

# **“Putting the Puzzle Together”: Reflection, Learning, and Transformation In an Integrated Liberal Arts Course**

Jacqueline Daly, MS, PhD Candidate

## **ABSTRACT**

*Over fifty percent of students in higher education are non-traditional adult learners. Some institutions have developed and implemented integrative liberal arts courses enhancing effective study strategies with interactive methods of instruction, relative and practical content, and a learning environment encouraging a deep learning approach through reflection. As part of a larger exploratory qualitative research study, this paper reports on the contribution of an integrated liberal arts course, the Proseminar, on learning identity and the learning process of the adult student. The findings suggest that participants of the integrated liberal arts course experienced significant changes in their identities as learners and the learning process through reflective activities and self-exploration within a liberal arts breadth of knowledge: Increased confidence as a learner, awareness of varied perspectives, impact of life experiences on values, beliefs, and assumptions of self, and their role in the world.*

## **Introduction**

The ability to learn is fast becoming a valuable skill for today’s workforce. To-date the older, non-traditional adult students appear to be the majority of the student population comprising over fifty percent of the enrollments at many campuses. Serving the needs of the adult returning student has created opportunities as well as special challenges for higher education. Several institutions have taken an entrepreneurial approach in providing comprehensive and effective degree programs for adults with the development of innovative, integrated course work reacquainting this cohort of students with the formalities of written and oral communication skills, group work, critical thinking, self-assessment, and goal development through critical self-reflection and self exploration. This has been done through the implementation of first year seminars, inclusive of liberal arts assisting a diverse student population in the development of strong analytical and communication skills encouraging higher order thinking levels.

The prevailing assumption that the ability to analyze evolves automatically as students take courses no longer exists in today’s colleges and universities. This course development is aimed at facilitating students in making sense of complex issues and events, developing research skills, and application of knowledge to new problems and unscripted questions. Through a liberal arts education a student may begin to see things as a whole. Knowledge becomes unified and allows for transfer of knowledge from one context to another.

A small Midwestern-based, Christian, liberal arts university developed such an integrated liberal arts course identified as the Proseminar. This the first course all adult returning students take at this university, and can best be described as a general education course engaging the adult student in learning and skill development “that contributes to the accomplishment of individual educational goals . . . engage students in group interaction, and critical thinking through issues related to adult development, self-assessment, and goals development” (Foxy, 1990, p. 51). The hallmark of the education program at this university is the Learning Autobiography, consisting of three self-reflective essays written by the students in the Proseminar class. The integrated liberal

arts course addresses four broad breadth areas: art/expression; social/civic, science/description, and value/meaning. The course work provides the adult learner with opportunities for self-exploration and examination of beliefs and assumptions relative to the liberal arts breadth areas through written assignments, current and classic readings, as well as discussions in each of these breadth areas.

While education brings about changes in comprehension and application, there are other equally significant changes occurring for the adult student as they critically reflect on themselves and the impact of the liberal arts breadth of knowledge in their daily lives. To-date little is known about the experience of the adult learner in a liberal arts integrated course and the relevant contribution to the learning process and learning identity.

#### Research Questions

The research questions guiding this inquiry are: 1) What is the contribution of the integrated liberal arts course on the learning process? 2) How has the integrated liberal arts course facilitated the development of the adult students' learning identities? 3) How do learners perceive their learning as a result of their experiences in this integrated liberal arts course? 4) How has reflection and self-exploration contributed to transformative learning and changed meaning perspectives?

#### Methodology

The phenomenon was explored at two university adult campus locations where the content and structure of the Proseminar class is similar. Data for this qualitative case study was obtained from a purposeful sampling of sixteen adult students who completed the course within two years of the onset of this research. The participant sampling was diverse in gender, age, and ethnicity. The chosen participants were required to have completed the course receiving a grade of "C" or higher, and must complete a minimum of twenty-four credit hours at the university. Two semi-structured, taped interviews and a document analysis of the Learning Autobiography essays written by adult learners participating in the study were analyzed. Participants reviewed verbatim transcripts for accuracy. Using a qualitative research software program each transcript and document was categorized and coded.

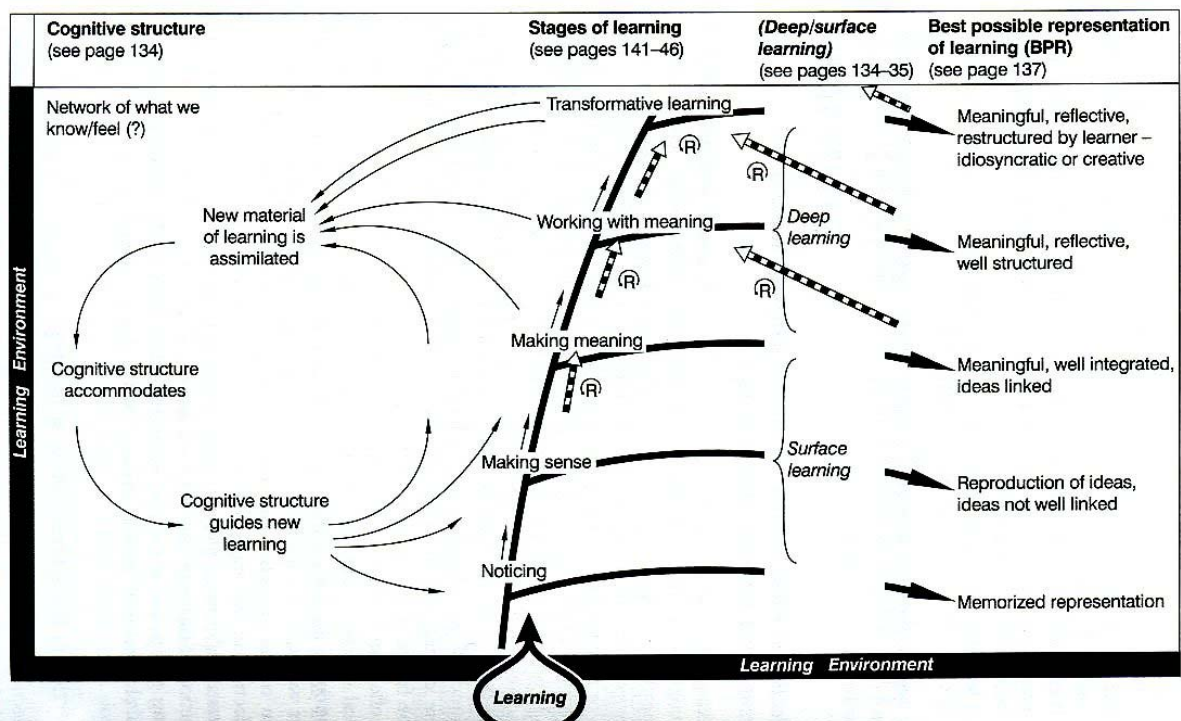
#### Conceptual Framework

How adults learn to make major life changes is a question that has fascinated adult education researchers for over twenty years. According to King (1998) a common and familiar goal of adult education is the development of the whole person whereby students have the opportunity to achieve their greatest potential as new doors of learning are opened for them. The framework utilized in this case study research will focus on the role of critical reflection, development of learning identity, and transformational learning as it contributes to the learning process of adult students in higher education.

**Learning identity:** Learning identity is a way in which individuals acknowledge the complex interrelationship of learning and identity. For the non-traditional student learning identities co-exist with and influence and are in turn influenced by other adult identities. Learning can relate the sense of whom individuals are in the world. Field, Biesta, MacLeod, and Malcolm (2004) noted that there appears to be a relationship with learning and the way an individual perceives self. Field, et al. further noted that identity may be connected with one's orientation and practice toward learning. Identities, as noted by Field and Merrill (2002) are stronger sources of meaning as a result of the processes of self-construction and individual perceptions. Johnston and Merrill (1993) purported that new experiences as learners may result in changing attitudes and expectations of learning that can lead to new learning identities associated with

independent/self-directed and reflective approaches to adult learning in higher education and in the students' personal lives.

**Critical reflection:** One of the most salient and distinguishing characteristics of the adult learner is his or her ability to critically reflect on his or her life experiences, integrate that newly acquired knowledge, and act upon resulting insights (Stein, 2003). According to Wolf & Holmes (2003), developing skills for critical reflection helps to facilitate lifelong learning assisting the learner through clarification and creation of the meaning of an experience as it relates to self and one's relationship to the world. The most significant adult learning experience involves a critical reflection of one's own assumptions about self (Geerling, 2002; Mezirow, 1997). Brookfield (1995) noted that adults are capable of learning through critical reflection. Moon (2000) identifies five phases in the learning process moving the student from a more surface learning to transformative learning.



Moon, J.A. (2000). *A map of learning and the representation of learning and role of reflection* (p. 154)

Reflection in the transformative learning phase allows the student to critically examine and gather greater understanding of a situation, self, or his or her knowledge (Moon).

**Transformative learning:** The works of Mezirow (1981, 1997) appear to be the impetus for the study of transformational learning and remains the only theory of learned major lifestyle change within adult education (Cooper, 2001; McDonald, 1999). At the center of Mezirow's theory of adult education is the concept of transformative or transformational learning. This theory recognizes that the development of new knowledge or change in currently held assumptions/perspectives through critical reflection may result in a dramatic change in one's meaning perspective. Learning process requires more than adding new knowledge to what is already known. The new learning transforms the previous knowledge into a new perspective enabling the learner to increase his/her world view and challenge current beliefs. Clark (1993) sees transformational learning as "learning that produces change"... (p.47). One's personal life

can become meaningful and rational when he or she is intelligent about the events that occur and become aware of *why* they attach particular meanings to reality (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2002).

### Findings

A number of themes emerged from the research focusing on changes in learning identity and the learning process. Critical reflection on previously held assumptions, and complex topics and issues within the breadth of knowledge appeared to have a transforming effect on not only the processes of learning, but perception of self and the world. Some of these themes identified in this research are: 1) From Uncertainty to Confidence as a Learner; 2) My Personal History: Telling My Story; 3) It Made Me Use My Head—Made Me Think; 4) The World and My Role; and 5) Transformation through Reflection.

**From Uncertainty to Confidence as a Learner:** It appears that the learning identities for many of the participants in this study changed as they progressed through the Proseminar course. Several participants expressed a sense of fear relative to their capability in meeting demands of the educational processes. However, there was an element of surprise as they discovered they can still learn and be successful as an adult student as they progressed from uncertainty in their role as an adult learner, to a confident, capable learner. The interviewees noted that the Proseminar class influenced the way they learned, their perceptions as learners, and the learning process: “I can become part of the learning process now. . . . not only can I learn, but there is, there are still some brain cells . . . It’s just too much to let go!” Students felt the Proseminar class contributed to their new found confidence: “. . . so, I really think it did help”. A participant believed the Proseminar class helped her become more aware: “really opened my eyes to the fact that I really am more intelligent than I give myself credit for so . . .” Students appeared to develop a better sense of themselves as learners and saw themselves quite differently: “I was able to have a better identity of who I am along with my dream building . . . god, this doesn’t look like my head here--never gave myself that much credit before”. According to some participants the course “provided them with a tool that can take them very far—a level of security and confidence in my learning, uhm, future, or whatever”.

**My Personal History: Telling My Story:** The learning autobiographies provided an opportunity for the adult student to revisit his or her life, reflect on his or her personal philosophy or purpose in life, examine values and revisit previous goals. The self reflection helped some students realize: “here is where I am, here is what I am doing, and how is this going to help me in my career goals. Writing the “personal history” brought some students back on “track” and become aware of where values, beliefs, and assumptions originated. “Dream building” was a special term used for goals by one student; the reflective writing helped her continue “dream building” for her future in new ways. “Because I now am building and have a whole different outlook and perspective on my education . . . I know that I’ve grown already from the day I started school . . . . It is quite a bit different”. Telling her story appeared to be an uplifting experience for another student; it was exciting to feel the growth made over all these years. Writing it down in “black and white”, and “it is looking back at me . . . sharing it with someone puts it to a whole new level of intimacy”.

**It Made Me Use My Head...It Made Me Think:** Reflecting on the readings, activities, and discussions in the Proseminar class appeared to have a significant impact on students’ realities. Critical thinking was a term identified by participants. Not taking things at face value “TV, radio, reading, anything, any information” and the realization of fact versus opinion, as well as

being able to identify and tell you “how it relates to me. . . what value it has. . . or how the meaning has changed my world” were comments shared by several participants. Proseminar participants noted that they had taken “pause for a minute . . . maybe this is an option”. Learning activities, discussions, written and oral communication, and researching primed the participants to look at themselves and issues going on around them “and how it all ties in to other things”. “It was like walking into the class with a huge box of puzzle pieces, and slowly I began to put them together”. The reflective activities helped adult learners to broaden their perspective on ideas, as well as recognize and understand that everyone is not at the same point in time. One of the participants was amazed at how quick she was to judge people by the color of their skin, or the side of town they lived on—“I am amazed at how small minded I can still be . . .”.

**The World and My Role:** Students noticed that they now respond instead of react and reflect on how something will impact me, my family, and greater society. One student described himself as a “microscope” and a reflection of everything [society] represents. There was a sense of wanting to give back, contributing and teaching someone else with the knowledge learned. There was a realization of his or her value in society: “I am not just another person . . . I am another voice that can be heard”. Students noted it was not just a matter of whom you are, but “how do we all work together. . .” During the interviews, some participants expressed they had a “responsibility to people . . . anybody can take, take, take”. The application of one’s belief system to his or her community was identified as vital to how our society works together.

**Transformation through Reflection:** Students began to see things as a whole; knowledge became unified. Through the various readings and discussions within the four liberal arts breadth areas they became aware of the function and integration of this breadth of knowledge in their lives. Another significant transformation revealed in the interviews was the confidence to engage in dialogue: “I am finding that I am talking, I mean speaking more and trying to get my thought and opinion across”. One student could hardly recognize herself when she discovered that she was “really a strong person, a strong individual. . . .” Another student noticed a change in his outlook with people enabling him to become more outgoing and appreciating that people are not the same, nor do they come from the same backgrounds. Reaffirmation of values and beliefs as a result of reflection in the Proseminar reawakened a student’s passion to reach his goals.

#### Implications for Adult Education

This research can assist adult educators and program development specialists currently aligned with adult education institutions in identifying the value and contribution of integrated liberal arts courses to the learning identity and learning process for the nontraditional, adult student. Integrating the liberal arts breadth of knowledge in adult programming can enhance the ability for continued learning through reflection and self-exploration, as well as lifelong learning skills. The integrated liberal arts course can facilitate the transition of the returning adult students to the higher education environment with the expectation that they demonstrate higher order thinking skills, exhibit the ability to identify key ideas and concepts, and support interpretations of readings based on their experiences and a breadth of knowledge. In creating an effective course structure, the inclusion of interactive, practical and relevant learning activities closely aligned with and building upon the students’ valuable life experience is an important consideration. Approaching the development of courses and programs for the adult learner is somewhat different than curriculum in place for the traditional student. To develop and implement this type of integrated liberal arts course work educators, and those involved in curriculum development at colleges and universities need to understand the integration and impact of the liberal arts breadth

of knowledge on the daily lives of the adult students. It is the responsibility of educators to not only challenge students, but to educate the whole person.

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Jacqueline M. Daly, MS, PhD, Assistant Professor: Education and Leadership, Ottawa University-Milwaukee, Email: [dalyj@ottawa](mailto:dalyj@ottawa).

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