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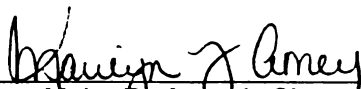
CLAIMING AN EDUCATION: THE JOURNEY OF THREE
ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A COMMUNITY
COLLEGE DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH COURSE

presented by

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of the requirements for the

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THE JOURNEY OF THREE ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A
COMMUNITY COLLEGE DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH COURSE**

By

Carol A. Brown

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

CLAIMING AN EDUCATION: THE JOURNEY OF THREE ADULT WOMEN STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE DEVELOPMENTAL ENGLISH COURSE

By

Carol A. Brown

The purpose of this study was to understand better how three adult women students enrolled in a developmental English class at a community college made sense of their educational experience. All of the subjects can be classified as “non-traditional” students and included a woman returning after thirty years to school and two that had recently emigrated from the Middle East. The study examined the relationship of the classroom educational environment and the academic achievement and self confidence of the women while enrolled in this course. Within the single site of the classroom, what factors hindered or supported these women’s construction of their personal and academic identities? Through formal and informal interviews and classroom observations, an educational narrative for each woman was developed. This study expanded the definition of learning beyond the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills as it aligned the cognitive and affective experiences of the adult women students within the classroom.

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PREFACE

“I learn on my own... this is the first step...I’m taking it one step at a time”

“That day I think maybe I join the university...I feel educated”

“I have to learn, I don’t care I will take one class a semester....I have to finish”

In 1976, I began my community college career teaching introductory American History at Houston Community College. The first semester I taught at night in a high school located in a Mexican American neighborhood. Most of my students were women between the ages of 22-50. They had little or no support from their families or their community for the decision to return to school. It was an amazing semester for the students and me. These women would come early and stay late just to discuss the day’s assignment. They did their homework in the bathroom of their homes or after their families were asleep. In spite of their difficulties, few dropped out and many ended up with grades of C or better. We had a wonderful time that semester, and I watched their self-confidence grow as students. By the end of the semester you could see the difference in how they defined themselves as students and women. I returned the second semester, and several were back to take the second half of the course. Though I had lost a few, those who stayed were even more determined to get an education and perhaps even go on to the University of Houston.

Over the next twenty years my classes would be filled with women just like those of the first semester. For the college, they were classified as “non-traditional students” since they did not fit into the “typical” 18-21 college cohort. Like my first set of students

would watch these women grow as learners and gain self-confidence as individuals as they successfully completed my course. Often at the beginning of class they would tell me that they had not been in school for several years and therefore, would probably not do as well as the younger students. Inevitably these adult women students would have the highest grades in the course, and other students would rely upon them when they were having problems understanding the subject matter. Each semester these women seemed to find learning an empowering experience in which they could make connections between the formal education of the classroom and their personal growth and development. This dissertation is dedicated to them, and I thank them for allowing me to participate in this process with them.

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INTRODUCTION

Community colleges are one of the fastest growing institutions of post secondary education. Increasing numbers of women are entering higher education through the portals of community colleges and make up almost sixty per cent of the student population (Phillippe, 2005). Given the easy accessibility they provide for women into higher education, community colleges have been the major venue for them to achieve formal education. What are the learning experiences of these adult women students within the educational setting of community colleges? According to McCabe (2003), community colleges support the fundamental American belief in the worth and potential of the individual. Taylor and Marienau (1995) note that for adult women, education represents a change and a shift in how they live their lives in terms of who they have been and who they may become. Adult women students are making a conscious effort to try and take charge of their lives and have power over the direction of their future (LaPaglia, 1995).

Do adult female students find “meaningful experiences” within the classroom setting that allow them to grow and develop as learners and individuals? What type of educational environment allows adult women students to claim their education by believing they are empowered over their learning? Are there educational environments that support these students and their learning experiences? Does this type of experience change them as learners and individuals? These questions became the central focus for developing a study designed to better understand how adult women students in community colleges define their educational experience as learners and individuals. Can

linkages be found between their classroom and learning experiences that support the self-development of adult women students (Taylor, 1995)?

Chapter 1

Background

Flannery and Hays (2000) note that the research on adult learning has been shaped by the universality of its theories and the assumption that these theories can be used in all educational settings for all adult learners. The theories have not been specifically tested against the experiences of adult women students in community colleges. Similarly, feminist pedagogical research (Maher & Tetrault, 1994) has looked at a “traditional female student” as the prototype for understanding and modeling positive learning environments for women. These types of feminist pedagogical theories (Taylor & Marenau, 1995; Gabriel & Smith, 1990; Maher & Tetrault, 1994) assume there is one type of learning environment in which women can be successful. However, the impact of race, class and other demographics has been absent in many of these women’s studies. Researchers have not given consideration to the unique learning experiences of adult female students (Flannery & Hayes, 2000).

This inquiry became a case study of three women enrolled in a developmental English course for one semester at a community college. A developmental English course was chosen for several reasons. One of the most important trends in community college education has been the increasing number of first time students who are under-prepared for college work (McCabe, 2000; Rouche & Rouche, 1999). With nearly one-half of all community college students enrolled in developmental courses (McCabe, 2003), developmental education has become an integral part of the community college mission. Developmental education courses are seen as the most viable means to increase student preparedness for mainstream courses (Perin, 2002). The goal of developmental courses is

to bring a student's basic academic skills to a level which prepares them for college level courses. These basic skill courses are an entry point to college that can hinder or support student success in college. However, studies indicate retention rates of less than 50% within these courses (McCabe 2000). Women students make up an important percentage within this at-risk student population and exceed male enrollment in developmental courses (McCabe, 2003). These courses provide adult women students with their primary access to higher education (Goto, 1999). It is important to consider the types of classroom environments for development courses that will be supportive of adult women students.

Significance of the Study

Research concerning students enrolled in developmental courses looks at the context of classroom learning and not at the specific experiences of adult women students. These studies (McGrath & Van Ruskirk, 1999) state that a positive educational setting within developmental courses can engage students, transform them into active participants and provide them with confidence in their ability to succeed. Goto (1999) describes a developmental course as a contact zone between the student and the learning experience. Student success is tied to the ability of students to control their own educational path and negotiate any differences with the instructor. Accordingly, the classroom can create a transformative culture that supports the academic achievement and self confidence of students (McGrath & Van Ruskirk, 1999). This research was concerned with a specific developmental classroom and the experiences of adult women within it. The research holds significance for community colleges as they construct their developmental courses. Given the increasing number of women enrolled in

developmental courses, but the low retention rates, it is important to understand what types of educational environments support their learning experiences.

Statement of the Problem

The absence of research that looks at the adult woman student experience can limit higher education's ability to create supportive learning environments that are engaging for them. Can the structure of the educational environment influence the level of involvement of adult women learners in their own learning? The focus of this study was to better understand how adult women students enrolled in a developmental English class at a community college make sense of their educational experience. This study examined the relationship of the classroom educational environment and the academic achievement and self confidence of the women while enrolled in the course. The research analyzed whether or not the educational environment of the classroom engaged and transformed these students. The educational environment included the pedagogical approach of the instructor, the way the course was structured, the composition of the class, the interaction between the instructor and the students, the sequence of this course within the developmental courses of the college and the relationship of these students to the instructor and other students in the classroom. Within the single site of the classroom, what factors hindered or supported these women's construction of their identity as learners?

The central research question for the study was, "Within a developmental English classroom, how does the educational environment affect the experiences of adult women students as learners and individuals?"

To examine the phenomena of these students' experiences, the study was concerned with understanding whether or not this specific experience was positive or negative for the adult women students of the study. It looked for evidence of academic achievement and self confidence by these students at the end of the semester. Was there evidence that the educational experience engaged and mattered to the students? Whether or not academic success and personal growth occurred was determined by the self-analysis of each of the students. What was their perception of this specific experience? Did they believe that a change occurred to them as learners and individuals?

Assumptions

The assumption of the study was learning can be empowering or disempowering for women students. The study took into consideration learning is situated within larger social realities (Tierney, 1993) that link learners to their own perceptions of themselves and their worlds. Educational environments need to consider the experiences and context in which adult women are coming to school (White, 2001). Shifting identities, social practices and cultural representations (Fine, 1992) are part of the situational determinants (Unger, 1989) around which development and learning occur. Situated learners bring their identity and self-esteem into the learning experiences. This becomes particularly important for adult women students who are often motivated to return to school because of a personal, life-changing event (Anderson, Fine, Geissler & Landenson, 1998). Their learning experiences can transform perceptions of themselves and lead to new construction of their identity (Flannery, 2000). Given that most curricula are generically developed, course content has the ability to restrict or validate the educational horizons of students (Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1999). Giroux (1983) notes pedagogy must be

attentive to the histories, dreams and experiences students bring to school. When learning environments are transformed to become personal and emancipatory (Harding, 1991; Minnch, 1990), adult female students can articulate their voice and develop positive identities and sense of self (Weiler, 1988) so that they are empowered over their learning experience.

The educational environment should support the development of a “valid” student voice (Ortner, 1996). This voice occurs when learning becomes personal and emancipatory (Freire, 1970). Through this experience, a new definition of self can occur that allows women students to have greater agency over their lives. Coming to voice (hooks, 1994) means a reposition of power and knowledge relations for women learners. It allows those who were marginalized to move from silence to speech (hooks, 1994). A fundamental change occurs in the way women learners view themselves and their social setting.

The position and status of women learners within the classroom is determined by how they define and are defined by others within these environments (Fine, 1992; Lather, 1991; Luke & Gore, 1992; Middleton, 1993, Tisdell, 2000). This study expanded the definition of learning beyond the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills as it aligned the cognitive and affective experiences of the adult women students within the classroom.

The learning experience can be transformative for adult women students. Experience, history and individual social and cultural contexts impact the learning experience (Merriam, 1993). Adult learners see their learning as more personally significant and grounded in their own concerns and circumstances (Brookfield, 1987;

Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1975). Education can lead to change within the individual (Cranton, 1994, 1997; Dirkx, 1997; Meizrow, 1990). For adult women students, positive educational environments can foster agency and support their development and change as they reflect on their assumptions and beliefs and look inward to themselves (Dirkx, 1997; Grabove, 1997).

Purpose of the Study

What are the connections between formal education and personal growth and development? Is learning a personal and educational experience that connects the personal and educational lives of adult women students (Meizrow, 1997)? Feminist pedagogy points to creating learner-centered environments where the classroom becomes a place to make meaning of the learning experience (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Maher & Tetrault, 1994). The climate of the learning experience will help determine the level of involvement of women learners in their own learning. While focusing on women and their learning experiences, these pedagogies speak to creating environments in which all students are agents in the learning experiences and constructing knowledge in relationship to their identities and sense of themselves. Through the learning process there can be a cognitive and affective restructuring of their world, as they know it. However, I was interested in the confluence of factors within a classroom setting that affect the learning experiences of adult women students as learners and women. Situated within a classroom environment not specifically focused on adult women students, how did they experience learning? What would determine their success and would it be different from other students in the same class?

Gilligan (1982) notes that the interpersonal process of learning can be transformed into an intra-personal experience for women students. Accordingly, for adult women students, as learners and individuals, a successful learning experience could be defined as a transformative experience. They not only improve their academic abilities but also achieve new levels of self-worth as individuals. Enhanced self-esteem, a clear sense of identity and finding their voice are directly related to their learning experience (Hays & Flannery, 2000).

The purpose of the study was to understand what effect the educational experiences of adult women students enrolled in a community college course had on their academic achievement and self confidence. While the study began with a stated research question, it did not have a stated hypothesis concerning what were the most influential learning environments for adult women students. The study was exploratory, intending to have the hypothesis come from the research. Through the process of discovery and analysis, the research could have led to a theory.

Design

The study was designed to explore and study the experiences of adult women students within one course for one semester. The classroom was the primary site for the research situating these students and focusing on their learning experiences. Through interviews with the students, observation of the classroom, interviews with the instructor and examination of classroom artifacts, I examined, experienced and inquired about the learning experiences of adult women students enrolled in this course. Through these inquiry methods, I attempted to understand how an educational environment could marginalize or empower adult women students. The text of the study was shaped by the

interactions of the adult women students with their learning experiences. It focused on their experiences in the classroom and how its educational culture affected them as students and individuals. Through the narrative provided by the students, I looked for themes and patterns in the discussion that could validate whether or not the informal and formal attributes of the classroom marginalized or empowered these students as learners and individuals. These were students who enrolled in the course to enhance their skills and prepare themselves for college level courses. They came to “learn” in the traditional sense: the imparting of a set of skills and knowledge that would make them proficient in English grammar and paragraph writing. What happened to them over the course of the semester? Were there situational factors within the classroom setting that made a difference for the students? Did they leave the course not only proficient in writing a paragraph but also with a validation of self? Was there greater self-confidence in who they were and what they could accomplish?

The study was informed by several theories that included; feminist development (Gilligan, 1988,1982; Harding, 1991; Taylor & Marienau, 1995; Unger, 1989), feminist pedagogy (Anderson, Fine, Geissler & Ladenson, 1998; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Hayes, Brooks, Tisdell & Hugo, 2000; Kenway & Morda,1992; Maher & Tetrault, 1994) and adult learning (Cranton, 1994; Daloz, 2000; Keghan,1994; Knowles, 1986; Mezirow, 2000; Tennant & Pogson, 1995).They provided a set of theoretical and philosophical perspectives for research that was directed at understanding the educational and learning experiences of adult women. However, while each theory informed the study around specific components of the research, there was not a single theory that adequately served as the basis for the study. I sought to understand the “meaning” of the

experience of these women in this classroom setting. The study tested the universality of these theories against the experience of the students. Did their experiences affirm current theories concerning feminist pedagogy, feminist development and adult learning? While the theories guided the study, the themes of the research emerged from the experiences of these students.

Description of the Study

The purpose of the study was to understand the educational experiences of adult women students enrolled in a community college developmental course. The study was limited to a single comprehensive community college located in the suburbs of a metropolitan area in the Midwest. The college was chosen because it was a single campus and had a well-defined developmental education program. Given its service area, it was hoped that a cross-section of adult women students would participate in the study. I had the support of the Vice President of Instruction and the Chair of the English department of the college. The course chosen was the second course in the developmental English sequence and offered during the spring semester. As the catalogue description indicated, it was designed to prepare students for composition courses. Placement in this course depended on either a satisfactory placement test score, passing of the first developmental English class or English for Second Language students. The instructor had taught this sequence of courses for several years at the college.

The instructor was very receptive to the study and throughout the semester was very supportive of the project. While the course met twice a week, I observed the class on a weekly basis throughout the semester. The study was originally designed to interview five adult women students twice in the sixteen-week course. It was hoped that a limited

number of students to interview allowed me the opportunity for in-depth interviews and follow-up analysis. However, the composition of the class saw fewer adult women students, and a number of them indicated that they did not want to participate in the study. From my conversation with the instructor and the Director of the Women's Center, we concluded the reluctance to join the study came from the concerns of the time commitment. Most students were working and going to school and, therefore, felt they would be unable to participate. As a result, the sample for the study became three adult women students who were interviewed at the beginning and the end of the semester. The interviews were semi-structured for one hour with open-ended questions that allowed them to describe themselves, their educational goals and objectives and their experiences in the course. Their interests and focus often shaped the interviews. The instructor also participated in the study and agreed to be interviewed. Again, the interviews were semi-structured and allowed the instructor to discuss her background, goals for the course, teaching methodologies and observations of the students.

The central phenomenon situated these students within their classroom experience and focused on their perceptions of the learning experience over the course of the semester. This study focused on the three women as they were located within this specific class. While the class was the site of the research, it was the narrative of the students that shaped the study. The women's "stories" framed the direction of the study. The interaction with the students was both formal and informal. The structured conversations occurred in the interviews. However, over time there were a series of informal conversations with the students before and after class. The informal discussions with the students often provided a sense of what they were experiencing at a particular time in the

class. It also helped to create a less formal relationship between myself as the researcher and the students. One student and I often discussed the parallels between our lives. We were both older when we returned to school, had jobs and felt that our husbands were very supportive of our education. From both types of interactions, formal and informal, it became clear each student brought to class different life experiences, their own socio-cultural positions and ways of defining themselves.

All of the subjects could be classified as “non-traditional” students since they were women students over the age of 25. Their backgrounds were quite different from each other. One student decided to return to school after thirty years and raising her children. She had a terrible experience in high school but had spent most of her adult life educating herself. One recently emigrated from the Middle East and had teenage children. She already had a two-year degree from her native country. The third was a wife with a young child. Her family had decided to immigrate to the United States from the Middle East and become citizens. Her decision to go to school was based on a desire to interact with people and not sit home all day. In spite of the differences in their backgrounds, the standpoint for each woman was how they viewed what happened to them over the course of the semester.

Classroom Context

By observing the class each week, I had a context for their experiences. The composition of the class included twenty-eight students who were equally divided between male and female students. Almost half were out of district students who chose to attend this particular college. This designation meant they chose not to go to their local community college and had to pay higher fee rates than in-district students. Placement in

the class was based upon three criteria; the score of the placement exam, passing the first developmental English course, or passing the course for non-English speaking students. As the instructor noted, the composition of the class was unusual for a developmental course. The majority of the students appeared to be younger than 24 and had only attended this institution. From casual conversations, it was clear that most students were working and attending school. There were five African American students and five non-native students. The instructor indicated that she had rarely seen so many African American students in one class.

Classes often develop their own personalities and this was particularly true for this one. The instructor described the class as “energetic, like a sock hop, you never know who will go dancing in the middle of the center of the stage.” The students appeared to have good interactions between themselves and the instructor. The instructor saw the class as “joyful...they seemed to enjoy themselves...they did not bring their crabby faces often.” The students remained responsive and involved in class activities throughout the semester.

Having established a “picture” of the class the next step was to see how and where these three women students “fit” into it. The study focused on the experiences of these three women and the objective was to profile and analyze their stories within the context of the classroom. From their stories and experiences within the classroom would emerge the themes of my study. As the observer, it was important to see how they positioned themselves within the classroom. Was there interaction with other students and the instructor? Did they participate in class discussion and complete the required assignments? What was their motivation for enrolling in the course?

In the first several classes, all three seemed to struggle at times to understand the class and homework assignments. As one noted, "If only I can get over the homework hump." She often completed more than what was assigned for homework. One had difficulty in understanding the assignments. Several times she completed the wrong assignment. From the beginning of the course, she often asked questions to the instructor and her fellow students. The third struggled with note taking. She often sat quietly through the entire class period. By the end of the semester, the women believed that they were different as students and individuals. Observing them from the beginning of the semester, they behaved differently by the end of the semester. One student had clearly become a leader among the students. Students often came to her before and after class for help. She received calls at home to discuss homework assignments. Another was actively involved in class discussions. The third student expressed a new confidence in herself as a student.

Had the students found the semester to be meaningful for them? From their own words, and my observations of them, all three subjects believed that the course had been a positive experience for them. Each expressed that the course made a difference for them. Kate felt "it has been an excellent experience...I have more confidence ...my skill in writing improved... I think about school all the time.)" Masa indicated "I like to know...school taught me a lot...I feel better." Fena believed "I learned a lot of things in this semester." All of them decided to continue taking courses the following fall semester. This included the next level of English composition. When asked what made the experience positive, they cited their confidence in their abilities to be successful students. One decided she wanted to be a teacher and another was thinking about the

medical field. From this experience, they gained validation of their abilities as learners and confidence in themselves. Their perceptions of themselves as learners and individuals were tied to a definition of self and identity. Within this classroom, the learning experience came to mean more than the imparting of knowledge. These women gained agency and voice over their learning experience.

Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The purpose of the study was to understand the affect of the learning environment of the classroom on the development of adult women students as learners and individuals. Specifically, I was interested in understanding the experience of three adult women as they enrolled and completed a developmental English course at a suburban community college in the Midwest.

The focus of the study was on the students and not on the instructor , the pedagogy or the classroom. However, these factors became important to how the students in my study defined the experience they had over the course of the semester. It was important to pay attention to their understanding of the educational and personal experiences they had during this time period. The research centered on understanding what types of educational environments help adult women students to have successful learning experiences. The study took a non-traditional view of the academic experience by focusing on the women's perception of whether or not they believed there was evidence of their growth and development as learners and individuals. The measures of success were determined by their ability to successfully master the course content and the changes they saw in themselves as individuals.

As the researcher, I established the parameters of the study and its conceptual framework. I have spent most of my educational career in community college classrooms as an instructor of American History. During that time period, I have been blessed to work with hundreds of adult women students who entered college with fears and worries about their abilities to succeed. I listened to their stories as they started the semester

worried they could successful complete the course. Often, I found them to be the best students in the class. I struggled with my own abilities as an instructor trying to support them while creating a learning environment that recognized the multiplicity of types of learners in these classrooms. By the end of the semester many of the adult women students succeeded as students and, from their conversations with me, it was apparent they felt empowered as learners and individuals. Yet, I never knew if these were unique experiences I saw or whether they represented themes that could be translated to other classroom environments.

As I entered graduate school I focused my course work in areas that could lead to a research project about adult women students. These courses enriched my own understanding of adult learners, feminist theory, cognitive development, and critical and feminist pedagogy. There was never any doubt that my research would follow a path toward the same question I struggled with as an instructor: can learning environments be created that support the academic and personal growth of adult women students? How do these students negotiate meaning making of their lives through an educational setting (Bogden & Bilken, 2003)? The essay of Adrienne Rich (1979) framed my thoughts as she urged women students to claim their education and take it as the rightful owner. Not unlike the work of Baxter-Magolda (1992), my research would focus on listening to what the students had to say and trying to understand their frames of reference for their educational and personal experiences.

As I began to structure the conceptual framework for the study, it became evident that my standpoint would be as a feminist researcher. Reinharz (1992) states that feminist researchers do not consider feminism to be a method, but rather a perspective on an

existing method in a given field of inquiry or a perspective that can be used to develop an innovative method. For me, the lives of adult women students are important and are worth examining for the richness and diversity of their experience (hooks, 1989). For adult women, education represents a major change and shift in how they live their lives, who they have been and who they might become (Taylor & Marienu, 1995). They have made conscious efforts to change their lives (LaPaglia, 1995). The dilemma as the researcher would be to ensure that I provided appropriate representation to their experience (Gordon, 1995). As I undertook the study it was important to reflect on why I would do the study. Could I have a personal interest and still guide the research process (Stacey, 1991)? As Stacey (1991) notes what is germane in feminist research is to understand the issues as a female and a researcher.

The study allowed me access to these women's lives as they negotiated issues of agency, voice and identity in an educational setting. It was not just about the knowledge they attained but how they were shaped, as individuals, by this particular experience. Given the complexity of their lives, were there learning environments that could support and acknowledge their development (Taylor & Marienau, 1995)? Could these environments help them to overcome internal and external barriers to their success? Was claiming an education an opportunity for empowerment by these women?

Lather (1991) states that there is no neutral research or neutral education. In establishing the parameters of the study I worked toward a level of research that encouraged self reflection and deeper understanding of their situations by the students (Lather, 1991). There was another level to the research that was important to me. As a community college educator I am very aware of the depiction of community colleges

within higher education. Society's image of community colleges is a place for the powerless, uneducated, non-traditional student, those who are on the margins of life (LaPaglia, 1995). Shaw, Rhoads and Valadez (1999) believe the diverse students in community colleges face an array of experiences and attitudes that distinguishes them from traditional students and often places them at odds with the values of the institution. I hoped the study would bring forth a different picture of community college education, one that spoke to empowerment and supportive environments where students could achieve personal and professional success (Landen & Turner, 1995).

Within the research matrix developed, I understood that, as the researcher, I became part of the study. Gluck and Patai (1991) believe research has on-going negotiations between the narrator, the text and the readers. These negotiations mitigate the distance between the subject and the researcher as the researcher acknowledges her place within the study. The context of the researcher and the subject shifts as the researcher deals with issues of self, as a female and a researcher. According to Stacey (1991), this creates an intimacy between the researcher and the subject. She continues that women studying women is an interactive process in which the feminist researcher is a collaborator in the research process. Her personal interest and skill guide the research process. Feminist researchers are cognizant of their stance within the research, their acknowledgement of lack of neutrality and their representation with the study (Stacey, 1991). I knew I would go into the study with a proactive stance that brought my own experiences as a woman and an educator. However, this time I was situated as the researcher and not the teacher.

The struggle for me would be in determining who controlled the text (Borland, 1991). As Borland (1991) notes, the dichotomy occurs in reconciling the desire to empower women and their voices while acknowledging that it would be my voice interpreting the experience. If the text no longer stood apart from the researcher, then the shape of the text would change. As Behar (1996) states, the text becomes the researcher as the researcher becomes part of the totality of the research experience. As the study progressed, I found an intimacy grew between the students and me. It became about women talking to other women. Again, I hoped that I was also a careful listener. The semi- structured interviews were only part of the discourse I had with them. I found myself before and after class talking about our lives and the issues all of us were facing as students. They saw me as another student struggling to balance school, work and family.

The choice of a female instructor brought another dynamic into the research. We found many commonalities in our personal and professional experiences. We were both first generation to attend college, our progression to community college education came from other educational venues and we were committed to the role of community colleges. We were more than two educators reflecting upon our experiences in the classroom. Our conversations were often natural and reflective. The instructor remarked on several occasions how much she liked having me in class. She commented that it made a positive difference knowing a colleague was there. I found myself renewed as an educator as I watched her interact with her students. I brought it back into my own professional career, citing examples of her teaching pedagogy to faculty and deans at my institution. I later thought about how this affected my role as a researcher. Geertz (1988) writes of the webs

of significance to see or be seen as the researcher. Clearly, I had high visibility as a researcher. My presence on a weekly basis in the classroom did make a difference in the relationship I established with the students and the instructor.

Lather states that “research illustrates rather than provides a truth test” (Lather, 1991, pg.522). In some ways this study was a truth test for me. I believed there were classroom environments with particular characteristics that could emancipate and support adult women students as they constructed the future direction of their educational and personal lives. The study allowed me to see if this was, in fact, true for three adult women students.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to understand the impact of a classroom setting on the academic achievement and self confidence of adult women students. The focus was to be on the adult women students and their experience. From their perspective, did they believe their experience within the classroom had been successful for them? The definition of success was not defined only by mastery of the course, but also by their self-perceptions of growth and development over time. This study was concerned with three women’s educational and personal experience in that course and how they saw themselves as learners and individuals. It paid attention to the educational experience from the personal perspective. What defined it as a meaningful experience? I was interested in hearing the voice of the students. Voice was defined by having them tell me how they defined their educational experience. Were they meeting the educational and personal goals that were the reasons the women enrolled in the course? How would they define whether or not it had been a meaningful experience? Did they feel transformed as

learners and individuals as a result of this educational experience? As Masa remarked, “It has been an excellent experience...I have more confidence... my skill in writing has improved...I think about school all the time.”

Light (1990) indicates that a study’s design is the single most important factor determining whether or not your findings will be stellar. Given the research question, the study was framed through qualitative methodologies that sought to understand and interpret the personal experiences of three adult women enrolled in a developmental English course at a Midwest suburban community college. It was exploratory as the emphasis was on the context of these students’ educational experiences. As Creswell (1998) notes, I understood there could be variables that were unknown at the beginning of the study. The only context was the classroom setting in which the participants were placed. Not beginning with a single theory to be tested, the study was framed by the context of the students’ experiences in the classroom. The classroom became the locus of phenomena and events that constituted the basis for the study (Schulman, 1988).

The methodology used to achieve this goal relied upon qualitative techniques that included in-depth interviews, observations of the classroom, and examination of classroom artifacts. It centered on description of places, people and conversations. Within this section is a discussion of the plan of the study and the methodologies utilized during the course of the study. Careful attention was given to my role of the researcher as a participant observer, data analysis and synthesis, methods chosen and the limitations of the study.

The general logic and theoretical perspective (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003) of the study was to understand the lives of the students within the context of the classroom

setting. Following in the tradition of student studies such as the work of Baxter-Magolda (1992), the focus of the study was to listen to what the students said and use their experiences as the frames of reference for the research. Creswell (1998) defines it as the “essence of the experience.” What are they experiencing, how are they interpreting their experience and what is the structure of the world they live in? Given this focus and direction, the study integrated elements of both phenomenology and case study.

Methodology should become the operational framework in which the research is placed (Leedy, 1997). Kreiger (1991) notes that people are differently situated in relation to their environments and there are different possibilities for experiencing the world and knowing themselves. Given that the focus of the study was on the lives of the participants within the context of the classroom setting, it was important to understand the essence and experiences from their perspectives and the views they held throughout the semester (Creswell, 1998). The research became three case studies of the experiences of the participants in the classroom. The time and activity of this class, one semester, meeting twice a week, bound the research of the participants’ experiences. Through a phenomenological approach, I could understand the meaning of the events of these participants in this particular situation. It was important to understand how and what meaning they constructed around the events of the classroom for their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Design of Study

The design of the study began with the decision to choose a community college as a site for the research. Given their theoretical and ideological tenants, a community college was a logical choice for a study of adult women in a developmental course.

Community colleges were founded as open door institutions that provide access into higher education for groups otherwise denied this opportunity. They embrace their ability to be comprehensive, inclusive, multifaceted organizations that define their role by the abilities, needs and achievements of their students (Savage, 1989). Some argue (McGrath and Spear, 1991) that as open access institutions, community colleges believe that they can be the instruments for equity and mobility. Unlike other higher education institutions, community colleges see their mandate as serving the needs of a representative community. According to McCabe (2000), community colleges support the fundamental American belief in the worth and potential of the individual. Females comprise almost 60% of the student populations of community colleges (Phillips, 2005). Given the large number of adult women enrolled in community colleges, I hoped the identified site would provide participants for the study.

The college chosen was located in the suburbs of a major Midwestern city. It had one major campus and several satellite locations. Over 12,000 students were enrolled as part-time and full-time students. In many ways it fit the profile of a typical community college, providing transfer courses, occupational and professional programs and personal enrichment. The college mission statement indicated, "College programs are designed to help individuals realize and develop their potential." The college was an active participant in a recent national movement to become a learner centered college (O'Banion 1997; Taggett & Barr, 1995). This movement has focused on moving institutions from being teacher center to learner centered. Community colleges have shifted their emphasis to putting the learner first. As the catalogue for the college stated, "it (the college) provided the right choices and the right styles of learning for students."

Shaw, Rhoads and Valdez (1999) conclude that academic success for the diverse student populations of community colleges hinges upon strong institutional commitment, leadership from both faculty and administration, allocation of resources, and the development and maintenance of programs and services that support students. Given the profile of the institution, it appeared that this was a college committed to student success.

The Vice President of Academic Affairs was quite willing to have the college participate in the study. He stated that the college's developmental program focused on having students become ready for college courses. Working with the chair of the English department, he recommended an instructor who was recognized as one of the outstanding faculty on campus. Her credentials included teaching both the honors and developmental English courses. In addition, she served as the editor for a community college research journal. After contacting the instructor, it was agreed that the study would focus on a developmental English course she would teach in the spring semester. This was the second course in the sequence of developmental English at the college.

A developmental English course was chosen for several reasons. Developmental education is one of the most important trends in community college education (McCabe, 2000; Rouche & Rouche, 1999). Nearly one-half of all community college students are enrolled in developmental education courses (McCabe, 2003). As Perin (2002) notes, developmental education has become an integral part of the community college mission. A large portion of entering community college students are asked to take assessment exams that indicate whether or not they are ready to enroll in college-level courses. These basic skill courses are an entry point to college that can hinder or support student success in college as they ready students who are defined as under prepared to master college

level work. Women students make up an important percentage within this at-risk student population and exceed male enrollment in developmental courses (McCabe, 2000). These courses provide adult women students with their primary access to higher education (Goto, 1999).

Most research has focused on the ways women learn and not on the challenges and limitations that are placed on women students in developmental learning environments (Key, 1988). Research concerning students enrolled in developmental courses has been concerned with the context of classroom learning and has not looked at the specific experiences of adult women students. Goto (1999) indicates that in developmental courses, student success is closely tied to their ability to control their own educational path. By capturing the experience of these women students in this course, the study could lead to greater understanding of how a classroom environment can create a transformative culture that supports the cognitive and affect development of adult women students (McGrath & Van Ruskirk, 1999). The study could help educators in considering how developmental educational courses impact students and their lives.

The course that was observed focused on building writing skills. As its catalogue description stated, it was designed to prepare students for traditional English composition courses. Its major goals included mastering basic paragraph structure and ways for students to improve their writing skills. Successfully completing this course brought students' basic skills to a level that prepared them for college level courses. Success in this course could determine future student success in college.

The course was scheduled to meet twice a week for an hour and a half during the spring semester of 2002. The composition of the class included students who took the

first course in the developmental English sequence, students who completed the appropriate English grammar for Second Language Students, and students who were placed in the course through the college assessment process.

Data Collection

Three data collection strategies were used during the course of the study: interviewing, observation and examination of classroom artifacts. At the beginning of the semester, the course selected included a total enrollment of twenty-eight students. Selection criteria for the interviewing process included that the female students would not be traditional college age of 18-24 and that this was the only higher education institution they had attended. It was hoped that between 5-7 students would be interviewed. Several factors mitigated the selection process. The class composition presented immediate problems in acquiring an appropriate sample for the study. Among the twenty-eight students enrolled, fourteen were female but only eight fit the non-traditional student profile. The eight adult female students included four African American students and three non-native students. The male students included a large number that were between the ages of 18-24, one African American male and one non-native student.

On my first day of observation the instructor introduced me and had me explain the background of the study. I explained that the study would focus on interviewing several of the female students. I hoped to obtain information that would be helpful to instructors in working with adult female students. There were several questions from the class concerning why females and not males, and why I was focusing on a particular type of student. The instructor suggested to the students that they talk to me about the study and indicate if they were interested in participating. By the second week the instructor

and I discussed having me approach several of the women in the class. She met with them as well to discuss participating in the study. The African American women indicated that they were unwilling to participate in the study. It appeared I would have difficulty finding participants. However, I then met one-on-one with four of the women, three non-native students and one white middle age student. They agreed to participate and signed consent forms to be interviewed. The instructor also agreed to be interviewed for the study. I felt it was important to have her perceptions of the students' experiences during the semester. Though I never revealed my conversations with the students to her, her observations often paralleled those of the students.

Interviews

There were two sets of interviews with the students and the instructor. Though I set up two interviews with her, one student found that she could not make the time and never participated in the study. While the sample was small, I believed correlating the interviews to my classroom observations provided the appropriate data for the study. The interviews with the students were held in a room within the Women's Center on campus. The Center staff was very accommodating, providing me with coffee and additional information about the college and their perceptions of adult women students. The interviews with the instructor took place in her office.

The interviews were semi-structured with a set of protocol questions that allowed for some open-ended conversation intended to capture their own feelings and perceptions. I found there was often a "free-flow" of conversation between the students and myself. The same process was followed with the instructor. I often found that the conversation continued after the tape recorder was turned off. The first set of interviews began at the

fourth week of class. By this time, the students were somewhat acclimated to the course but were still fresh in their perceptions of themselves as students in the course. One student requested that I not use a tape recorder. She indicated it made her uncomfortable even though she knew her answers were part of my research. I often had to go back after the interview to my notes to make sure I captured all of the information she provided. The second set of interviews occurred at the end of the semester so that I could capture the women's analysis of the experience at its completion. One of the participants was unable to attend but sent me her written responses to the questions. It is important to note I had informal conversations with the participants before and after class. As the semester progressed, these conversations occurred on a weekly basis. While the two formal interviews provided a basis for the self-analysis as individuals and learners, the informal conversations allowed me to "fill in" on a regular basis. It was often through these conversations that I learned how they were feeling, what challenges they were facing and if they were feeling positive about themselves and the course.

The interviews were organized to allow me to establish a level of rapport with the participants (Leedy, 1997). They were semi-structured so I could build upon their answers and ask follow-up questions that helped clarify what they were saying. The setting for the interviews helped to make them feel comfortable with the process. All agreed that they were glad to be part of the study and looked forward to the results of the research. In both sets of interviews I was guided by the desire to capture the students' self-perceptions of what was occurring to them as a result of being in the course. Was there evidence they had gained self esteem as learners and individuals through this experience? The first set of interviews focused on who they were and why they were

enrolled in the course. These questions asked them to provide information about themselves. I asked them to discuss why they were in school and what their goals and expectations were for the course. We discussed the learning environment and their perceptions of the instructor and their classmates. The interview was guided by their perceptions and analysis of what was occurring to them as a result of being in the course.

The questions for the first interview with the instructor were aligned to those of the students. She also provided me with background information about herself that included education and teaching experiences. I was interested in knowing why she decided to teach at a community college. Her perspective was quite clear that this decision was a conscious choice on her part. We spent time discussing the course itself, and her expectations for the students. Not unlike the students, I focused on her perceptions of herself as an instructor and her role in supporting the learning needs of the students.

The first set of interviews provided me with a platform for understanding the students and the instructors. I certainly better understood the motivation the students had for being in the course and their expectations for themselves. Their motivations varied from "...this is the first step...taking it one step at a time...in my education" to "my reason to come to school was to know people." Another stated, "That day (when she enrolled in school) I think maybe I join the university, I feel educated." One of the primary goals of the instructor was to have her students become, "good student citizens-professional citizens." She believed her role was to "take their work seriously and have respect for their ideas."

The second set of interviews with the students occurred during the last week of class. They were required to complete a standardized writing prompt that helped determine whether or not they could move on to the English composition courses. As the interview began, I thanked them for the opportunity to get to know them and told them how much I appreciated the time I spent with them. I indicated that I wanted to talk about their observations of this experience and how it impacted them as students and individuals. We talked about their relationship to the other students, the instructor and their future educational plans.

The instructor and I met the week after classes were over. Like the students, the questions focused on having her reflect on the semester. We discussed whether or not she met her goals for herself and her students, and if she saw a difference in the students by the end of the course. I asked her if the experience of the class led to any changes for her as an instructor.

The second sets of interviews were the other book end to the research project. Through the voice of the students and instructor, I came to see what impact the class had for them. All three students felt it was a very positive for them as learners and individuals. One tied it to gender by stating, "being a woman and getting older, I have more confidence, more sense of identity, you know what you want and how to achieve it." She had already enrolled for courses in the fall semester. A second noted that her primary education goal was to learn English and now she wanted to become a teacher. A third felt she achieved her goal of being more confident as a learner. She wanted to become a Medical Assistant.

The instructor felt it was a tough semester for her. She had gotten ill and had missed several days of class. The school had also been closed for a snow day. In spite of these setbacks, her highlight was "...to see so many students do so well." Her analogy for the class was to see it as a "sock hop." When I asked her why, she indicated that the class had a rhythm and motion that reminded her of it. We talked about the incremental changes that could be seen in the students. She wanted them to leave the course feeling they were empowered to take charge of their educational careers. The instructor wanted to create an environment that challenged and supported students in their learning experience. From the comments of the participants, it appeared the teacher achieved this goal. Each of the three women students successfully completed the course. Each believed that they grew as learners and individuals.

Observation

The second data collection strategy focused on direct observation of the classroom environment. The class met twice a week for one and one half-hour; I attended one classroom session each week for the sixteen weeks. There were two settings for the classroom meeting; a regular classroom with tables and chairs and a computer writing lab that was located next door to the classroom. The seating arrangements in the classroom included tables and chairs facing a blackboard and monitor for the instructor's computer. The students sat next to each other in four rows. For the first several weeks, female students sat on one side of the room and male students sat on the other side. Younger students often sat with their male and female counterparts. A few students shifted their place in the classroom as the semester progressed. However, most students did not change their seating arrangement after the first week. Two of the three participants in the

study sat next to each other the entire semester. They were located in the second row of the classroom. The other moved her seat, but it was always to be near her friend. The seating arrangements provided insights into certain classroom dynamics. Younger students sitting together often talked about social events rather than classroom assignments. Some pairs of students worked closely together on assignments both before and after class. Some students arrived late and always sat in the back of the class.

The computer lab had a different configuration with the computers arranged in three rows, with two rows facing each other. There was a large screen in the front of the room that showed the work of the instructor. The class met, on the average, once every other week in the computer lab. Certain assignments were to be done during that time period. The dynamics within the computer lab were different from what I observed in the classroom. The younger students tended to finish their assignments quickly and talked to their friends. The participants worked much longer on their assignments and often required the help of the instructor or other students.

The instructor clearly set the tone for both classroom environments. By the second week she knew the names of all the students. She began each class by saying good morning and sometimes commenting on the hats or apparel that students wore. The instructor's comments were positive and not derogatory. She then discussed the assignments for the day. She clearly established the parameters for each class meeting. Her expectations were that students would support each other's learning. As an example, in her early comments in the computer lab, she told students to make sure that they knew each other's names and that their colleagues were in the same place on the assignment.

The classroom artifacts that were provided to me by the instructor supported my observations. They included the college catalog, textbook, the syllabus, handouts and additional assignments given during the semester. On several occasions in their interviews, the participants made reference to assignments in the textbook or projects they had been assigned. The instructor also provided me with copies of the student work for the first assignment of the semester. The students were asked to write a topic sentence about themselves and five things that were most important to them. This background information gave me a context for understanding the complexion of the class. From the individual narratives, I learned about their personal backgrounds, which helped to understand the personality of the class. There were several papers that discussed why the students came to college and their expectations as students. This was important in understanding whether or not the participants in the study were similar or different from the other students. Were they aligned in their expectations, goals and backgrounds? While the majority of the class was younger than the participants, it appeared that there were many similarities between the two groups.

Though the research was a case study of three adult women students, by observing the participants in the natural setting of the classroom, I hoped that there would be a context for understanding their school experiences during the semester. I was seeking to enter their world and have some familiarity with it. As Creswell (1998) notes, I was trying to comprehend the structure of the educational world they lived in while taking this course. I looked for critical incidents in this environment throughout the semester that might help to explain their interpretations of their experiences in the class. Through these observations I wanted to be able to convey dimensions of life within the

classroom. As I observed the dynamics of the classroom, it was going to be important to be able to convey what was going on, what the setting looked like and what people were involved (Strauss & Cobin, 1998). It was important to document the complex interactions that might occur within this environment between student and instructor or student and student (Marshall & Rosman, 1998).

Not unlike the interviews, my classroom observations did not have predetermined categories. I observed general patterns of behavior of the students and the participants in the study. While I had the outline for class activities, I was not looking for any specific actions but rather the more broadly based dynamics of the interactions of the participants to fellow students, the instructor and the classroom environment. It was important to observe these interactions, not only to understand their perceptions of their experience but also to have a picture of how the class worked. How did the instructor structure the class, what types of pedagogues were being used and what similarities and differences were there between the participants and other students in the class?

Role of the Researcher

My role in the classroom was a participant observer. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), in this role the researcher spends “prolonged periods of time in the subject’s natural environment... collecting data and simultaneously participating and observing.” My goal was to observe and understand (Geertz, 1988). As noted by Marshall and Rosman (1999), I wanted to be able to hear, see and experience the same reality that the participants were having. Would my observations be similar to those of the participants? Would I observe nuances that might not be captured in the interviews? Did having an observer in the classroom change behaviors (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003) ?

On the first day I entered the class, the instructor introduced me to the students. She explained why I was there, what I hoped to accomplish and provided me with an opportunity to talk about the research. There were several questions from students concerning the study. For the younger students, there was interest in why I had chosen adult women students and not younger students. Male students asked why I was studying female students and not them. I had a second occasion to talk directly to the class when the instructor and I asked for volunteers for the study. The instructor later noted in her second interview that she liked having me in the class as a colleague. She did not indicate that it had changed any of her approaches to teaching the students. However, she described it as having another professional in the room, a colleague that understood her goals for the class.

I would arrive early, sit in the back of the classroom and try to be as unobtrusive as possible. I sensed by the third classroom visit that the students seemed comfortable having me there. In the hallway prior to class beginning, I found myself talking not only to the study participants, but to other students as well. They would freely discuss their lives from where they were taking vacations to issues they were having at their job. When not talking directly to me, they did not shield their conversations from me. In these direct and indirect ways, I was better able to understand who these students were. On several occasions, I spent that time with one of the study participants discussing our experiences as students, wives and mothers. From these discussions I gained as much insight into her experience with the course as I did in the interviews. We grew to be quite comfortable with each other. I looked forward to those discussions and saw myself not as a researcher

but a fellow student. These out of class times gave me important insights into the lives of the participants and other students.

Did the class change because of my presence? Since I was there almost from the first week, there was no way to benchmark differences in the classroom environment. I did not notice any shifts over time in the behavior of the students or the instructor as a result of my presence. Changes that did occur were more likely the result of other factors such as the time of the semester; for example the behavior of the class changed just prior to spring break. The students were much more focused on where they were going on vacation than the material being discussed in class. As the semester grew closer to the end, many students seemed to focus on whether or not they were caught up on the class assignments.

In class, the students talked rather freely with each other in front of me. Occasionally they would glance over to see if I was writing in my notebook. During one of the classroom discussions, the student sitting next to me asked if I had gotten what was said. He indicated that he wanted to make sure I had written it in my notebook. Students sitting next to me would talk about the class, ask if I was getting enough information and sometimes volunteer if they were having difficulties with the assignments. One student wanted to know if I enjoyed being in the class. I found over time that I was drawn into the discussions of the students. There was one student who I began to worry about as he often shared his late night and weekend activities with me and the class.

I had prior experiences in observing the educational environments of classrooms. As a department chair and dean, I had observed more than 200 full- time and part- time faculty in the classroom. In making the decision to include observation as part of my

research, I wanted to be able to draw from my prior experiences. From these experiences, I learned that to capture the essence of this learning environment, it was important to develop notes that were descriptive and later reflective of class meetings (Creswell, 1998). I knew my attention had to be on the instructor, the students and the study participants. I began each class by noting the topic for the day, the method of presentation and the assignments that were given prior to class. I noted seating patterns of students, pre and post class dialogue and who was in attendance that day. Was the topic of the day clear to students? What was the method of presentation? Was the instructor able to draw them into the learning experience? How were the study participants reacting to the presentation and expectations? Were they asking questions, did the instructor call on them and if it was a paired exercise, who was their partner? I tried to capture specific dialogue of the instructor and the students.

As the class progressed I noted my thoughts on what was occurring in the classroom. Did the instructor integrate the students into the learning experience? Were there key phrases from the instructor or the participants that indicated how comfortable they were with the discussion? As an example, one pattern I noted in the teaching methods of the instructor was her use of personal examples, such as learning to swim or watching a soccer game, to help explain an assignment. I noted how often the study participants asked questions or participated in class discussion. One study participant actively pursued asking questions about the material or the assignment. A second one always asked someone else. The third rarely asked questions and sat passively throughout the class meeting. I found I was much more comfortable as a participant observer than as an interviewer. In the classroom environment I could see a broader picture of the students

and their experiences throughout the semester. Perhaps it was the snapshot over time of whether or not there were differences that could be noted in them as learners and individuals.

Analysis

The methodologies were defined by classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. As noted, the parameters for research were expanded by the informal conversations held with the study participants, the instructors and other students of the class. Data analysis involved looking for patterns from the interviews and classroom observations. As I looked for those patterns, the classroom artifacts were helpful in understanding the outcomes and direction that the instructor established for the course.

Patton (1987) states that analysis should bring order to the research. It allows the researcher to attach meaning and significance and to develop coherent patterns. The focus of this analysis was to look for categories and themes that supported the research question. From the interviews and observations, was there evidence that this had been a positive experience for the study participants? Could I verify that, by the end of the semester, the learning environment of this classroom had created a supportive setting for the participants to grow and develop as learners and individuals?

The questions of the interviews were open ended to allow the participants the opportunity to describe their experiences. I took each respondent through the same sequence of questions using the same words (Patton, 1987). My goal was to have the participants reveal themselves and allow me to see the world through their eyes. As Patton (1987) notes, the purpose of the interview was to find out what was on their mind and not to observe their behavior.

I wanted to create a systematic way to analyze the interviews. Given the small sample of the study participants, I did not rely upon research software programs to codify the interviews. After each interview I listened to the tape and transcribed it verbatim. I found it important to listen several times, not only to capture the words but the inflections of the participant. I then noted key issues that were discussed, how I thought the participant approached questions and the direction that the interview went. At several points in the interview, I stopped the tape and reviewed what was said. This allowed me time to write key phrases and statements. At the end of the transcription I reviewed my notes.

Choosing to transcribe the interviews could be seen as arduous and time consuming. However, I used it as a time for reflection and review. As I listened to the tapes, I highlighted statements that I found characterized the experience of the participant. I was interested in changes in speech patterns as they addressed the questions being asked. I was unable to do this for the student who was not tape recorded. Through this process I hoped to develop a methodology through which the participants could self identify the experience of being in this class. Within their narrative, I looked for indicators that told me their perceptions of themselves as learners and individuals. Were there important statements that helped me to see how they characterized their classroom experience? As I reviewed the tapes I came to realize that, though the study focused on the classroom experience, their outside lives were also important to the study. The interviews transcended into their life stories, the reasons they came to school, their goals and expectations for themselves. The tapes provided a venue to understanding issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety as a student or their opinions concerning education. For one

student, the negative experience of high school meant she waited 30 years to enter college. Another saw school as a way to expand her horizons beyond being a mother and a wife. Two of the participants started their schooling in other countries. Consideration of codifying significant themes and meanings had to take in a much broader picture that transcended the participants as just students in the classroom.

For fourteen weeks I sat in the class as a participant observer. Being there on a regular basis helped me to gain acceptance from the students. While recording the events of the classroom was important, I also noted my immediate reflections and analysis of what was occurring. For example, not only would I state what a study participant said but the inflection of the voice or body language that I saw. One participant struggled through a computer lab assignment. At the end of the class she told everyone, "I appreciate everyone's help" and waved the printed page. I noted the look of amazement on her face as she continued, "The computer age is amazing." I used words like animated, frustrated, and passive as I observed the participants. This became very helpful when I later analyzed the notes from each class meeting.

In the early sessions, I focused on the class as a whole, what was the topic of the day, seating patterns, and interactions between students. Were their identified leaders within the class who dominated discussions? Sitting in the back of the class, I sometimes experienced difficulty hearing the one-on-one conversation between students. Once the study participants were identified, I tried to place them within the context or environment of the class. Were there on-going patterns of behavior for them as the semester progressed? How closely could I correlate what was occurring in the classroom to the interviews and my outside discussion with the students? One participant indicated in her

first interview that she spent most of her life learning on her own. She saw this as a “first step” toward a formal education. From my observations in class I found she never missed a class nor failed to have an assignment completed on time. A second participant stated that she came to school to “get to know people.” Yet within the classroom she rarely participated in discussions and always sat with the same friend.

Observing the instructor was very helpful in understanding her teaching style and outcomes for the class. As with the participants, I found recurring patterns of behavior through these observations. As I noted one day, the teacher had wonderful facial expressions when explaining an assignment. She often injected humor into the conversations and carefully watched for who was and was not participating. She regularly used examples that might be relevant to the students, such as the latest rock band or what they would be doing over spring break. I reviewed my observation notes every two to three weeks. At that time I would draw to key themes from the notes. Though I kept careful notes of each class meeting, this proved to be more of a challenge than transcribing the interview notes. In addition, I had my notes from the informal conversations. The test was whether or not I could shape the information into a rich portrayal of what occurred during the semester (Leedy, 1997).

My challenge was to decide what types of data were important. Primary was the students’ self-identification of their experience during the semester. This came from the interviews, my observations and the informal conversations. My objective was to give “voice” to their experience. From the observations and interviews, I tried to pull out key phrases or statements I believed were reflective of their behavior and activity during the semester. This included my notations from the classroom observations where they had

expressed a sense of frustration, anxiety or feelings of success. Because the study focused on affective development, it was important to include self-identification of their experience, their perceptions of the learning experience and how they felt during the semester and once it was completed.

The second challenge related to the situational component of the study: the classroom and the instructor. While this was not the focus of the research, it created the context for the study. From the classroom observations, I developed a separate set of categories. I looked for patterns of teaching pedagogy, strategies and approaches by the instructor and the general outcomes for the course. If the outcome for the course was to prepare students to develop appropriate written skills, how was this translated into educational strategies and teaching techniques? From the instructor interviews, I learned her goals for the students. Within the context of the classroom, was I finding tensions between what she wanted them to accomplish and their ability to achieve those outcomes? For example, as they received grades for their assignments, what impact did it have on their self-esteem? One participant told me that the “best experience is getting good grades and not flunking.”

I struggled with developing a single coding pattern for the research. I found that the research was rich with thoughts and phrases that described the participants’ experience from their perspective, the instructor’s perspective and my own. What were the feelings and perceptions the participants had about themselves and this experience? Given the focus on the students’ experience, I wanted to be careful to create as broad a template as possible. Ultimately, I chose to understand the experience in a holistic fashion. The analysis was driven by what I heard and saw throughout the semester.

After much review I came to understand that the study was about the women's perspective of this experience. According to Patton (1987), qualitative research and analysis depends upon the researcher providing rich descriptions of what has been collected. My challenge again was to provide the descriptions that told the story of their experience. It was clear that their own words were the basis for this study. What emerged was a part of their life stories, the experience they had in the course and how it affected them as learners and individuals.

Chapter 3

A Different Journey

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to provide an authentic voice to three women's experiences during the course of one semester in their developmental English class. It was important that the study give significance to the feelings and reflections of their individual experiences. Each woman was quite different in her background, educational experience and age. Two were returning students and for one, this was the first college-credit course she had taken. There was no commonality in their socio-economic background. Two of the students had emigrated from Asia and the Middle East and the third had never left the state or the region where the college was located. Interestingly, their initial motivation for attending school was not degree oriented but one of educational exploration. One had a successful business but felt it was time to expand her educational horizons. She was coming back to school after almost thirty-five years and with the memory of a very negative experience in high school. One wanted to expand her experiences beyond taking care of her child and living in her community. The third had a degree from another country and enrolled at the college at the suggestion of her friend. The consistent theme for the three students was a desire to acquire an education. In *Claiming An Education* (1979), Adrienne Rich delineates between receiving an education and claiming one. According to Rich, to claim an education is to take it as a rightful owner. Each of these women made a conscious choice to move forward in their educational careers.

A Path To Self Discovery

According to Tierney (1993), learning is situated within larger social realities that link learners to their own perceptions of themselves and their worlds. In entering college each of these students had a purpose and direction for their educational experience. While these goals differed from student to student, the women understood taking this course was an important step in changing their lives. Each woman brought her own identity and definition of self-esteem into the learning experience (Flannery, 2000). As their stories unfolded, it was important to remember that their identities were multifaceted and being reconstructed through this learning experience (Shaw, 1999). Like many other adult women students, they were making a conscious effort to take charge of their lives and have power over the direction of their future (LaPaglia, 1995). It was not an easy journey. As Fine (1992) notes, shifting identities are part of the situational determinants around which development and learning occur. Throughout the semester, in different ways, they struggled to make sense and meaning of the circumstances they found in this class.

Background: Placing The Study

The location of their story is primarily the classroom. Through personal interviews, interviews with the instructor, and my observations of the classroom, their story unfolded. While the focus of the study was not centered on the instructor, she could not be divorced from the story. Francis had been an English instructor at the college for ten years. She described her work as a “passion.” “I am a classroom teacher first, it is very important to me to see people apply what they have learned.” While Francis had taught an array of courses at the college, she felt that “developmental classes are some of the most important ones we teach.” According to Roueche and Roueche (1999), the key

to successful educational experiences for developmental students is having an instructor who understands that her students may be under prepared for college level work but does not view them as being incapable of moving forward in their academic development.

Theories concerning developmental education (McCabe, 2000, 2003; McGrath & Spear, 1987; Roueche & Roueche, 1999) emphasize focusing on the whole student to encourage their academic and personal growth. Francis understood the complexity of the issues facing developmental students. She commented that students in developmental courses often were coming back to school or continuing their education under duress. “For some reason they are not well prepared...their learning styles were never addressed. It could be they had some bad experiences with not very sensitive teachers...but they are finding they have to go to college for some reason.” Francis saw each student as an individual, understanding who they were, setting goals for them, and working with them to achieve those goals. She created a balance between a supportive and nurturing environment and bringing them to a higher level of proficiency in their writing skills. “ I want them to feel more independent as learners; I want to influence them in many ways to be good student citizens, to be professional, to take pride in their learning. I know that some of the reasons they are in a developmental class is because they have not succeeded before...they need to learn quickly to navigate in a professional environment. I have enough arrogance to believe that I can answer their needs”

Francis structured the course to create an environment that facilitated student learning in a welcoming and positive environment. Francis’ academic goals were to have her students learn “simple content and skills grammar, to be editors and writers.” Francis created an atmosphere of trust, respect and community within the classroom. Given the

high level of trust, she was able to produce an accepting atmosphere that was integral to how the students developed as learners and individuals. Francis saw each student as an individual, understood who they were, set goals and worked with them to achieve them in a supportive and nurturing environment. Her strategies balanced mastery of course content with instilling confidence in the students. The syllabus for the course (Appendix G) states it is a skills class that “takes a step-by-step approach to all writing tasks.” The classroom was a learner-centered environment and a place where students could make meaning of the learning experience (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Maher & Tetreault, 1994). Their ability to achieve new levels of self worth as individuals, develop enhanced self-esteem, have a clearer sense of identity and find their voices were directly related to their learning experiences (Hays & Flannery, 2000). Through shared trust, safety and enthusiasm for learning, it was an educational setting in which students were engaged and active participants in the learning experience.

Francis created a welcoming and positive environment for the students. Given her significant classroom experiences and teaching techniques, she was able to create an environment that facilitated student learning (Roueche & Roueche,1999). Within this educational environment, Francis shaped a learning culture of academic and personal support (McGrath & Van Ruskirk, 1999). Her academic goals and expectations for her students were clear. “I want them to feel more independent as learners. I want to influence them in many ways to be good student citizens, to be professional, to take pride in their learning...I want everyone to be able to communicate and be understood, the way he/she wishes to be.” It was an environment that would give these women the confidence that they could succeed (McGrath & Van Ruskirk, 1999).

Kate's Journey

In the following two chapters, I group the students by backgrounds, goals and experiences. By following this format, it provides the opportunity to see the similarities and differences in the experiences of the three women students. This chapter focuses on Kate. As a “traditional” non-traditional student, she seemed to test the theories related to adult learning and development. The following chapter concentrates on Fena and Masa. As non-native students, they faced unique cultural and educational issues during the semester. In their stories, much of their experience related to their ability to overcome traditional learning concerns related to their foreign backgrounds and experiences. Working from the concept of “other” (hooks, 1994), through this experience these students would have greater agency over their lives. It created fundamental changes in the way they viewed themselves and their world.

The Background

My introduction to Kate was on the first day I attended class. I arrived early and sat in the back of the class to watch students enter and take their seats. I noticed an older, white female student who sat in the second row. She turned to a fellow female student and said, “This whole thing makes me nervous. I got my book binder for class, the journal and an extra one for myself.” In so many ways that statement represented her early days in the course. Kate worried about her educational abilities, would over compensate by doing more than required, and frequently questioned whether or not she would succeed in the course.

Kate was a 52-year-old woman who lived in this region of the state all of her life. As she later explained in her first interview, Kate graduated from high school at eighteen

and the next week married. She was married to the same man since high school graduation, had two adult sons and was self-employed. Kate's journey during the semester became one of self-discovery and liberation. I watched her grow from being tentative about herself and her educational abilities to becoming confident and self-assured.

In many ways, Kate seemed to fit the profile of a traditional adult female student, lacking confidence in her ability to learn, uncertain about what to expect from college and believing that she did not have the skills to be successful in college (Clark, 1993). For adult women, education represents a major change and shift in how they live their lives, who they have been, and who they might become. The barriers to their success can be external or internal (Taylor & Manenau, 1995). Kate was often concerned about how she appeared to herself and others. In our first interview Kate told me that she did not want me to record the interview. She expressed concern that, "...her words not be heard ten years from now."

Kegan (2000) tells us that every student comes with a learning past that creates a disposition toward learning. Kate's prior educational experiences had not been positive. From her earliest experiences in elementary school, she expressed disdain for public school education. Kate talked about her memory of the smell of school and how glad she was that college did not have that odor. By the time Kate went to high school, she was turned off by formal education. She hated high school and could not wait to graduate. Each day her husband drove her to school on his motorcycle and had to convince her to enter the school building. Following a brother who was considered "bright," Kate described her experience as "sliding through." She often wandered the halls, isolated

from most of the school activities. Kate had instructors who made fun of her in class and she felt there was no one to talk to about her situation. The year she graduated, she refused to have her picture in the yearbook. In telling me, "I did not want to be in it," she expressed her sense of disconnect to the educational experience. "I was really a miserable child during those years." Thus, the concept of formal education Kate brought to this learning environment was partially shaped by her earlier experiences in public schools. It was an experience where Kate believed she had performed poorly and been passed on just to get her through school. It brought her personal discomfort and dissatisfaction (Ferro, 1993). This perspective became extremely important once she enrolled in college.

In the intervening years after high school, Kate raised her family and became self-educated. When I asked her about attending college, she explained that she loved education and learning things, but Kate described it as, "I learn on my own." Through her local library, she read most of the classics including *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Count of Monte Crisco*. "I read to learn and for pleasure. One day I will own my own library and not have to return books in three weeks to the library." Through her visits to the library she taught herself to be a master gardener. This led her to starting her own horticulture business. With help from her sons, she stuffed mailboxes with flyers and her business grew to serving 12 clients. In our first interview Kate mentioned her concern that in the spring her business might affect her schoolwork.

Taking The First Steps

Kate exhibited many of the characteristics of a self-directed adult learner (Brookfield, 1985; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1975, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). As Merriam and Caffarella (1999) note, the context of adult life shapes what an adult needs

and wants to learn and to a lesser extent, when and where learning takes place. As Kate entered college, it was important for the instructor to consider Kate's prior knowledge and experiences (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Kate was used to planning and managing her own learning (Cross, 1981). In her adult years, Kate became focused on her professional and personal enrichment. In reaction to her high school experiences, Kate set her own course to become educated.

Given all that Kate had accomplished, she had great fear and trepidation in attending college. With her children grown, she decided it was time to go to school. The college was out of her district, which meant paying out-of-district tuition fees. She chose the college for its reputation. She saw the community college as convenient. Although she did not know what she wanted to do and had not declared a major, she decided to get her 'basics' at the community college. If she was successful Kate thought she would move on to a four-year college. "This is the first step to going to a four year school." It was interesting that Kate did not have a particular program or major in mind; rather the goal was to be able to complete school.

Kate explained her reason for attending college was that she "...loved education and learning things." She mentioned that her sons were grown and that it was the right time for it. During her adult years, Kate moved herself along an independent path of learning. Her journey after high school began from a position of silence to one where she learned the sources for knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). As *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986) notes, Kate was moving along a development sequence in the construction of knowledge. Her learning began as a personal journey and

Kate was ready for new challenges. She realized that the time was right for her to embark on a new educational experience.

Her actual journey to college was a difficult one. She drove to the campus several times but did not go in. Kate described it as “a first step, tried, got frightened, went home and came back again.” When she finally entered one of the buildings, Kate thought it “did not smell like a school but more like an office.” Her first step was to take continuing education courses to make sure she could make it through the semester. They were refresher courses in English and math. Kate saw it as “Going to school, complete the exercises at home and show up the next time.” It was “taking it one step at a time.” That first successful step was an important one for Kate. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) state that the way a woman feels about herself, her self-esteem and self confidence are significant elements in the decision to participate in a formal educational setting.

The next major educational event for Kate was to take the placement exam for college credit courses. This assessment helps determine the college readiness of students through a series of tests that are focused on reading, writing and mathematics. Kate walked through the student services building several times before she went in and took the test. Once she was given the score and recommendation, she enrolled in the developmental English course that focused on building writing skills. Students were placed in the course if they did not meet a minimum score for English Composition I. This developmental English course was the one that I observed. Kate’s instructor, Francis, believed Kate was capable of taking English Composition I. While Kate may have had the skill set for the composition course, she had not scored high enough on the assessment to be placed in that course. According to Flannery (1993), the affective

cannot be separated from the cognitive dimensions since emotions are involved in every aspect of learning. Her fears about returning to school could have prevented Kate from scoring high enough to be placed in English Composition I. Kate was operating at an affective level where she perceived herself incapable of being successful in that course.

Classroom Dynamics: Instructor

Given her background and experiences, Kate brought with her to this class a unique identity and prior history. Since her prior formal educational encounters were negative, would they hinder her success in this class? What hurdles would she need to get over in order to see herself as a successful learner in this situation? If her learning experience in this class was tied to her earlier life experiences, could she create a new socio-cultural context that would be more positive about formal education (Luke & Gore, 1992; Weiler, 1988)? In the intervening years from high school, Kate exhibited independence as a learner and a woman. In her first interview, I asked her about the structure of the class. She noted it was going a little too fast, "I am used to my own pace, this is a little fast." Being self educated, starting her own business and raising two children taught her a level of independence. Kate saw herself as passionate. "I speak first and then think later, I guess I am opinionated." Would it be difficult to be in the "traditional" learning environment of the classroom? Her expectations were that the course would help her to build skills in writing and grammar. She wanted to be able to take the first English composition course and complete a term paper successfully.

Post structural feminist theorists (Fine, 1992; Lather, 1991; Luke & Gore, 1992; Middleton, 1993; Tisdell, 2000) believe that the position and status of women learners within the classroom are determined by how they define and are defined by others within

the environment. Kate was fortunate to have an instructor who believed that developmental courses “need a good teacher.” Creating this type of structure and environment was important for students like Kate whose prior experiences were with teachers expecting her to fail. Now she had an instructor who worked with her to succeed. Francis’ goals for the course were clearly aligned with Kate’s, who wanted to learn grammar and improve her writing. Francis wanted students to feel empowered in their learning. Francis looked for improvement in her students and showed respect for their ideas. Her classroom was a balance of expectations between teaching her students to be “editors and writers,” and having them “feel more independent as learners.” For Kate, success in the course reached beyond the development of skills; it gave her greater agency over the development of her voice and identity (Harding, 1996).

Feminist pedagogy is shaped by its concern to understand how the processes of teaching and learning can facilitate women’s learning (Tisdell, 2000). Working from a gender standpoint, feminist pedagogy assumes there are unique educational environments that support women’s learning. Learning can be a transforming experience in which women find their voices or authentic selves through the learning experience (Maher and Tetrault, 1994). Within this context learning becomes personal and emancipatory (Weiler, 1988). In the learning experience, women then build bridges between their academic achievement and self-confidence. It is a learning environment that supports the development of agency and identity. In creating learner-centered environments, the classroom becomes a place to make meaning of the learning experience (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Maher & Tetrault, 1994).

Though Francis had not named her classroom as a feminist environment it held many of those characteristics. Her sensitivity to students and her understanding that for many of the students, like Kate, returning to school was aligned to who they were and what they hoped to achieve as students and individuals. Francis utilized feminist pedagogy with all the students in the class. She understood these students needed an educational environment that understood and supported them. It was a classroom environment, as Kate described it, that helped students to “have more confidence and a sense of identity.” Francis’ emphasis on the concept of the whole learner made a difference for Kate. As Kate noted, during the course of the semester, she came to “know what you want and how to achieve it.”

Classroom: Interacting With Others

The experiences and exchanges within each classroom setting influence the way people go about learning and their success at it (Flannery, 1993). Kate found herself in a unique situation. The students represented a range of age, gender, race and ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the students were traditional age students (18-24) and there were more males than females. Kate was probably one of the oldest students in the class. There were only a few other adult women students over the age of 25. Initially, the makeup of the class was a challenge for Kate. Returning to school required Kate to establish relationships with her fellow students. She entered the classroom feeling uncomfortable; could she build a sense of community with her fellow students? If she did, this would help to create a supportive environment in which Kate could become more confident about herself as a learner and a person (Mezirow, 2000)?

In the early part of the semester Kate struggled with the chatter that often went on before and after class. The younger students talked about weekend activities, cars and the latest bands. These discussions seemed to resonate throughout the classroom. Kate reminded me that she was there to learn and it seemed that the younger students had an attitude. Landen and Turner (1995) note that adult women treated like traditional students are more likely to drop out. Kate faced the difficulty of being an older woman in a world of younger students. Her peer relationship initially focused on Fena and two other adult women students. It took several weeks before Kate expanded her acquaintances beyond those relationships.

The instructional strategies of Francis were instrumental in having Kate move beyond her initial circle of peers. The classroom activities included group work and peer review of the assignments. In the computer lab, students were given the instructions “make sure your colleagues are in the same place.” This was particularly important for Kate in the first series of computer assignments as she had to ask fellow students for help. As the semester progressed, Kate became one of the stronger students in the class and often received some of the higher grades on assignments. Kate found herself in the situation where other students asked her for help. Though proclaiming “I am not the teacher,” Kate helped those who asked her. The more engaged she became in the class, the more Kate appeared comfortable and confident.

In the early classes Kate’s greatest concerns were her homework assignments and the computer lab work. Though she said that there were several computers at home, this was her first experience with Microsoft Word and formal writing on the computer. The students spent more than half their time in the computer writing lab, completing

assignments. The first time Kate worked in the lab, she encountered difficulties. She was unable to save her work and was fearful that it would be lost. Her initial reaction was one of frustration but then she found herself asking for help. Jose, one of the younger male students, quickly came to her aid and patiently walked her through the assignment. Upon successfully completing the assignment in the lab, she noted "the computer age is amazing." As the semester progressed, Kate turned to her fellow students in the computer lab when she needed it. In an environment where students were expected to help one another, Kate reached out to her fellow students. In a traditional classroom environment she probably would not have asked for help. Remembering that Kate saw herself as an independent learner, her willingness to seek and acknowledge help was an important step in becoming more integrated into the classroom environment. These were important changes for Kate, who came into the class with her high school perspective of no one wanting to help her. With each academic success, Kate was beginning to change a fundamental belief about her academic abilities. As Kate's self esteem grew, it became easier to reach out to others in the class.

Finding A Place

In the beginning weeks of the semester, I found Kate's relationship to Francis quite interesting. Tennant and Pogson (1995) state that adult expectations for education are associated with childhood feelings, especially towards parents and teachers. The instructor can be seen in a number of different ways including as a judge and authority figure. Under this model, the adult student attributes considerable power to the instructor. Kate felt unsure and she was struggling at times, but she would not see Francis during the posted office hours. When I asked her why, Kate told me that office hours were like

being at work and you do not disturb people at work. “It is like my dad in his office and we did not bother him. I will not bother her. You respect them and you don’t bug them.” Kate went on to discuss how her father intimidated her. Though Francis worked hard to create a warm, inviting and nurturing relationship with her students, Kate continued to see Francis as the same type of authority figure as her father. It took Kate a number of weeks to finally go to Francis’ office. Francis commented to me on how uncomfortable Kate was during their discussion. For Kate, it was much easier when she was learning on her own. Could she begin to develop a different frame of reference for her relationship with Francis? One that would allow her to move beyond the vulnerable relationship she had with her father?

In the early part of the semester Kate appeared uncomfortable when the instructor called on her. “I am not there to be a teacher but to learn.” Not having found her place in the classroom and not having established relationships with many of the students, she worried that, “You are called on, and everyone is watching and waiting for you to talk.” She seemed to struggle with the homework assignments, often not sure which exercises to complete. More often than not, she completed more assignments than required. Kate called it the “homework hump” and worried that she would be able to get over it. In the first interview, Kate told me, “I am not psychologically dealing with it and I get nervous.” When I asked why she did not ask about the assignments, Kate told me she did not want to interrupt the instructor. In the first few weeks, she only asked Francis questions before and after class. Once again, Kate saw Francis in an authority role and wanted to make sure she was not challenging that authority. For Kate, Francis held the power within the classroom. Kate’s earlier educational experiences in high school made

her feel marginalized and alienated from the learning process. To change this perspective, Kate had to come to a different understanding of Francis. Her prior educational relationships were built upon issues of power and knowledge being held by the instructor (Friere, 1970; Giroux, 1983). Could she come to understand there was now a different relationship that would support her learning (Minnich, 1990)? This relationship would emphasize her strengths and make her an active constructor in her own knowledge (Belenky, 2000).

In those first weeks, it seemed as if Kate was trying to find the “rhythm” of the course. Given her desire to succeed she struggled with what she perceived of as roadblocks: homework and the computers. When the first assignment was returned, Kate questioned Francis about her comments on the paper. Francis explained that Kate should think of her as an editor. Kate asked how she could use the suggestions without turning it into the editor’s paper. It appeared from this that Kate wanted to take ownership for her work. It was difficult for her to understand that she did not have to do it all on her own. There was an inherent struggle to succeed and when Kate was particularly frustrated, she would cross her arms and say, “I don’t understand.” Her body language and statement indicated an inability to reach out for the help she needed from Francis. For Kate, these feelings initially created tensions in her relationship with Francis.

While Kate appeared to struggle in the first weeks of class, it was clear that she was becoming a successful student. She did well on her first major exam and on several in-class assignments. She still continued to do more homework exercises than assigned. However, as the weeks progressed, there was less anxiety about completing them. She was available to help her classmates. She often met with Fena before and after class to

discuss the assignments. Kate continued to struggle with her place in the class. While she told me it took too much time to help Fena, she was always available for Fena.

Growing as a Learner: Defining Identity and Acquiring Agency

As the semester progressed, there were clear signs that Kate was becoming more secure about herself as a student and achieving levels of personal empowerment. These transformations occurred slowly, yet Kate knew they were happening. In our second interview Kate noted that, "Being a woman and getting older, I have more confidence, a sense of identity, you know what you want and how to achieve it." By the end of the semester, the change in Kate was quite remarkable. Increasingly, she took on a leadership role in the class, actively participating in class discussions, talking with her fellow students, asking questions and probing for further understanding of the lessons. She even received phone calls at home from other students asking for help on the class assignments. In discussing the change, Kate told me she was uncomfortable in this new role. She felt that "I am not the teacher and don't have the patience to be one." This comment indicated some of the struggle for Kate as she redefined herself. She was no longer the invisible high school student ignored by students and teachers. Kate's new visibility and respect were helping to shape how she dealt with an identity that did not match with her past.

It was difficult to pinpoint the moment in which the change happened. As I observed, with each class, Kate seemed to grow more confident, interacting with other students and willing to voluntarily participate in class discussion. Given her initial reticence to participate in the early part of the semester, this change provided another indication of Kate becoming more comfortable as a student. Clearly, one building block

of her newfound confidence came from her academic success. When I asked her to compare herself at the beginning and the end of the semester, Kate replied, “I have more confidence that my skill in writing improved. I am not nervous anymore about coming to school. I don’t get nervous going into the class.”

Kate was finding her voice. Belenky (2000) states that most adults have not had the experience of reflective discourse, the ability to articulate the underlying assumptions of their thinking and how they might change. Kate could see clear evidence from good grades and the praise of Francis that she was doing well in the course. It was her goal to be able to write an essay and now she believed that this could be attained. What she was not articulating were the changes going on in her thinking about herself as an individual. Her comments were tied to her experiences as a learner. In the environment established by Francis, she became a motivated and productive learner. Francis encouraged and challenged Kate to move into advanced stages of her learning (Cross, 1981). Unlike her earlier experiences with formal education, Kate was in an environment that was nurturing her self-concept, helping her to become more confident about herself as a learner (Pratt, 2002).

Though there was evidence that Kate was growing as a learner and a person, Francis worried about Kate’s self-confidence. As instructors, we often do not have the complete biographies of our students. What Francis knew about Kate came from conversations about Kate’s family and home life. She was concerned that Kate appeared to have little confidence. She wondered why Kate had high levels of anxiety, adding, “Maybe it’s from an earlier time because I sure have those ties to my childhood.” Francis saw it as “one of those slow, slow changes of mind that education encourages. She will

never be the same again, and she won't be comfortable being just Kate any more. It is going to have to be Kate with an education."

Francis was correct in understanding that for Kate, the transition to a formal classroom setting was not easy. Kate continued to carry the baggage of her public school years. As Kate described her experience in the class, "It is a long way from high school." Prior to the class, Kate dictated her own learning. She came to realize how much her learning patterns changed during the semester. "I am learning so much about going to school, learning how to follow instructions; after all those years of doing it my way, it is different in school." Shortly after spring break, Kate bought a tape recorder. She explained that it would be helpful in keeping up with class notes. One of her concerns was that it was hard to keep up with Francis when she used the computer and screen in class. For Kate, it was not liking working on the blackboard where you had more time to write. By buying the tape recorder, Kate hoped she could keep up with the work and not slow Francis down. In this decision, Kate utilized a strategy to support her learning. Kate was also concerned about her relationship with Francis. The tape recorder became a way through which Kate did not have to acknowledge needing help from Francis.

Kate came to understand that Francis respected her as a learner. Throughout the semester she received positive reinforcement from Francis. For example, in a lesson about sentence structure, Kate posed several questions that indicated she was not grasping the concept. Francis replied by telling Kate it was a good question. Francis' reply indicated that she appreciated Kate's willingness to ask a question and not be afraid of the consequences. This type of affirmation by the instructor is important to students like Kate who are not accustomed to support as they negotiate their learning environment.

When Kate finally finished the assignment correctly, Francis looked at Kate and said, "Hallelujah, you amaze and confound me." This statement represented how far the relationship between Francis and Kate had come from the first days of the semester. The two of them were developing a relationship built upon respect and understanding. Parker Palmer in *The Courage To Teach* (1998) states that good teachers are present in their classroom, engaged with their students and their subject. Francis understood the importance of engaging Kate in the learning process by creating a positive link between the subject content and Kate's abilities as a learner (Palmer, 1998). In this supportive environment Kate was learning how successful she could be in the production of knowledge (Amstutz, 1999).

As the semester progressed, Kate and I spent more time talking before class. Kate was willing to share her work with me and the relationship I had with Kate allowed me to become part of her experience. Ruth Behar (1996) notes that in her field experience, the text became the researcher as the researcher became part of the experience. Over time, the intimacy we developed allowed Kate to feel safe as she talked about herself in these informal settings before and after class. Unlike her perception of Francis as authority, I was a fellow student. Kate was very interested in my research and the ways I balanced a job, school and my family. She wondered how I felt being a student at my age. We came to realize how much we had in common. There were several discussions about the support we received from our families. Kate noted that, "My husband is there, has always been there for me. I find that I have to juggle more than in the past but college is a priority. It is at the top of the list." While she sometimes worried about cleaning the house and other chores, her husband told her, "You have wanted to go for years and years

for years and years and you have finally done it.” Her husband and son read her assignments and one of her sons told her, “You are way beyond me Mom.” The support Kate received from her family was integral to her growth and development throughout the semester. Kate felt that her family became participants in her experience. Williams (1997) notes many returning adult women find themselves having to balance between their home life and their school life. Kate was able to maintain a balance between these two spheres because her family accommodated Kate attending college. Like her peers and Francis, her family provided Kate with encouragement and support. They were integral to her growing confidence about herself and her ability to succeed.

Kate was also learning how to reach out to her fellow students. Kate shared that several of the female students called her at home. Though it worried Kate that Fena relied too much on her for help, Kate was always willing to stay after class to review assignments with Fena. Fena was not the only student who sought Kate’s help on class assignments. On several occasions, Susan, another woman in the class, approached Kate for help. Kate was always supportive, showing Susan how to complete the assignment and telling her how well she was doing.

Kate developed strong peer relationships with several of the female students and it was clear that Kate was considered one of the student leaders of the class. Yet, she continued to struggle with her connection to the students when they sought her help on class assignments. “I don’t like to give help; I have no confidence it is the right answer.” Cranton (2002) states that it is easier to maintain habits of mind and expect that what happened in the past will happen again. Kate continued to struggle between her fear of failure and the desire to reach out and make connections.

Within The Classroom Environment

In the beginning of the semester, Kate indicated that she thought most of the younger students had an “attitude.” Francis described the personality of the class as “energetic, like a sock hop, you never know who will go dancing in the middle of the center of the stage next.” The class could be described as active, with talking going on during the class and several younger students often dominating class discussions. Kate worried that although Francis had control of the class most of the time, “sometimes it got away from her.” Given Kate’s perception of the teacher as authority, she saw order and control as Francis responsibility.

Francis did not see a demographic divide within the class. She noted that students were always willing to help one another. However, seating patterns, established by the students, had the younger students sitting together in one area of the room. Kate and the other adult woman sat together in the front of the room. Kate was a non-traditional student in a traditional environment. Francis’ classroom was not structured solely around the adult learner. From 18 to 55, the students represented a broad range of developmental and cognitive stages. The younger students brought a different context for learning and life experiences than Kate. While Kate exhibited many of the learning styles characteristic of an adult woman learner (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Flannery, Brooks, Tisdell & Hugo, 2000; Taylor & Marenau, 1995, Tennant & Pogson, 1995), Francis had to balance Kate’s learning style against younger students who often needed more guidance in learning to become “professional students.” Francis’ approach created assignments and class exercises that brought the students together. For example, there was a great deal of cross communication as students reviewed each other’s work.

As the class moved through the semester, Kate became more integrated with the environment and willing to participate in class discussions that related to the interests of the younger students. This was important for Kate, as over time, the atmosphere that developed mutual help and support from the other students.

For Kate, perhaps the greatest accomplishment was, “leaving the ghosts behind.” As the semester continued and her confidence grew, Kate realized that this experience was really different from what occurred in high school. Kegan (2000) describes transformative learning as a creative process of development. Kate was learning how to work through her beliefs and assumptions in light of this new experience (Cranton, 2002).

In terms of her academic preparation, Kate probably did not have to be in the class. Francis believed that, “Kate shouldn’t be in our class...but given the fact she is not very confident, it was a good class for her to take....(she) needed to take this course.” It was never a question that she could learn how to write a paragraph but much more about changing her internal perspectives about herself and school. Kate also came to understand that Francis was there to support her. “Francis lets me glide along. She sees my individual style; she knows when I need an ego boost. She is attuned to what students need. She figures out what we need. I need eye contact. I understand through eye contact.” As an adult learner it was important for Kate to have that face-to-face contact of the classroom.

Francis understood Kate’s learning needs and was able to integrate them into her lessons. In an interchange between them about grammatical structure, Francis told Kate, “The more you understand, the more it works for you.” She asked Kate to try the exercise

using a different word. Kate did and was successful in completing the exercise. Francis replied, “Didn’t I tell you?” In another interchange Francis asked Kate to share her example on the board. When Kate replied no, Francis looked at her and said, “That’s not a word I recognize.” Kate’s assignment went on the board. By the end of the semester Kate was telling Francis, “We are all college students, we can handle it.”

Test Taking

As the semester began, Kate had a high level of anxiety concerning test taking. Prior to the first in class exam, she asked Francis to repeat the chapters to be covered several times. Kate prepared for exams by reading the text and several other grammar books she bought. “You know I have been preparing by reading grammar books. It is like reading a novel. I even have them in my bathroom.” This high level of anxiety came from her fear of failure. As the semester progressed, Kate recognized this was one of the most difficult issues she faced in the class. “I am getting better at being less anxious over taking tests. I realize that if I flunk, the world will not come to an end. If you prepare for the tests it helps. Sometimes I feel like it is information overload and I say my prayers. Whatever will be will be.” Kate was beginning to understand how to make meaning out of her learning experience and realized that she could not let anxiety over test taking hinder her progress.

While Kate focused on grades, Francis tried to remind the students to “focus on the actual product of language as being the most satisfying part of the course.” The tension between grades and product was particularly evident as Kate and others prepared for their writing prompt. The English department and the college required that students complete a writing prompt as part of the course requirement. Students were given a topic

to complete in the computer lab. The entire department read the essays. If a student failed the prompt they could not go on to the next level of English.

On the day of the exam, Kate was nervous. In our conversation prior to class, she told me, "I'm red, look at my neck, my blood pressure is high...this is my first exam...it is hot or just me?" Kate understood the importance of the prompt and her fear of failure surfaced. Francis knew caring was integral to her classroom environment (Amstutz, 1999), and so just before the prompt began, she told the students, "You are going to do so well on this test...the creative juices are flowing...its spring and the daffodils are blooming." This simple statement was important to students like Kate who needed the extra reassurance. Unlike test taking experiences earlier in the semester, Kate had no hesitancy and immediately began to write. As I watched her throughout the hour, Kate remained calm, writing, reviewing and re-writing.

When the class reconvened for its last meeting prior to the final exam, Francis informed the students, "I thought you might like to hear how far you have come in your writing." She handed back the essays and specifically asked Kate to explain her essay to the class. Unlike earlier classes where she did not want to share her work, Kate appeared relaxed and comfortable explaining her essay. At the end of the class, Kate asked Francis how to enroll in the next course for the fall semester. Kate wanted to take the course with Francis. Kate later told me that she was going to enroll in a math class during the summer and English 101 in the fall. She understood that the fall class might have the same students in it. "I want to let the others go on and I will start by myself."

Conclusion

Kate was ready to continue her educational career. She met her goals to “know more English grammar.” More importantly, she was “not nervous anymore about coming to school. I don’t get nervous going into the class. I still get nervous on exams. I’m not always confident in what I know.” Had she noticed any difference in herself? Kate believed the class was an excellent experience. “I have more confidence, my skill in writing improved.” Kate recognized that she was not the same person who entered the class sixteen weeks ago. “Being a woman and getting older, I have more confidence, a sense of identity; you know what you want and how to achieve it.”

What was Kate’s journey? It was a journey of self-discovery and change. It was a journey that began with hesitancy, driving to campus, several times stopping. It was a journey that took her five times before she took the placement test. It was a journey that began with a goal of completing the course and being able to write a coherent paragraph and essay. Even with all of her fears and doubts, Kate knew it was time, time for her to take charge of her life in a different way. Time to prove that she was still not that invisible student from high school. Kate’s journey was about understanding who she really had become.

What happened to Kate? While she was a wife, mother and had her own business, Kate never forgot her earlier educational experiences. Entering college was a conscious choice to take charge of a part of her life that had not been fulfilled. Having felt on the margins of the educational system, returning to school meant a new direction and focus. Kate found herself in a learning environment that supported and challenged her as she became increasingly empowered to achieve her personal and educational goals.

Chapter 4

Finding Their Way

Introduction: Strangers in the Land

The study was based on the premise that there were classroom environments that could emancipate and support adult women students as they constructed the direction of their educational and personal lives. Were there unique characteristics within a single classroom that fostered the three adult women of the study to believe they grew and developed as learners and individuals? The analysis came from their lived experiences and the lenses through which they saw the classroom experience.

The journey of Fena and Masa during the semester can be described as “Strangers in the Land” (Higham, 1988). Unlike the majority of the students in the class, they were not native born. Masa emigrated five years earlier from Jordan with her husband. They intended to become American citizens. Fena was a Pakistan native who came to the United States with her two children. Her husband remained on business in Saudi Arabia. She never discussed whether or not they planned to become American citizens.

As students in the course, Fena and Masa found themselves in an environment in which they often moved back and forth between their native cultures and the dominant culture represented in the classroom. Their lives were framed by these dualistic environments, each having unique norms and values. The challenge for Masa and Fena became seeing if the classroom environment created learning experiences that allowed for the integrity of who they were, as non-native students with unique cultural backgrounds, while supporting their educational goals of becoming proficient in the English language (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Both had attended this college for

several semesters and, while this was not their first course, in some ways it was the most important one. The course helped them continue to improve their proficiency in English writing and speaking. Success in the course allowed them to continue on to English Composition I, a required course for most degree programs at the school.

Fena's and Masa's immediate educational goals were to write and speak coherently in English. However, during the semester they came to believe that "progress" meant more than improving their English skills. By the end of the semester their goals expanded and they were each making conscious decisions that affected both their educational and personal lives. They found their voices, defining who they were and feeling empowered to make choices for themselves. These were different voices than the ones with which they began the semester. At that time they appeared to know what goals they hoped to achieve but were not sure if they would be successful. In the initial days of the course they were hesitant to integrate into the larger classroom environment. Masa sat quietly by another female Arab-American student while Fena quickly relied upon Kate to help her navigate through the first set of assignments. These behaviors changed over the sixteen weeks as their classroom experience created an enhanced validation of themselves as learners and individuals.

Shaw (1999) contends that the complexity and the interplay of assumed roles and social categories define the lives of community college students. In understanding what occurred for Fena and Masa during the semester, it was important to remember that their learning experiences were rooted in cultural backgrounds different than other students. They were adult international women coming from a context of difference. This difference carried with it unique cultural backgrounds and experiences that stood apart

from most of the students in the class. Over of the semester, their struggles become one of belonging and not belonging as their backgrounds were mediated and influenced by what occurred in the classroom (Abdulhadi, Alsultany, & Naber, 2005).

Fena struggled all semester between the worlds of home and school. Each part of her life demanded her attention. According to Abdulhadi, Alsultany & Naber (2005) Arab American women struggle on multiple fronts between their private and public lives. An absent husband made Fena the primary parent in her family. Her twelve-year-old son commented that it seemed as if she was always studying and doing homework. Her situation was exacerbated when her husband arrived from Saudi Arabia. He expected Fena to be home and he saw school as being of secondary importance. Her burden throughout the semester was how to balance her desire to pursue her education while maintaining the demands of her family.

Masa came to school to expand her borders beyond family and her immediate community of fellow Jordanian émigrés. Her world felt confined and defined by little interaction with those outside this group. She felt that continuing to stay at home meant she would never learn English. Unlike Fena, Masa had a supportive family environment that allowed her to pursue her educational goals. It was important to Masa that she be a role model for her four-year old daughter. It was a delicate balance that each woman walked between the old and the new in their lives.

Facing Unique Challenges

Not unlike Kate, Fena and Masa were claiming an education. They had a defined set of educational goals they believed could be attained by becoming more proficient in English. Masa wanted to become a teacher and Fena wanted to continue her studies at a

four-year college. Each was determined to meet their goals. Masa expressed it as, “I have to learn, and I don’t care. I will take one class a semester, I don’t care. I have to finish.” In many ways their journey seemed a traditional one, not unlike other students in the class, as they took courses toward a higher educational goal. Yet, Fena and Masa faced unique hurdles because of their cultural backgrounds. The complexity of their experience created differences and difficulties that many other students did not face. It was not always a seamless transition between the two cultures. Masa and Fena were entering a new world, one that often assumed they were no different than those who were born into it. Given their backgrounds, it was interesting to see, whether or not the classroom environment could support their educational goals while still understanding and also supporting their difference (Tierney, 1993).

Not only were the backgrounds of Fena and Masa different from most of the class, but each of them came from a different culture and environment. What set them and the other international students in the class apart from native students were the cultures that served as the dominant foundations for most of their experiences. Gloria Anzaldua (1987) notes there are shifting and multiple identities for individuals who reside within a borderland- that place in which one is caught between the experiences of two cultures. It is the place in which the ethnic and the dominant cultures can reside. Within the framework of the study, it was important for me to recognize that this classroom was a borderland for Masa and Fena. The original focus of the research did not include studying non-native adult woman students. Fena and Masa’s role in the study raised important questions that I needed to consider. As they chartered their path through

the semester, how would they manage to bring their own culture and experiences into this educational environment? Would they be able to blend their old and new worlds?

Masa: A Path to Assimilation

Masa was a twenty-seven year old émigré from Jordan. She was married, had a four-year daughter and lived in a close knit community of émigrés from Jordan that included her husband's extended family. Masa had been in the United States for five years. Her immediate family remained in Jordan, though she had an opportunity to visit them every three years. In the initial interview, Masa indicated that her reason for attending this college was to learn English and to interact with people not from her immediate community. Masa was very aware that "English is my second language." It was important to her to learn English and, "if I did not go back to school, I would not learn English, that is it." While her primary motive for attending college was to learn English, it was clear that Masa had several long-term goals that included acquiring a degree. "I (am) going to be an elementary teacher; I want to do the best thing for me. When my daughter needs help in school later, I can be the first one to help her...I want to come back to school to have a degree." From a life of sitting home, watching her child, "nothing to do, just go shopping..." she now found "...everything had changed. My life is busy, more busy than before and I enjoy it."

Caffarella (1993) notes that learning is a personal process that occurs within the context of the learner's life and the societal context that surrounds them. The experience can bring new awareness and new challenges. Masa came to define her learning experience beyond the traditional definition of imparting knowledge. She saw it as a community experience, the desire not only to communicate but to also experience a new

definition of community. Masa wanted to interact with those who were not part of her immediate cultural group. "So my reason to come to school was to know people: I like other people." When I asked her if she felt comfortable with other students, Masa indicated that "I used to be shy, used to think that everyone would laugh at me when I talk, but now I am comfortable."

Masa saw a broader definition to acquiring specific knowledge that would make her more proficient in English. Attending college provided a way to assimilate into American society. Like immigrant groups before Masa (Taylor, 1971), education provided a platform to understand the values and norms of the larger society. Taylor (1971) describes it as the opportunity to be presented with "influencers" that help immigrants become more Americanized.

The Classroom Environment: Defining Position

During the course of the semester, I watched the positionality of Masa in the classroom (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). I was interested in understanding where she could be placed within the context of the classroom. Given her background and expectations, how would Masa interact with other students and the instructor? Masa was an Arab-American adult female student who was placed in a classroom environment in which the majority of the students were younger and native to society. It was important to recognize that Masa was attending school at a time when many Americans had clear stereotypes regarding the Arab-American community. Given her background, would she be able to achieve her goal of becoming assimilated and comfortable within the classroom environment?

Masa had taken four courses at the college and, even more importantly, was taking this particular course for the second time. The first time, Masa received a D+ from a different instructor. As class began, Masa should have had some understanding of the expectations of the course. Certainly, her willingness to repeat the course indicated determination to be a successful student. From prior courses, she had the experience of interacting with students from varied backgrounds. Yet, she came to the course with some hesitation, finding her comfort zone in the class with other international students

Masa's relationship to Francis, the teacher, was important in her ability to be a successful student. This was not her first interaction with Francis, who had been Masa's instructor in the English for International Students course. Entering the course and familiar with the instructor, I asked about her expectations of Francis. Masa replied, "I think she (Francis) is very good with us, especially with international students. You know she tries to explain it, like for example, if you do not understand anything, she helps you." In her interviews, Masa mentioned feeling comfortable going to Francis for help. Her sense of comfort with Francis came from the instructor's understanding of international students. Francis expressed to me, that from her experiences, international students had a hard time reading signals in American culture and, therefore, it was important to explain procedures that would seem natural for native students. As she stated, "They need to feel what they are doing is important."

Unlike other students who had not taken a prior course with Francis, Masa knew Francis' teaching style and expectations for students. While Francis liked students to contribute to the discussion, Masa rarely participated in classroom conversations and did not volunteer to answer the questions that Francis often asked the students. In our first

interview, Masa expressed concerns about her English proficiency. "The first day I was scared...everyone is going to speak English...as an international student how will I understand?" She felt it was hard at first. Masa worried about the younger students she met. "Some of the students had just finished high school, and I was scared. Oh my God, they know everything. They just finished high school, and I finished my high school in Jordan in Arabic and I finished in five years. How could I be in the same class?" However, four weeks later she felt that she was being encouraged, "None of them laugh at me so it encourages me, and everybody was ready to help if I want somebody to help they would be happy to help..."

One of Masa's goals was to communicate with a wider group of people, particularly those she defined as Americans. For her, education was not only academic learning, but also a process of socialization. Masa hoped this would help her become more familiar with the norms of society. Masa believed she could achieve part of this goal by interacting with other students. However, Masa chose to spend most of her class time with Abby, another female Arab student and Franz, a German student. Prior to and during class she often turned to Abby for explanations of the lesson. Masa tended to work on assigned group projects with Abby and Franz. The few times that Masa sat with other students, there was little interaction with them. It appeared that Masa established a comfort zone with Abby and Franz in which she was most secure, although she never expressed any feelings of alienation from the rest of the class. This was a robust class where younger students talked frequently about experiences that were culturally different from her background. Masa aligned herself to students who were similar to herself, trying

to navigate in an environment in which they were “Strangers in the Land.” From this “safe” place, Masa could bridge into the larger classroom environment.

When asked in her first interview to describe the classroom environment, she replied, “The relationship is very good, we get along with each other...I think everything is Okay. They are not shy to ask questions.” She felt the atmosphere helped her a lot. While claiming to feel comfortable in the classroom, in the first weeks, Masa worried about her English proficiency. “I still, like when I talk, have a lot of grammar mistakes, but it is better than before...a lot better.” In enrolling in this course, Masa was continuing her journey toward self-confidence. She believed her ability to speak English was the result of being in school. When asked if she felt more comfortable in speaking English because of these courses, Masa replied, “Sure, sure I used to be shy. I thought everyone would laugh at me when I talked.” While her self-perception was of a more confident student, there was still evidence of being reticent within the class.

A Different Path to Learning

Masa’s journey proficiency in English led her to a different place. Gloria Anzaldau (1987, p.3) describes it as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.” Her educational and personal goals were driving Masa to redefine herself in terms of a different cultural context. Her struggles reached beyond being successful as a student. As Masa moved into this place of difference where she struggled to become someone else, at times, the new environment felt uncomfortable. Her known world had a history and stability for her. Masa was now adapting to norms that could create a new identity and negotiating a new path that could

conflict with what she had been in the past, yet her personal and educational development were intertwined. Success in one area could not occur without success in the other area.

Having English as a second language provided educational challenges for Masa. She adopted a particular learning style to overcome these challenges. At times she wrote her ideas in Arabic and then translated them into English. She found that, “For me, I cannot understand things the first time. Sometimes I have to repeat it twice to understand it. I am not trying to get it.” Masa indicated she was frustrated at times, “Some of the stuff you understand right away, but some, if I can’t, I feel like it is hard.” In her desire to listen to Francis and others during class, Masa did not take notes during class presentations. It was difficult for her to follow the lesson and write notes. She occasionally wrote down a word that she did not understand. Her learning style helped to explain her reliance on Franz and Abby for help. Masa worked hard at the homework assignments and used them as an opportunity to remember what was taught in class. Her ability to flow from one language to another was essential to her academic success; her native language was still important to learning English. Throughout the semester, in her interviews and in my observations, she never expressed frustration that she was not a native speaker. Masa entered the class with a set of deficiencies based upon English not being her primary language. Masa understood the challenges she faced and adopted learning mechanisms to overcome them. Masa was determined to succeed and found unique ways to surmount these learning problems.

Learning English was further complicated by Masa’s lack of experience with computers. Given the importance of computer literacy to the course, this was a continuing challenge for Masa. During the first assignment she struggled to format and

later save her work on the computer. Work took longer to complete than it did for other students. Given her reluctance to ask for help, except from Abby or Francis, these experiences became one more hurdle to overcome. Francis spent a great deal of time with Masa in the lab. Acknowledging Masa's difficulty on the final computer writing assignment, Francis allowed her to complete it in another room.

Masa understood some instructors' teaching styles were not helpful for her given her learning style. "Some of them, they come and they talk, talk, talk and I don't understand them." Masa felt that Francis' teaching style was very supportive to her ability to succeed. "(Francis) gives time, takes time if I am still, like I didn't understand it. She doesn't care if she doesn't finish, if she takes her time talking about this one thing, she doesn't care." Given Francis' experiences in teaching English grammar for second language students, she understood the challenges these students faced in making the transition to English. She explained, "I cannot imagine what it is like for them to sit in classes. I am always amazed at what happens, can you imagine what it is like for non-American students to bump into this culture?" Francis believed it was important to create an environment that recognized and supported the dualistic experience of international students.

Enrolling in the course a second time, she specifically chose Francis as her instructor. Masa believed that Francis could help her master the course and did not hesitate going to Francis' office when she did not understand material presented in the class. For Masa, this course was a natural progression from her previous experience with Francis. She believed working with Francis would lead to success in the course. This was important in advancing toward her goal of being able to read and write in English.

Support Systems for Success

Masa believed that the support of her family was a key reason she enrolled in college. Her husband and his family wanted her to attend school to develop her English skills. They commented on the improvements of these skills since she started college. Her husband took on several household chores that included grocery shopping. Given their cultural background, this was an important signal to Masa of her husband's support. Darraj (2005) notes that Arab-American women face many challenges within their own community concerning education including concerns the women will become "Westernized" by this experience. However, Darraj explains that younger men and husbands are more supportive of woman and education. Within her cultural group, Masa faced an unusual situation in having not only her husband, but her extended family, support her educational career. Masa's husband's support extended to her classroom assignments including helping her with the homework assignments early in the course. When this occurred, Masa told Francis, "I get help because I did not write it by myself and she says that is Okay, you'll learn." By the end of the semester, Masa completed the assignments on her own and then showed them to her husband.

One of Masa's motivations for attending college was to be a role model for her daughter. As she explained, a primary reason was "...to encourage her. I am one who wants to teach my daughter at home, help her when I am here, to learn to read and to write so I can help her." She was concerned that her daughter not exist in a dualistic society, one culture at home and another at school. By improving her English skills and attaining an education, Masa was able to reinforce the importance of education and learning for her daughter. Masa's four-year-old daughter also understood why it was

important for her mother to be in school. On one occasion Masa brought her daughter to class. When I asked her about the experience, she noted that her daughter told her, "Don't worry, don't talk to me, just listen to your teacher...she knows that Mama has to do homework: she gives me time to do it." Positive reinforcement by her family was important to Masa's willingness to continue to pursue her educational goals. Her husband's support allowed Masa to balance family and school. Masa understood that her life had become "...more busy, more busy than before and I enjoy it. Yes, it is hard, but I try to make it not hard for me." Having a strong family support system allowed Masa to meet these challenges and continue her education.

By the end of the semester, Masa felt confident about her accomplishments. When I interviewed her after the final exam, she seemed poised and sure about what the semester meant. Masa saw a big difference in herself as a learner, "I compare myself to when I started the semester, and now I feel a big difference. Now I can write paragraphs and wrote an essay last week. My grammar is more correct than before and my sentences are stronger." Through her lens, Masa knew she made important improvements in her English skills. Her educational accomplishments also transcended into her feelings about herself. "I am more confident about myself. I feel that I can speak better and this semester has taught me a lot, especially when I speak with people. I feel more confident." Masa was going to continue her learning process during the summer when she was not taking classes. "I need to know how to understand how I can take notes so it will help me in English 101. I am going to take a pencil and paper, hear the news, take notes and try to write it down."

Defining Identity: Gaining Agency

Had Masa reconstructed herself from this learning experience? Masa's challenges included unsuccessfully completing the course the first time and an identity rooted in one culture, but now being framed by another. Her willingness to be interviewed and to share her experiences with me showed how engaged she was in her journey. Her discussions with me never focused on feeling fragmented between the two worlds of school and home. While Masa recognized the challenges, when I asked her if she saw any differences or changes not only in school, but at home and with friends, Masa replied, "I am more confident. I know a lot of American people, people who speak English. I have more friends now than before...school taught me a lot. Before I sit home and I did not know what to do. Now every time I have a chance to do things, go to the library, meet people, I feel better."

For Masa, the educational environment had not been threatening, but supportive. Tierney (1993) notes the importance in education of setting up dialogues of support and understanding across differences. Masa saw the environment established by Francis as welcoming and nurturing towards her. "She is the best teacher I have ever had. If she teaches all the English classes I will take them with her...she helps me a lot with everything. She understands that there are international students in the class. She gives her time to everybody." Masa believed Francis treated everyone in the same way in the classroom. This allowed Masa to feel part of the dynamics of the classroom and not different from other students. Coming from the experience of barely leaving her community, afraid to speak to those not part of her community, this feeling was an important part of her growth and development, not only as a student, but as an individual.

The educational experience became a community experience for Masa. She was learning how to negotiate within a larger cultural context than the one she was part of before attending school. Masa ended the semester with a renewed sense of self-confidence. She began to redefine her sense of self, her identity. For Masa, the educational challenges could not be divorced from who she was and how her identity was changed by this educational experience.

Fena: Difficult Steps Along a Similar Path

The challenges that were faced in the classroom by the three women were similar and different for each of them. Throughout the semester, Fena appeared to be the most visible in her struggles to succeed educationally and adapt to the larger cultural context of the classroom. Like Masa, as an international student and an Arab-American woman, she encountered both cultural and educational barriers that were different from many of her classmates. Masa expressed an interest in wanting to quickly assimilate into American life. This was evident in her dress, which appeared no different than others in the class, and her approach to getting out in the community to meet people. In the years she spent at home, television was an important conduit to understanding the norms and values of American life. Fena, however, wanted to hold on to her native traditions while she acquired a new identity that was being defined through her educational experiences. In her dress, she chose to wear a traditional hijab, headscarf, while the rest of her clothes were more typical of a native-born student. Fena participated in the college's diversity fair with an exhibit on Pakistan. Perhaps even more than Masa, the classroom became her borderland as she moved back and forth between these two life experiences.

Fena was a thirty-three year old Pakistani who had a twelve-year old son and a fourteen-year old daughter. Born and raised in Pakistan, prior to coming to the United States she lived with her husband and children in Saudi Arabia for sixteen years. She and her children had resided in the United States for two years. Her husband continued to live in Saudi Arabia though he made routine visits to see her and the children. Fena attended college in Pakistan where she was granted a Bachelor of Science in the Science of Home Economics from an all-female college. As she explained, “In Pakistan I completed 14th grade...there is a 10th grade that is school finish, but here is 12th grade school finish. After 10th grade I attended four years of college.” Fena never indicated whether the prior educational experience helped prepare her for her current educational experience.

It is important to note that all three women shared a common goal in attending the course. Their motivation was to improve their English skills. All of them wanted to be role models for their children. Education was an important reason for Fena and her children to come to the United States. “My plan was to come to the United States. I want(ed) to see that it was good for the children...been here two years...that is why I came here first and now I want to decide what I want to do.” When I asked her the reason for specifically coming to this institution, she replied, “Because of English, because before I did not know.”

Like émigrés before them, Masa and Fena understood that competency in the English language was a door for themselves and their children into American society. Language and education are often the bridges that allow émigrés to no longer be viewed as “Strangers in the Land” (1988). Masa wanted to use her language skills for social integration and assimilation into American society. It was important to her to be seen as

an American woman. Fena saw these skills as a way to feel more confident about her academic abilities. Her struggles came in trying to decide where she belonged. The bridge between the two cultural worlds was more difficult for Fena than Masa. According to Abdulhadi, Naber and Alsultany (2005), it is not unusual for Arab-American women to struggle in their search for identity between their native communities and their educational communities.

Unlike Masa and Kate, Fena did not make the decision to enter the college with well-defined goals. She initially came to the college to accompany a friend who wanted to register for a course. "I here with someone, only for company, she took information from (College) and I ask, can I come here and study? She said why not? In that day I said Okay." Given that the decision to come to the United States was carefully thought out, it is interesting that Fena made such an impromptu decision to attend school. She asked about the procedures to enroll and was told to take the college placement exam. It was her understanding that it was a free test and "...whatever the results they give you the subjects." With no understanding of computers, Fena proceeded to take the test. "They said only use your one finger. I said Okay I would try. I tried and tried and I gave the test." It took Fena five hours to complete it; however it did not deter her from enrolling in school. "But I am really excited that day. I don't know what the next step, maybe I fail. I don't know English, I don't know computers." Fena felt that, while she entered college without defined educational goals, it was a good decision. She immediately enrolled in a grammar course designed for English as second language students. "I started the class before I had a plan to join the school, before I know where I was going but suddenly everything is going well and I am happy here."

Finding A Place Within the Classroom: Building Support Systems

Fena exhibited a high level of motivation throughout the semester. Her behavior in class corresponded to Francis' observations of international students. Francis noted that these students were "...much more prepared for class, they have a work ethic that is stronger for class, maybe a little more pressure for performance... they want to bring the good grades home...you can only justify going to school by getting a 4.0." Fena frequently asked questions of Francis and other students. She sat next to Kate the entire semester and spent time with Kate before and after class reviewing assignments. They continued to work together throughout the semester.

Unlike Masa, Fena liked to volunteer and participate in class discussions. Even when her answers were incorrect, it did not stop her from contributing to the discussion. During those occasions Francis continued dialoguing with Fena until she reached the correct answer. Francis was quick to compliment her with phrases such as, "Very good, on the point." While she did not always initially grasp the concept, Fena did not give up. Though she struggled with the course content, her determination led her to continue. There was never any indication that she would drop the course because it was more difficult for her than for other students in the class.

Like Masa, Francis was Fena's instructor in the English as a Second Language Grammar course. Fena believed it was a positive experience. "Last semester I started the class, I don't know grammar. I speak English, but I don't know grammar and everyone says your grammar is not good. But now I speak confidently and I understand sometimes what my mistakes are. Sometimes in talking, I did (make) mistakes but I know immediately so really happy... (I) am satisfied with the teacher." As with Masa, Fena's

comfort level with Francis was an important element in her educational success. Fena believed Francis took the time and gave attention to each student. She saw Francis as willing to accept answers even when they were incorrect and felt supported by the way Francis treated her in class. Fena understood she made mistakes; however, these were seen as positive, not negative, experiences. "I click with the mistakes because (Francis) immediately says two or three times and she immediately clicks and she says something again two, three times and then she writes it (on the board). She understands that the students not understand the thing that (is) why she gives different types of assignments. I like this type of work and now I understand, really happy with the instructor. That is why I took the instructor."

Francis created an environment in which Fena and Masa felt safe even in those times when they did not grasp the lesson. McGrath and Van Buskirk (1999) showed that educational environments can engage students and help them to be enthusiastic about their studies. It is their belief that students will have the ability to succeed in a positive educational setting. Given her background and teaching experiences, Francis understood it was important to create positive teaching strategies that engaged students in the learning experience. I asked Francis what type of pedagogy she used with her students. She replied that successful learning came from creating environments in which "I want everyone to be able to communicate and to be understood the way he/she wished to be." In developmental courses, Francis believed that repetition and auditory drill were very important. The students needed to feel what they were doing in the class was important, both to them and to her. "These students need the motivation and they need to feel that what they are doing is important. I know they are having a hard time with the subject."

Francis understood the academic and personal challenges Masa and Fena faced in the course. She was able to balance the need to master content while building positive relationships with her students. Given Fena's willingness to acknowledge her academic struggles to Francis, Francis appeared to create a learning environment in which students felt support and understanding while mastering the course content.

Building support systems was particularly important for Fena in the computer lab assignments. Like Kate and Masa, Fena struggled to understand how to format and type her work; it took her longer to complete assignments. As in the traditional classroom, Fena sought help from Francis throughout the semester. Francis saw the computer lab as a place where students could relate to each other, particularly for international students. "The international students have to ask neighbors questions. As long as students don't take over for each other, they have to talk their way through assistance...helping each other." Through the support of Francis and other students, Fena was able to overcome her lack of experience with computers. It did not become a deterrent to her learning experiences and came to understand the importance of the lab in helping her develop as a writer and a learner.

Fena's support system within the college transcended the classroom. As McCabe (2000) states, the services of a college must create a climate of caring to help developmental students succeed, including those services that exist outside the classroom. For Fena, there were two college counselors who were influential in her decision to attend college. These counselors helped guide the decisions Fena made concerning which courses to enroll and how to shape her academic program. Their advice was particularly important this semester when one of her classes was cancelled. At their suggestion, Fena

enrolled in a math class. This was her first experience with a male instructor. Moreover, it had been twenty years since she took a math course. Fena described her male instructor as, “soft spoken” and that, like Francis, he spent a lot of time at the board. “His style is also very good. Sometimes I did not understand how I did a question of the math because I did not have the math class before...he does it a lot of times (math problems), on the board and then I understand...that helps you to learn, to hear it, to say it.” Fena was proud of her marks in the course and remarked she was determined to receive an A as her final grade.

Landen and Turner (1995) indicate that women students can achieve personal and professional success in supportive educational environments. In spite of her language and cultural barriers, Fena believed she could succeed because of the way both Francis and her math instructor structured their courses. As she noted in talking about her math class, “It is good for me. He understands it can be this way or that way, lots of times on the board and that I understand.” Fena felt acceptance from her instructors in their willingness to take time with her and to understand how important it was for her to take time to process the course content. Through their guidance, she felt valued as a learner and an individual.

Understanding the Classroom Culture

Fena’s view of the other students in the class was different from Masa. Masa, at first, felt intimidated by the native students and their proficiency with English. Being a high school graduate, she worried initially about the ability to keep up with them, yet, by the end of the semester, Masa indicated feeling comfortable among them. When asked about the class, Fena focused on the importance of being a good student. “I think if all

students attend regular class, they do not need to do work at home...open the book, read, do the homework.” In contrast, she saw herself as having to work hard because she did not understand English as well as the native students did. “The students know English and they understand. I don’t think it is hard...if they attend the class, they don’t need to do anything.” Fena’s observations were quite interesting. There were a number of younger native students who did not complete the assignments and sometimes did not bring the text to class. It appeared Fena saw them as not having to work as hard as she did. While she struggled with the assignments, Fena believed the younger students could merely come to class in order to be successful in the class. This difference helped shape her perceptions of her place in the classroom.

Fena defined her place differently from Masa in the classroom. Masa was more sensitive to the larger culture of the classroom, noting that many students were recent high school graduates and it had taken her five years to complete high school in Jordan. One of her goals was to feel comfortable enough to interact with other students. Being around other students gave Masa a sense of “belonging,” being part of the larger society. Fena saw herself as a student, in the classroom to learn. Her expectations were that the other students should act in a similar manner, be prepared and participate in the classroom discussions. Like Francis, she expected students to take pride in their learning. Fena’s support group within the classroom included Kate and other adult women students. It was to this group that she spoke before and after class. In class, her answers were always directed to the instructor and not the rest of the class. She sat close to the front of the room and rarely acknowledged the younger native students. This was unlike Kate who participated in the younger students’ conversations and seemed comfortable

interacting with them. Given her background, it appeared there was a cultural divide between Fena and the younger native students. Unlike Masa, Fena did not indicate any interest in understanding or becoming assimilated into their cultural environment.

Influencing the Learning Environment

For each of the women, their families had some influence on their learning experience in the course. Masa and Kate had strong family support for their decision to enroll and take courses at the college. Throughout the semester, they felt encouragement as they faced challenges of succeeding in the course. Both spouses stated they understood the importance of Masa and Kate successfully completing the course. Fena's situation was quite different. At times she found that her education clashed with the expectations of her family. Education was important to the decision to come to the United States, but, it was seen as "...good for the children." The emphasis was on the children's education and not Fena. With an absentee husband, Fena found herself in the role of a single mother, which meant balancing home and school life. "I try every week to adjust my schedule, sometimes every day. Sometimes at night I think what I do in the morning. I go home to prepare lunch, my son is at swimming, and I pick him up. Sometimes I don't get home until 8 o'clock." Adding to her responsibilities, her children volunteered her for projects at their school.

Fena's decision to enroll in college was quite spontaneous and, with an absentee husband, there was not much discussion with either him or her children. This could explain the reaction of her son to having her enrolled in college. If she took a long time completing her homework, he became upset. "My son is not comfortable because I took lots of time with my English books...he says you are busy with your books." Given her

responsibilities to her children, Fena found it difficult to spend the time necessary to understand and complete her assignments. Fena not only had to balance her time, but also her emotional energies between school and home. This was compounded by the fact that she did not like to drive in bad weather, which sometimes meant missing classes. Having these dual roles with little family support increased the pressures on Fena as a student. Without a support base at home, Fena had to turn to the instructors and others in the class. This would help explain the phone calls to Kate at home. As the semester progressed, her relationship to Kate and Francis were essential to her ability to succeed in the course.

Having an absentee husband who only visited occasionally, presented another set of challenges for Fena. During the semester, Fena's husband came to visit from Saudi Arabia. While he was there, it appeared the relationship between them exhibited elements of the traditional patriarchal customs and attitudes of the Arab culture (Darraj, 2005). His expectation was that Fena would re-arrange her time and energy to focus on his interests. This included rescheduling her math exam. Fena told me it was difficult to keep up with her schoolwork when her husband was there. Though he had not participated in her educational experience, her husband was determining her future. When I asked about future plans, she replied, "I don't know what my husband (will) decide. I came here wondering of my education. I am happy." Darraji (2005) explains that Arab-American women confront two battles as they seek an education: the tension between how the family and community regard them and the way they are viewed by the larger American society. While Fena struggled with the tensions between school and home life, she decided "...in the meantime..(I) continue to go to school." In spite of tensions at home, at

the end of the semester she indicated her goal was to enroll in the Medical Assistant program at the college. Her silence at home had not deterred her from moving forward with her educational plans.

Like the other two students, over time Fena talked to me before and after class. While we spoke of family and struggles in the interviews, these were not topics of conversations in the classroom setting. On one occasion she asked if I was able to observe everything going on in the class. I explained that sitting in the back helped. I asked how she felt things were going in the course and she replied they were progressing. I found that an interesting answer given what I thought were high levels of anxiety over the course content. However, Francis supported Fena's observations. When asked at the end of the semester how she viewed Fena's progress, Francis replied, "She is much more in charge of her education. She knows how to plan. She said to me, 'I know what I am doing' and she does much more so and is not so focused on being worried." Francis believed that Fena grew in her confidence and ability to plan her educational career. At the end of the semester, Fena decided to take two courses that included English Composition I with Francis as the instructor.

Fena was unable to complete the second interview due to illness. However, she sent written answers to the questions. Her willingness to share her experiences on paper indicates the growth that occurred for her. Fena was not shy in expressing her thoughts about the semester. When asked if she felt more confident as a learner and what were the best experiences of the class, Fena replied, "Yes, I feel more confident as a learner...I learned how to prepare and study for class and now I am successful." Her best experience was "how to write a paragraph for an essay." The difficulties with the course were often

eliminated through the explanations provided by Francis. Once given, Fena felt “ease and comfort.” The semester brought her an understanding that, “now I can write my own essay.”

Fena’s answers to the questionnaire are interesting given the struggles that occurred at home. I could not discern if the environment at home was now more supportive of her educational goals. Given that Fena stated she was going to continue college, this indicated either resolution at home or her determination to continue school regardless of the home situation. Her husband’s return to Saudi Arabia provided Fena with more freedom in making decisions. It allowed her to move from goals that were privately held but which she was not able to publicly acknowledge (Nafisi, 2004).

Defining Self

For Fena and Masa, the semester brought new levels of personal and educational confidence. When I asked Francis what her goals for the students were, she replied that they take pride in their learning. It was important that the students “turn out good writing” as this was the tangible product of the course. Both Masa and Fena believed they achieved this goal. They were writing in English at new levels of proficiency. While Masa might still struggle translating between Arabic and English, she felt confident in her ability to move to English Composition I. This was in contrast to receiving a D the first time she took the course. Fena could now write her own essay and understood the importance of concepts like parallelism in developing a paragraph. Fena felt that “I understand English as an individual and a learner.” The two had the confidence to take their skills into the larger society. Their cognitive development influenced how they viewed themselves.

The course was structured by Francis to have students see progress in the learning. She understood that cognitive development impacts how students see themselves and the confidence they have in themselves. Fena and Masa entered the course concerned they would be able to master the material and develop the skills necessary to become proficient writers of the English language. While there were struggles, their determination and motivation kept them focused on their goal. They also navigated an environment that was not native to them. As “Strangers in the Land,” their path to educational success included both academic and cultural barriers. They developed support systems in and outside the classroom. Success in the course meant Fena and Masa crossed an important milestone that led them to new educational experiences. It o meant they felt more confident within an environment that was not native to either one of them. When asked if she noticed any differences outside of class as a result of taking the course, Fena replied, “I feel educated.” Their experience was a mixture of fragility and courage (Nafisi, 2004).

Chapter 5

Understanding The Experience

Introduction

The intent of the study was to understand whether there were specific educational conditions within a college classroom that could support the academic and personal development of adult women students. The study identified three adult women students, enrolled in a developmental English class, who were willing to participate in the study. Each woman had distinct reasons for enrolling in the course. They shared a common educational goal, to improve their writing skills. The study captured the experiences of these women as they progressed through the semester. Weekly observations of the classroom, including interviews with the women and the instructor for the course, provided an opportunity to study what happened to these women over the course of the semester. Though references were made by the women to experiences outside the classroom and the course, the context for the research remained with their classroom experiences.

The research question asked if there were particular classroom environments that support the affective and cognitive development of adult women students. Would these specific educational conditions affect the future direction of their educational and personal lives? As a researcher, it was important to understand this experience from the women's perspectives and from observations I made in the classroom. The study focused on their perceptions in this course over the semester. In listening to their narratives, it was important to remember that each of the women had multiple identities; they were students, women, wives and mothers. Their perspectives were built from cultural, female

and adult standpoints. From these individual lenses, it became clear to me these experiences were real and meaningful for each of the women.

As I followed the students through the semester, there did not emerge a single pattern to describe what occurred for the three women. I recognize that the size of my sample was small. However, I believe the reasons for not finding a single pattern related to who the women were and the type of experience they had in this class. While there were similarities and differences in the women's experiences, each woman's journey was unique to her. What they shared in common was a belief the course was meaningful and helped them to understand themselves and their abilities as learners. My analysis, from the in-class observations and the interviews, validated their conclusions. By the end of the semester, I witnessed the ways in which they had changed. The change came in subtle and overt ways within the classroom environment. They were willing to participate in class discussion, to ask questions of the instructor Francis, and to acknowledge their struggles with the curriculum. They expressed how they felt about the experience, moving from fear and concern to confidence about themselves. As students, the women made successful progress in the course. They were confident about themselves and their future.

Motivation and Determination

Goldsmith and Archambault (1997, p.13) state, "For adult women, college is not an expected next step; it is a conscious choice from among...a myriad of choices. It is choosing to alter one's life radically." The life of each woman in my study was complicated, and there were multiple reasons why they enrolled in school and in this course. Each described specific academic goals that focused on successful completion of

the course with a new set of writing skills. As the course progressed, from my conversations with them, there emerged a common theme that was not focused on enhanced academic skills. It was their desire to grow and develop as individuals. While this was not articulated to me in the beginning of the semester, by completion of the course, each understood they developed in ways that transcended their academic ability. This conclusion validated the premise of the study that this educational experience affected the academic achievement and self confidence of each of the woman.

Whatever the academic and personal barriers they overcame, these women brought to the class personal drive and determination. Kate believed it was the right time for her to continue her formal education in spite of apprehensions of once again failing in an academic setting. Masa saw school as a conduit between two cultural worlds. Fena struggled between the expectations of her family and her desire to enrich her educational experiences. For each of these students, this course helped them shape their future and supported their determination to succeed. By the end of the semester, each woman moved from apprehension about their abilities to believing they could succeed. Success was defined as both academic accomplishment and personal growth.

These themes emerged as important elements of the research and findings. Initially I intended to focus solely on the classroom environment. The research question centered on the conditions of the classroom and understanding how they could affect the personal and academic development of these women over the course of a semester. The question and study implied the classroom had conditions that affect the experiences of the women. Did the women feel supported in their learning by the instructor and fellow students (Kegan, 1994)? Each of the students acknowledged the importance the support

of Francis and fellow classmates. However, equally important was their desire to succeed. Their personal motivation and determination was integral to reaching their goal of completing the course.

In analyzing the interviews and observations, there emerged a set of intrinsic factors that were important to my study. The personal goals each of the women set for herself made a difference in her success. It was this strong efficacy that carried them through the course. Adult education theories (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981, Kegan, 1994) indicate that adult learners are focused on practical goals in their educational experience. Kegan (1994, p.292) states only a small percentage of adults entering school are interested in “personally growing from being in school.” From the research and observations, for these students, their personal goals really mattered and affected both their academic and personal success. Though not always clearly articulated, each of the women entered the course understanding that this experience could bring changes in their lives. Kate wanted to remove the ghosts of past educational experiences. Masa wanted an entry to a world beyond the borders of her community. Fena established an identity different from the one at home. What occurred went beyond the desire to persist and complete the course. For each woman, there developed a sense of empowerment. Enrollment in the course represented a form of control over the path of their lives.

From the research, I came to understand that the experience of each woman was individual and should be understood from her experiences rather than trying to categorize them within a specific theoretical construct. I came to appreciate that the women had multiple goals and individual needs. Understanding the women had these goals and needs helped me to see that their self-direction was reflective and focused on themselves. More

and more, research lens was shaped by the women and my ability to understand who they were and what they hoped to attain through this educational experience. The inquiry centered on what mattered most to them. Though the educational goals were visible to them and others, it was their internal goals that drove their sense of success. The balance between the two provided the basis for how each woman defined her identity. Their identities were multifaceted, drawing from their educational experiences and their personal backgrounds.

The theories of adult learning helped to guide the research but did not shape the conclusions. Merriam (2001) notes there is no single theory of adult learning, contending that it should be understood through a “prism of theories, ideas and frameworks” (Merriam, 2001, p. 96). Given the diversity of each woman’s experiences, motivations and expectations, and how each of them negotiated her learning experience (Goto, 1999), it was difficult to find a single adult theoretical framework that was appropriate to the research. As Cranton (1994, p.3) states, “The phenomenon of adult learning is complex and difficult to capture in a single definition.” The research and analysis was framed by the individual context of the ways in which each woman learned and developed over the semester (Hayes, 2000). One of the common themes for each woman was her determination to succeed in the course. Each had strong self-determination, that carried her through the course. By the end of the semester, each spoke of the confidence she felt in her abilities as a learner and as an individual. The change began with the women and their ability to understand their motivation for being in the class.

Flannery (2000), Fine (1992) and Tierney (1993) state that learners bring their own identities and perceptions of who they are into the learning environment. Within the

classroom, students are linked by these identities to their learning experience (Luke & Gore, 1992; Weiler, 1988). These experiences can transform perceptions of self and lead to new identity construction (Flannery, 2000). What occurred for these three women was not the construction of a new identity. The change, over the course of the semester, for all of them was to have this educational experience enhance identities that began to evolve before they enrolled in this course. Kate's education continued throughout her adult years. Attending college was recognition that she was ready for a formal educational setting. Masa had determined she would not stay at home. This course continued her goal to assimilate into the culture. By attending college, Fena created a world outside her home. Each of the women entered this course with a strong foundation of their identity. The experience helped each woman enhance and build upon how she defined herself.

Classroom as Support and Validation

All of the women had multiple identities that defined who they were. They were adults, women, and two of them were not native to American society. Given their backgrounds, were there theoretical constructs that could be used to frame their experience within the classroom? As adults, would adult education theories be appropriate to what I observed? These theories are situated in learning environments in which the adult student is the center of the classroom experience (Cross, 1981; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Adult learning theorists make assumptions concerning who is in the class and the focus and development of the learning experience. Were these students who would be defined as self-directed and self-reflective (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1984)? As Brookfield (1986) notes, adult learners are oriented toward learning, are willing to set

their own goals and define the methods by which to learn. Adult learners see their learning as personally significant and grounded in their own concerns and circumstances (Brookfield, 1986; Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1975).

Working from the premise of transformational theorists (Cranton, 1994; Dirkx, 1997; Mezirow, 1991, 2000), did the educational experiences of these women in class lead to changing their perspectives and meaning systems? Mezirow (1997) states that the principal goal of adult education is transformative as it allows students to reflect on, and negotiate, their own values and meaning purposes. Were the conditions within this classroom fostering agency and supporting their development and change as they reflected on their assumptions and beliefs and looked inward to themselves (Dirkx, 1997; Grabove, 1997)?

Would the tenants of feminist pedagogy help understand the reasons these women grew and developed as learners within this specific classroom environment? The context of feminist pedagogical theories (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Harding, 1996; Kenda & Morda, 1992; Luke & Gore, 1992) focuses on the classroom as the site in which female students are given the opportunity to reshape themselves. It is a place to make meaning of their learning experience. It can transform perceptions women have of themselves and lead to new construction of their identity (Flannery, 2000). From the research, was there evidence that each of the women was creating an authentic self through this learning experience (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1994; Ortner, 1996)? Were there fundamental ways that each woman changed their view of themselves or their social setting (hooks, 1994)?

As non-native students, how important was it to be in a classroom that integrated multicultural perspectives into the curriculum and classroom practices? Would it affect the development of Fena and Masa as learners and individuals? The theoretical constructs for multicultural education (Banks, 2004; Rendon & Hope, 1996 Rhoads & Valadez, 1996;) focus on the importance of creating classroom environments that respect cultural differences and support the development of students. This type of classroom is sensitive to the cultures of its students and aware of an array of learning styles that are aligned to the multicultural perspectives of the students. Within these classrooms, it is the recognition of the experiences of students whose identity can be perceived as different and, therefore, stand apart from other students. Gallos and Ramsey (1997, p.45) describe it as “the experience of being othered.” These theoretical constructs emphasize honoring the differences of students. Tierney (1993) explains it as an environment that is infused with difference. For Rhoads and Valadez (1996), it would be important that the course offer Fena and Masa the opportunities to learn without having to reject the cultural forms they brought with them.

The experiences of these women in my study could not be categorized within any of these theoretical constructs. What I came to understand is that all of them grew as learners and individuals in a classroom environment that was not specifically shaped around their needs as adult learners and non-native students. The classroom presented a cross section of ages and backgrounds. This created a hybrid complexion for the student body and the learning environment. The demographics ranged from recent high school graduates to older adult female students. The majority of the students were under 25. The instructor, Francis, described the atmosphere as a “sock hop.” From the observations, I

noted the class had high levels of visible energy, particularly among the younger students. The younger students' conversations often focused on themselves, the weekend, parties and not academic issues. Their references in classroom discussion were relevant to their age group: rock bands, media stars and cars. These activities contrasted with the behavior of the older and non-native students who appeared to be more focused on academic concerns related to the course. All three women commented on the differences between themselves and the younger students. Kate remarked about the lack of attention of the younger students. Kate remarked about the lack of attention of the younger students. Masa and Fena both felt these students had an advantage since English was their primary language.

Adult Learners and Support Systems

Adult learning research focuses on isolating the adult learner within the educational process (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1984; Merriam, 2001). Little consideration has been given to placing the adult learner within a learning environment that must account for students across a broad demographic span. This was the type of class in which Fena, Masa and Kate were enrolled.

Given the demographics, the women could find the classroom a threatening and hostile environment, one that was not welcoming to older and second language students. If that were true, it would hinder their success as students. What I found was that the women developed support networks among some of the older and non-native students in the class. The networks were informally created by the women that helped create a sense of belonging for each of them. Fena and Kate sat in the front of the room with other adult women students. The conversations among the women occurred before and after class

and included a wide range of topics such as jobs, children and classroom assignments. Over the course of the semester, Kate took on a leadership role within this group. The other adult women students often turned to her for help with classroom assignments. She frequently led the discussions that were held before and after class among these students. Kate struggled at times with this new level of recognition as a learner and a leader. Kate was being defined by these students quite differently from her earlier formal educational experiences. It took time for her to understand that peer recognition placed her in a leadership role within the classroom. As the semester progressed, Kate appeared more comfortable in this role.

Masa's primary support system was two other second language students, Abby and Franz. She relied upon them for help with assignments and rarely interacted with other students in the class. Though Masa expressed interest in becoming more assimilated into the classroom environment, she continued to rely upon a peer group more reflective of her own background. However, in her second interview, Masa indicated she felt more comfortable with her fellow classmates.

The three women were not in a classroom environment that was shaped only by the adult learner; the focus of the course was not directed to meet only their learning needs. However, the three students were able to develop support systems among fellow students. The women sought out those students who were similar to themselves. Based upon my research, for adult women students placed in diverse classroom settings, the ability to create support systems with fellow students who have common interests and backgrounds can make a difference. It gives the adult students a sense of belonging, a place of safety to rely upon for help. As the younger students gravitated toward each

other, the adult students did the same thing. They aligned themselves in ways to support each other through this educational experience. The women felt acceptance and understanding from their fellow adult students. From this comfort zone, they were able to interact with younger students as part of their learning experiences. In this situation, presented with a classroom environment that had to account for multiple types of students and learning needs, these women created a structure that supported them through this experience.

Multicultural Learners and the Classroom

There were only four non-native students among the twenty-seven students in the classroom. Fena and Masa found themselves part of a very small minority that included only one other Arab-American female student, Abby. Fena and Masa entered an environment in which they were “Strangers in the Land” (Higham, 1988). It was a situation in which they found their backgrounds and experiences to be different, even from fellow adult students. The stated goals of the course were not framed from a multicultural perspective; the course goal was to improve English writing skills. The course and curriculum focused on providing students with a level of proficiency in a language that was not native to these two students. Most of the examples in the classroom and textbook related to experiences that were foreign to both of them. Though the instructor, Francis, expressed an understanding of the challenges faced by non-native students, the course was not structured to foster dialogue across cultural zones. As an example, I observed only one class meeting with an assignment that provided a multicultural perspective of the course curriculum. It involved a discussion concerning *Spanglish* and the ways that this represented a hybrid of English and Spanish words.

Though the content was not structured around a multicultural point of view, Francis framed the course in a way that supported some of the concepts of multicultural education. This presents a different perspective concerning the focus of multicultural education. As stated by Rhoads and Valadez (1996), community colleges must rise to the challenge of developing programs, courses and practices that ensure students are provided a framework to learn new ideas, concepts and ways of understanding the world. In this classroom, the interactions were not guided by a specific educational perspective concerning multicultural education and diversity. However, Francis believed in a classroom in which “everyone treats each other with respect.” Not specifically focusing on respect of difference, Francis created a common mode of behavior for herself and the students. Her goal was to maintain an atmosphere in which all students were respected and encouraged to share their views and ideas. Her assignments required formal and informal interaction among the students. The strategies included peer review of assignments and peer support in the computer lab. Consequently, Fena and Masa grew to feel comfortable within this classroom environment. Masa was able to describe her experiences as, “At first I was scared. I thought how am I going to ask questions in the class? American students don’t laugh when someone is talking.” Fena was able to reach out to other adult women students for support and help. Though it was not a stated goal of the course, the natural openness and acceptance by fellow students allowed Masa and Fena to feel welcomed by the instructor and classmates. From their comments Fena and Masa felt less “strange” in this classroom environment by the end of the semester.

Masa presents another perspective for a student of difference. Her primary reason for enrolling in college and this course was to become more proficient in the English

language. This goal was a stepping stone to assimilation into American society. She did not express interest in having her difference validated by the classroom environment. Masa did not desire to stand apart from the rest of the students and therefore, creating the environment suggested by multicultural frameworks was not important to her. Her college education was a means to develop a new cultural identity. Her silence in class did not represent feeling marginalized but concerned the academic challenges she faced in learning a new language. Since she did not take notes, Masa spent her class time listening to Francis and the other students. While Masa did not interact with students other than Abby and Franz, she described the other students as, , “They are nice...they are patient.” Though there was minimal interaction with most students in the class, Masa said she felt comfortable among her classmates.

Masa’s desire to assimilate into the classroom and society presents a different perspective regarding the goals of students of difference. The assumption of theorists is that it is best to create classroom environments that are aligned to the multicultural perspectives of students (Adams & Marchesani, 1990; Astin, 1998; Banks, 2004; Fernandez, 2004; Landen & Turner, 1995). However, Masa did not want validation of her culture or difference. She wanted the opportunity to assimilate into the larger society and hoped that this experience would support her transition. Given her experience, it is important not to assume all students of difference want to stand apart from the mainstream.

As non-native students, Fena and Masa faced similar academic challenges in the course. Both desired to become proficient in English and improve their writing skills. While Masa’s struggles appeared to remain in the classroom, Fena’s struggles reached

into her family life. Fena's situation was exacerbated by cultural issues, which Malik (2002, p.169) describes as "patriarchal constructs". Fena had little support at home for her educational endeavors. Aldulhadi, Naber and Alsultany (2005) state that Arab-American women struggle on multiple fronts that include their private and public lives. They are often burdened with the responsibility of not becoming westernized (Darraj, 2005) by their surroundings. The challenge for Fena was to balance the demands of her home life with her desire to attend school. In creating multicultural perspectives within the classroom, it is important to take into account the cultural struggles students face as they attend school. As in Fena's situation, these struggles may not relate to the classroom environment, but to circumstances at home. These conditions can become an additional burden for students in meeting their educational goals. Adult women students from cultures that are rooted in strong patriarchal traditions may find it more difficult to succeed as they balance their cultural and educational lives.

Fena compensated for her situation by creating a support network among the other adult women students to substitute for the support she did not appear to have at home. Given the lack of family support, these relationships kept Fena from feeling isolated and alone in her educational experiences. Unlike Masa, her network extended beyond other non-native students. The women, particularly Kate, helped guide Fena through the semester and it is likely that, without her fellow students, Fena's struggles with the course content would have been even greater. Though there was not a formalized structure within the classroom that created these networks, Fena chose to develop them as a means to be successful in the course.

Pedagogy and the Learning Environment

The learning experiences of the three women were framed by their enrollment in a developmental English course. The National Association for Developmental Education states the purpose of developmental education is to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to attain academic, career and life goals (McCabe, 2000). Placement is determined by entrance tests that indicate whether or not a student is ready for college-level courses. Masa and Fena completed English as a Second Language courses prior to enrolling in this course. According to the instructor, Kate appeared to have good writing skills. However, Kate believed the course was important to becoming successful in English Composition One.

The sequence of the college's English developmental courses typified the structure for developmental education at community colleges. They are perceived as "college- readiness" courses that become pathways to academic success in college-level courses (Prince & Jenkins, 2005). The developmental education literature reveals concerns regarding the effect of these courses on students (Key, 1998; McCabe, 2003; McCabe & Day, 1998; Rouche & Rouche, 1999). For example, the concept of being "developmental" may cause students to feel inadequate and marginalized because they are asked to enroll in these courses (Rouche & Rouche, 1999). Fena, Kate and Masa did not express any concerns about being enrolled in a developmental English course. Each saw the course as an important academic building block toward furthering their educational goals and success in English Composition One, a required course for designated academic programs and degrees. Their apprehensions centered on being able to complete the course successfully.

The focus of the research was to understand the experiences of Fena, Kate and Masa within the environment of this course and class. Though the study was not focused on the instructor, Francis, she was integral to analyzing and understanding what happened to the students over the semester. Groto (1999) describes the developmental classroom as a contact zone in which students navigate their learning experiences. The students may enter the classroom with their own agendas for being there, and those agendas can conflict with that of the instructor. The agendas for Kate, Masa, Fena and Francis appeared to be aligned.

Like the students, Francis' stated goal was for students to acquire the basic skills to become proficient writers. Although it did not seem that Francis had not structured the course around a specific pedagogical construct, given her experiences, she did work to make the course to be inclusive and to address the multiple types of learners that were enrolled in the course. Francis felt she had a good understanding of the challenges her students faced in her course and believed that, "Developmental classes are some of the most important ones we teach." Francis believed there were multiple reasons why her students were not prepared and, therefore, enrolled in the course; these included that the students' learning styles had not been addressed or that they had a prior bad experience with a "not very sensitive teacher." Francis believed the students "wanted to go to college for some reasons." She saw her role as supporting and guiding the students toward becoming successful learners. Francis worked from a standpoint that it was important to create a safe environment that challenged her students, but did not threaten them.

Like earlier classes she taught, Francis understood that this class had its own unique personality, which she described as a "sock hop." It is an interesting

characterization given the differences Francis saw between younger and older students. From her perspective, older students were a lot more anxious while younger students needed more guidance. To Francis, the classroom behavior appeared to be more masculine than feminine. This is not surprising given that more males than females enrolled in the course. In her view, a masculine class would try to “get by with as little as possible” as compared to a feminine class, which was “more down to cases and they want to do all the exercises, want to have answers to everything.” If Francis’ analysis was correct, the environment of the classroom could have been uncomfortable for Masa, Fena and Kate. While Fena, Kate and Masa focused on being academically successful, many of the younger students appeared to only want to do a minimal amount in the course. However, Francis’ approach to her students and her ability to recognize and to understand the differences among them mitigated it becoming a hostile environment for the three women. Francis created classroom conditions that nurtured and instilled confidence in these women.

Francis began with a common set of goals for all the students in the class. While recognizing there were differences in learning styles, she wanted students to learn and to develop their skills. “I talk a lot about the importance of learning, the importance of the subject. In my developmental classes, I do a lot more of that... (they) need motivation (to) feel what they are doing is important.” Rather than differentiate between female and male, adult and younger students, native or non-native students, in her mind, “When it comes to real learning, I don’t know if there is a big difference.” As a result, her classroom, like her students, was a mix of elements of adult learning, feminist pedagogy and multicultural theories (Banks, 2004; Cross, 1981; Gallos & Ramsey, 1997; Kegan,

1994; Luke & Gore, 1992; Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Rendon, 1999; Tennant & Pogson, 1995; Tierney, 1993; Weiler, 1998). Her primary goal was to have her students “become good student citizens, to be professional, to take in their learning, to learn quickly to navigate a professional (learning) environment.” Within a set of boundaries she established in the classroom, Francis wanted her students to have the ability to feel confident about their learning experiences. These boundaries were shaped by the manner in which she directed each lesson from its content to the type of student activities used in the classroom. From my observations, it appeared Francis developed instructional strategies that were inclusive and respectful of students. Each student was given the opportunity to participate in class discussions, and peer interaction was an important part of classroom activities. In her interviews, Francis described the importance of seeing each student as an individual. As I observed, Francis saw each student as unique while directing them toward successful completion of the course. In a nurturing environment that utilized positive reinforcement, she reminded them that “the more you know, the more you understand.”

Francis created a classroom that balanced academic rigors with support for the individual student learning experience. As each of the women noted, through her teaching practices, Francis instilled confidence in the women as they engaged in the educational process with her. Palmer (1998) states there are inner forces that connect the instructor, the students and the subject. In Francis’ passion for the subject and the desire to bring it to her students, she created ways to connect to Masa, Fena and Kate and affirm their abilities as learners. Not working from a single theoretical stance, Francis utilized practices that were based on her experiences and appropriate to the students in the class.

Francis saw each of her students as individuals and understood how important the relationship she established with them was to their academic success. Kate, Fena and Masa looked to Francis for guidance and direction and each woman had a unique relationship with her. It could be seen in Francis' patience with Fena and Masa in the computer lab or helping them through a classroom assignment; she was available to them after class. At times, with Kate, Francis was more direct. On several occasions she asked Kate to expand on her answers. Though it created some tension, as when Kate refused to share her work, Francis often "did not take no for an answer." Francis took the time to see each of the students as individuals and adapted her approach to their learning needs.

Francis' sensitivity to each of the women created bridges that brought them into the learning environment and supported their journey. While maintaining control of the structure of the course, Francis provided an inclusive learning environment that connected to the learning styles of the three women. Relationships between Francis and the women were built upon the concept that students should not be placed in categories, whether by age or academic abilities. Given the diversity of students within many community college classrooms, future research should consider pedagogical frames that account for a multitude of learning styles. This should extend beyond present research (Brookfield, 1987; Cross, 1981; Tennant & Pogsen, 1995; Weiler, 1988) that looks at students within broad-based categories. The challenge for instructors is to create classroom environments that are holistic, recognizing the uniqueness of the student and integrating good teaching that helps students to develop a base of knowledge from the course content.

Integrating Academic Achievement and Self Confidence

Central to the research study was to understand the relationship of academic achievement and self confidence within a classroom setting. Was there evidence of progress being made by Kate, Fena and Masa in their knowledge acquisition? In what ways did their academic growth affect their development as learners and individuals? In understanding what occurred to the three women, there may be implications for further studies concerning learning, personal development and classroom structures. Kohlberg (1975), Erickson (1968) and Perry (1985) see cognitive development in individuals unfolding over time. Readiness and timeliness are central to the sequence of moving from one stage to another and, therefore, to new levels of development (Strange, 1994). Feminist studies (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, 1996; Fine, 1992; Hare Musting & Marecek, 1990; Unger, 1989) question the ways in which knowledge is created and its relationship to development. These studies look at where the individual is located in order to understand the patterns of development. They can focus on understanding how women define learning, gather knowledge and create meaning from the experience (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). Is learning a personal interactive process that can create new awareness in women concerning their identity, needs and challenges (Fiddler & Marienau, 1995)? Does this occur when women have agency over their own learning (Maher & Tetreault, 1994; Weiler, 1998)?

Masa, Fena and Kate entered the course with a set of predetermined academic goals that were reinforced by their personal determination to succeed. Each had different levels of academic preparation for the course. Self-educated, Kate had “learned on my own.” While well-read, her learning experiences were isolated and self-directed. Masa

and Fena faced greater academic challenges in a course that was a second language for each of them, yet both of them had the resolve to achieve their academic goal of improving their English skills.

The experiences of the three women indicated a strong connection between their cognitive development and their sense of identity. In watching their progress over the semester, it became evident each changed as a learner and individual. They made connections between their internal and external development (Gilligan, 1988). They became better able to understand who they were as each woman learned how to negotiate her learning experience. Kate grew from being an autonomous learner to becoming confident in learning within a collective environment. Over the semester, Kate came to feel she was “learning so much about going to school, learning how to follow instructions after all those years of doing it my way. It is different in school.” Kate explained that “the best experience is getting good grades. It is so much fun. My self esteem comes along with it.” Kate’s academic success in the course helped to enhance her self image. As she mastered the course content and received good grades, Kate’s confidence grew.

Masa defined her educational experience as a means to help her form a new identity, one that allowed her to assimilate into society. Mastery of course content meant not only proficiency in the English language, but greater agency over her future. Thus, when she struggled in the early weeks of the course, Masa understood “it is hard, but I try to make it not hard for me.” By the end of the semester, with improvement in her skill level, Masa was pleased she could “write a paragraph and even wrote an essay last week. Before I could not write five or seven sentences. I am more confident and I have a chance to do things.” Doing things was seen as an ability to “speak better and I use better

grammar than before, correct grammar I can say.” For Fena, success in the course brought “lots of changes in my life. I understand English as an individual and learner. I am more confident and feel educated.” This concept of feeling educated was important to all three of the women. Comprehension of the course content became equated with their personal development. The mark of success was not only the good grades they received, but the sense of accomplishment each of them felt.

What can be learned from the experiences of Kate, Fena and Masa? As Kate noted, academic success impacted their sense of identity. As they progressed through the course, mastering its content and concepts, each woman gained greater self-awareness. Their evolving sense of self was made through their connection to academic accomplishments (Gilligan, 1982). Their sense of identity came from their academic experiences during this semester. Mastery of the course content was important to the way the women felt about themselves as learners and individuals. As Flannery notes (2000), the external influence of the classroom impacts the development of identity and the sense of self. The academic success of each woman helped enhance the continuing journey of defining herself. Their growth and greater sense of self was evident in their decision to continue their academic careers once the course was completed. For these women, the study confirmed the strong links between cognitive and personal development within a classroom environment. Future studies should research the link between academic and personal development within different types of classroom structures. Can the experiences of these women be found in other classroom environments? How can their experiences be utilized to create successful experiences for adult women students enrolled in developmental courses?

Understanding Their Journey

The research focuses on the experiences of three women enrolled in a developmental English course for one semester. The study situated these students within their classroom experience and focused on their perceptions of the learning experience. It was their lens that framed the study and its conclusions. From their words and my observations of them, it appeared the course was a positive experience for them yet this occurred in a classroom that was not centered on adult learning, feminist pedagogy or multicultural learning. It was an environment in which the women interacted with other students representing different genders, ages and backgrounds. The instructor had not shaped the course around a specific pedagogical approach that focused only on their learning styles or their cultural backgrounds.

Why were the women able to be successful? The desire to succeed began before the semester started. An important element was their motivation for enrolling in the course. Each student entered with a defined set of academic and personal goals. They were able to develop support systems within the class among fellow students. These peer relationships were important connections as the semester progressed. The instructor provided a nurturing and supportive environment while still emphasizing the importance of mastery of course content. With the support of the instructor and classmates, the women felt validated in their learning experiences.

When asked what made the experience positive, the women cited their confidence in their abilities to be successful students. This came over time and with affirmation of their abilities as learners. These experiences helped them gain confidence. Within this

classroom, the learning experience came to mean acquiring knowledge, but also gaining agency over their lives as students and individuals.

Attention must be paid to the important relationship between mastery of course content and improved self-image among adult women learners. In this study, the three women wanted to become proficient in English. Their goal was to complete the course successfully and be prepared to take English Composition One, the next level class. These women entered the course concerned about their abilities, either because of past educational experiences or having English as a second language. By the end of the semester, they felt a sense of accomplishment, which gave each woman renewed confidence. Achieving their academic goals brought new levels of self-worth and agency over their lives.

Implications of the Research

This research provided an opportunity to look at the experience of three adult women within a classroom over one semester. Each of the women was unique and different from each other. It is important to remember the experiences of these women students were centered on who they are and why they entered college. Researchers should look at the experiences of adult women students as distinct and unique. I came to understand that “one size” does not fit all and, therefore, theoretical constructs helped to guide the study but did not frame it. Future researchers should consider other studies that are focused on specific educational life histories and what can be learned from those student experiences.

This study raised a number of questions that could be pursued in future research. What importance should be placed on the role of intrinsic motivation in the academic and

personal success of adult women students? Was this a unique situation given the reasons each woman had for enrolling in the course? In this study, the women's personal histories helped frame their personal goals and, therefore could not be divorced from the classroom environment. To what extent is it the case for other students? How are these personal histories acknowledged and taken into account by faculty and the curriculum? How much can community college faculty address students' personal histories with increasing class sizes, changing student populations and instructional demands?

In this study, families were integral to the experience of each woman. While the pressures adult women have in meeting family and student responsibilities is well documented, in this study two families were active participants in the learning process. Are there ways to cultivate families engaged in the learning process so that other women students could benefit as these two did?

The development of peer support systems within the classroom was another important aspect of the study. As noted, these were formed ad hoc and out of the need of students to join with others who understood their issues or concerns. In this study the peer groups served as a bridge into the classroom environment. How important are peer groups in other classrooms that integrate younger and older students?

Based on this study, consideration should be given to further research concerning adult women learners as they are placed in classroom environments with diverse representation of age ethnicity and gender. How does it impact the learning experiences of adult women students? What theoretical constructs can be used to help understand these experiences?

Increasing attention must be paid to the ways in which the cultural backgrounds of adult women students can impact their learning experiences. What are the relationships between student success and their cultural histories? How can classroom environments account for the distinct cultural backgrounds of students like Fena and Masa? Given the dearth of current literature, there is a need further research concerning Arab-American women students and higher education as my study showed a clear impact of cultural identity on classroom learning.

The instructor of the course took a traditional approach to learning. The focus was the mastery of course content so students became better writers. However, the instructor had a holistic teaching style that valued these women as students and individuals. It was a unique relationship in which Francis, the instructor, was able to balance her affective teaching style with a procedural approach to mastery of the material. Francis is an example of an instructor who focused on content mastery and made strong connections to her students. Further research should focus on whether this is found in other classroom environments. Are there other instructors who can successfully balance their love for teaching with the ability to create a standards based curriculum? What are the characteristics of instructors who are able to achieve this type of symmetry in their classrooms? Can this approach to teaching be taught to others?

Role of the Researcher

I began this study because of my personal interest in the topic. Over the course of twenty years in the classroom, I saw many adult women students who entered on the first day of class with fear and trepidation. By the end of the course, they were often the most successful students in the class. I watched them grow as learners and individuals,

exhibiting new confidence in themselves. Often they were seen by their classmates as “leaders,” the students who understood the material and could help others in the class. Through my research, I wanted to see if my observations could be formally validated. It was a voyage to understand the ways in which women learn and grow in our classrooms. I hoped it would help future instructors understand who these women were and why they were in their classroom.

This is a project in which I became part of the research. I became involved in the research because I wanted to give voice to the experiences I saw in my own classrooms. Over the course of the semester, I came to know Fena, Masa and Kate in a context that extended beyond the classroom observations and interviews. Their willingness to talk to me before and after class and to share their lives for one semester provided an entry that allowed me to be visible and part of their experience. I came to know them as individuals, not just students. They allowed me to enter their lives for one semester.

As Ruth Behar (1996) notes I became a “Vulnerable Observer.” I worried when Masa was absent for several class periods. Upon returning, she shared that it was due to illness. I had tears on the day Kate told me that one day she would not have to go to the library, but would own her own books. I was concerned that family pressures would force Fena to leave school. I observed them within the context of the classroom environment and the interviews, but they were more than subjects; they became my friends. I looked forward to talking to them before and after class. Being allowed into their lives provided me with insights about each woman that I would not otherwise know about them.

Though the study did not center on Francis, it was difficult not to make her more important to the study. Perhaps that is for a later paper or future research. In Francis I saw

myself as an instructor. Our teaching styles and approaches were almost identical. Like Francis, I have high standards for my course, but work hard to bring the students through the semester. I understand her passion and love of teaching and the desire to want to make a difference in students' lives.

Did my involvement with the study make the analysis more difficult? I do not believe it did. Rather it gave me a base of understanding that perhaps another researcher with less teaching experience would not have had. Did it color my perceptions about the study? I do not believe it did. As Behr and Gordon (1995) note, it allowed me to write more creatively and to be more self-engaged in the process. It allowed me to portray the value of Kate, Masa and Fena's lives. I thank each of them for the opportunity to get to know them and share their stories.

APPENDIX A

LETTERS AFFIRMING SELECTION SITE

January 7, 2001

Dr. XXXX
Vice President, Academic Affairs
Community College
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Dr.XXXX,

Thank you for allowing Community College to be the site for my study during the winter semester, 2002. The purpose of the study is to understand the educational experiences of adult female students enrolled in a community college English developmental course. The study is designed as a case study and will look at these students' experiences during the course of one semester. Through the setting of the classroom, I will have the opportunity to examine the learning experiences of these students. This will be accomplished through interviews with the students, visits to the classroom, an interview of the classroom instructor and examination of classroom artifacts. Given Schoolcraft's commitment to student learning and developmental education, the study could provide the college with additional information that would be helpful in meeting your educational objectives.

Through your assistance, XXXX has agreed to allow me to use her English 055, Building Writing Skills, Section #111507, as the site for my research. I will be attending her class on Thursday mornings from 10-11:20. We will work together to identify appropriate students to participate in the study. I will meet with the students, provide general information about the study and ask them to participate. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, I will explain their role and responsibilities in the study. Each participant will sign a letter of consent and be interviewed three times during the semester. Hard copies of the transcribed interviews will be made available to the students

The study is the foundation for a dissertation at Michigan State University. The university's policies require that pseudonyms will be used within all texts and documents produced by the study. The study will identify the college, classroom instructor and students by pseudonyms. No comments will be attributed to specific individuals. Every effort will be made to insure that no details will be provided in any verbal or written reports that could identify Community College, the instructor or the study participants. The dissertation will be published in hard copy and microfiche, which will be housed at the Michigan State University library. Publication may also result from the final project.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me.

Thank you again for the allowing me to complete my research at Community College.

Sincerely,

Carol Brown
Cc: Marilyn Amey
Hale Program, Michigan State University

January 7, 2001

Teacher
Faculty Director
Associate Professor, English
Community College
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Dr.XXXX,

Thank you for allowing your classroom to be the site for my study during the winter semester, 2002. The purpose of the study is to understand the educational experiences of adult female students enrolled in a community college English developmental course. The study is designed as a case study and will look at these students' experiences during the course of one semester. Through the setting of your classroom, I will have the opportunity to examine the learning experiences of these students. I will be using your English 055, Building writing Skills, Section #111507 as the site for my research. I will be attending your class on Thursday mornings from 10-11:20. With your assistance, we will identify potential students to participate in the study. I will meet with them, provide general information about the study and ask them to participate. Upon agreeing to participate, I will explain their role and responsibilities in the study. Each student will sign a letter of consent and be interviewed three times during the semester. Hard copies of the transcribed interviews will be made available to them. You have agreed to allow me to interview you during the semester and provide me with appropriate classroom artifacts. I have provided you with a copy of the methodology section of my dissertation proposal that outlines the methodology and protocol for the study.

The study is the foundation for my dissertation at Michigan State University. The university's policies require that pseudonyms will be used in all texts and documents produced by the study. The study will identify the college, students and you by pseudonyms. No comments will be attributed to specific individuals. Every effort will be made to insure that no details will be provided in any verbal or written reports that could identify Schoolcraft, the study participants or you. The dissertation will be published in hard copy and microfiche, which will be housed at the Michigan State University library. Publication may also result from the final project.

**I look forward to working with you this semester.
Thank you again for allowing your classroom to be the site of my research.**

Sincerely

Carol Brown

**Cc: Marilyn Amey
Hale Program, Michigan State University**

**Lou Reibling
Vice President, Academic Affairs**

APPENDIX B

Consent Form (Student)

Case Study of Adult Female Students Enrolled in a Developmental English Course at a Community College

This research concerns your participation in a study of adult female students enrolled in a developmental English course at your college. The study is interested in your perceptions of this learning experience. Your involvement will include being interviewed three times over the course of the semester. Each interview will be one hour in length and scheduled at a time and location that is convenient for you. If you consent, each interview will be audio taped. The interviews and their transcriptions are integral to the case study. This study is the foundation for a dissertation and it will be shared with the dissertation committee. The dissertation will be published in hard copy and microfiche, which will be housed at the Michigan State University library. Publication may also result from the final project.

Be assured that your responses will be held in confidence to the fullest extent allowable by law. If you consent to having your interviews audio taped, the tapes, transcripts and all research notes pertaining to the study will be kept in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. To protect the confidentiality of your identity, pseudonyms will be used within all texts and documents produced by the study. The study will identify your institution and classroom instructor by a pseudonym. No comments will be attributed to specific individuals. Every effort will be made to insure that no details will be provided in any verbal or written reports that could identify you. Your participation is voluntary, and you can decline to answer any questions during the interviews. If you wish, hard copies of the transcribed interviews will be made available to you. You can withdraw from participating in the study at any time without penalty to your grades. This can occur until the final stages of the writing process of the dissertation.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please feel free to contact Ashir Kumar, Chair of Michigan State University's University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects at (517) 355-2180 or through e-mail at ucrish@msu.edu. If you have any questions regarding the study please contact either Marilyn Amey at (517) 432-1056/ amey.msu.edu or Carol Brown at (248) 349-0652/ cabrown@voyager.net.

Please check one statement below

_____ I agree to participate, and I give consent that the interview can be audio taped. At any time I may ask that the tape recorder be stopped.

_____ I agree to participate, but I do not give consent that the interview be audio taped.

_____ (name)

Researcher
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APPENDIX C

Protocol Questions for Interview One (Students)

(Revised/01/27/02)

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. As I mentioned, I will be audio taping the interview and it will be transcribed at a later date by me. Pseudonyms will be used for you, the instructor and the class. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question, please let me know.

1. Would you begin by describing yourself? It would be helpful if you included something about your background including your age, where you are from, and your family structure. Do you work? How might you describe yourself to someone else?
2. Have you attended college prior to enrolling here? Where and when did you begin your college career?
3. Can you describe the reasons why you decided to attend this community college? Why did you choose this form of higher education? Did you have any preconceived notions concerning college life/community colleges?
4. What are your long-term education goals? What do you hope to gain by attending college?
5. How did your decision to attend school this semester affect your life?
6. Why did you decide to enroll in this course?
7. What were your expectations for this course? What did you expect from the instructor, from yourself?
8. How would you describe the first few weeks in terms of your adjustment to the class and the instructor?
9. How would you describe the learning environment of the class?
10. What types of things have been helpful to you in learning? Do you have specific strategies to learn something?
11. What role does the instructor play in supporting your learning needs? What types of things do you find helpful to you in learning?
12. Have you noticed any changes in yourself since beginning the course?

13. How do you balance going to school and other parts of your life?

APPENDIX D

Protocol Questions for Interview One (Instructor)

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. As I mentioned, I will be audiotaping the interview and it will be transcribed at a later date by me. Pseudonyms will be used for you, the students and the class. If at any time you do not wish to answer a question, please let me know.

1. Would you begin by describing your background? It would be helpful if you included your educational background, your degrees, how long you have been teaching in higher education.
2. How long have you been teaching at Community College? What are the types of courses you have taught? Do you have any other college responsibilities?
3. Can you describe the reasons why you decided to teach at a community college and specifically this one? Did you have any preconceived notions concerning community college teaching?
4. Why do you choose to teach this course?
5. What are your expectations for yourself during the course of the semester? What do you expect from the students? How is this reflected in the structure of the class?
6. How would you describe yourself as an instructor? Is there a particular methodology that you use? If so why? Why do you describe the class as a “workshop?” Are there specific strategies that you incorporate into your approach to the course? Why did you choose strategies such as journals, peer review, collaboration and the use of a computer lab?
7. How would you describe the learning environment of this class?
8. What role should the instructor play in supporting the learning needs of the students?
9. Do you notice a difference between the learning styles of the male/female students? Do you notice a difference between older/younger students? Do you believe there is a difference in the way male/female students learn?
10. Have you noticed any changes in the class since it began?

APPENDIX E

Protocol Questions for Interview Two (Students)

Thank you for the opportunity to interview you for a second time this semester. I appreciate the time we have spent together and have learned a great deal through my observations of the class and these interviews.

As the semester is winding down, I would like to talk to you today about your observations of this experience and how it has impacted you as a student and as an individual.

- 1. In general, how would you describe your experience in this class? As you look at where you are today compared to when you entered the class, do you notice any differences in your self as a learner and as an individual?**
- 2. Do you feel more confident as a learner? Being enrolled in an English course can you see any changes in your learning style, your writing, how you study and prepare for class?**
- 3. What would you describe as the best experiences you have had in the class? Could you describe some of the highlights of the course during the semester? Were you comfortable with your role within the class structure?**
- 4. If you have done something different this semester what would it have been? What did you find most difficult during the semester?**
- 5. What have you learned about yourself through this course? As a learner and as an individual?**
- 6. If you could share one thing with the instructor what would it be? What did you find most helpful in the way the course was structured? What hindered you?**
- 7. What are your educational plans once the course is over? Will you be enrolling in future courses at the college? Which ones?**
- 8. Have you noticed any differences outside of class as a result of taking this course?**

APPENDIX F

Protocol Questions for Interview Two (Instructor)

Thank you for the opportunity to observe your class this semester. I feel like I have become part of the class. In this second interview, I would like to discuss the semester and your observations about it.

- 1. As you think back over the semester do you feel that you meet your goals for yourself and the students?**
- 2. What do you consider some of the highlights of the course for you and for the students?**
- 3. Did you notice a difference in the students by the end of the semester? Could you give some examples?**
- 4. Some of the students might be defined as “high risk”, low-test scores or poor preparation for class. What were some of the reasons why some students stayed and others did not? Do you believe there are any predictors for who will stay and who will not? What types of pedagogy help to support student retention in a developmental class?**
- 5. I noticed that you had a fairly high retention rate, how many students remained from the original group? Who left and why do you think they did not stay?**
- 6. Were some students more willing to contact you out of class than others? If so which ones and why?**
- 7. Every class seems to take on its own personality, how would you describe the personality of this class?**
- 8. Based on this class, would you change any of your specific strategies or methodologies that you used this semester? Why or why not?**
- 9. We have talked before about the issue of gender and learning. Did you notice specific differences in this class in learning styles based on gender, age or ethnicity?**
- 10. Have you noticed any changes in yourself as an instructor as a result of the class?**

APPENDIX G

Course Syllabus XXXXX College ENG XXX

Course: ENG XXX – Building Writing Skills

3 Credit Hours

Texts: Along These Lines: Writing Paragraphs and Essays 2nd ed.
by John Sheridan Blays and Carol Wershoven.

Additional Materials:

HD computer disk

3-ring binder and dividers (optional)

Paper folder with pockets for journal assignments

Catalog Description:

This is the second of a two-part course (ENG XXX) designed to prepare students for composition courses. The major goals are to master basic paragraph structure and write clear, efficient sentences. In connection with paragraph structure, students will study topic sentences, ways to improve paragraph content, and strategies for organizing paragraphs. In studying sentences, students will learn about diction, syntax and punctuation. Accurate spelling and appropriate grammatical concepts will be emphasized. A grade of 2.0 or better in ENG XXX is necessary to enter ENG XXX.

Prerequisites:

Satisfactory ASSET score or minimum grade of 2.0 in ENG

Course Objectives:

Upon successful completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Use writing as a tool of expression and for success in ENG.
2. Identify, plan and write the elements of a paragraph—especially topic sentences, subtopics and termination sentences;
3. Order ideas, develop detail, unify ideas, and retain coherence;
4. Write basic sentence patterns and all four voices of sentences;
5. Use punctuation marks; find and correct punctuation errors;
6. Find periodical literature in a library;
7. Understand and apply basic principles of some rhetorical modes to be encountered in ENG XXX—specifically, illustration, description, narration and comparison.
8. Proofread and correct papers for common usage, sentence structure or word choice errors;
9. Understand the basic components of expository essays in preparation for ENG;
10. Collaborate with others—as writers frequently do in the workplace.

Methods of Instruction:

Since ENG 55 is a skills class, the course is taught as a workshop. In other words, the course takes a step-by-step approach to all writing tasks. Brief lectures, book exercise, discussions, and in-class writing will be used to demonstrate writing principles or modes and help students learn how to plan, write, and revise paragraphs.

Outside of class, students complete reading assignments and exercises from the text, write applications, conduct research, and prepare some writing experiments. For each application assignment, students submit rough drafts for feedback before the final draft is due.

To teach critical thinking and collaboration skills, many group exercises are conducted. Some classes may be held in the ACL (Academic Computer Lab), Brander Library or other campus sites.

Student/Instructor Responsibilities:

1. Students should schedule at least two hours of study time outside of class for each class credit hour.
2. Plagiarism of writing assignments or dishonesty on homework or exams will result in a grade of zero.
3. Students should keep a complete record of graded papers and exercises, records grades and keep track of their course progress.
4. Students should discuss with me any needs they have for test taking or other learning activities. I may refer special accommodation requests to the Learning Assistance Center.
5. Please inform me of any health condition that may cause a classroom emergency.
6. Except in emergency situations, I do not accept assignments after deadlines. If students encounter difficulty with assignments they should request extensions before the deadline is imminent. If students miss turning in assignments due to physical or personal emergencies, they should call me within 48 hours so a new deadline may be established.
7. If assignments are turned in late without extensions, or if they do not meet an assignment's format or requirements, I will return them without grades.
8. I will return in-class work or exercises within two class periods; I will return graded reports no later than two weeks after submission.

Attendance Policy:

- Attendance is taken daily. Because students earn extra grades for class application and participation, attendance will affect an overall grade average. Consistent class attendance is necessary to complete this course successfully; more than three hours of absence puts a student's grade at risk.

- Schoolcraft College announces closings on local radio and TV broadcasts.
- Students are responsible for completing assignments given during missed classes.

Support Services:

1. The Learning Assistance Center may have tutors for this course. The LAC is located in the McDowell Center — Room 210. The direct number is 734-462-4436. Plagiarism of writing assignments or dishonesty on homework or exams will result in a grade of zero.
2. The general (open) computer lab for student use is located in MC 100 (lower level of the McDowell Center). This lab is available for students to complete homework assignments and is open daily and on weekends. The lab hours are posted in MC-1QO.
3. Lab technicians are available in MC-100 to help students with hardware or system problems in the labs, but they will not be able to answer questions on software packages.
4. Food and drink are not allowed in any computer lab. Additional policies may be posted in MC-100.

Keys to Success:

- Maintain a positive attitude about learning and the class.
- Attend all class sessions and be punctual.
- Read the textbook and the handouts before and after classes-
Invest in learning and enjoy learning with others. Ask many questions.
Expect new skills to be difficult to apply, yet relish the challenge.
- Be proud of your daily professional growth. Have fun.

Evaluation Techniques

Course grades will be determined according to the following assignments and averages:

3 Unit Tests	15%
4 Writing Application Assignments	45%
Journal Assignments	10%
Class Application and Participation (CAP)	10%
Paragraph Exit Exam	10%
Multiple Choice Exit Exam (Final Exam)	10%

- **Unit Tests (15%)**

The three, forty-five minute Unit Tests will be short-answer, "work-on" tests similar in content and type to daily exercises. The unit tests, each worth 5% of the course grade, evaluate general course progress and prepare students for exit exams.

- ***Writing Application Assignments (45%)***

The emphasis of this course is writing, but grammar will also be reviewed. Consequently, three, two -paragraph-length applications, each worth 10% of the course grade, will help students apply composition and grammar skills in concert. The applications will also prepare students for the Paragraph Exit Exam. The last application assignment, worth 15%, will be essay-length and prepare students for ENG 101. For each application assignment, the student will submit a rough draft for feedback before the final draft is due. Rough drafts will earn CAP points; final drafts will earn grades.

- ***Journal Assignments (10%)***

From a list of twelve journal assignments, students will complete six. These assignments are designed to teach writing by writing and will be graded for completeness rather than "correctness." Students will be given three weeks to complete these assignments outside of class.

- ***Class Application and Participation (CAP) 10%***

Over the course of the semester, up to 100 points may be earned by each student on homework, pop quizzes, outline reviews, submitted rough drafts and other class activities. Missed point-checks may not be made up for any reason. Clearly, if a student is not present, he or she has not progressed through class participation. However, some opportunities for extra credit assignments will be provided so that students may bank some points against a possible sick day. At the end of the semester, each student will be given a CAP grade that corresponds to the points he or she has earned. For example, if a student has earned 76 points, the grade will be 2.7; if the student has earned 95 points, the grade will be 4.0.

Exit Exams (2 Sections) (20%)

The Paragraph Exit Exam (10%) is a one-hour writing test given to all ENG 55 sections and graded by two readers. From a list of about ten ideas, each student will select one, write an appropriate topic sentence, and develop a unified paragraph to support this topic. Unless facilities are not available on the test day, students will be able to use a computer or write the paragraph by hand.

The Multiple Choice Exit Exam (10%) given during the class scheduled **final exam** period, will only take one hour to complete even though the final exam period will be one hour and fifty minutes. The exam of fifty questions will contain questions on paragraph development, topic sentences, topic focus, transitions, wordiness, and subject/verb and pronoun agreement.

Grading Scale:

As explained in the Schoolcraft College catalog, grade points alone – **not letter grades**–are used to evaluate assignments. At the end of the semester, assignment grades will be added together, according to their percentage weights, and averaged.

Important Dates:

Spring Break

March 2-8, 2002

Last Day to Withdraw:

March 22, 2002

Final Exam Window:

Tuesday, April 30

10:00-11:50 a.m. LA 310

(See Course Calendar for weekly schedule)

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