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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of past life experiences and current life biography on the learning of adult students in the undergraduate classroom. A total of 90 undergraduates at least 30 years old who had completed at least 15 hours of academic course work at community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and public universities participated. They completed semi-structured interviews on their own sense of meaning and actions as learners, as undergraduates, and as adults who maintained work, family, and community role involvements. Five belief structures of engagement in learning were delineated in the study. The "entry voice" belief structure reflected students who believed they could not judge or make initial personal sense of classroom knowledge, while the "outside voice" structure reflected students who brought a strong set of beliefs to college, anchored within their real world of work and family. The "critical voice" reflected students who entered college from a private cynical involvement to obtain a credential, while students with a "straddling voice" structure placed their beliefs and actions as intersecting and connecting both academic and adult world knowledge. Students with an "inclusion voice" belief structure actively sought immersion into the academic world and academic knowledge. (Contains 19 references.) (MDM)

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## Adult Meaning Making in the Undergraduate Classroom

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### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Many theorists of adult learning have suggested that a learner's past and current life experiences directly influences the level of engagement and understanding in the learning process, as well as the long-term retention of learning (Cross, 1981; Jarvis, 1987; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1990). However, there are few substantive studies which have examined and validated these assumptions of adult learning and, in particular, adult learning within formal classroom environments (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Merriam & Caffarella, 1990). Do past life experiences and current life biography influence adult learning in an undergraduate classroom experience?

### BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This paper reflects a portion of a larger study conducted 1992 through 1994. The original study was framed in a naturalistic inquiry process. It sought to illuminate the adult undergraduates' sense of understanding and meaning of their experience in the undergraduate learning context.

As stated by Patton, qualitative research is utilized:

To understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself...to understand the nature of that setting--what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting--and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting...The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (Patton, 1985, p.1)

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Thus the study was not framed in the belief that a single reality exists for all adult undergraduates or for all collegiate undergraduate institutions. Rather, it was assumed that there were multiple realities of the adult learner and of institutional environments which serve adult undergraduates. These realities were constructed in an interactive and dynamic fashion. Clearly, these realities were context-bound; they reflected the particularized experiences, perceptions and interactions of a person in an environment. Further, these realities were time-bound. Thus, this study presented the here and now of individuals and their life context at the time of the research study.

Two geographic locations, each encompassing three different postsecondary institutions in close proximity, were selected for the research. These three types of institutions from each geographic site included: a private liberal arts college with an adult degree program, a public community college, and a public university. One of the geographic locations was an urban center city of approximately 400,000 population, while the other site was a more rural-oriented city of approximately 200,000 population. Each institution of the six represented unique differences of size, institutional history, commitment to adult students, and organizational structure in comparison with the other collegiate institutions.

Interviewees were initially identified through a purposeful sampling strategy. The initial defining characteristics for the sampling pool were adult students who a) were currently enrolled as undergraduates, b) were at least 30 years of age, c) were in good academic standing according to their institution's criteria, d) were currently enrolled in a baccalaureate degree program or had selected an academic major in a college transfer program at the community college, and e) had completed at least 15 hours of academic course work beyond any developmental studies requirements. Initial selection from the pool for contact requests were made through a balanced representation according to gender; age, ethnicity/race; varied hours of enrollment (part-time to full-time); varied levels of academic status (freshman, sophomore, junior or senior) in relation to the nature of the institution or program; and varied academic majors. In addition, the interviewee's home address in relation to the site location was considered, since possible differences in access might be due to commuting distance between home and collegiate setting. In the case of the two community colleges, the study only considered those individuals who had already completed

all developmental studies course work and were participating in college-level academic courses. The final representative sample included 90 adult undergraduates including: Public Community College - College Transfer Programs, Total of 29 lower-division students; Private Liberal Arts College, Adult Degree Program, Total of 38 upper-division students; Public University - Total of 23 lower and upper-division students. [For additional details regarding the sample, design and implementation of the study, refer to Kasworm and Blowers, 1994].

Each participant was initially contacted by letter describing the project and noting that they would be contacted by phone regarding their interest in participation. Upon telephone contact, the individual reported their desire and ability to participate in the session and, if available, an appointment time was made. Interviews were held on the college site. Each participant was again advised of the nature of the study, confidentiality of the data and its future use in reports and publications, and the coding of participants to protect anonymity.

The interviews in this naturalistic inquiry were considered individual case studies, highly rich narratives of the adults' own sense of meaning and actions as learners, as undergraduate students, and as adults who maintained work, family, and community role involvements. A semi-structured interview format was used, with each interview held on the adult student's respective campus and typically lasting about 1 ½ to 2 hours in length.

Analysis of the data was grounded in inductive thematizing and categorizing of narrative data. Inductive analysis was conducted in three stages, beginning with the individual adult student as a case. The second stage involved cross-comparisons by setting to identify themes and categories for that institutional setting. The final stage of analysis involved inductive analysis across categories of institutions. Each case study interview provided both descriptive and analytic categories of adult student actions, beliefs, experiences, and judgements.

The original study was guided by three research questions:

- 1) **How do adults describe their learning engagements in the classroom and its relationship to their broader life involvements?**
- 2) **What is the adult undergraduate experience in relation to the context of family, work, and community roles and responsibilities?**
- 3) **How do adults describe their perceptions of involvement in a public community college, public university, or private liberal arts adult degree program environment?**

This current paper will discuss one frame of meaning structures from the first guiding question in the research study--"How do adults describe their learning engagements in the classroom and its relationship to their broader life involvements?" Divided into two parts, this paper in the first part will present a macro perspective of adult learners' engagement in the classroom learning process and their framing of their beliefs about the undergraduate learning. The second part will speak to the current topic of the nature of meaning-making for these adult learners as they negotiated their life-worlds in relation to the world of classroom and expert knowledge structure learning. Five beliefs structures of engagement in learning will be presented, each representing a "knowledge voice".

### ADULT LEARNERS AS UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

#### Context framework of understanding

Adult undergraduate students in this study believed the *classroom was the main stage* for the creation and negotiation of meanings for learning, for being a student, and for defining the collegiate experience and its impact. This dominance of the classroom experience for adult undergraduates also defined the "shared culture" of the college for these adults. In particular, the faculty instructor and the particularistic class ethos was central to their understandings of being an adult undergraduate and of the undergraduate experiences. Unlike current literature on young undergraduates, these adults did not experience the dominant importance of peer group or of the broader collegiate campus experience as defining influencers on their experience as undergraduate learners. Dependent upon context and the specific educational experiences of the learners, there were variations of beliefs and meanings by adults regarding the goals and process for learning,

for preferred teaching and classroom interactions, and for gaining and retaining knowledge.

This classroom culture of place and time for adults was more than a stylized ritual of a classroom experience, more than an expert instructing novice learners in disciplinary knowledge. For these adults, this place and time created unique personal meanings of self in relation to the collegiate learning. In addition, many of these adults saw their learning beyond the classroom walls and collegiate environment. When the learners were categorized into various levels or stages of post-formal intellectual and self development, these varied learners each made meaning of the importance or unimportance of life experiences and life roles to the learning experience of the undergraduate classroom. The potential connectedness to their adult world was stimulated sometimes by the structure of the degree program [curriculum targeted to adult learners], by faculty who encouraged active learning, incorporated active discussions and by formal and informal groupings of students who were project groupings or study/learning groupings. In addition, there were many adult learners in this study who created and acted upon meaningful learning through their reflections and life actions in their adult roles, through reappraisal of their past biography, and through their sense of humanity connected with the social and spiritual world. Because they were embedded in adult roles and actions, they actively made meanings of their collegiate learning experiences and learning through student, work, family, and community citizen roles.

As suggested by Vygotsky's activity theory (1978), as well as related theories of social constructivism, adult students viewed their learning role from life-world actions. In this theoretical foundation, life activities were suggested to be influenced by adult choice and judgement based in constructed personal meaning. Thus, these adult students defined and acted upon learning within the classroom transaction from their life-world context, from their interactions with adult roles and relationships in the student role, and from continuous reflection upon life meanings as they engaged in undergraduate education (Kasworm, 1990b). Adult undergraduate learning was initially framed by the classroom or collegiate experience; however, adult students usually interpreted and acted on significant learning experiences from their entire social system. As noted in a review of adult undergraduate student research, "adult students are examples of centrifugal growth, of

academic growth towards outward roles and experiences" (Kasworm, 1990, p.366). These adult learners made meaning of the undergraduate experience as they concurrently engaged in student, work, family, and community adult roles. Their development of understanding came through this interactive process. Although adults were physically "taught" in a classroom by a faculty member on a collegiate campus, significant collegiate learning interdependently occurred between the classroom interaction and the adult student's community of student, work, family, and societal life.

**Focus upon classroom learning and student conceptions of knowledge**

As students shared their journey of collegiate learning, it became evident that there were two broad levels of frames of focus for adult learners in undergraduate collegiate environments. Drawing on the work of Rogoff and Lave (1984) and the more recent work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on everyday and situated cognition and learning, most adult students experienced an "apprenticeship" in the student role and upon success in meeting that "apprenticeship", they then moved on into a more in-depth approach to learning and to intersubjective meaning-making between their adult roles and classroom learning.

**Apprenticeship in student role.** At this first level of actions, the adult student constructed a world of learning by the rituals and routines of the classroom lectures, note-taking, papers, examinations, and grades. These learners, because they had usually been outside of the collegiate setting for a period of time, focused their attention and meaning making to becoming the good and successful student. Thus, they shared their understanding and their pride of expertise of this student role based in the language of the instructional culture. However, beyond their abilities to successfully model and conduct the student role, these adults were aware that they were different and other in the collegiate classroom. Their place within the classroom, their personal identity and their sense of being valued reflected cultural artifacts [as defined through Vygotsky], socially negotiated beliefs and acts of meaning within the classroom transaction. For example, many of the adults spoke to the nature of a "comfort zone" established by the faculty member as an implicit and often nonverbal set of actions towards the specific adult student and the sense of connectedness in the classroom through in-class group interactions and knowledge of individual student names. Many adults held a belief that sitting close to the front of the

class established commitment and relationship to the instructor, that it communicated that they cared about the class, the learning, and the instructor. Lastly, these adults often noted highly ritualistic actions which were believed to maximize learning recall and provide them the retention of information for class assignments and tests.

In this first level of learning to be successful as a student, those individuals who were new to the particular collegiate environment or had a significant break from prior collegiate learning initially worked very hard to be successful as students. These students suggested limited awareness and understanding related to in-depth learning of the course content. For these students, their level of learning was personal and political. Their sense of identity and competence was on being judged by the "experts" in the academy. They felt a definitive sense of power between themselves and their judging environment in which the "rules" were not necessarily known and in which they were unsure due to age, break in schooling, or past experiences of potential failure in school and for themselves. Many adult learners suggested experiencing their first "filter" of meaning as they entered a new collegiate environment - whether they were transfer students, re-entry students, or first time students. These individuals were highly focused and actively creating and socially negotiating meaning regarding their future success as a student within the context of the class. They were creating implicit accepting relationships with faculty and students, and demonstrating their ability to succeed through positive grades and feedback from the instructor. These students shared highly personal and ingenious ways of keen observations, probing questions, and comparative monitoring of their actions with others to figure out if they were succeeding. Many identified the "smart members of the class" and would sit next to them or would sit in front where they believed many of the smarter folks in the class sat. This first level of meaning-making did draw upon past experiences, or the lack thereof, and was often based in relation to experiences which would be analogous to the current student role. Many spoke to the notion of a "work ethic" as a driving meaning for them to be successful and effective.

**Constructing a learning world.** Many of these adult students also spoke to operating at a second level --constructing a world of learning and of knowledge construction within the classroom. These individuals had moved beyond the apprenticeship in the



student role. They now opened up their minds to knowledge, skills, and beliefs which transected their life biography and course content. These individuals spoke to socially negotiated actions of connection or potential utility of the learning experience to the adult life context beyond the collegiate classroom, as well as the potency and saliency of their life experiences to understand and making meaning of the classroom content. This second level had many variations in its nature of construction and direction, as will be seen in the following analysis of the five belief structures of engagement of learning.

As students engaged in making meaning of the undergraduate class experiences, of academic content, and themselves as tools of learning and action, students spoke to the concepts of surface and deep approaches to learning. At this second level, adult learners made subtle and complex metacognitive decisions about the approach to learning. These decisions were clearly influenced by their life biography and their motivation in the learning process, as well as by the acts of the faculty member, the text, and the structure of the class. In gaining further understanding of these actions, work by Marton and his colleagues at the University of Göteborg shed light on these action (Marton, 1981). They examined how in the teaching process, students held various conceptions which differed from the author of the textbook or from the teacher who was trying to make the students acquire or construct a particular understanding or semantic rote recall. From this initial work, Marton and his colleagues examined the conceptions of learning held by the student and the approaches to learning adopted in carrying out academic tasks. Interviews with adults established that they viewed learning in quite different ways (Marton & Saljo, 1979; Saljo, 1979). Further work has suggested that there was a major distinction between whether learning was viewed as the reproduction of knowledge presented, or the transformation of information for one's own understanding.

TABLE 1. DEFINING FEATURES OF APPROACHES TO LEARNING

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**DEEP APPROACH**

- A. **Intention to understand for oneself**  
**Interacting vigorously and critically with the content**
- B. **Relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience**  
**Integrating components through organising principles**
- C. **Relating evidence to conclusions**  
**Examining the logic of the argument**

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**SURFACE APPROACH**

- D. **Intention simply to reproduce parts of the content**  
**Accepting ideas and information passively**
  - E. **Concentrating only on assessment requirements**  
**Not reflecting on purpose or strategies**
  - F. **Memorising facts and procedures**  
**Failing to distinguish guiding principles or patterns**
- 

(Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983, Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991)

At this second level of construction of meaning, adult learners were active decision-makers regarding what materials should be learned at a surface approach and what materials and ideas should be learned in an in-depth approach. However, in these discussions, many adult learners linked their actions often to the nature and type of knowledge for the classroom and for their adult life worlds. Those adults who were at this second level of construction of meaning often conceived of their learning through "code word descriptors" of the nature and type of knowledge for the classroom and for their other life worlds. These adult students spoke to their making judgements and juggling decisions and actions with these with different types of knowledge and knowing. They often spoke to either creating separate mental compartments or defining and judging their learning actions in either of two different way of learning. Some adult students differentiated between **academic learning** --learning in the classroom which included theory and memorization--and **real world learning**--learning which was directly part of the adult's daily actions in the world. Other students spoke to similar dichotomies between theory versus practical information, or between life experience learning and

decontextualized facts, terms, and concepts. Adult workers seemed to express these dichotomies the most vividly. These adults came into the collegiate environment embedded within their particular work practice and actions. In their efforts to make sense and meaning of the course work and assignments relative to their real world involvement, students articulated this deeply felt difference between "academic learning" and "real learning." As stated by one student, " For myself personally [I try] to see if I'm really learning it for knowledge or just learning it for the class. You know how sometimes you can learn something and you just memorize it for the time..."

This conception of types of knowledge and learning domains has been formally described by a number of theorists, including Sternberg and Wagner (1986), Scribner (1986) and Lave & Wenger (1991). In their writings, these researchers have drawn upon the constructs of practical intelligence, practical thinking, tacit knowledge, situated learning and situated cognition versus formal cognition, academic knowledge or theoretical thinking. For example, Lave and Wenger discuss the nature of learning embedded in real-world situated activity:

---The situatedness of activity appeared to be anything but a simple empirical attribute of everyday activity or a corrective to conventional pessimism about informal, experience-based learning. Instead, it took on the proportions of a general theoretical perspective, the basis of claims about the relational character of knowledge and learning, about the negotiated character of meaning, and about the concerned (engaged, dilemma-drive) nature of learning activity for the people involved. That perspective meant that there is no activity that is not situated. It implied emphasis on comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than "receiving" a body of factual knowledge about the world; on activity in and with the world; and on the view that agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other. (p.33)

These adults truly experienced the differences between situated learning and received learning in a classroom. These adults believed that situated learning was a different way of knowing and learning from that of propositional knowledge or constitutive knowledge structures, which was the focus of most academic knowledge and instruction. Adult students, who articulated these types of knowledge and their active efforts to make sense of their place in the classroom and their place in the world, brought a very dynamic form of situated learning into the classroom. They struggled to make meaning through these

potentially perceived dichotomies of academic and real world learning. They also made judgements about the nature of academic knowledge, its utility and value, and relevancy to their lives. These adults often utilized real world contexts to create understandings and actions of scaffolding between the theoretical world of knowledge in the classroom and the practical world of knowledge in adult life. Thus, these adults often suggested making meanings embedded within their adult world and socially renegotiating those meanings as they explored classroom learning, the faculty member's ideas, and the text. As noted by Eraut, "ideas become clarified and personalized during use; and have only limited meaning prior to use. The context of use affects the way an idea is understood" (Eraut, 1985, p.117). For these adults, the "context" of their lives and its relationships to their learning, influenced how and what they learned and the meaning assigned to it.

### **ADULT BELIEF STRUCTURES OF ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING**

How did adults construct and made meaning of undergraduate classroom learning? Five belief structures of engagement in learning were delineated in this study. These belief structures represented "knowledge voices," which defined the individual's belief structure for making of meaning in undergraduate classroom learning, of the nature of knowledge and its value, of beliefs of socio-political power between faculty, students, and knowledge in the learning transaction, and of socially negotiated understandings/actions upon that knowledge between the world of undergraduate classroom and their adult life worlds. These belief systems reflect an anchored meaning orientation in relation to these two knowledge worlds: the "academic world knowledge structures" and the "adult life world knowledge".

#### **Entry Voice**

The *Entry Voice* belief structure reflected adult students who believed they could not judge nor was able to make initial personal sense of classroom knowledge. Rather, the adult learner viewed the collegiate classroom learning transactions as a new and confusing culture of actions, words, and evaluative systems. Adult learners in this group were newly entering students into a collegiate system often labeled as freshmen, transfers, or reentry students. This group also reflected adult learners who entered into course with content areas which were also unknown and emotionally charged for these students, such as foreign

language or calculus.

In this belief structure, some students assumed a cognitive apprenticeship model. However, if students had mastered the basics of the student role, they often found themselves reverting to ritualistic actions, as well as searching for strategies to make sense and meaning. They found that the acts of being a good student did not necessarily create sufficient understanding and retention to make good grades. These adult students assumed that they must memorize and be able to replicate the exact expert knowledge of the course discipline. However, within the substantive knowledge learning process, these adults often could not readily make meaning connected with their life biography. They assumed that academic knowledge was different from real world knowledge; that these two knowledge categories represented two different worlds with fundamentally different ways of knowing and understanding. Thus, many of these students suggested they act on memorization with isolated and detached symbols and statements of definition without anchors to their own personal meaning structures.

In this voice, adult students suggested that collegiate expert knowledge structures, language, and inquiry were not part of their current life worlds. They spoke to entering a new culture and were attempting to become socialized into these new rituals, language, ways of thinking, and making meaning. However, the culture of the classroom rarely surfaced the explicit understanding of learning and understanding. Thus, the adult student presumed it was his or her responsibility to work hard and through those efforts, he/she would come to know and understand this new culture, its language, and its acceptable behaviors. In particular, these adult students expend significant efforts in analyzing fellow students and instructors to determine how to make sense and meaning.

These students perceived faculty as all knowing. Thus, the socio-political power of the classroom solely rested in the hands and the actions of the faculty member. These students expressed frustration at faculty who were unhelpful in creating meaning and sense of the classroom knowledge for the student. And they keenly recognized that the faculty instructor would be the one to dictate what knowledge should be known and assessed for students. Students in this belief structure did not believe that their previous knowledge and life worlds had any meaningful relationships to the class content. They placed

significant importance upon class organization, lectures which were clear and definitive and explanations of future assessments and evaluations.

Within this belief structure, these individuals often viewed knowledge as a hierarchy of steps moving from the simple to the complex of academic knowledge structures. They initially saw themselves as outside of this culture of academic knowledge making meaning. Many suggested that they must come to know and understand a new set of knowledge and truths and a new language and skills before they could truly operate in this academic environment. Thus, they perceived themselves on the outside and as a marginal participant. They realized that college studies were different and used different kind of knowledge from their own background.

In this new culture, some of these students [community colleges and in one adult degree program] expected faculty to aid the learner by determining the current level of knowledge and understanding of the student. Armed with these insights, the faculty instructor would create clear, specific, and easily-learned (memorized and recalled) knowledge which was at the level of the student's current knowledge base. These students suggested a belief in "levels of understanding and learning." Further, they believed that effective instructors should use more common, public forms of language and skills to initially engage these adult students in effective learning experiences. Use of special terms, concepts, and skills were viewed as demands of advanced academic knowledge. A community college student noted, "But the teacher would need to not only know the subject material well, but be able to bring it down from the egghead Ph.D. level, all the way down to the common, to the base." Another community college student noted, "So I went from there [not knowing mathematical fractions], to where I am now. It's a bit of a step. It's like climbing the Eiffel Tower or something. It's just so slow coming...from there all the way up to here.. I'm almost to the top. I feel good about myself now."

Beyond the faculty expertise in presenting and reinforcing the new structures of classroom knowledge, these students in community college and in the customized adult degree program also desired and valued faculty who would socialize them into appropriate student study roles. "I think the instructors whatever they recommend, I try to follow their recommended procedures. I mean, I feel that they're the experts on the subject and they're

going to advise me which way is best to learn the material (community college student)."

Within this belief structure of the *Entry Voice*, those students who were in university classrooms and in the other adult degree program of similar ethos to a university classroom did not voice expectations for faculty modification of instruction to their current level of understanding. These adults assumed that they entered into a very competitive academic environment and that they needed to come up to the standard if they wanted to get a university education. Thus, these beliefs of deficiency of knowledge and skills was viewed as a hurdle to overcome, while they engaged in their university college courses. Those adults in universities who noted this belief structure also suggested various self-assessments and learning actions which would bring their knowledge and skill level up to the level of the course. In this group, they assumed that they were deficient and that it was their responsibility to modify their knowledge and skill background. Their frustrations were in finding appropriate resources and ways to assess their knowledge. They did value academic advisers who alerted them to these issues and suggested possible background work to get them up to the speed of the classes. They also noted several faculty who would identify their weaknesses and suggest remediation activities.

These students in the university and in one of the adult degree programs faced a greater challenge because they perceived that they were the key actors to either make it in this new culture and figure out how to become good students and make good grades, or to fail and be rejected by the academic culture. They did not believe that the faculty member could or should make the class different for their limited understandings. In essence, if they were "good enough" to make it in the university--they needed to change themselves to conform to this new culture, to be able to memorize and recall the language, concepts, and ideas in these disciplines, and be able to gain good grades through tests and papers.

In this belief structure of the *entry voice*, these students looked at the learning of academic knowledge as necessary and important. However, they did not necessarily view it as meaningful and connected to their own adult life world. Rather, they suggested that they were engaged in these courses, usually lower division courses, because they were foundational. They viewed their current learning experiences as preparation for later

courses which would be more relevant, helpful, and meaningful. Most suspended any judgement against these lower-division courses, because they believed that the faculty were experts on what they needed to know and that these experts had carefully identified their curriculum which included their current lower-division courses. In essence, they assumed they were building a foundation, similar to a foundation of a house. This foundation was necessary, but it wouldn't make any sense until the later stages of construction, when the later courses which were meaningful and connected to adult lives and actions were taught.

### Outside Voice

Students who represented the belief structure of the *Outside Voice* brought a strong set of beliefs and actions which anchored them within their real world of work, family, and life. They viewed college as often a necessary involvement for their future; however, college was characterized as a culturally unique place, with only fragmentary connection to the world of adult life and work. These individuals believed that academic knowledge was valuable, as long as it was anchored in their own worlds and reflected their perspectives of life and lived experience. Thus, these individuals selectively made meaning of classroom knowledge. Those areas of knowledge they would learn for retention beyond the test or the quiz [short-term memory] focused upon: 1) reinforcement of their current knowledge, 2) further illumination of past personal knowledge, and 3) validation of their knowledge expertise.

These students learned on two different levels based in their perceived conception of the value of the classroom knowledge and its applicable to their current life roles. These more judgmental students recognized the academic game of memorizing and acting in short-term recall to make good grades for this academic environment. They spoke to highly selective actions and sets of judgements related to long-term retention and learning. These judgements were often based in their beliefs of their own current value and expertise in their practical worlds of actions. They recognized that the credential was necessary and that they needed to participate and exit this process of the undergraduate degree structure; however, they saw much of the classroom as a distant and detached knowledge often unconnected to the real world. They also saw themselves as more expert and knowledgeable than did the academic world of course accrual and fulfillment of designated



academic curricula. This particular group of people often questioned the logic of institutions who did not use assessment for equivalent life experiences for academic credit--because they knew that they were more knowledgeable than the current academic system transcript. Within this group was also a number of individuals who had been attracted to a unique customized adult degree program oriented to the working practitioner. This upper-level degree program was designated as an applied organizational management degree, featuring an accelerated curriculum conducted in a 18-month lock step sequence of one course every 5-6 weeks. Students were instructed in 12-15 person cohorts, with each cohort experiencing course work directed by rotating practitioner instructors. Each class had a weekly one-night, 4-hour class meeting incorporating project reports, with a required small study group meeting for an additional four hours each week. This program featured portfolio assessment of academically equivalent life experiences and a senior's research project, based in their work setting responsibilities. As noted by one of these students:

Here everybody feels like they are on the same level. I especially like the facilitators [instructors] of the classes, because they are quite often from the type of work--they do the type of work they teach. So they not only have the textbook experience, but they have the everyday experience that they can offer. And they can relate to you.

Students in the university setting suggested their meaning making coming from their practical knowledge world in relation to their academic knowledge classroom.

I tend to take everything with a grain of salt because I know what we're learning in school is book learning. It's not practical application outside the classroom. Some of the instructors tend to forget that. And the young students take it verbatim.

A student in a university technology program who was currently an electrician spoke to this process:

And having to make calculations, it was almost like second nature just like right into play, that was my experience. I didn't have to think about it. "Oh you mean this is called solving for a variable. I've been doing that all my life." and I didn't know that's what it was called. And yes, maybe I do achieve better now than I did when I was a child because of my work experiences.

These anchored world experiences could also hinder learning of academic knowledge, as noted by this one adult degree program student.

It's so hard after you've worked many hours, to be able to sit down and concentrate on something like accounting, especially when you do it all day. And your book has the unreal situations--when you've done real live situations all day. You think, "This is garbage. How do you they [text authors] get a hold of this unreal material?"

Another student at the university articulates his decision-making related to his sense of knowledge dissonance between real world and academic world ideas and understandings in a classroom discussion.

I have to decide how valuable my information is, or how my information will be accepted. In some classes, I'm really able to do that; in other classes I can sit back and say, It's really not a good idea in this class....It's better for me not to have an opinion about anything and just let everybody else rise to the occasion.

The role of the faculty member for these students can be significant. Several of these students viewed faculty as neutral or suspect because they are typically anchored in the academic world. Those faculty who also could speak from the real world experience and particular work-related experiences were assumed to be more knowledgeable. Several of these students noted that faculty members who came to know these students and their work lives could draw out information from the class and bring a connectedness from the student's world in relation to the knowledge. Faculty who provided flexibility for classroom knowledge applications to their work life also provided connectedness. But it was the faculty member who had to be the key catalyst for these students in making the connections. These students also spoke to the socio-political transaction of the classroom and recognized that they were different from the traditional, young undergraduate. Thus, they saw themselves as apart from the faculty member, the young students without world experiences, many aspects of the academic knowledge within the classroom, and clearly the assessment system. They continually faced meaning discrepancies between their knowledge of the real world and the knowledge presented in the academic knowledge world. And the stronger the discrepancies, the more likely they would consider voicing these issues. However, they were also mindful of the public forum of respect for the faculty member and of the valuing of academic knowledge. Many of these students would not voice their beliefs of discrepancies, because they believed it would be challenging the professor.

There was a subgroup of faculty identified as supportive of these individuals. These students valued these professors because they would allow for varied points of view and thus would create a discussion medium where the student could voice these critical discrepancies. These student of the *outside voice* valued being able to let the professors and other students know what they believed and how they saw the world. These individuals particularly valued faculty who would examine the student's alternative beliefs and opinions along side those of the text and the class. However, they also realized that they needed to probably learn the dictated knowledge structures of the course, because those were the implicit rules of the game in the classroom.

Within this belief structure, there was another group of adult students who were in lower level jobs and who looked to college as a way to improve their lives and to get a better job. Their functional outlook was also the screen for engagement in the classroom learning experience. In this belief structure, these folks looked to upper-division classes to help them directly in their lives. Sometimes, they found they could delineate specific knowledge which could be transported into the real world. However, many of these folks were frustrated because most of their college experiences did not have that direct application focus. Situated from a work role, an adult degree student noted:

This accounting class that we just finished up recently, I was able to take it back and apply practically everything that I learned to my job...And after I finished that class, I said [to the boss], "I think I'm ready to give that [the departmental budget] a look." He handed it over to me and I never gave it back. And I was able to handle it on my own from there on.

For this student, the academic experience had finally proven itself to be value and meaningful in his world of work.

Thus, in supporting this *outside voice*, there were students who found classrooms and faculty who shared directly transferable knowledge and skills into the work practice. Or more often, these students found faculty and classrooms who were sufficiently flexible to open up the learning transactions for exploring academic knowledge in relation to real world knowledge and action of the learner.

In this group were also another group of students who did not find class experiences and faculty who provided this support and recognition of their life experiences, nor provided

helpful interaction with their personal models of reality based in an adult world. They were more judgmental regarding this culture of academic knowledge. They often bordered on the edge of movement towards the next voice, that of the Critical Voice-- negating the value of the academic knowledge environment for their real world experiences and their lives of meaning. It was evident that the *outside voice* belief structure held many tensions and paradoxes. In particular, these individuals had significant ego and identity invested in their expertise and competence in the real world roles, and after in the belief that knowledge was a tool for them to have competence in the world of work.

### Critical Voice

Adult learners in the Critical Voice suggested that they entered the collegiate environment from a private cynical involvement. These learners attended college to get a credential as a "societal ticket" to access preferred jobs, as necessary validation of expertise for job promotion or job security, or to resolve social pressures in either work or family settings for a college degree. They viewed the classroom as a place of incompetent and unknowing faculty and for duped or naive students. Thus, academic learning was judged to be a faculty-student game. In this game, they were sideliners forced to participate, yet only through external compliance. They believed that valuable knowledge came from "real world experiences and action." These students rarely attempted to make meaning of the classroom learning environment. On these rare occasions of in-class meaning making, it came from a direct intervention and helpful assistance from a faculty member who aided the student to locate relevant knowledge which met their real world needs and demands and was somewhat connected to the academic world of the classroom.

Many of the *critical voice* adult students expressed issues with their earlier and current schooling experiences. Part of this group had experienced poor grades or had flunked out in their earlier years. Some were currently experiencing problematic involvements with classes. Some were receiving lower grades than they desired and often in conflict with their perceived qualifications and competence in the real world. They saw the academic environment, somewhat like Alice in Wonderland--sometimes nonsensical and often with Cheshire Cats and Dodo Birds. They saw many oddities and silliness which frankly didn't make sense or meaning for their daily worlds of work and life.

These students reflected an earlier pattern in my research identified as the "withdrawal pattern" identified in an exploration of self-directed action within the traditional undergraduate classroom environment (Kasworm, 1991). The students in this pattern were outwardly conforming to the external boundaries and expectations of the formal classroom. However, these adult undergraduate could not express any intrinsic engagement in the classroom process, in the knowledge interactions, and in their goals for their undergraduate work. These students were focused upon getting "good" grades and passing the tests, while maintaining as much psychological distance as was feasible from the faculty and the classroom experience. These students were caught in a serious dilemma between their perceptions of personal competence and the judgement by their professors of their lesser abilities in the academic world. A key theme for these students was their significant feelings of incongruence and frustration due to receipt of lower grades (C,D,F) in courses. They could not visualize any other cause for their dilemma, other than assuming that the system was a crazy one, one that was stacked deck against them. Many of these students suggested an approach-avoidance belief system for their involvement in the undergraduate classroom. This perspective was most evident by examples of passive resistance to the classroom experience. These students did not openly vocalize their resistance to the faculty, but they did describe their involvement as non-responsive, noncommunicative, and passive. One learner spoke to purposefully identifying the seat closest to the door and laying claim to it--for a quick exit. For these learners, their sense of self and learner role was caught up in a more dominant arena of loss of esteem, of feelings of vulnerability, and of a lack of connection between themselves and this "academic judging environment." They believed there was a necessity for them to get the academic degree, but they totally disliked the academic culture and the tyranny of the grading structures. They spoke to ways to screen out much of the academic world and to minimally comply with those base requirements for sufficient grades. They acted in ways to shield themselves from the stupidity, incompetence, and tyrannical personalities and actions in the academic culture.

### **Straddling Voice**

Adult learners with a *Straddling Voice* belief structure placed their beliefs and

actions as intersecting and connecting both academic and adult world knowledge meaning structures. They viewed themselves as working across two knowledge structures and equally valuing those two worlds of knowing and doing. When they spoke of their classroom meaning-making, they saw connections and meanings between academic learning and adult world learning. They believed that each world informed the other through new understandings and perspectives, new language, and new skills and insights for acting in their here-and-now world of academic and adult life role actions. These adult students actively attempted to make applications and connections between these two worlds of collegiate learning and adult world living. They spoke of seeing new understandings or action of classroom learning into their family, work, and community lives. And they also utilized their knowledge and insights from their life roles within the classroom for elaboration and illumination of academic knowledge within the classroom.

These students viewed knowledge beyond the strict confines of academic languages and concepts. They made meaning of knowledge from a broader world-view. Thus, they viewed knowledge as not "contextualized" solely for the academic classroom or for the on-the-job practical action. They saw knowledge and their making of meaning to transcend physical and time boundaries. Thus, knowledge and understanding was now considered applicable and understood through different contexts and different knowledge transfer processes for application and illumination.

Often the adult students in a number of the other voice belief structures would question specific general education course requirements as not immediately relevant or helpful for adult undergraduate students. However, students with *straddling voices* were often able to articulate value in the broad curriculum. Here are two comments from community college students.

When I took the course [introductory biology], I was amazed every time I opened a newspaper and read things. I said, "Golly, it just goes right along with the course I'm taking. This is weird. This is strange." And then I noticed it with everything I did, and I thought you know, people don't even know what they don't know. Sad. Because you just read the paper and you never see the stuff because it doesn't mean anything to you.

I'm even going to plays now and things, and they're interesting. I've always loved comedy. And now comedians are even making jokes on levels--that if you haven't been to college it's totally over your head. You'll miss the true meaning of the joke. And a lot of these things I didn't realize, until after I'd had philosophy and sociology and anthropology.

Many adults suggested that they attempted to integrate these two kinds of knowledge together. Some individuals noted it in a very pragmatic way.

In most of the subjects I'll have a little bit of outside [life] knowledge and I try to incorporate the outside knowledge with the new [academic knowledge]...But one of the things I did lately was that I reached the point where the concepts were concepts that I had bits and pieces of knowledge from before [past academic knowledge]. And I was able to combine them with the new knowledge...It was a lot easier to retain.

Other students suggested integration of real world and academic knowledge as they aided their children, as they made sense of their work environment, or as they acted as adults in leadership roles in their community. These adults viewed themselves in a learning journey where both academic knowledge and real-world knowledge can interact with each other in meaning-making activities. Thus, faculty who provided active opportunities for discussion, small-group projects, and flexibility of paper topic [which could relate to their current work/life concerns] were able to bring these two "worlds of knowledge" into interaction.

These students suggested that there could be a different kind of socio-political relationship between themselves and faculty members. These individuals saw faculty in a quasi-peer relationship. They believed there could and often was a respect on both sides for each person's expertise and each person's meaning worlds. As noted by one individual:

A sense of respect, a sense of understanding the time contrast, an admiration. You're not necessarily treated as a contemporary. But it's an adult communicating with another adult, instead of an adult communicating with someone in their late teens or early twenties. And there's just a difference with the dialogue that develops from that [relationship].

### **Inclusion Voice**

These adult learners were a unique breed of individuals who actively sought immersion into the academic world and academic knowledge. They suggested that through their academic learning they had begun to see a new world-view perspective of their adult life knowledge. They actively spoke to building meaning bridges and creating an

integration of thought and action between their life world outside the academy and their academic world of knowledge and understanding. Further, this group uniquely spoke to creating and generating new knowledge from these connections of meaning and application. In essence, they acted upon their past and current knowledge and created new understandings and applications. They viewed faculty as helpful experts, as well as co-learners and partners with them in the lifelong learning enterprise.

This pattern reflected the Transformative Pattern from my earlier study of self-directed learning actions in the formal undergraduate classroom (Kasworm, 1991). This pattern was the most integrated and complex patterns in this study and reflected self-directed learners with broad, encompassing learning relationships across both the undergraduate classroom, as well as other life involvement and roles. The individuals in this pattern were uniquely oriented to world views concerning the nature of higher education and the undergraduate learning process. Each of these adults was involved in undergraduate work both at a functional level of courses, grades, and degree--just as other students in this study. However, these students spoke to a prominent, definitive perspective of their own internal value of learning, their involvement across their life work in learning, their commitment to undergraduate work as a broadening of values, perspectives, and beliefs. These individuals spoke eloquently to their own meta-cognitive actions of knowledge acquisition, understanding, redefining, and applying among their various life roles and learner actions. These learners characteristically described cognitive activity linked to the reframing of knowledge beyond the classroom setting and of constructing new connections, usage or understanding beyond the original content. These undergraduates were engaged in varied projects and experiences which transformed their learning between the classroom and other parts of their lives in a continuous cycle of action and reflection. In these actions, they spoke to transformation of knowledge and of themselves in these acts.

Most of these individuals saw themselves as possibly pursuing graduate course work and becoming faculty members themselves in higher education. They also exemplified beliefs and actions of self-directed lifelong learners. Their world of learning was not only created within their current actions of student and other adult life roles. Their world of learning was transformative and generative.



### Summary

These five belief structures of engagement in learning, these knowledge voices expressed in adult undergraduates, suggest new descriptive understandings of the nature of contextual and life biography meaning making as it influences adult learners' engagement in collegiate learning. These findings refute adult learning theories which suggest that adults' orientation to learning focus solely on pragmatic application needs and goals. Rather, these meaning constructions suggest a more complex interrelationship between an adult's life biography, beliefs about collegiate involvement, and the classroom learning process. Clearly, these voices lend credence to the theory of situated cognition and also demonstrate the more significant complexity of situated cognition in relation to beliefs regarding expert knowledge structures and intuitively known world knowledge structures. They also suggest new understandings of the potential influence of a leader's life experiences and biography as they engage in the learning process within a formal collegiate setting.

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