in their writing abilities coming into the program. “No, I did it [writing her third essay] all on my own. But I'm a very confident writer,” said Clare. “The writing comes pretty quickly to me,”
said Nathan. “PLA did not help with the writing. I had lots of experience with other classes,” said Toyia. Regardless of the timing of when they took their PLA course--Clare at the beginning, Nathan in the middle, and Toyia at the end--it appears that PLA was not needed to help them improve their writing or get over any writing insecurities.

Where all six participants struggled initially was connecting their experiences to the learning outcomes.

Although PLA did not appear to be a factor in their writing abilities, it was spoken of as something that assisted in other ways. For instance, Maria mentioned that it did help with time management in such a way that she had to figure out how to write 10 pages. She knew she could not do it just sitting down; so she carved out time every day; and, when she thought of things to add to her paper during the day, she wrote them down in notes. Clare spoke about how taking the PLA course at the beginning gave her great confidence in starting her program in the fall.

When I walked in the door in the fall starting my program, I was confident…all three essays I got full credit on the first try. That gave me a confidence boost.

I already knew how to use the whole online system, which I was nervous about that too; so the first day of class I was helping other people. I had another confidence boost, I can do this.

Each essay that I submitted it got me back in writing mode. Even watching my first essay to my third essay, they all got increasingly better. Then when I was starting school I just felt like I could do this. I had that confidence.

I think when I first took that course over the summer, it empowered me. I felt like I can do it.

Just the fact of sitting down and writing a 10-page paper and the success of completing that. After I looked at how much I gained; normally I would be like, “I have to write a ten page paper that sucks.” After I did that and I
saw how much I gained from it, I'm no longer afraid of writing these 10-page papers.

Although the initial reaction to whether or not PLA was a factor in assisting with college readiness was negative, it does appear that in some ways it did assist students who took the course in the beginning to middle of their program with writing, time management, and preparation with college classes.

**Theme Four – Writing Critically**

When the participants were asked what it meant to write critically on their experiences, pertaining to research question number three, words such as “soul-searching,” “therapeutic,” and “digging deep” emerged. Toyia even found that her memories were producing an emotional reaction when writing.

“Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which beliefs have been built... Learning may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action” (Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 1). There are three types of reflection that can lead to transformational learning: content reflection, thinking about the actual experience; process reflection, thinking about ways to deal with the experience; and premise reflection, examining one’s one beliefs, values, and assumptions about the experience (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 145, Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 21). In the PLA program, students are taken through a series of questions in the PLA Essay Writing Guide that flow through these three types of reflection. Students are assessed based on their ability to analyze their experience and communicate what they learned and how it was learned.
In Nathan’s interview he stated that, as a program developer, he made programs but did not explain what the decision-making process was along the way and why he came to a particular decision. In his case, writing critically meant the following:

When you take other courses in school, you read through a book or a textbook or they say here's the process. You study and learn here's what the process is, but they don't always explain how you got to that process. It's more of a just trust us that this is what you should be doing as opposed to if you do it this way you're going to uncover these obstacles, if you do it this way you're going to uncover these. It's not just what you learned and why you're doing it, but it's what you learned and why you're not doing it a different way.

Having the ability to broaden one’s mind and challenge assumptions and beliefs requires thinking beyond a surface level. Two participants spoke about requiring themselves to “dig deep” in order to touch learning that they were not even aware of. Ashlee and Maria spoke of changing their outlook on how others in their experiences acted through writing. “As I wrote the essay, it helped me understand actually her [supervisor] and what her insecurities were and why she felt threatened with me. Before I was just like angry, like this is not fair.” (Ashlee)

I'm going to say with the portfolio in the class there's no surface thinking, everything is critical thinking because you have to find a subject that you can relate to, what you've learned from it. The criteria is like four different things, so you have to critically think. You can’t just talk off the top of your head, you have to sit down, you have to think about the situation, you have to think about how effective or impacted you and your family, and then what you've learned from it and from wherever you learn how did it take you to the next level? (Toyia)

As I started to actually type, I really had to think, wow, did I really behave that way? Once you have to start typing it, and really thinking, I said this, he said that, I did this, he did, you know that kind of thing, you really start to think deep inside. I have a little different perspective now on my marriage then I had when it was happening, right? I think that's kind of
what I mean, you know, when you're writing, you really have to think. You know, you can't just schmooze it over, it starts coming back in a different way than it had before. (Maria)

Often part of critical reflection is going to a place that is uncomfortable and, as Jarvis (2006) noted in his Transformation of the Person through Experience diagram, an adult confronts the experience using the whole person (body, mind, self, life history). Emotion, reflection, and action, are undertaken for change to take place. A person’s history that is seen as safe and without much discord may find the need to be challenged in ways that as never before. Toyia discussed growing up in a safe environment where she did not truly recognize, as a Black woman, racism in America or even what it meant to be a minority. She did not recognize these things not because she was uneducated, but rather because it was more comfortable to ignore what others were going through. This was not her experience with all subject matter, but Toyia did see this play out regarding minority issues.

What that topic did was it forced me to go somewhere that I probably would have never ever, ever inquired about, or never even did research. I'm like, "I read constantly, but I would never go and read anything like that." This class challenged me to just go and learn something new that I wouldn't know. I like that it pushed me and the way that it pushed me is that, it made me uncomfortable, it helped me to go to a place that I probably would've never taken myself. (Toyia)

Often, a part of the critical reflection process is therapeutic. Clare said that, when she began writing her educational biography, which is the very first part in the portfolio, she easily thought that her strategy would be to write and delete out the “stupid stuff” until she got it back down to the required six pages. What she discovered was that her biography is the person that she is today. She exclaimed that, “…everything does matter!” when talking about her difficulties in simply deleting her life away. This proved
to be her first round of therapy in so many ways. Toyia mentioned critical thinking and critically writing as therapeutic, going hand-in-hand.

I would say it’s therapeutic. I know that word kind of scares people, but it definitely will help you have some type of insight about yourself. When I wrote my paper, there were things I was like, “I didn’t even realize I thought like that.” When I see it on paper or even if I go back and proofread something like “I didn’t realize I was so rigid with certain things” or “This is an alignment of what I thought.” (Ashlee)

The Volunteerism paper, the more I wrote that, the more I realized I actually volunteer my time, a lot. That was very, that made me feel really good, and I didn't even put everything in it because it could only be 10 pages. I couldn't even write about everything, so that made me feel good. (Maria)

Ashlee discussed her ability to do this by way on connecting with family and friends.

I needed to dig down into the like, “How did it [issues at work] affect my self-esteem? What did I do to pull my self-esteem up?” She [instructor] made me dig deep into those types of things…I did this by being self-reflective, it was talking to former co-workers that I had built relationships with, family members who knew what was going on along the way. It was a lot of just talking to friends and family, self-reflecting, definitely a lot of self-reflecting. Being honest with myself like, “Okay, did you do all that you could do to make this thing work out? What were some things you could have done differently?” It’s hard to do that because sometimes you can’t be that objective with yourself. It was definitely self-reflecting and talking to people who were still working there who understood my issues.

The difficulty in critical reflection is then to be able to put into words what you know to be true. Previously noted in the Essay Structure were comments participants made pertaining to their difficulties in doing this precisely. “Their learning challenge is to integrate that knowledge into the knowledge asked of them by the institution” (Conrad, 2008, p. 143). This is typically a challenging task as they do not always know how to write an academic description of their knowledge (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). Ashlee had
spoke about her efforts as a combination of feedback from her instructor and guidelines in the PLA handouts.

That’s why the professor was great because I would think that I explained it well enough and it’s like no. Learning outcomes, how did you feel about this? How did you feel about that? I would read my paper and say “Well, I did say” then I realized “You know what, I really didn’t expound on it as much.” That’s what I found challenging in the paper was the learning outcome. Which again I thought would be the easiest thing because it makes you really dig down to sort out, “Okay, what did you learn?” You just can’t say, “Well, next time I know not to do x, y, and z.” It’s like, how would you deal with the situation if you were to approach this stuff again? It made me think about that. (Ashlee)

**Theme Five – New Perspective**

The main theme that emerged from students’ assessment of what they had learned after completing their portfolios, research question four, was a new perspective on who they are, how to deal with others, and in leading their way through life. Kamenetz (2011) mentions that PLA programs enable students to think about what they have learned and how it fits into their future goals. Colvin (2012) mentions that reflecting on experiential learning enables students to become more aware of future learning opportunities and essentially go looking for learning (p. 88). This can be seen in the participants’ responses. Toyia, for example, felt sheltered from various aspects in her life, whether it pertained to racism among African Americans in the United States or simply understanding the finances in her house. There was a fear of learning about these things; however, as a result of the class, she now tackles uncomfortable issues head on.

They're talking about getting gender-neutral restrooms at schools now. This talk has been going on, to be honest with you, for like three and a half years; and I'm just like, whatever. Be you [transgender]. I don't have anything against you but I don't even want to know about like what really happens. You know what I'm saying. I don't know if it's my age, I don't want to know like really what that means to be transgender. Now I'm okay.
with it and I just said this morning, "You know what? Yeah, we need to learn more about it. We really do, we need to learn more about it." When I returned my books, I'm okay with it and I will be getting a book on it. I don't really like to use the Internet as much I like books. Instead of me Googling it, I'm just going to go and buy a book and then I can understand it better. (Toyia)

Toyia experienced a transformation that took her through Mezirow’s 10 phases of transformative learning. Not everyone in the study had experienced all 10 phases, though it is not a requirement that they do in order to experience transformative learning (Kitchenham, 2008). Only two participants moved through all 10 steps. The remaining students still discovered a new perspective and the capacity to view the world in a different light. Table 4 indicates each step in Mezirow’s Theory of Transformational Learning (TTL) that each participant experienced in the PLA program.
Table 5. Participant Transformational Learning Phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mezirow’s TTL</th>
<th>Julie</th>
<th>Maria</th>
<th>Ashlee</th>
<th>Clare</th>
<th>Nathan</th>
<th>Toyia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process begins with disorienting dilemma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learner self-examines feelings of guilt or shame</td>
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<td>Learner examines unexamined assumptions</td>
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<td>Learner realizes others share feelings</td>
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<td>Learner explores options for new roles and actions</td>
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<td>Learner plans course of action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learner obtains skills and knowledge needed to put plan into action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learner begins to try out new roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learner develops confidence and competence in new role</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learner incorporates new perspectives into self</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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*NOTE: Table material adapted from Mezirow, 1978.*
Ashlee’s disorienting dilemma played out in her fight with her employer in the courts. It was the “battle” that she was in with her supervisor over harassment complaints that propelled her to return to school and finish her degree. Each step in the process brought her one step closer to being free of the doubts that she was harboring. She went from questioning her actions and what she could have done differently to reflecting on the possibility that she did everything possible to correct the issue and it was possible that the issue was with her supervisor.

As I wrote the essay, it helped me understand actually her and what her insecurities were and why she felt threatened with me. Before I was just like angry, like this is not fair. As I wrote the paper, it helped me release some of that anger that I was feeling towards that. (Ashlee)

There was a sense of loss that she was feeling in leaving the job; and, through her writing, she discovered that the feeling was connected to insecurities that she has had since childhood.

It wasn’t just only I missed working with the kids, I missed working with co-workers. It took an impact on my self-worth. Which I really wasn’t connecting because I thought, Well, I don’t need to be there because this job is crap so to speak. (Ashlee)

Ashlee recognized in the end that she does not communicate as well as she thought she did and should have trusted her gut instinct in working out issues with her supervisor. She now researches jobs in ways that she never did before, such as looking at what employees and critics are saying about the company. In addition, she recognizes, when conversing with people if she is holding back or trying to take control of the conversation.
Clare did not move through all 10 phases but still discovered a confidence beneath the surface that was always there but never nurtured. Her disorienting dilemma was a tremendous fear concerning her ability to succeed in returning to school. There was much at stake, and she felt that there was no room for error. Each time she received positive feedback on her essays, Clare received a “confidence boost.” It was her determination to get something out of the essay that drove her to utilize feedback from her classmates and instructor as well as researching the topic. With each essay that passed on the first try, her confidence soared. It was also through the essays that Clare realized that, although she has worked in a number of industries and taken some classes in various things here and there, it was not all in vain. Her experiences do matter. She has something to offer. She rejects her old way of knowing; and her beliefs, ideas, and values are transformed.

Maybe because I had always just changed my mind so many times, and I could never decide what I wanted. I always felt like I was wasting my time. I always felt like, "I just wasted all of those stupid medical classes, what did I learn from that?" Do you know what I mean? I always felt like I just wasted two years of my life doing that, now I wasted ..and I'm never going to use any of that. That's how I looked at my educational background. It was a waste because I could never finish anything, I changed my mind too much, I never knew what I wanted to do, and then I felt like once I sat down and broke down all my life experiences, educationally, none of it was a waste. What was I thinking? I learned this whole time. So I didn't get a degree and I don't have the whatever...maybe I could have been a doctor by now if I would have stayed on one track. But I gained a ton, I learned a ton, none of it was a waste. That's why it had such drastic impact on me. Instead of being embarrassed of always changing my mind, it was all good. All of it. I have so much knowledge. I know exactly what I don't want to do, I know what I love to do. I think it took me sitting down, writing that bio and writing those essays about my life experiences to realize that none of my education was a waste of time. I think it helped me a lot. (Clare)
Maria did not have a disorienting dilemma; however, she did move through the stages to find a new sense of self. It was in writing her essay on divorce that she considered the possibility that her actions back then might not be justified. What she contemplated was the possibility that, at that time, at that age, this is what she knew to be true. “…what I did then was because of what I knew at the time, and you know, also how other people reacted at the time; whereas, it would be totally different now because I know more, act differently, understand that what other people do is not a direct reflection on me.” In addition, she worked through the effects of the fact that she was alone in dealing with her divorce or illness. One of her methods in obtaining knowledge was talking with family and friends extensively regarding her issues. She found that she was the only one isolating herself from others rather than turning to them for support. “In writing the paper, having other people read it, having my sister, now that I can talk about it without feeling like I'm going to be looked at in a different way, that's helped a lot.” Her confidence in accepting her life as it is and recognizing the control that she has to make changes grew as a result. Maria’s form of knowing underwent a transformation and moved from a place of “subject” (the thinking and feeling that has control over us) to “object” (the thoughts and feelings we say we have and for which we can take responsibility) (Mezirow, 2000).

I did a lot of soul searching and a lot of...After the first few things happened to me, I got a new motto. Never say never, and never say always, because I have found that you can't do that. As your life changes and progresses, what you can and can't do changes, and what you should and should not do changes, so you can't say I'm never going to do this, or I'm always going to be this way because I found that that doesn't work, and writing these papers really solidified that for me. You know, you just can't, life is too fluid to be rigid about never doing this, always doing this. I think that's something that it really, writing these papers really helped
with that, so when I hear people say, oh never, you know, I...don't say that, you know, because you don't know what's going to happen to you a year, or two, or ten from now. Your total perspective changes when it's you, or when it's a loved one, or you know, after you've lived life a little bit more. (Maria)

Nathan and Julie appeared to travel through the stages the least out of all of the participants. There was not a disorienting dilemma that propelled them into the transformative learning, and Julie focused on frustrations with the PLA process as a whole. Her essay on death was sent back for revisions due to the assessors wanting her not to include deaths experienced prior to the age of 18 years old. Julie was quite upset since she wrote on the loss of her mother at the early age of 15 and felt this was a crucial element that she should have the ability to reflect on. “I said, No, that’s all right. We’ll just kill off the grandparents and the other people. We’ll write what they want to hear which is...This kind of stuff, to me, was nonsense, but again, not worth discussing.” If anything, Julie was disillusioned by the university not accepting experience as PLA credit and in the ways they assessed her essays. She recognized that her learning from various jobs undertaken throughout her life was extensive, and she could not understand why others were unable to see it. What Julie gleaned from the experience of writing her essays may be construed to some degree as transformational; it changed her outlook on life in how she views the world now versus when she was younger. In all likelihood, however, it also could appear to be adding to her existing knowledge, which would produce only informational learning. Did her “form” actually transform? She appears to have a different outlook to an extent; but, according to Mezirow (2000), this can take place without a complete transformation. It is possible that her frustrations with the university are masking her ability to express how her form transformed. Kitchenham
(2008) notes that content reflection can take place involving a transformation of a meaning scheme, in other words, thinking back to what was done in the past and considering a new approach. Julie does consider that how she views her world now at 65 is different from when she was 40. Although Mezirow might not consider this a complete transformation, it may take on a straightforward transformation if a meaning scheme was transformed (p. 115).

A 10 year old loses the person that's nearest and dearest to them in their whole life, that impacts you forever. It really, really does. How you look at it, as I said before, when you're 40 reflecting on it is different than how it looked at the time that it happened. No, I think this is an incredible thing...There's a discipline to it of looking at yourself through different kind of little topical lenses if it were. (Julie)

Although Nathan did not move through the 10 stages in the same way or to the same degree as some of the other participants, he still discovered a new way of communicating in the end. Nathan jumped into the PLA program after a classmate, who was writing his essays, mentioned it to him. There was not any discourse; but, through his writing and getting feedback from his classmates, Nathan found that communicating is not always about the facts but can include the process. As a result, he is more reflective in his outlook on life and in how he connects with people. Nathan went from what he knew to how he knows, which is transformational learning. It is less about whether he went through all steps, as this may not happen (Kitchenham, 2008); but rather, whether he was able to alter his beliefs and increase his capacity for abstract thinking. He shifted from accepting the values and expectations of society to self-authoring in making choices about external values and expectations according to his beliefs. Once again, this may not be a complete transformation; but his process reflection
involved learning new meaning schemes, thus producing a transformation of meaning scheme, equaling a straightforward transformation (Kitchenham, 2008).

I'm more reflective if anything, whether it's just for the essays I wrote or in general. I think I look at things a little bit differently as well when I'm doing something. I think more about why am I doing it that way and what did I go through in that process to reach that determination? I never really thought of it before. It was more of...You think of it like...You write why you wouldn't touch a stove when it's hot. You learn. Someone will tell you don't touch it because the flames are hot and you'll burn yourself, but unless you actually touch it and learn it. I think that was more of a different perspective looking on it, and even if it's not something I'd write an essay about going forward, it's more I think of things a little bit more that way. (Nathan)

**Concluding Remarks**

The students who participated in the PLA program did experience a change in themselves. Some found their confidence level increased, while others discovered a new perspective in how they view others and the world around them. They found a new voice as a result of “digging deep” within themselves. It was through peer and instructor feedback that they developed the ability to reflect on their experiences critically. Although the participants do not attribute the PLA program as having an influence on their readiness, their stories of improvements in time and stress management, ability to write more effectively, and handle difficult classes prove otherwise.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the learning experiences and sense of readiness of adult students who participated in a prior learning assessment portfolio program that supports persistence and academic success in a private, non-denominational, university in the Midwest. I sought to understand the students’ experiences in participating in the PLA portfolio process, thereby creating greater clarity in the students’ assessment of what they learned, their preparedness to take future courses, and their ability to think and reflect critically, leading to transformational learning. The primary research that exists on PLA speaks to student persistence and motivation and program assessment. The primary research conducted on the impact of PLA and the learner has been anecdotal (Thomas, 1995), and there is a lack of evidence in what adults find meaningful from their experiences with PLA. A summary of the study and discussion of the results are provided in this chapter. This chapter also will include a section on implications, recommendations for practice as well as for further study, and reflections on the research.

Summary of the Study

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach, specifically a social constructivist perspective and semi-structured interview research design. The six
participants in this study provided rich descriptive data describing their lived experiences in participating in the PLA program.

The main research questions being explored were as follows:

QUESTION 1: What are students’ sense of readiness to participate in college classes following completion of a portfolio for earned credit?

QUESTION 2: What do students experience as barriers and accomplishments in completing a portfolio?

QUESTION 3: How does completing a portfolio affect a student’s perception of his/her ability to think and reflect critically?

QUESTION 4: How do students perceive their success in the portfolio process?

Chapter Two highlighted PLA programs through six sections that guided this study, from the historical background of PLA to its impact on higher education and Mezirow’s Transformative Theory. The second section discussed andragogy and its role pertaining to PLAs; while the final section delved into concepts and theories that supported adult learning and means by which learning and persistence could take place.

The analysis of the data revealed five themes: college readiness, PLA process, feedback, writing critically, and new perspective. In this study, I used the transcendental approach and modified the van Kaam method to analyze the semi-structured interviews. This particular method consists of 12 parts and four categories (van Kaam, 1966): analysis, translation, transposition, and phenomenological reflection. The themes emerged from the use of the modified van Kaam method.
Discussion of the Findings

Research Question 1: What are students’ sense of readiness to participate in college classes following completion of a portfolio for earned credit?

The study conducted by CAEL (2010) found that students who undertook a PLA program had higher persistence in earning credits and higher degree earning rates. The students in this study did not believe that participating in the PLA program had any effect on their persistence, but rather that it shortened the time to completion, as also noted in the CAEL study (2010). Three students stated that they were confident writers going into the program, and four students stated that they already had the motivation to persist and move through their program.

Jarvis (2004) and Brookfield (1986) state that adults turn to education in order to solve a life problem. The problem in this case that had students turning to the PLA program was in finding a way to complete their degree in a shorter amount of time. There did not appear to be a life problem, per say, that propelled them into the PLA program; however, the students did state how returning to school in general would contribute to the direction in which they were heading in life. For instance, Ashlee said that her crisis in dealing with an employment issue drove her to seek refuge in finishing her credits to get her degree in order to move on to a different job. Clare wanted to challenge her mind; being a stay-at-home mom was not enough for her. She had a long resume of dabbling in a number of fields but never finished any education she started. In Clare’s case, each time her essays were approved, it gave her the validation that she needed in order to move onto the next step. Her confidence continued to strengthen; and by the time she began classes in the fall, she felt ready to take on any subject in any...
educational format (online or in class). Clare appeared to be the only one who recognized the advantage of writing essays as it pertains to preparing her for college courses. All six students stated that what they perceived to be a take away as a result of the PLA course was additional credits, and a couple mentioned less costs involved. Most did not perceive the program had assisted in their preparation for college classes; nor did they think that they would gain any type of transformational effect, essentially a change in their beliefs and assumptions. Their enrollment advisor offered the PLA program as an option to handle outstanding credits rather than take additional classes. This notion of writing papers as an alternative to taking classes appeared to be what drove them to this option.

Research Question 2: What do students experience as barriers and accomplishments in completing a portfolio?

There needs to be more information regarding what motivates students to continue through the portfolio process and what discourages them to even begin (Leiste and Jensen, 2011). With the exception of one student, the students in this study only found out about the PLA option after admission into the university. All of them said that knowing now what they know about its benefits, it would have factored into their decision on where to attend school. The university did a great job of marketing the program heavily to them, but only after they were enrolled. The issues that mainly emerged from the program came in the way of difficulties in the writing process. Although the university had a step-by-step method detailing how to accomplish this and what the assessment would consist of, the students still struggled to connect what they
had learned to learning outcomes. This is not uncommon for students, according to Leiste and Jensen (2011); they recommend that students have the instructions and support along the way for each stage they pass through. Additional research speaks to the necessity of students being informed regarding policies and procedures (Hull, 1993), that print material is clearly and easily understood, and that there is feedback from assessors (Dagavarian & Walters, 1993). The PLA program at the Midwestern university did contain these measures. Students received a lengthy PLA Handbook, handouts, syllabi, and examples of essays that both met and did not meet the assessment criteria. In addition, feedback from their peers, instructor, and assessors was very helpful and, in some ways, critical for them going out on their own to write additional essays without this support. A couple of students made note that it was due to the work that was done in class that gave them the ability to fly solo afterwards. The feedback provided a foundation; but at the same time, a couple of students had concerns regarding how they would be viewed by others. It is unknown if this had been previously addressed in class; but it was on their own accord that they found strength to “expose” themselves, as Ashlee said. Once doing so, they discovered that they were in similar places as their classmates and/or were not receiving criticism or harsh judgments. This appeared to propel students to open up, dig deeper, and work harder to reflect on their own experiences in ways they had not foreseen.

Research Question 3: How does completing a portfolio affect students’ perception of their ability to think and reflect critically?

All six students had their essays pass either on the first or second try. What this essentially means is that, according to the assessment guidelines outlined for the PLA
program, students had met the criteria of critical reflection in their essays. They could not speak to surface-level thinking, as one student stated, but had to delve into territory that they did not know existed.

The university, recognizing that this was uncharted territory for most students, provided a well-thought-out plan that included handouts, expectations, and support throughout the stages of the course and beyond. The essay topics enabled students to start small with challenging a critical event by exploring the people, places, and senses involved. This enabled an instructor to get into the head of the students to see what they were visualizing and then determine how best to help them along and to cope with any anxieties. The research discusses this as one type of method in introducing students to critical reflection (Conrad, 2008; Mezirow, 1990). All six students spoke highly of their instructor’s assistance in helping them navigate their way through the process. Had they not had the support of their instructor to get over hurdles, their motivation to continue with their struggle to verbalize what they learned, deal with anxieties that recalling emotional events stirred up, and dealing with rejection from papers that did not pass on the first try may not have lasted.

Wlodowski (1985) states that students need to be able to comprehend the material or experience success in their work in order to keep their persistence going. Students recognized their proficiency in being able to reflect critically and verbally connect what they learned to the course learning objectives. In addition, they described how the PLA course required of them a different style of writing than any other classes taken. It was through this style that they had to learn how to reflect on something, such as their experiences, in such a way that was not told to them. For instance, Nathan mentioned
that his classes were unlike the PLA course because they generally involved reading texts and memorizing how to do something, such as in his program development class. He had to learn in the PLA class how to think in a way that was not repeating what he essentially read in a text. He had to learn to explore the process in depth and uncover ways in which to communicate. In his case, the challenge was understanding why a person would do it one way and not another. What makes this way more favorable, and can you explain the thought process in getting there?

*Research Question 4: How does the student perceive his/her success in the portfolio process?*

The students in this study discussed that their take aways for the PLA program were obtaining credits and, in some cases, time and financial savings. On the back end, when asked what they would tell a prospective student regarding the program, these elements emerged; and only when asked to provide any additional benefits did students go into a deeper level of connection with a new self. It is not to say that they were unaware of any changes within, by no means; but their initial statement of what they would receive was similar to what they were told by their advisor regarding the program. The research shows that students have the ability to transform their perspective through reorganization of meaning (Stevens et al., 2010). This appeared to be the case for the students in this study. They came away with a new way to communicate with others and, rather than fear the unknown, research a topic in order to gain a better understanding. The tools that they discovered were not those that were solely for use in additional college courses, but rather those that could and would benefit them beyond the walls of academia into the next chapter in their lives. The students are confident in their ability to
persist, and those who are continuing with course work or new educational programs have a confidence in their ability to achieve their goals. The students discussed their awareness of who they are and their relation to others, meaning that the PLA program directly impacted their self-awareness and discovery, problem-solving skills, and personal empowerment, again coinciding with research (Kamenetz, 2011; Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009).

**Implications and Recommendations for Educators**

The implications of this study illustrate that students have the ability to be successful in a PLA portfolio program when they have access to and understand the procedures and policies, assessment criteria, and support from their instructor and classmates.

The students who completed their essays at the end of their program said they were able to bring to the classroom everything learned from previous course work, including the ability to write academic papers. What this may mean for future educators is the possibility to use the PLA program as a required baseline program and then capstone for an academic program for all students, not solely nontraditional students. This might play out in a two-tier program with a baseline assessment midway into their college program and at the end using the portfolio as a capstone. Students beginning their junior level would participate in an accelerated, hybrid course where they would create a portfolio, writing on topics chosen by them. They would be assessed on overall competencies, rather than on specific program knowledge. The capstone taken at the end of the program would measure both program knowledge and transformational learning competencies and could be an independent studies program. Faculty with expertise in
transformational learning would teach the baseline course and assess the portfolios; whereas, at the end of the capstone, the portfolio would be assessed by program faculty and transformational learning faculty. The goal of the capstone is to determine if and to what degree transformational learning occurred and what in the program can be improved to increase the likelihood of this taking place. If an institution is committed to transformational learning as changing the way students succeed, then it needs to be incorporated into every class, measured, and put back into the academic program.

Another implication for future educators is the national conversation around access to higher education for adult students. If the nation is expected to meet President Obama’s goal for 2020, there needs to be greater discussion around how to support the adult population in returning to school. PLAs have been known to provide that support, but they do not have acceptance as yet by all faculty and institutions. When they do exist in schools, their marketing is low; thus, students typically do not know the programs are available, nor have they any idea what the programs entail. These programs are often relegated to the backburner with few dollars to fund them. If the program is to assist in enrollment, then it needs to be part of the forefront of an institution, which means faculty and administrators need to believe in its benefits to their students. The university website needs to feature the PLA program prominently for prospective students who might be seeking out this type of program and for those who do not know how these programs can make a difference in their lives. The students in this study mentioned that, had they known about the PLA program and its benefits, even if only a savings in time and cost, it would have made a difference in the choice of school they attended. The Midwestern university in this study was primarily marketing to internal students.
Recommendations for Future Study

1. Conduct a 360-degree review assessment by interviewing the students and facilitators (faculty members, dean of college, associate dean, department chair, assessment director, curriculum design designator) involved in the PLA program.

A 360-degree assessment of the PLA program would enable facilitators not only to make changes to the actual program but also to increase the chances of buy-in from faculty who are not completely on board. In addition, it could make necessary changes to marketing the program, both internally and externally, to increase student participation.

2. Does the academic program factor into a student’s success in their ability to participate in the PLA program?

Four of the students in this study were in the Applied Behavioral Science (ABS) program and one came from Management and Information Systems (MIS). The students in the ABS program used more nurturing type descriptions of their transformation than the direct, succinct, focused descriptions laid out by Nathan in the MIS. All were successful; but in locating students for the study, invitations went out to everyone in the PLA program, and the majority of students who replied to the invitation came from the ABS program.

3. Gain a better understanding of why students do not participate in the portfolio program.

There needs to be a better understanding of reasons why students do not participate in the PLA portfolio program. In this study, the marketing of the program was internal to students who had already been accepted to the university. The students also
had confidence in their writing abilities thus not fearing, for the most part, the heavy
writing requirements.

4. What is the degree of persistence that students will endure if their portfolios
are rejected once, twice, or three times?

The students in this study stated that they would have persisted even if their
essays were sent back to them for revise. One student had two essays sent back, and she
was “determined” to move forward with making changes. There needs to be research
conducted on the persistence of students whose portfolios are not accepted to see what
changes need to be made in the program.

5. In what ways might timing of taking the PLA in a student’s program have an
effect on his/her transformation?

Is it better to take the PLA course and write essays on the front end, in the middle
of the program, or can there be value in taking after completion of one’s program? In this
study, I discovered that five of the students appreciated taking the course when they did.
Only Nathan stated that, had he known about the PLA program and the number of classes
he could avoid attending because of the credits gained from the essays, he would have
taken it at the beginning of his program. In addition, he said that, knowing the time and
financial savings, he might have even returned to college earlier. The literature does not
speak to the timing of portfolios but rather the gains in what it can do. Wlodowski (1985)
does say that students need to be able to take control of their learning and be part of the
planning and facilitating process, enjoying the experience, and finding it meaningful and
worthwhile. The six students commented on the benefits of their programs that PLA may
not have necessarily prepared them for college course work, but it did change their outlook and perspective on how they see the world.

**Conclusion Remarks**

The students in this qualitative study did experience a sense of accomplishment having completed the portfolio class and essays. One of the main issues that they embarked on in the process was connecting their learning outcomes to the course objectives, which they had the opportunity to practice in class and with peers. Through critical reflection, the students were able to go beyond surface-level thinking to a level that ultimately challenged their assumptions and beliefs. As a result, they gained benefits beyond improvements in their writing but rather saw a transformational effect take place. What emerged was a new sense of self in how they related to others and the world around them.

What about my new sense of self? As an adult student entering into a doctoral program, I was wrought with fear in my inability to succeed in the coursework, much less complete an entire dissertation on my own. The first course was treacherous as I navigated through to discover a way to manage my time effectively, cope with apprehensions regarding studying among peers, and practice patience with my own learning process. Up until this point, I knew only one way to be taught by an instructor and take in information as the student and I reverted back to this dependency in my doctoral program. The frame of reference that had the instructor in control of what I learned, how I learned, and if learning occurred was deeply ingrained and was still present throughout my dissertation process. I tried on different perspectives by asking
one question in class and sitting back to see the type of feedback I would receive from the instructor and classmates. When I realized I was in the same situation as my peers, I asked another question and then another and then another. Before I knew it, I was taking control of my learning and feeling free to participate in discussions without the threat of being dissuaded by others. This transformation of enabling me to open my mind and take in new information did not come without an emotional piece. My confidence seemed to soar one minute and drop the next. Initially, the goal was to discover the “right” answer in class, announcing it with pride. When the answer appeared to be “wrong,” my hearing deafened and feelings of embarrassment and insecurity overcame me. I did not recognize that what I was searching for in the end was the wrong thing. Even in my dissertation process, I sought out other people’s answers to my questions but my director sent me back to research and look within to uncover a deeper understanding. I needed to find my answers, not hers.

Today, I recognize my ability as a scholar to research worldly issues and engage peers in conversations that I normally would shy away from. I now take control of my learning, ask questions as often as needed, and allow my confidence to soar. I succeeded in this program and emerged a different person. I, too, have experienced a transformation.
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Dear <student>,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting as a part of my dissertation research with Benedictine University located in Lisle, IL. This study is on how participating in prior learning assessments, specifically the portfolio program, has contributed to transformational learning and self-directedness of adult students and their preparation to be successful in future courses at your University. I am asking that you participate in this study because of your experience with completing a portfolio to obtain college credit. Your participation in this study will provide valuable feedback to other adult students, like you, who have or are considering participating in the portfolio or other prior learning assessment programs.

Your contribution to this study, if you agree, will be to participate in an interview. There will be complete anonymity and confidentiality regarding your participation and identity in this study. Your interview will be recorded and then transcribed by me using a transcription software. The transcripts will be kept in a locked safe at my house. The interview will help me gain data to use in my study. The data obtained from the interview will be utilized exclusively for the purpose of this research and at no time following the research will your name or the University’s name be used in presentations, discussions, or articles regarding the research. The interview will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

If you agree to participate, I will email an Informed Consent Form for you to sign. I will collect this form prior to conducting the interview with you. A gift card will be provided during the interview session to thank you for your participation.

If you agree to participate and/or have any additional questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me, Angela Ryan, now or at any point during this study at ryan6087@sbcglobal.net. You also may contact my dissertation director, Dr. Bridget Collier, at bcollier@uchicago.edu

Angela Ryan
Doctoral Student
Benedictine University
APPENDIX B

CONFIRMATION EMAIL

Dear <student>,

I am writing to thank you for agreeing to participate in a study that I am conducting as a part of my dissertation research with Benedictine University located in Lisle, IL. As a reminder, this study is on how participating in prior learning assessments, specifically the portfolio program, has contributed to transformational learning and self-directedness of adult students and their preparation to be successful in future courses.

I am confirming that your interview information below:

Date:
Time:
Place:

If this information is incorrect, please contact me at ryan6087@sbcglobal.net or 773-633-8200. I will also contact you by phone the day before your interview to confirm our plans to meet.

There will be complete anonymity and confidentiality regarding your participation and identity in this study. Your interview will be recorded and then transcribed by me using a transcription software. The transcripts will be kept in a locked safe at my house. The interview will help me gain data to use in my study. The data obtained from the interview will be utilized exclusively for the purpose of this research and at no time following the research will your name or the University’s name be used in presentations, discussions, or articles regarding the research. The interview will help me gain data to use in my study. The data obtained from the interview will be utilized exclusively for the purpose of this research. The interview will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

I have emailed you an Informed Consent Form for you to sign but will have some onsite as well. I will collect this form prior to conducting the interview with you. A gift card will be provided during the interview session to thank you for your participation.

If you have any additional questions regarding this study, please feel to free to contact me, Angela Ryan, now or at any point during this study at ryan6087@sbcglobal.net. You also may contact my dissertation director, Dr. Bridget Collier, at bcollier@uchicago.edu.

Angela Ryan
Doctoral Student
Benedictine University
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Exploring the Learning Experiences and Sense of Readiness of Adult Students Who Participate in a Prior Learning Assessment Portfolio Program

Dear Participant,

I, Angela Ryan, am writing to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting as a part of my dissertation research with Benedictine University located in Lisle, IL. This study is on how participating in prior learning assessments, specifically the portfolio program, has contributed to transformational learning and self-directedness of adult students and their preparation to be successful in future courses at your University. I am asking that you participate in this study because of your experience with completing a portfolio to obtain college credit. Your participation in this study will provide valuable feedback to other adult students, like you, who have or are considering participating in the portfolio or other prior learning assessment programs.

Your contribution to this study, if you agree, will be via data collected from an interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. You will be asked to respond to a series of questions pertaining to the research purposes. The interview transcript will be presented to you for verification of accuracy. There will be complete anonymity and confidentiality regarding your participation and identity in this study. Your interview will be recorded and then transcribed by me using a transcription software. The transcripts will be kept in a locked safe at my house. The interview will help me gain data to use in my study. The data obtained from the interview will be utilized exclusively for the purpose of this research and at no time following the research will your name or the University’s name be used in presentations, discussions, or articles regarding the research. The interview will be given a secure code and a pseudonym will be assigned to your name to keep all the information fully confidential. Your real name will only be known by me as the researcher. This interview will help me gain data to use in my study. The data obtained from the interview will be utilized exclusively for the purpose of this research.

When the project is complete, all transcripts and audio tapes will be placed in a locked safe at my house. Records of the audio tapes will be stored in the safe for seven years and destroyed by shredding when they are no longer needed. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may choose not to answer any particular question or withdraw from the interview at any time without consequences. There is essentially no risk associated with choosing to participate in this research project.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Benedictine University. The Chair of the Benedictine University IRB is Dr. Alandra Weller-Clarke who can be reached at aclarke@ben.edu or at (630) 829-6295.

162
If you have any additional questions regarding this study please feel to free to contact me, Angela Ryan, now or at any point during this study at ryan6087@sbcglobal.net. You may also contact my dissertation director, Dr. Bridget Collier, at bcollier@uchicago.edu.

You will be given a copy of your signed consent form. Please acknowledge with your signatures below your consent to participate in this study and to record your interview.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Angela Ryan

I consent to participate in this study

Name: ___________________________
Signature: _________________________
Date: ____________________________

I give my permission to record this interview

Name: ___________________________
Signature: _________________________
Date: ____________________________
APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Background/demographic information:
   - Gender?
   - Age?
   - Ethnicity?
   - Year graduated from high school?
   - Current level in college?
   - Number of credits attained by the portfolio?
   - How many courses had you completed, if any, prior to submitting a portfolio for the first time?
   - What type(s) of portfolio format did you choose (online or in class)?
   - Did you seek assistance from a mentor, faculty member, or peer at any point when working on your portfolio? If so, by whom and to assist you in solving what problem or with clarification on what area? Please explain.
   - What program are you in and when is your expected graduation date?
   - What essay topics did you write on? Did they pass on the first try?

2a. What have you experienced overall in terms of completing your portfolio? Can you speak to your overall experiences that you had?

2b. What contexts or situations have influenced or affected these experiences in completing your portfolio?

3. In what ways did the opportunity to participate in a prior learning assessment program influence your choice of the University you attended?

4. What made you choose the portfolio over taking an exam? How did you first learn of the PLA program and its offerings of exams and portfolio options? What were your expectations or what did you hope to achieve in going through the portfolio program? Did the program overall meet your expectations? In what way did it or not? Please explain.

5. Following completion of your portfolio, describe your sense of readiness to participate in your college courses. Were there aspects of completing your portfolio that you attribute to your sense of readiness to participate in and pass classes? Academic (study) skills or personal (time, stress mgmt) skills that were developed? Self-confidence? Motivation?

6. What aspects of the portfolio process (from learning about the program (marketing), application phase, completing your portfolio with or without assistance, to receiving a pass/fail grade and any follow up questions) did you find to be challenging/barriers?
Successful/accomplishments? Were there aspects of yourself that you found to attribute to any barriers or successes in the process?

7. What was your assessment of what you learned as a result of completing your portfolio? What played a role in achieving your learning objectives?

8. What does it mean to think and reflect critically and in what ways has completing your portfolio made a difference in how this is or is not accomplished? In what ways did you challenge your assumptions and beliefs in order to take in new information and gain new perspectives? Do you feel that you have more of an ability to open your mind to new information from here on out than prior to completing your portfolio? Please explain.

9. What does it mean to be a self-directed learner and what tools and resources do you need to achieve this? Has participating in the portfolio process provided (additional) tools for you to develop this area? Please explain.

10. Given what you know of completing a portfolio, would you do it again? Please explain.

11. If you were going to discuss this portfolio program as it has affected you (positively or negatively) to a prospective student, what would you say?

12. Do you have anything further that you would like to add that we have not discuss?