Mature Women Learners' Experiences

With Reflective Assignments

by

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Abstract

The use of reflective assignments is a relatively recent development in the academic environment, and supports a belief that an important goal of education is helping learners become more aware of themselves and of their own knowledge about what they are experiencing and learning. The purpose of this study was to explore how mature women learners experience and understand reflective assignments as a learning activity. The data gathered provide some understanding about the learning needs of mature women learners when completing reflective assignments, and serve as a base for making suggestions to reduce learner confusion and discomfort, and to increase learner awareness of personal learning.

Data were gathered from face-to-face in-depth interviews using open-ended questions and were analyzed using the constant comparative process described in grounded theory approaches to research. The data analysis identified a two-stage process in learning to complete reflective assignments, with a plateau or resting period between the two stages. The first stage requires the learner to make sense of what it means to write a reflective assignment. The second stage requires the learner to make sense of what it means to learn through writing a reflective assignment. Recommendations arising from the study are directed to instructors who facilitate the learning experiences of learners through assigning a reflective assignment as part of course requirements.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

1.0 Introduction

Reflective assignments are a relatively recent learning activity in the academic environment. This study was undertaken to explore how mature women learners experience and understand reflective assignments as a learning activity, and to generate knowledge from the data regarding learning and development through reflective learning activities. In this study the term *reflective assignment* refers to a course activity identified in the course syllabus or by the participant as a "reflective" paper or assignment. Reflective assignments are often based on such course activities as maintaining a journal, writing an autobiographical paper or assessing one's own learning. *Reflection* is understood as a process used to create meaning from experience. *Mature women learners* refers to women thirty years of age and older at the time of returning to formal higher education. *Higher education* refers to enrollment in a university program at the undergraduate or graduate levels.

1.1 Background

Within the literature on adult learning, a major focus is learning from one's own experiences within the family, workplace, community, and formal learning environment. Reflection, generally understood as taking time to think about and analyze an experience in order to make sense of it, is seen by most adult educators as an important part of the process of using experience to gain new learning. Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985)

indicate that reflection is the common denominator for turning experience into learning, making the best of a situation, and being able to transfer learning from one context to another context. MacKeracher states that "[r]eflection is a crucial key to learning" (1996, 247). Reflection is acknowledged as the difference between becoming skilled at a behaviour through repetition, and learning through reflecting on one's use of the skilled behaviour in practice. Repetition results in cognitive change alone; reflection in both cognitive and affective change (Boyd & Fales, 1983).

My interest in this topic resulted from my participation in a graduate program that frequently used reflective assignments; a learning and evaluation method that I had limited experience with before commencing graduate studies. Most of my undergraduate university courses expected me to use a reflective process in which my personal knowledge and experience was set aside in order to enable me to make an objective, non-biased analysis of new information. Entering the graduate program in adult education I encountered reflective assignments that expected me to use a reflective process that included my personal knowledge and experience in the learning process. Even though I was unsure of what the instructor expected from the assignment, I welcomed the opportunity to reflect on the new information rather than memorize the course content.

I understand myself to be a reflective person and I have been a sporadic journal keeper for more than twenty years. But until I began graduate studies I had not made a connection between reflection and learning. I understood learning as the outcome of a cognitive process that involved acquiring knowledge from a source outside myself. Reflection, on the other hand, was a private process of making sense of my personal, subjective world.

As an undergraduate student I frequently experienced a gap between information that was being presented, and my personal, subjective knowing about the situation. I wrote in my journal: "I know I am gaining information, but I don't feel as if I am learning." At the time, I did not understand what I meant when I made this statement. I now understand my comment as an intuitive awareness that learning was more than gathering information. Missing from my undergraduate experience was the opportunity to validate my personal experiences and knowing, and to integrate subjective knowledge with received knowledge. Most of my undergraduate course activities ignored my adult experiences as irrelevant to the course content that I was expected to learn. I understood that personal experience and knowledge were considered too subjective to have value in the academic world. The reflective assignments in my graduate program provided an opportunity to bridge the gap between information and learning, and to gain a conscious awareness of my learning and development in the program.

Although reflection ". . . is a process used spontaneously by many people" (Boyd & Fales, 1983, 114), my class experiences indicated that most learners had never thought consciously about the process of reflection until they were asked to complete a reflective assignment. It was apparent to me that not all learners welcomed the opportunity to complete reflective assignments, and that some of the learners experienced a significant amount of confusion and discomfort with the assignment. Learners had a sense that reflection involved attention to what they thought and felt about an experience that had occurred, and consequently, assumed that a reflective assignment required that they write from their personal point of view. But some learners

felt unsure as to how to connect their personal point of view with their academic experience and how to present any connections they were able to make. It was not unusual for students to inquire of the instructor whether they had permission to use the personal pronoun 'I' in the assignment. Even with reassurance from the instructor, some learners continued to voice their uncertainty about how to proceed with such an assignment. Some learners indicated they were not 'reflective' people; some expressed resistance to reflection that required attention to past experiences that were painful to recall; other learners found that once they started to write the reflective assignment, it practically *wrote itself*. The feelings expressed about completing reflective assignments indicate that the desire and capacity to reflect is different in different people (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985).

The traditional educational experience for most learners is a linear process that involves receiving new knowledge or skills through reading, note-taking, and memorizing. Most learners believe that educators possess important 'facts' and 'truths' that will be given to the learners. The learner's task is to acquire these 'facts' and 'truths' by listening, reading and being receptive. Activities, such as essays and examinations, require the learner to feed back the information she has retained in order for the instructor to measure the amount of learning that has occurred. Freire refers to this process as the banking concept of education in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (1995, 139). The aim of formal education may vary among institutions, programs of study, and instructors; however, academic learning environments tend to support content and skill learning using this traditional approach.

Schön refers to this traditional approach as technical rationality, and indicates that it "is an epistemology of practice derived from positivist philosophy" (1987, 3). Technical rationality supports the notion that problems are best solved by the application of intellectual knowledge to the specific situation, and ignores, as irrelevant, the context of the situation and the personal and practical knowledge of the problem solver. Over the past twenty to thirty years there has been an increasing acknowledgment of the importance of context and the necessity of supporting the development of reflective practices that contribute to the construction of reflective practitioners. Real world problems present themselves as "messy, indeterminate situations" rather than "well-formed structures" and it is important for learners to develop *reflection-on-action* skills in order to be able to deal with complexity in practice areas (Schon, 1987, 4). At St. Thomas University and the University of New Brunswick, programs such as nursing, social work, and adult education use reflective assignments to facilitate the learner's self-understanding, and presumably to bridge the gap between theory and practice and support the development of reflective practices: "Reflective practice is defined as the process of bringing past events to a conscious level and of determining appropriate ways to think, feel, and behave in the future" (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994, 38).

Kerka (1996) points out that reflective assignments can be disorienting for some learners for a number of reasons. First, learners may lack experience in knowing how to write reflectively, because it has not been part of their experience in the formal learning environment. Without directions and guidance from the facilitator, they may find it difficult to know what and how to write. Second, if the traditional power relationship between learners and teacher is maintained, learners may not be motivated to learn

reflectively, because they understand the expectation to be that they are to learn what the teacher wants them to learn.

Third, learners' anxiety about reflective assignments may be related to ". . . little sense of involvement in their own learning" (Main, 1985, 97). They understand themselves to be careful listeners to knowledge that is located in the authoritative *other*, but incapable of being an agent of learning for themselves (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Baxter-Magolda, 1992).

A fourth reason that learners may resist reflective activities is that ". . . they have little belief in its value for them" (Main, 1985, 97). One aim of higher education is to assist learners to develop the ability to see knowledge as contextual, and understand themselves as able to create new knowledge, but it often neglects the developmental process that helps learners achieve this ability. Traditional teaching methods support a "separate" style of knowing that involves "critical" thinking. In this style of knowing, in order for experience to yield knowledge, the mind must work to achieve order and meaning from the experience by standing outside the *self* and making sense of the situation separate from any personal feelings connected to the experience. An alternative style of knowing, "connected knowing," involves reflective activities that call for the learner to connect ideas and feelings, mind and body, in a process of *appreciative* thinking (Belenky et al, 1986; Carfagna, 1995). In most higher education institutions, using the whole self in the learning process is understood as being subjective and as lacking the status of critical thinking and separate knowing. Connected knowing and appreciative thinking receive less developmental support and validation because of their lower status in the academic world.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

Teaching techniques "... can be practiced in ways that, although academically sound, are not necessarily developmentally encouraging" (Taylor & Marienau,1995, 93). Because reflective assignments are used in academic programs such as nursing, social work, and adult education it is important to the field of education that instructors understand the manner in which learners use reflective assignments for their learning and development; and how reflective activities can be *developmentally encouraging*.

"The reflective process is a complex one in which both feelings and cognition are closely interrelated and interactive"(Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985, 11). Reflective assignments recognize personal experience and knowing as a necessary core component of adult learning, and provide learners the opportunity to integrate received knowledge with subjective knowledge. However, most other learning activities reject personal experience and knowing as too subjective to be academically sound. This study focused on how mature women learners in higher education experience and understand reflective assignments as a learning activity. Specific research questions were:

- What are the experiences of mature women learners with completing reflective assignments in the formal learning environment?
- How do mature women learners experience and understand their learning from completing reflective assignments?
- What factors enable the learning process? What factors create obstacles for the learning process?

Since women make up the majority of the students in nursing, social work and education, I interviewed women, rather than both women and men, enrolled in these

programs at St. Thomas University (STU) and the University of New Brunswick (UNB). My interest in understanding the experiences of mature women learners rather than younger women learners is connected to my own return to formal education as a mature learner. Little has been written, until relatively recently, about women's experiences in the world; even less has been written about the mature woman's experiences. The older the learner, the greater the amount of personal life experience she will bring to reflective assignments, and I wondered how she would integrate personal experience and knowledge with new experiences and received knowledge. My personal experience in classes with other learners led to understanding that a reflective assignment can be an unfamiliar learning strategy that creates obstacles to learning for some mature learners, while others welcome the opportunity for learning in a manner that feels very comfortable and natural for them.

I expected to find a relationship between the learner's understanding of reflection as a learning process and the extent to which she thought reflective assignments contributed and supported her growth and development. I also expected to find a relationship between a woman's personal perception of herself as a reflective person and the manner in which she experienced reflective assignments.

Data about reflective assignments were gathered from face-to-face in-depth interviews using open-ended questions. Ten women, who were at least thirty years of age and attending Saint Thomas University or the University of New Brunswick full-time in academic programs that use reflective assignments (e.g. nursing, social work, education), were invited to tell their stories about using reflective activities in their learning.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Reason and Marshall (1987) indicate that research contributes to knowledge in three ways: *for them, for us,* and *for me.* For "them", this study contributes to adult educators' understanding about the nature of learning and development from completing reflective assignments. David Boud indicates that ". . . learning is a complex process which is not fully understood" (1987, 233); and within that complex learning process, reflection is understood as an important component. It is known that it takes effort to receive new ideas, integrate them with what is known, and create meaning regarding what has occurred. The results of this study reflect the experiences and understanding of these particular women and cannot be generalized to other women or men. However, the results do contribute to our knowledge about some of the factors that both support and block effective learning with the use of reflective assignments.

For "us", this study contributes to the participants' personal understanding of their own reflective learning processes. Boyd and Fales's (1983) study, of people who self-identified as reflective, found that the action of reflecting on reflection provides an opportunity for study participants to become conscious of reflection as a process, and to use it more effectively for their own learning.

For "me", the study contributes to my personal understanding of reflective learning. Reason and Marshall (1987) suggest that researchers often choose research topics that allow them to gain a personal understanding of an old, limiting pattern. My personal experience with reflective assignments is relatively recent, and this project increased my understanding about resources that enable effective learning with reflective assignments.

1.4 Assumptions and Limitations

One assumption that informs this study is that most learners have never thought consciously about the reflective learning process until they are asked to complete a reflective assignment. The learning experiences that learners are most familiar with are assignments that are written from an objective point of view, putting self aside and focusing only on the received knowledge. Therefore, being asked to do a reflective assignment can be disorienting for some and freeing for others.

A second assumption that informs this study is that the epistemic tradition that supports learning by listening, note-taking and repeating the information that has been memorized does not support learning with reflective assignments. Reflective assignments require that the learner engage in a process of making sense of experience or of new information, rather than passively receiving the experience or information. The learning environment may have to change its assumptions about reality and the nature of knowledge in order to support effective learning with reflective assignments.

A third assumption that informs this study is that our society is oriented to the greater significance of the masculine in its language and knowledge. The historical position of women in a patriarchal society has been understood as *other* to the *normal* masculine perspective. As *other*, women have often been ignored, trivialized or declared deficient. Dorothy Smith points out that:

> . . . women have been largely excluded from the work of producing the forms of thought and the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and ordered . . [T]he socially organized production and transmission of ideas and images deprive women of access to the means to reflect on, formulate, and express their experiences and situation. (1991, 234)

Reflective assignments are frequently understood as *other* to more traditionally academic learning activities, and they are used as a learning activity in areas of study that have a majority of women learners. It is important therefore that reflection is understood from the perspective of women learners.

A fourth assumption is that reality is constructed by individuals in interaction with their social world and that subjective knowing is a valid source of knowledge (MacKeracher, 1996). This assumption about how reality is constructed demanded that I use a qualitative approach to this project (Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Deshlar & Hagan, 1989). A qualitative approach increases our understanding of how people make meaning of their situations, in this case completing reflective assignments.

The data are subjective in nature and as such it is possible that data from a different sample of women might produce different results. Nevertheless, although this study is delimited by gender and age, it is possible that some or all of the themes that emerge from the data may be true for some men and for younger or older women.

1.5 Summary

Reflective assignments shape a growing part of the strategies used to support learning in the formal educational system. The purpose of this study was to explore how mature women learners in higher education experience and understand reflective assignments as a learning activity. The research questions included:

- What are the experiences of mature women learners with completing reflective assignments in the formal learning environment?

- How do mature women learners experience and understand their learning from completing reflective assignments?
- What factors enable the learning process? What factors create obstacles for the learning process?

Data about completing reflective assignments were gathered during conversations with ten women enrolled full-time in nursing, social work, or adult education programs. The data provide some insights into the learning needs of mature women learners regarding reflective assignments.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Experience is one of the dominant themes discussed in the literature on adult learning and development, and reflection is the activity that supports using experience to gain new learning. The literature reveals at least two ways that reflection can be used to support effective learning. Some educators (Brookfield, 1995; Cranton, 1992; Kolb, 1993; Mezirow, 1985, 1997; Schön, 1987) construct learning as a linear process involving the use of the mind in critical reflection to transform experience into learning. I understand transformative learning to be a hierarchical process in which the experience, with its subjectivity and bias, is acted upon by critical thinking in order to transform the experience into learning that is ordered, rational and enlightened. More recently, Cranton (1998) indicates that, as well as analysis, imagination, affect, and impression can play an important part in the learning process. Other educators (Apps,1996; Belenky et al, 1986; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Clinchy & Zimmerman, 1985; MacKeracher, 1993, 1996) understand learning as a journey involving the whole person in a process of learning and development that is less linear and more cyclical. This process appears to use "appreciative", rather than critical thinking to understand experience using the mind, body, and feelings (Carfagna, 1995). The noticeable difference in these two attitudes to both learning and reflection leads me to understand the discourse on reflection as being situated within a culturally constructed and gendered dichotomy between cognition and affect. The use of such terms as *critical reflection* versus *self-reflection or reflection, doubting* versus *believing, critical thinking* versus *appreciative thinking*, and *rational*

versus *reflective* processes appears to be based on undeclared masculine and feminine attitudes or qualities with the first of each pair being seen as the more privileged, more valued and more masculine term. A person who approaches experience with a feminist attitude must learn to set that approach aside in an academic world which holds the masculinist, rational, critical approach in higher esteem. This chapter will discuss these two approaches to reflective activities under the headings of (1) transformative learning and critical reflection, and (2) appreciative learning and self-reflection.

2.1 Transformative Learning and Critical Reflection

Stephen Brookfield indicates that reflection ". . . has its roots in the Enlightenment idea that we can stand outside ourselves and come to a clearer understanding of what we are and who we are . . ." (1995, 214). This idea of standing outside oneself is central to Jack Mezirow's notion of transformative learning in which the emphasis is on a process of critical reflection in which an individual becomes aware of her or his meaning perspectives or frames of reference for understanding the world. These *frames of reference* are composed of *habits of mind* and *points of view. Habits of mind* are the individual's habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that have been constructed by the *self* in the process of human communication and lead the individual to have certain *points of view,* which are her or his beliefs, attitudes, and judgements about a situation (Mezirow, 1997).

In this approach to development and learning the educator's role is to assist the learner to become aware of her or his *frames of reference,* to use her imagination to redefine the situation, and to engage in " dialogue devoted to assessing reasons

presented in support of competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view" (Mezirow, 1997, 6). When this process of critical reflection results in changes in a *frame of reference*, transformative learning has occurred.

Transformation also plays a part in David Kolb's (1993) learning model. Kolb describes an experiential learning model that defines two continua along which people vary in their approach to learning. One continuum moves from learning through concrete experience (feeling) to learning through abstract conceptualization (thinking). The other continuum moves from learning through active experimentation (doing) to learning through reflective observation (watching). The two continua together create a model comprising four phases. His theory suggests that full and effective learning occurs only when all four phases are integrated. Experiential learning theory understands learning as a continuous and cumulative process of learning and re-learning in which new experiences grow out of the old experiences. Knowledge is derived from the experience of the learner and is tested through the experience of the learner. The role of the educator is to support the learner in using the required skills and abilities to move through the four phases of learning. Within the reflective observation phase, reflection involves the creation of knowledge by transforming the experience through thinking. At a later stage in the learning cycle, knowledge is put into practice by transforming it through action, the opposite of reflection.

Both Kolb and Mezirow have been criticized for ignoring feelings in their learning models. Scott, in discussing transformative learning theory in relation to the grieving process, argues the need for the whole body to be involved in ". . . becoming

aware of the essential in life, in both the inner and the outer world" (1998, 48). Apps (1996) indicates that this whole person process involves listening to the whispers from our hearts, the messages from our bodies, and the thoughts from our minds. Melamed and Devine (1988) investigated potential gender biases in Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI) and comment that learning models that ignore feelings do not adequately explain the learning of women and are constructed to describe the learning of men:

> By forcing choices to be made between either/or dichotomies, by viewing learning as an abstraction unrelated to context, by emphasizing the rational without also including the intuitive and the metaphoric, and by assuming that learning is an individual process rather than a collaborative one, women's preferred ways of knowing remain obscure. (Melamed & Devine, 1988, 77-78)

To succeed in higher education women have learned to live the discourse constructed by and for men. This discourse alienates women from their personal knowing. Within the educational institutions, proper academic performance has been established by male-defined criteria reified to the extent that it is understood as *normal*. MacKeracher (1996) indicates that formal educational systems tend to support critical reflection that favours and reinforces the use of strategies of separate, autonomous and independent learning. One becomes a "critical thinker" by learning a process that uses objective criteria to consider ideas and construct arguments that will be able to meet the rigorous standards of other "thinkers" (Clinchy & Zimmerman, 1985). Personal experience is discarded as an unreliable source of information and one learns ". . .to confine and focus our insights within the conceptual frameworks and relevances of the discipline" (Smith, 1990,15). Literature on women's development reveals the impact of this mainstream approach to reflection and thinking on the development and learning experiences of women.

2.2 Appreciative Learning and Self-reflection

Women's development was initially understood in relation to an assumed male norm of adult development. Eventually research explored women's development on its own terms (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky et al, 1986) and suggested that ". . . there are at least two paths in "normal" development: *the autonomous, separate or independent path* which typifies the majority of men (and some women)" and "*the relational, connected or interdependent path* which typifies most women (and some men) . . ." (MacKeracher, 1996, 124).

Autonomous, separate or independent learners position themselves outside of what is to be known, while relational, connected or interdependent learners position themselves in a relationship with the knower and what is to be known (Clinchy & Zimmerman, 1985; MacKeracher, 1996). Both paths to learning use ". . .conscious deliberate systematic reasoning" (Clinchy & Zimmerman, 1985, 4). And both paths to learning imply that what is to be known has to be considered cognitively.

The difference between the two paths is based on the role of affect in learning. Elbow (1973) labels the two approaches *the doubting game* and *the believing game*. In the *doubting game* the learner's position is separate from what is to be known, and the task of learning is accomplished by asking challenging questions in a logical fashion with the intent of proving the truth or worth of the ideas. Feelings are to be overlooked or overcome. In the *believing game* the learner's position is in relationship with what is to be known, and the task of learning is accomplished by asking questions in an attempt to understand the situation and the context. Feelings are an integral part of the process of

understanding. The intent is to see different sides to the issue and integrate the new learning with what is already known.

Ways of knowing tend to be gender-related, although they are not gender-specific. The learning activities that presently dominate the university environment support and value the autonomous, separate, and independent path of development, and have implications for the experiences of women in learning environments (Belenky et al, 1986). Women often cope by compartmentalizing the two modes of learning. They use the rationalizing mode in classroom and workplace situations and the reflecting mode in their personal lives. Women realize that success in the classroom and the workplace depends on following the process of critical reflection using the criteria of the separate, autonomous and independent knower (Clinchy & Zimmerman, 1985; MacKeracher, 1996).

Gallos (1992) indicates that some women approach formal learning activities with three strong feelings. First, they feel terrified they will not be able to do what is asked of them; or if they complete what is asked of them, then others will be able to see that they are not smart enough to be in the learning environment. Second, they feel self-doubt about their ability to contribute anything of worth. And third, they have a sense of novelty that the learning experience will be different from anything they have experienced before. Learners require an environment that teaches them the skills of separate knowing (an adversarial stance) while staying connected to the self. And they also require an environment that helps them explore and know themselves so that the skills of connected knowing (an embracing stance) can be used effectively (Clinchy &

Zimmerman, 1985; Clinchy, 1996). "Maturity in learning and knowing increases as the individual is able to integrate the two sources of knowledge" (MacKeracher, 1996, 132).

Relational learning activities, such as reflective assignments, support development for the learner who is following the relational path, and they do not harm the learner following the autonomous path (Mackeracher, 1993). Reflective activities within a supportive learning environment can provide the opportunity to integrate validated subjective knowledge with received knowledge in a manner that supports personal and professional growth and development.

Boud, Keogh and Walker understand reflection as a ". . . purposive activity directed towards a goal" in which " . . .feelings and cognition are closely interrelated and interactive" (1985, 11). Recognizing that Kolb's model gives only a limited explanation of the elements of the reflection component of the process, Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) present a model of Kolb's reflective phase that involves three sub-phases: returning to the experience, attending to feelings, and re-evaluating the experience. The first sub-phase, returning to the experience, involves reviewing it and clarifying in one's own mind the experience and the feelings surrounding the experience. The second sub-phase involves attending to the feelings surrounding the experience. The feelings must be acknowledged, validated and managed in order to remove affective barriers that will interfere with the activity of reflection. The third sub-phase of re-evaluating the experience has four activities. The first is association and requires relating the new information with what is already known. The second activity is integration and involves making connections between the new and the known information. The third activity is called validation and involves determining if the ideas and feelings are valid. And the

fourth is appropriation and requires that the person experiment with the new understanding. Michelson (1996) questions whether Boud, Keogh and Walker understand that feelings can be a source of knowledge that may not require the mind to act upon them in order to have learning. Michelson suggests that Boud and his colleagues have positioned the affective dimension as something to be overcome and argues that "[t]he discourse on reflection, in effect, tells us *not* to trust our bodies or our feelings" (1996, 449).

Reflective learning may be understood as ". . . the *process* of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience (present and past) in terms of self (self in relation to self and self in relation to the world) (Boyd & Fales, 1983, 101). This process may create obstacles for some women; while others may experience the opportunity to learn and write reflectively as personally liberating. The manner in which learners perceive themselves in the learning environment depends on their early socialization, accumulated life experiences and the manner in which they have adapted in order to feel valued in institutional structures (MacKeracher, 1996). Boud (1987) indicates that learners may need assistance in understanding reflection and how to use reflective assignments effectively. They may also need assistance in learning to validate personal experience, to recognize themselves as knowers, and to understand knowledge as constructed and truth as contextual (Walden, 1995; Taylor, 1995). Separate knowers may need assistance in integrating thoughts and feelings because they have denied the importance of subjective meaning and context. Connected knowers may need assistance because their approach to learning has been ignored in formal educational systems resulting in their doubt about the value of their feelings in relation to learning. Educators are not trained, as a rule, to

support connected, interdependent learning, and may need assistance in enabling reflective learning activities. For those educators who are aware of the need to support both types of learners, the institutional environment may present obstacles to the process in the shape of class size and time constraints (Clinchy & Zimmerman, 1985). This study contributes to our understanding of how mature women learners understand and experience reflective assignments in the academic environment, and to our knowledge of how educators can support learning through reflective assignments.

2.3 Summary

Two approaches to reflective activity guide my understanding of this area of interest. One approach acts on experience using a linear process in which critical thinking transforms the experience into learning and development that is orderly, reasonable, and enlightened. The second approach receives experience using a less linear and more cyclical process in which the whole person, including the mind, is involved in making meaning of the experience. The order of the second approach is difficult to make visible and articulate because of the limitations of our gendered language. The terms orderly, reasonable, and enlightened, with their masculine connotation, may not be the best words to use for the learning that occurs through reflection that uses mind, body, and feelings. This study contributes to our present understanding about the manner in which reflective activities relate to learning and development.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

Reflection refers to thinking about an experience or about received information in order to make sense of the experience or information and to give it meaning. Within the literature on adult learning and development, reflection is understood as a crucial element for effective learning. To facilitate the use of reflection in the learning process, reflective assignments shape a growing part of the strategies used to support reflective learning in the formal educational system. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of mature women learners when completing reflective assignments, and their understanding about reflective assignments as a learning activity.

3.1 Design of the Study

In order to generate data rich in detail about the experience and meaning of completing reflective assignments, I took an inductive and grounded approach to the study. Merriam and Simpson indicate that "[i]f you want to understand a phenomenon, uncover the meaning a situation has for those involved, or delineate process – how things happen – then a qualitative design would be most appropriate" (1995, 99).Valuing the qualitative paradigm, this study took a phenomenological approach that assumes that reality is constructed by many realities rather than ". . . one, observable, measurable reality . . ." (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, 97). Within the qualitative paradigm, knowledge is understood to be context bounded and constantly changing. The purpose of the inquiry process is to discover the interconnectedness among realities and expand knowledge by

creating new knowledge on the basis of human experience rather than to prove existing knowledge using a different sample or a different context.

In contrast to traditional social science research where the researcher is the expert on defining reality, Riger points out that ". . . an interpretive-phenomenological approach permits women to give their own conception of their experiences. Participants, not the researchers, are considered the experts at making sense of the world . . ."(1992, 733).

Edson (1988) indicates that a good reason for doing research using a qualitative design is because we do not know all the questions. The distinction within the qualitative design of using the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis means that more questions can be discovered in conversations with the participants. An interpretative approach provided the best opportunity for achieving the greatest amount of understanding about how these ten mature women learners experienced and understood reflective assignments. As the instrument of data collection, I was able to provide a responsive and adaptable approach to gathering the data that is not possible in a quantitative design. A constant comparative method of inquiry and analysis was used in this study to identify categories, try them out, and discard them until a fit between theory and data was reached (Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

3.2 Population and Study Participants

The population for this study was women who were at least thirty years of age and enrolled at the University of New Brunswick or Saint Thomas University in an undergraduate or graduate program that frequently uses reflective assignments as part of the course requirements. Most of the women were full-time students or had recently been

full-time students. I was able to obtain a sample-of-convenience by making personal contact with acquaintances who were students in the programs that use reflective assignments. In some cases my acquaintances agreed to participate and in other cases they suggested potential participants. Each woman was contacted by telephone in order to explain the purpose of the study, the process involved in the collection of data, and the sample requirements. If the woman still showed an interest in participating, an interview time was agreed upon. All the women I contacted agreed to participate, and besides the expected situation of arranging time to talk together, the process of obtaining a sample went very smoothly.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

My research question was developed and my initial interview questions were formulated as part of the requirements for a course in Qualitative Research. As part of the same course, I pilot-tested my interview schedule (Appendix A) with a woman in the social work program and a woman in the adult education program. The pilot-test interviews were conducted in the spring of 1999 and the data from those two interviews are included in this study. I interviewed the other eight women over a period of four months using the revised interview schedule (Appendix B). Following the interviews and after reading the transcripts, I contacted some of the women by telephone in order to clarify and expand on questions I had about the data.

In order to gain an " . . . in-depth understanding that is best communicated through detailed examples and rich narratives" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, 51), the data were collected during face-to-face interviews, which provided the opportunity for each

participant to speak in her own voice, and to ". . . elaborate, provide clarification, and discuss events at length" (8). An interview schedule using open-ended questions, which allowed for exploration of the participant's meaning, guided each conversation, and changes were made to the questions as new ideas emerged from prior interviews. In order to reveal subtleties embedded in the conversation, I attempted to focus ". . . less on getting questions answered and more on understanding the interviewee" (Reinharz, 1992, 34). I understand the interview process within the qualitative paradigm as the ". . . meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication of meaning about a particular topic" (Janesick, 1998, 30). In this process, I had more control in the process than the participant had because each participant was being asked to respond to my "framework of understanding" (Kaufmann, 1994, 127).

At the beginning of each interview I reviewed my research interest and had the participant read and sign the informed consent form (Appendix C). Interviews were conducted only after obtaining informed and voluntary consent, and only after I felt sure that the participant understood the project and felt comfortable with participating. Spradley (1979) emphasizes the importance of developing rapport that contributes to eliciting information. In order to support the development of rapport, each interview began with casual conversation in order to help put both the interviewee and myself at ease.

The interviews were audiotaped, and transcribed following each interview. Data analysis was ongoing and each conversation guided the questions used for subsequent data collection. Field notes were written as soon as possible after leaving each interview.

A journal of my insights, decisions, and reasons for the decisions was maintained in order to support the credibility of the study.

The data were managed and analyzed using a grounded theory constant comparative approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The grounded theory method involves a continuously developing process of using one interview to guide the path to be followed in gathering data in the next interview. Gathering and analyzing data occurred hand in hand, and questions were added when the data revealed an area that I had not thought to question the participants about. In some cases one interview would direct me to interview a participant from a specific program. For example, when the participant from the graduate program in the Nursing faculty told me that the undergraduate program uses reflective assignments more liberally than the graduate program. I decided to interview a student in the nursing undergraduate program. As categories, themes, and patterns emerged from the data, *member checks* were made to ensure accuracy in my understanding by sharing emerging analysis and conclusions with some of the participants.

3.4 Summary

Reflection is understood as a key element to effective learning from experience. Many course instructors in higher education require learners to complete a reflective assignment as a strategy to facilitate the use of reflection in the learning process. Understanding learners' perspectives of the usefulness of such strategies is important in order to facilitate an effective use of the activity. In this study a qualitative research

approach guided a systematic inquiry designed to increase our understanding of the role of reflective assignments in learning and development for a small sample of ten women.

Chapter 4

Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

In the first section of this chapter I introduce the reader to the ten women who participated in this study. In the four sections that follow the participant profiles, I describe four major themes that are present in the data gathered from my conversations with the women. The four major themes I have identified in the data are: the participants' experiences with reflective assignments, reflective assignments compared with other academic assignments, outcomes of reflective assignments, and factors that affect the outcomes. Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter and care has been taken to ensure the anonymity of all participants.

4.1 Participant Profiles

The interview schedules used to guide my conversations with the participants appear in Appendix A and B.

4.1.1 Karen

Karen agreed to help me pilot-test my interview questions. She is in her late forties and was a classmate when I attended St. Thomas University. Karen returned to school in 1994 as a full-time student after being away from formal education for almost 25 years. She arrived at university with personal experience that included marriage, divorce, single parenthood, and long-time employment in the private sector. At the time of the interview she was completing her final semester of a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program.

Her initial experiences with reflective assignments occurred during her first year at university in a unified 18 credit-hour program (the Aquinas Program) designed to explore the theme *Truth and Society* from the perspective of three different disciplines. Teaching strategies used in the program included: personal journals, reflective papers, and ink-shedding. Ink-shedding refers to the practice of responding to experience by pouring personal thoughts and ideas onto the page in an uncensored fashion. Karen says, "to do [ink-shedding] immediately, without much thought, I found hard" (p.4). Although Karen gained some level of comfort with the reflective activities in her first year of university, her early learning experiences caused her to be concerned that she was not learning the basic concepts of the disciplines. She says, "I was resistant to the idea [of not being given the information], . . . and we didn't have the feedback from the professor to know that we were even on the right track" (p.4).

Karen tells me that reflective assignments in the form of journals and learning papers are common learning activities in the BSW program. She understands that reflective assignments require that she integrate new information and experience with personal knowledge. Karen indicates that her process for completing a reflective assignment requires more focus, care, and time than the other course activities require. She thinks that the purpose of a reflective assignment is to enable learners "to get their ideas down on paper and understand what they've learned from [the course work or the experience]" (p.11).

At the close of the interview, Karen indicates that the opportunity to talk about her experiences with completing reflective assignments enabled her to see the importance of the reflective assignments for her learning.

4.1.2 Laura

Laura is the second participant who agreed to help me pilot-test my interview questions. I am acquainted with her because we participated in courses together in the Adult Education program. Laura returned to formal education in 1992 and completed a Bachelor of Arts with a double major. She followed that degree with a Bachelor of Adult Education, and is presently pursuing graduate studies in Adult Education. Laura's first encounter with reflective assignments occurred in Adult Education courses.

She is an avid journal keeper in her personal life and has kept personal journals since she was a young woman. Laura understands that writing in her personal journal is an emotional catharsis with the journal serving in the role of a sympathetic ear. Reflective journals and assignments in the formal education environment require that she move beyond the outpouring of emotions. She says "to come and find that this is part of an education process was just great" (p.8). She uses a reflective process that was introduced to her in one of her initial courses in Adult Education. Laura finds that the process outlined in Kolb's Experiential Learning Model is useful with any experience and in any area of study. Laura tells me that reflective assignments provide the opportunity to validate personal knowledge by enabling her to see where she has been, to think about where she wants to go, and to make sense of the journey. She says, "I think I like the reflective paper because I like history, and when I write that paper I get to write my history" (p.14).

4.1.3 Ann

Ann is a friend from the graduate program in Adult Education, and is the first woman that I interviewed using Schedule B. She entered university in 1979 when she

was a young woman going through the strain of mothering two young children at the same time as her first marriage was ending. She was influenced to attend university by her sister, a university student, and also by Ann's belief that if she had more education, she would be more effective in parenting her child who has a learning disability. Over a 12-year period she accumulated the credits to gain a BA with a major in Psychology. Continuing with her formal education she earned a BEd in 1993, and is presently pursuing graduate studies in adult education. She says, "being so enthusiastic about learning and education myself didn't really help me to identify what the people [I am working with] needed" (p.2). Consequently, Ann returned to university in 1998 with the goal of becoming more capable of serving the adults with whom she works. Some of these adults are reluctant learners and learners who have failed in previous learning attempts. She believes that her BEd did not prepared her to support the adult learner in an effective manner.

Ann, in her forties, is at the mid-point of her present program of study. Residing out of province, she moved to Fredericton for her first semester in order to attend university full-time. During her second semester she took one course though tele-conferencing. I interviewed Ann while she was living in the city again and taking a summer school course, her sixth course in the program.

Ann's first experiences with reflective assignments were in Psychology courses in which she was expected to keep a journal of her experiences and learning. She encountered a similar journal assignment in one course in the Bachelor of Education program. She tells me that she tried to avoid courses she knew would have a journal assignment because she felt uncomfortable doing journals. When she was unable to avoid

such courses, her willingness to participate in the process of journal writing was determined by the degree of comfort she felt with the facilitator.

The courses she has taken in the Adult Education program usually have the requirement of a reflective paper either in the form of reflection on a topic or issue, an autobiographical paper, or a self-evaluation of learning that has occurred during the course. She understands these assignments as providing an opportunity to go beyond the usual educational experience of gathering information. Ann believes that reflective assignments encourage her to explore the meaning of the course content in relation to her life, how she is going to use the new learning, and why it is important to make a change.

4.1.4 Barb

Barb is a student in the Bachelor of Social Work program. When I called her to explain the study, she was unsure as to whether she would have anything to offer; but was willing to meet with me and talk about the two experiences she has had with reflective assignments.

Barb completed a medical technician course following her high-school education. She married, had children, and later separated from her husband. When her children reached high school, Barb desired further education and began to take some courses at UNB with the idea that she might pursue a law degree. About the same time she was diagnosed with a disabling condition and became involved with the local support group for people with this condition. Her experience with this group demonstrated to her that many social workers and psychologists have limited understanding about the manner in which this condition affects all aspects of a person's life. Barb decided to gain the education necessary to more effectively support people with this condition. In 1994 she

began the BA program at St. Thomas University and was accepted into the Bachelor of Social Work program in 1998. She indicates that five courses each semester are more than she wants to cope with. She has chosen instead to take three courses each semester, and extend the length of her program from two to three years.

She had taken two courses in the social work program that required her to complete reflective assignments. Her first assignment was a journal assignment in a social theories course. Barb understands herself as a reflective person in her personal life, but did not understand how to transfer her understanding of personal reflection to keeping a journal on social theories. The other assignment she completed was an autobiographical paper in a spirituality and social work course. She says, "I loved that one" (p.4). Nevertheless, Barb thinks that mature learners need a workshop to assist them in learning how to write reflective assignments.

4.1.5 Carol

Carol is also in the Bachelor of Social Work program and was very willing to participate. She did not reveal her age to me other than to indicate that she was more than thirty-five years of age. She has a previous undergraduate degree and numerous years of experience in the paid workforce. Rather than take workshops and courses of interest, she decided to return to school full-time for two years and gain a BSW. Her preference would have been to take the post-degree program that is presently available and more condensed than the program she is presently completing. She has two courses remaining in her program.

Carol's undergraduate experience did not require her to complete any reflective assignments, so her first experience with this type of course work in an academic

environment was when she began the BSW program. Most of the BSW courses have some reflective writing component either as a requirement or an option. Reflective assignments are not a challenge for Carol. She understands herself as a reflective person who, after reading or experiencing something new, "think[s] about what it means from various points of view and various aspects" (p.11). Carol says that the assignments "haven't been that challenging. It's things that I've thought about before and so I just put it down on the paper" (p.4). She indicates that she is able to "whip them off with no problem" (p.8). Carol tells me that she does not learn from reflective assignments, and she feels impatient with having to complete them.

The BSW program has not provided Carol with the information and knowledge that she had hoped to gain. She was looking for "basic how-to tools, a tool kit"(p.7) of skills to guide her practice in social work. Her experience with the program has been that the program moves too slowly, and the course content is about issues that she has been aware of and thought about for years and years. From her point of view the program puts too much emphasis on creating a *just society* and not enough time on providing the practitioners with practical tools to deal with the real life problems that they are going to be facing every day in their practices.

4.1.6 Donna

Donna, in her mid-thirties, is a full-time student in the Master of Nursing program. At the time of our interview she was preparing to defend her thesis. She had completed a Bachelor of Nursing degree as a young woman and had been employed for a number of years as a Registered Nurse.

Her first experience with writing reflective assignments occurred in her graduate program. She completed two courses that required a reflective assignment, and one course that she thought was flexible enough to accommodate her need to stray from the purely academic style. The first reflective assignment she had to complete was part of a theory course. It involved maintaining a journal that would serve as the basis for constructing a personal theory of nursing. Her first reaction was that she was not going to like doing the assignment and had no idea of how to begin. Donna gives all the credit for what turned out to be a personal *transformative experience* to the instructor who provided direction and guidance throughout the process. The other two assignments that she wrote did not create the same degree of learning that she achieved from her first experience with reflective learning activities.

Donna also has experience as a teaching assistant in her graduate program that required that she read and comment on the journal entries of undergraduate students. Her experience as a teaching assistant leads her to believe that many instructors are uncomfortable with journal assignments and that "they really don't want to know what the students have to think and say because it is personal" (p.17). Donna thinks that in order to give "good reflective assignments there has to be more of a kind of mentoring culture, so that [instructors] can learn from each other" (p.20). She tells me that reflective assignments can "be wonderful," but that they should be used "only if the prof knows what she is doing" (p.15). In a later telephone conversation she told me she has decided not to give her students reflective journal assignments in the course that she is presently teaching (Field notes, Nov.17/99).

4.1.7 Eileen

Eileen entered a three-year nursing diploma program following high school and gained her nursing registration. Her employment as a psychiatric nurse following graduation motivated her to pursue further studies. In 1972 she earned a post-graduate diploma in Psychiatric Nursing. The care of women became her focus and she completed a number of programs that supported her personal development and learning, and her ability to support other women in their change and development. During this period of personal and professional development, she was employed in a number of different areas of nursing. In her late forties she decided that in order to advance her career she needed further education in the form of a BN, and entered the post-RN diploma BN program at the University of New Brunswick.

Eileen's feels discouraged with her experiences in the nursing program, and she was anxious to tell me the manner in which a reflective assignment contributes to that feeling. She experienced her first and only required reflective assignment during the first semester of her university experience. Writing the assignment created an emotional upheaval in her life that the instructor was unable to help her resolve. Instead of being a resource to alleviate Eileen's distress, the facilitator offered assistance with writing the required reflective paper in order to raise Eileen's mark.

The experience with this assignment led her to believe that reflective assignments often bring issues to the surface that the learner may not realize are unresolved. Eileen emphasizes that we all have tension areas that we may not have worked through. The personal transition that she was dealing with jeopardized her ability to complete the requirements in her other courses as well. Eileen will graduate from UNB next spring

with a BN, but her vision of the ideal experience of studying at the university level has not materialized. She believes that for the most part she has not gained any new learning. In order to gain the BN degree, she says, "I feel like I have regurgitated stuff that I already learned on my own" (p.14).

4.1.8 Freda

Freda, in her late thirties, attended a Bible College as a young woman and then, because she always had an interest in nursing, she returned to school in 1994 as a part-time student. Presently she is a full-time student in her third year of the Bachelor in Nursing program.

Reflective assignments had no part in her course work as an undergraduate student until she entered the nursing program where she found that reflective writing assignments are considered important to the process of knowing yourself in order to be effective in your nursing practice.

Freda's first assignment was a self-reflective journal. She enjoyed the experience because it offered the opportunity to come to know herself better and provided a record of her change and development. The next experience with a reflective assignment was also a journal assignment, but this journal required the learner to integrate personal experience with the literature. Although her initiation to writing reflectively involved simple self-reflection, she is not interested in continuing at that level of reflection. Freda believes that her growth and development involves linking the new information and experiences with her own personal knowledge about the situation. Freda's experiences with journals also include maintaining a journal within a clinical practice situation and receiving feedback from an instructor.

Freda raises the idea of the difference between personal and private issues in the content of the journal or paper. She feels comfortable in writing about her lack of knowledge or lack of experience, but she also wants to present her best image. Consequently, she hesitates to reveal private vulnerabilities for fear that they may be held against her in her pursuit of a nursing degree. She says, "every clinical instructor is different and with certain instructors I am really guarded in what I write" (p.23).

4.1.9 Gail

Gail is an acquaintance from the time when we were both students at St. Thomas University. She returned to formal education in 1992, when she was in her late forties, and completed a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Psychology in 1997. She decided to expand her education with a Bachelor of Social Work and presently has two courses remaining in her program.

Reflective papers occupied a small part of Gail's undergraduate experience. She remembers a few journals in Psychology courses and Religious Studies and a reflective paper in a Gerontology course. The Social Work program is where she has encountered most of the reflective assignments. Every course in Social Work either requires reflective writing or has the option for reflective writing. Gail loves completing these assignments because it allows her to gain an understanding of her personal knowledge. She has been a journal keeper in her personal life for many years. She says, "I'm a journal person. I like to journal. I journal my dreams, [and] I journal lots of times about my feelings and that sort of thing" (p.4). However, Gail feels some level of insecurity with the process in the university setting. Her insecurity relates to the fact that reflective assignments involve an interaction between the instructor and the learner. Gail says "the relationship with the

professor can support the process, but you like to know what the professor wants because each professor is a bit different" (p.8).

Recalling her first assignment, which was a field-placement journal, she indicates that the regular feedback she received from her field supervisor assisted her in the novice task of understanding what was expected of her in this assignment. In retrospect, she believes that guidelines for journal writing would have increased her ability to learn in the situation. Experiencing the benefits for her learning that result from these assignments, causes her to wish she had written a journal for every course she took in order to understand the material at a deeper level and retain the learning for a longer period.

4.1.10 Helen

Helen is in her early thirties and a full-time student in the Masters of Education in Adult Education program. She completed a BA following high school and worked in the field of journalism and adult training before deciding two years ago to return to university. Her previous degree and her work experience might have enabled her to gain entrance to the graduate program without taking the two-year consecutive degree program in Adult Education. However, Helen believes that unbeknown to her she has been moving towards working with adults for a long time, and took the two-year undergraduate program in order to gain a firm foundation in the program before she began graduate studies.

During Helen's first year of her first-degree program she experienced course activities that involved self-reflection, although at the time they were not identified as reflective assignments. The requirements for the first course that she took in Adult

Education were similar to what she had experienced in most university courses, but beginning with her second course in the Adult Education program she encountered reflective assignments. Because the first reflective assignment was an unfamiliar course activity, she experienced some discomfort regarding how to go about the process. But Helen quickly gained confidence in her ability to complete the assignments and accepted the importance of reflection to the learning process. Early in her studies her process for completing the self-assessments was very structured and mechanical, but as she came to understand more about herself as a learner she developed an approach that feels authentic. Helen has been a journal keeper for a large portion of her life. When she was able to make a connection between the manner in which she wrote personal journals and the reflection that was being required of her in the academic setting, she understood at a more personal level what was required for completing the assignments. Helen finds that writing a self-reflective paper involves a process that she has been using intuitively, but naming the process and making it more conscious makes it a more empowering activity.

4.2 Experiences with Reflective Assignments

I began each interview by asking the participants to tell me their experiences with completing reflective assignments for their course requirements. The responses indicate that the majority of their experiences with reflective assignments are limited to courses specific to nursing, social work, and adult education. Only four of the participants recall a few assignments that they identified as reflective in courses outside these three fields of study. Their experiences are discussed under three headings: reflective assignments as a

limited experience, varying numbers of reflective assignments, and varying types of reflective assignments.

4.2.1.Reflective assignments as a limited experience

All the women in this study indicate that most of their reflective experiences in educational institutions are limited to their current programs of study. Only four of the women recall any experiences with activities that might be called reflective, in courses other than their current areas of study. Ann, Gail, and Karen recall a few courses that required them to keep a journal; and Helen recalls a learning activity she did in her first year at university. She tells me that it was not reflective, but she says, "we called it being good editors, [and] there was a lot of self-reflection involved in it" (p.8).

Ann says that her first experiences with reflective learning activities were in Psychology courses and were "talked about as reflective journals" (p.4). She also recalls a journal assignment in an Education course she took. Ann says, "we were asked to journal after each class or after each experience" (p.4).

Gail tells me that she had journal assignments in some Psychology and Religious Studies courses that she took before entering the Social Work program. Recalling the Religious Studies courses, Gail says the professor wanted the students to experience what it was like to journal and reflect, but he was not interested in reading the journals. She also vaguely recalls a reflective paper in a Gerontology course. She says, "I can't quite remember, but I think we had to take some experience and reflect on it. It had something to do with spirituality and people in nursing homes" (p.6). Gail recalls that she wrote something about her father living in a nursing home. However, she says, "most of my reflective papers have been in Social Work" (p.2)

Karen had some experiences with reflective assignments in the Aquinas Program she took the year she returned to school. She says, "the whole concept [in the Aquinas Program] was reflection" (p.1). One of the activities that Karen recalls involved using the computer. She tells me "they taught us how to do a computer program where we would go in and read the work of other students. Then we would reflect on their work, and so we were constantly thinking about our beliefs" (p.2). As well as journals, Karen recalls two major group assignments that involved researching the Holocaust and the witch trials at Salem. She tells me that the group researched the topic, and then they were expected to reflect on what they had read. She says, "we were supposed to think about what is the truth about this. That was the whole concept. What we were doing was presenting all sides to an issue, instead of one" (p.4-5). Karen also recalls two Philosophy courses that she says, "expected that I give my opinions" (p.5). Except for these experiences, Karen encountered no other reflective assignments until she entered the Social Work program (p.5).

I never had one until is a common response to the question of experience with reflective assignments. Freda indicates that before she entered the nursing program she "never had a reflective writing assignment" (p.2), but that there are " a fair number in the nursing courses" (p.7). Donna, who completed an undergraduate degree in nursing a number of years ago says, "I don't recall doing any reflective assignments as an undergraduate. . . . So the only experience I have with reflective assignments is in graduate school, and then it really wasn't in that many courses" (p.1). Carol tells me, "I had no experience with them prior to entering the social work program, and as I said, I

have had previous university experience" (p.1). Barb's situation is similar and she says, "I really didn't have any reflective assignments until I got into Social Work" (p.1).

Reflective activities play a large role in the Adult Education learning environment. Ann indicates that "if [professors] really truly say that experience is important when you teach adults, [they] have to have reflective papers" (p.15). Helen indicates that the first course she took in her undergraduate Adult Education program was "just the traditional university course" (p.2). But since that first course, reflective assignments are usually required or optional in most of the adult education courses in her program. Reflective activities have become so much a part of Helen's learning experience that she says:

> Instead of waiting for the end of the term and then rushing to write a reflection paper, it becomes more of an ongoing process of saying, 'now how did things go for me this week and what do I think about what I learned, and how does this course relate to that course, and how am I connecting it?' So it has become less of an end of course assignment that I have to do and more of a learning tool that I use. (p.3)

4.2.2 Varying numbers of reflective assignments

The amount of experience with reflective assignments varies between two extremes. Eileen, in the post-diploma Bachelor of Nursing program, has completed only one reflective assignment, Barb has written two and Donna has written three reflective assignments. Gail, Karen, Carol, Laura, and Helen have two years of study in programs where most courses have a required or an optional reflective assignment. Gail, with only two courses remaining in her Bachelor of Social Work degree, says, "I will always choose the journal [assignment], because I think for me that's a great way of learning" (p.9). The remainder of the participants fit between these two extremes.

4.2.3 Varying types of reflective assignments

The women tell me they have completed a variety of reflective assignments that include journals, autobiographical papers, reflective papers, learning papers, and self-evaluation papers. Three types of journals are mentioned: self-reflective, integrative, and dialogical. In a self-reflective journal the learner writes about her feelings and thoughts in relation to a new experience. Freda says, "It was just open to whatever we wanted to write about, and there were no real restrictions placed on that. . . . Our writing wasn't critiqued. . . . It was enjoyable, not pressured writing" (p3-4).

Freda indicates that the second type of journal, that I have called an integrative journal, is "a more sophisticated form of writing. . . . It was reflective, but it was incorporating the literature into the writing. . . . I couldn't just say 'well, this is what I experienced.' It had to be backed with the literature" (p.4). Karen tells me that in the second type of journal she "was expected to read over a lot of handouts, then reflect on it and bring in your own experiences in learning and so on" (p.5). Carol indicates that in some cases the activity includes a "paper on the journal" (p.1). Donna's first reflective assignment was a requirement in her Nursing Theories course. She says, "We had to write journals every week. And then we had to write our own theory at the end of [the course], kind of based on our journals and based on our experiences in the course" (p.1).

In most cases, the learner's grade on the assignment requires that she pass the journal into the instructor at specific times throughout the course. However, Helen tells me that most of her journals were not assigned a grade. She says, "the journal was a tool for me to improve my practice. For me to become a better educator. So it wasn't used as

an assignment itself"(p.15). Helen tells me of a third type of journal assignment, a dialogical journal. She says:

> In another course where we were given a lot of latitude about what we wanted to do for an assignment, a colleague and I did a dialogue journal. That was quite a different experience and it was quite a leap of faith for both of us. But it was a very positive experience. . . . So in that case there wasn't any instructor involved because she said that she didn't have to see [the journal]. (p.13)

Freda talks about an assessment tool, used in writing journals in one nursing course, that "is basically a list of skills, and once you complete the skill in the clinical setting, you write about how you completed that skill" (p.7). I commented to Freda that the assignment sounded like a description of the steps that were taken to perform a required skill. Freda says that it is "nit-picky writing. . . . it's not very valuable [because] if you leave out something you did . . . it looks like you've overlooked that part and maybe you haven't overlooked that part [at all]" (p.8). She goes on to say that she does not learn very much from completing this type of journal assignment. She says, "I know it's kind of one of those things important for the clinical instructors, but as far as for me it has been a waste of time" (p.7). Freda "would rather write it as a story"(p.10). And she questions whether the assessment tool "is really adequate to let [the instructors] know that I'm on track with what I know and what I don't know" (p.10).

The autobiographical paper is another form of reflective assignment. Barb tells me that her autobiographical paper involved "reflecting back on my life. It was personal and there was nothing else to put together except what I had experienced" (p.4). Ann indicates that her autobiographical paper in her Adult Development course required her to think about a particular adult development model. She says, "I just needed to draw from who I was and my experiences [Show] that I had read the material, that I understood

the material, and I was able to take the material and apply that to pieces of my life" (p.9-10).

Reflective papers differ from autobiographical papers in that the learner is asked to chose a topic of interest and then, Ann says, "take this topic and apply it to your life and life experiences, and see where it goes" (p.9). Helen tells me, "there was one paper on ethics where I had to do some preliminary research, so I could have a handle on what I was going to be talking about. So I wrote on what I had researched and then I wrote a section on what do I think" (p.5).

In the experience of these women, learning papers and self-assessment papers are similar assignments that provide an opportunity for the learner "to determine what I got out of the process, to see what I've learned, to take stock, to take inventory" (Laura, p.9). Carol tells me that it is not a difficult process for her to write this type of reflective assignment. She says that you just have to write "what you think, what you feel about that, maybe what you learned, and how you will use it in the future" (p.3).

4.3 Comparison with Academic Assignments

Reflective assignments are different from non-reflective scholarly assignments. Some of the participants tell me that non-reflective learning activities separate personal experience and subjective knowing from what is accepted as knowledge and learning. Donna says, "With the kind of purely academic ones, it's just pure knowledge. It's just different amounts of knowledge about this subject or that thing. It's information. And I would say that's what the majority of them are. It's information. And that helps you to be able talk about the issue in an intelligent fashion or something like that" (p.12).

Laura says that when she wrote papers in her BA program "you would say, 'such and such said this' and you would quote various schools, various authorities within those schools. To put the word *I* in a paper was not done" (p.7). Donna indicates that in non-reflective papers "you've got to be so neutral" (p.11).

Freda understands scholarly papers and reflective papers to be "at two ends of a spectrum" (p.14). She says, "you know, instead of an assignment for the sake of doing the assignment that the professor needs, [a reflective assignment] is an assignment or a way where I can learn and express myself" (p.2).

Helen tells me that she has been in classes with learners who are "black and white [thinkers]. She says that for these thinkers "[traditional assignments] are academic [while reflective assignments] are not" (p.15). Helen tells me that learners who are very logical and literal are less inclined to want to bring their feelings into the classroom. She says that these learners think of a reflective assignment as "something that is really hooky. . . . Like, oh gosh, not this touchy, feely, stuff" (p.15).

The next two sections describe how some of the women understand keeping *self* concealed in a purely academic assignment as different from revealing *self* in reflective assignments.

4.3.1 Concealing *self*

The women indicate that their most familiar learning activities, in public schools and post-secondary institutions are non-reflective and require a cognitive approach to learning. The activities include such things as listening, reading, remembering and regurgitating. Non-reflective activities assume that there is one correct answer. Helen tells me that her "thirteen years of public school" taught her that there was always a right

answer, and she says, "I was good at getting the right answer" (p.7). Donna believes that most students have been raised with the idea that the teacher has the knowledge that the student is expected to learn. Donna refers to this as a "*fill and drill* method" (p.17). Karen, describing her early learning experience in the public school system of the 60's, says, "we were not asked for our feelings or reflections. It was not asked for, nor was it wanted. Everything was given to us and we regurgitated it back" (p.1).

Barb tells me " from my time when I was growing up going to high school, you gave back to the teachers what they gave to you. Thought wasn't even encouraged" (p.2). Barb says most of her education experience has been in a situation where, "it had to be the way the teacher said and there was no room for anything else" (p.4).

The limited experiences with reflective assignments at the university level indicate a continuation of the *fill and drill* method of teaching in post-secondary institutions. Barb says, "I do well on all of [my assignments], but I do really well when the professor reads and he wants back what he says. That's where I'm like 100% comfortable. I can memorize and put things in my head and I can reflect them right back. That's the base of my education" (p.13).

Freda tells me that before she had reflective assignments she believed that "it's alright to reflect [personally] but it's useless as far as your academic pursuits" (p.5). She says, "I tended to separate reflective learning from anything academic" (p.6). When Freda writes a "formal paper" she thinks of it as a "scholarly paper" and she says, "I tend to write my scholarly papers with a very hands-off approach" (p.14). Any personal connection with the topic of the paper is concealed. She recalls an academic paper in which she explored palliative care in home versus institutional settings. During the time

that she was writing the paper a family member was dying at home. Freda says, "I couldn't help but draw from that experience and what was needed for her to die at home. And I wrote with that kind of slant. But certainly nowhere in my paper did it reflect that there was a personal thing going on. . . Yet in my mind . . . were the influences of both personal and academic" (p.14).

Ann tells me the process she uses when she writes a non-reflective paper. She says, "I am going to give evidence that is outside myself. I am going to get evidence from other sources. I'm going to get quotes, other people's ideas, and I am going to put them together in a certain way. In some ways, I am sharing pieces of myself in the way that I piece it together and the theory I choose to use" (p.14).

Barb tells me of the struggle she had with writing a paper for an assignment that was not identified as reflective. She says, "it was a struggle because I knew [the professor] kind of wanted what he said, but he also wanted us to think. It meant me saying things that I didn't really connect with"(p.13). Some courses, such as those in Philosophy, pre-suppose reflection even though the course activity may not be identified as a reflective activity. Barb says that in a Philosophy course "you are supposed to think, question, and ask why"(p.13). However, in the Philosophy course that she took it was understood that the professor wanted the students to give back to him the ideas that he had presented to the students. Students counseled each other to "just give him back what he says" (p.13). Barb indicates that she didn't learn very much in the course. She says, "It was a pre-requisite for getting into Social Work, [but] it was a waste of money" (p.3).

Donna tells me of her experience in writing a paper for her Advanced Practice course. She says that it "wasn't just a purely academic paper," although "[the professor]

didn't call it a reflective paper" (p.10) Donna includes it as one of her three experiences with reflective assignments, because she says, "I put my own opinions and thoughts in it" (p.10). She explains that she understands thinking and reflecting as "almost synonymous" (p.10). The way the assignment was worded allowed enough "flexibility that I could do want I wanted," and she says, "I put a lot of reflection into it" (p.1). She indicates that "I knew that I needed to work these thoughts out, and I knew that the best way for me to work it out was for me to write it down"(p.10). Donna decided not to worry about the grade that might be given "and just sat down and started working it out" because she "knew it was a more flexible paper" (p.11). She received a good mark on the assignment, but Donna told me later, as we walked to our cars, that the professor commented that her paper was too subjective. Donna suspects that she would have been given a higher grade if she had concealed her personal ideas (Field notes, Aug.11/99).

Even though reflective assignments have not been part of the majority of the learning experiences for these women, Barb believes that some of the professors "think that everybody has done a journal and can't perceive that someone has come this far without [such an assignment]" (p. 14). The fact that Barb had no previous experience with writing journals for course work before the assignment in her social theory course may contribute to the fact that she says "I think I know how to do [reflection] personally, but I'm unsure at the academic level" (p.12). She indicates that the one journal assignment that she wrote "was just kind of bringing ideas together, other people's ideas" (p.5). I asked her "where was the *self* when you were writing the journal?" Barb replied, "not in the journal, outside of it" (p.3).

4.3.2 Revealing *self*

Despite the relative scarcity of experience with reflective course activities most of the participants understand that reflective assignments provide the opportunity to think about how received knowledge fits with personal knowledge. Ann indicates that in non-reflective assignments "I can stay outside the process" (p.14). But with reflective assignments she says the instructors " are saying, 'we want you to use knowledge and experience that is internal to you" (p.15). Later in the interview Ann says, "for true learning to take place you have to be able to personalize the knowledge to some degree" (p.18). Reflective assignments "provide a way to think about what you are learning and not just regurgitate [it back]" (Ann, p.18).

Karen says that she thinks of a non-reflective learning activity, such as an exam, "as a task to get done" while a reflective activity, such as a journal, "is [a] process [rather than a] task" (p.17). She tells me, "I have to get myself in the right space to sit down to write [a reflective assignment]. I have to clear my head. I have to get my housework cleared up. The kids have to be gone or whatever it is going to take so I am thinking about this and not about other things or another assignment" (p.11). Karen indicates that reflective writing is "a long process for me. . . . It makes me think so deeply . . .and it just triggers [thoughts], connecting one thing to another" (p.17).

Donna tells me of a similar process that involves preparing to write. She tells me that she did her writing on Sunday night. She says, "I had a cup of tea, everybody was in bed and [the house] was quiet. And like it was my time. . . . I would sit down, focus on whatever it was that I was going to talk about and it would just flow" (p.5).

Barb indicates that she also had a process that she followed when she wrote her autobiographical paper. She says "I always kept a piece of paper and when the idea came, I wrote it down and then worked it all together" (p.6). Barb tells me that writing the final paper involved "using the notes that I had made, and some of the stages [I had learned about in the course material] and putting it all together two or three times. It was one of the few papers that I put together, typed up and left for a few days. Then I went back and said take this out and move this here and so I was really pleased with it" (p.7).

Some of the women indicate that reflective assignments are different from non-reflective activities because they are learner-centered rather than teacher-centered. Freda says, that when she has a reflective assignment, "It's an assignment for [the instructor's] purposes, but it's my writing so I'm not so caught up in what they're looking for. So I just go ahead and wing it" (p.18). But other women, such as Karen, say, "I wonder if there is a way that [the instructors] could make you feel more comfortable and tell you what the expectation is" (p.10).

4.4 Outcomes of Reflective Assignments

The outcomes identified by the women in this study vary between two extremes. On one hand, there are negative outcomes experienced by Eileen and Carol. At the other extreme are the positive outcomes mentioned by Laura and Donna.

Eileen tells me "I feel sad that I came to get an education and this happened" (p.10). She is referring to a problem she encountered with her first and only reflective paper. The Nursing Concepts course required her to choose a topic of personal interest, research the topic, and write a reflective paper. She tells me that as she attempted to

integrate the new information with her personal experience, she was overwhelmed by anxiety. This was a complete surprise to her, and she says, "I didn't know that there was anything to be resolved about [the topic I chose]" (p.3). When she started to write the paper she encountered difficulties. She says, "Here I was with this belly full of new knowledge with strings of guilt attached, pain attached, and what was I suppose to do with it" (p.3). She indicates that, "I was having symptoms of high anxiety. [I was] anxious, displacement, couldn't concentration, irritability, terrible guilt, terrible guilt" (p.7). Eileen says "I jeopardized my other courses . . . because I couldn't function" (p.7). When she found that she was unable to write the paper, Eileen approached the instructor about what was happening to her. She tells me, "I went to see the professor and I started to say, 'I feel so guilty.' But I don't think that she fully understood. . . . [the professor] said, 'I'm so sorry, but you knew you shouldn't have done [that topic]'" (p7).

Eileen's experience leads her to believe that "reflective papers can be very, very dangerous if you don't have adequate guidance staff to deal with what comes out of it" (p.4). Since this experience, Eileen says, "I'm not too respectful of those courses. . . . I don't think the controls are in place to ask people to delve into things. It's like asking you to do some psychotherapy, but we don't have anyone to help you with it" (p.5). She has no intention of writing another reflective paper.

Carol encountered no problems in writing the assignments and tells me they are "not hard [to write]. It's not rocket science. So basically it's not challenging and I do it because it's assigned. . . . . It's just an assignment that you do to complete your requirements" (p.3-4). Carol's problem with reflective assignments is that "these issues are not new" (p.6). She has thought about most of the issues and is tired of discussing

them. Carol acknowledges that "there may have been little bits and pieces" (p.4) of new information, but she was looking for "the practical tools" (p.13) required for effective practice in the workplace. She feels invalidated by reflective course assignments and says, "it's almost as if they think that you have never thought about these issues before. Well, hello! I've lived a long life and have experienced a lot, and so in learning and reflective papers it's nothing new" (p.2). She points out that "you don't get to my stage in life without having . . . studied different things at different points in time" (p.6).

Laura and Donna are at the other outcome extreme from Eileen and Carol. Donna indicates that her first reflective assignment was "wonderful" (p.1). "It was a transformational experience" (p.4). Laura, also, is pleased with the outcomes from reflective assignments and indicates that they give her the opportunity to have "ownership [of her learning] and having that independence is so liberating" (p.10).

The remaining women are somewhere between the extremes of these two sets of women, and understand reflective assignments as having a variety of outcomes that include: validation of personal knowledge, increased self-understanding, increased retention of learning, and assessment of learning. These outcomes are discussed in the next four sections.

4.4.1 Validation of personal knowledge

Validation of personal knowledge began, for some of the women, with a sense of surprise that the instructor wanted to hear what the students thought about a topic. This was a new experience for Laura who says, "I spent five years doing a double major in the Arts faculty and no one ever wanted my opinion on anything" (p.7). She tells me about an assignment that stands out in her mind. She says:

> I was able to reflect upon my life and how I got from where I was, to reflect on my life now and how I got from where I was and the various transitions I had made. It was an opportunity for me to see the progress I had made. It opened my eyes to a lot of things I had not been aware of prior to doing that. (p.1)

Karen tells me of her feeling of surprise with an early experience with reflective assignments and says, "I [was] thinking this stuff and somebody was listening to me and it matter[ed]. I didn't get that in the early education system and in my own personal life, so this was really nice" (p.5).

Other women tell me that validation of personal knowing began with self-reflective journals and autobiographical papers. Freda's first reflective assignment was a self-reflective journal and she indicates that she thought "Wow! . . . This is about me and my experiences" (p.3). She says, "before that it wasn't acknowledged. It was like, to reflect is good for a pastime, but . . . it's useless as far as your academic pursuits" (p.5). Reflective assignments have enabled Freda to "acknowledge reflective learning [as] knowledge" (p.5) She says:

> When I came into nursing I realized that [self-reflection] was a valid way to learn, I was able to look back over my past and understand that you can't undo learning from whatever form, and I had quite a bit of learning about health care from my past experiences. Once it was acknowledged that it was okay to learn in more than one way, I [accepted] this as part of my learning, as part of my knowledge base. (p.6)

Now, Freda tells me "I can take all my experiences in life and bring it to the point in my life that I am at now and use it in my academic pursuit" (p.5).

Gail tells me, "What I find out when I'm doing journals or reflective writing is that I know more than I think I do" (p.2). She says, "I pour out myself. I go inside myself and bring all the things out, . . .because I am of the opinion that anytime we have things on the inside and we think about them and leave them there, we really do not have the

full picture" (p.2). She understands a journal assignment as an opportunity to "go back over my work and find out what I've been learning"(p.2).

Freda puts it this way, "It is one thing to think something, but it is another thing to write it down. When you write it down you not only acknowledge it, but . . . putting something concrete on paper is [an excellent way to] help [one] understand what [is] known about something and what [one] does not know about something" (p.3). Later in the interview Freda points out that "if you can write something and more or less acknowledge it as a written component, then I think there is more of a value in that rather than just having the thoughts rolling around in your mind. . . . Then it's kind of like okay this is how I can evaluate that based on what I have written" (p.19).

Carol, however, indicates that "the learning is already in my head, and putting it down on paper does not help me recognize what my learning was" (p.8). According to Carol, one of the purposes of the reflective learning papers may be:

> to go back and go almost through your outline or through your journal. . . . It is not to write a test, but to be able to at least write intelligently enough about it so [the instructors] know that you have read or experienced the material. . . . And for that reason, just as a review, it's fine. It does that. (p.11)

Laura tells me that validation of personal knowledge contributes to a sense of feeling complete or whole. She indicates that while she was completing her BA degree she was learning "all the things that everyone else knew and I didn't know. I always thought I was quite stupid" (p.9). When Laura had the opportunity to write reflective assignments, she felt as if she "became a whole person"(p.9). Donna supports this notion of wholeness and says "the personal assignments help you in your whole life, not just academically" (Donna, p.12).

Gail tells me that "it took me a long time to know that my own experiences were valuable and meant anything. I wish there had been more reflective assignments when I did my BA"(p.15). But Ann has mixed feelings about reflective assignments. Ann says:

> I hate reflective papers, I hate them with a passion. I wish they would be erased from the face of the earth because they stretch me so much. But I also understand that they are good for me . . .because they help me to gain confidence in my own internal knowledge, in my own point of view, in all kinds things. (p.15)

Reflective assignments such as journals, self-assessment and autobiographical papers can provide the learner with a record of their personal journey. Ann indicates "that you get a broader overall view about where you were and where you are now" (p.17). Writing an autobiographical paper in her Social Work and Spirituality course gave Barb an opportunity to write about her spiritual journey, "something that I had always wanted to do" (p.7). She observes, "It just made me value myself and see where my journey had gone. I saw that without knowing it I had followed certain stages. It made a picture for me about where I was. . . .So it made me feel more complete, and it did increase my knowledge" (p.17).

Most of the women indicate that reflective assignments enable them to value their personal experiences and knowledge in the formal learning environment.

4.4.2 Increased self-understanding

Validation of personal knowledge and experience supports an increased understanding of self. Freda believes that "self-awareness is the beginning purpose" of reflective assignments" (p.18). She says, "in addition to helping to understand more about myself, it's something that I can look back on, and to know where I've come from.. . . I

can see where I've progressed, whereas, if I had just thought about it [without writing it down], I would probably not remember it as vividly" (p.4).

Karen agrees that reflective assignments help "you know more about who you are" and she says that they also "moved me along in my personal growth" (p.14). Ann tells me about an autobiographical paper she wrote and says, "I don't see how that helped me to understand that [adult development] model better. But I would say that it helped me to understand myself better" (p.20).

Part of knowing oneself is being aware of one's abilities. Gail tells me that reflective writing provides the opportunity to gain "a greater understanding of what's being taught, and a broader understanding of your own ability that you weren't aware of. Like you can see that 'yes, I can do this and I can really learn'" (p.13). And Donna indicates that as she kept a dialogue journal with the instructor, one of the changes that occurred was that her "self-confidence" grew (p.5).

Some of the women indicate that self-awareness is an important aspect of being an effective practitioner. Freda says "you have to know yourself before you confront [practice] situations, because if you don't, you are going to get lost and overwhelmed in the situation" (p.2). As well as increased self-awareness, Freda says that in some of her reflective assignments "I really examined some of the things that I wouldn't have examined if I had not written it" (p.4). Gail says, "I think that the more aware you become of [societal] issues and about your own issues, [the more] vital [you are] to a profession . . . By journalling and writing about them, I'm working on myself. I'm not just learning about what's out there, but I'm working on me" (p.15). Even though Eileen did not have a positive learning experience with her reflective assignment, nevertheless,

she says, "it's a way of allowing us to know how the other person feels. It helps me to develop as a nurse, as a caring individual" (p.12). Helen points out that "when I take the extra time to reflect on what I've been reading and decide how that relates to everything else that I think and know and feel, there is a greater chance that that will actually become part of what I do as a practitioner and what I think as a person" (p.11).

Most of the women have trouble separating the development that occurs from reflective assignments into personal, professional, and academic sections. Instead some of them tell me that "personal assignments help you in your whole life," as opposed to non-personal assignments which give the learner "pure knowledge" (Donna, p.12). Freda puts it this way, "The thing is that realistically you can't say, 'this is my professional life and this is my personal life.' You can't separate them. There are personal experiences and learnings that I bring into nursing. And there are many nursing experiences or academic experiences that flow into my personal life" (p.21).

Some of the women tell me that when reflective assignments are effective they can change personal perspectives. Donna says that her reflective journal assignment "gave me a way to look at myself from a different perspective. It gave me a way to re-frame."(p.2). She indicates that "it can lead to transformation, I mean, you're really working [things] through, you develop your knowledge. I think it really can be wonderful" (p.15). Donna says, "I worked through a lot of things. My relationship with my mother drastically improved. . . . And to have that, I mean, I'm grateful to graduate school and to that course for just that one thing" (p.5-6).

Barb tells me that her two experiences with reflective assignments were different. She says, "[the first] one did broaden my base [of] what I knew about the theories. But I

did it on the outside stuff" (p.12). Barb says that the second assignment "changed my perspective" (p.12). She describes the difference between the two assignments by telling me that "it seems from my two experiences that it either comes from me and changes me, or comes from outside me and changes some facts in my head" (p.13).

Although Carol did not personally experience reflective assignments as an effective learning method, she does believe that they can be helpful for some learners. She believes that the purpose is "to get you to think about the material that you've learned, apply it to your own life, and see whether or not there are things to discover. Or learn to apply in the future, or maybe to change your thoughts, or see maybe if there has been previously uncharted areas"(p.3-4).

Karen says that one of her social work courses "kind of opened my eyes a lot to what was my normal education when I was young. And the difference between that and the way I am being educated now with this type of reflective work" (p.1). She sometimes worries about not having enough information, and says:

> Here we are done and we are thinking that we don't know enough and shouldn't this program have taught us how to specifically do this and this. . . . and I'm realizing that I am never going to know it all. You are never going to go into a job and be well trained. It is a constant learning and it is pretty scary, because I think in this competitive age you are expected to know things at a certain level. And that is not realistic because you haven't been in the field. (p.15-16)

Most of the women indicate that at least some of the reflective assignments enable them to gain an increased understanding of themselves and their life experiences and that this understanding supports their personal and professional development.

4.4.3 Increased retention of learning

Some of the women indicate that writing about their experiences and what they are learning from the experiences helps them retain the information and make connections between different courses.

Gail tells me that an outcome of reflective assignments is "having a greater understanding of what's being taught" (p.13). She says, "What I remember is what I write about" (p.14). The journal assignment "helps me to understand myself more and it helps me to ask questions which I might not have asked, that I might never have had the opportunity to ask in class" (p.13). Gail indicate that journals help her "retain a lot more of the things that I study," so much so, that "in a course where I don't have to do a journal, I will do a journal because it helps me to stay focused in the class" (p.14).

Donna finds that with a reflective assignment "you come away from it with really having played with it, worked with it, and thought about it"(p.15). She says the reflective process means that "at the end of it you leave the assignment, not [just] with this wheelbarrow of knowledge, but also with what you think is relevant in the wheelbarrow of knowledge" (p.15). Helen says, "if I eliminated the reflective process, two weeks after I'd written the paper I probably couldn't tell you a whole lot.. . . The reflection process helps me to actually own what I have done" (p.11).

Reflecting on one's personal knowing about a situation provides the opportunity to see what is missing. Gail tells me, "I've learned if I can take my thoughts and feelings and either talk about them or put them on paper, that I can see them differently. And I can solve problems quicker than if I keep it on the inside" (p.4). The opportunity to reflect on the information or the experience also, according to Freda, enables her to "go back and

see the gaps in my knowledge or a gap in my experience" (Freda, p.13). Laura's reflective process is a very concrete process that assists her to move through stages that bring her to a point of thinking about what is required "for the next concrete experience" of her learning (p.2).

When the learning experience involves "lecture, study notes, and examination", Karen says "the learning does not stay with me as long" (p16). Non-reflective activities allow a space to be maintained between self and knowledge. Without the requirement of a reflective assignment, Ann says, "I can stay outside the process" (p.14). She says, "I don't think that you retain things as well if it is just at an intellectual level . . . [the instructors] want us to take the information in and have an internal understanding. . . . at a feeling level and not just at an intellectual level" (p.14).

Along with supporting retention of learning, Karen tells me that one of her reflective assignments enabled her "connect between courses and between disciplines. I realized for the first time how connected everything really is. And that to me was tremendous" (p.13). Donna tells me:

> You don't just shuffle [the information] away in that little box of your brain that says, "this is nursing theory or nursing research." I think it all works together there. And I think the next time that you see something from this course you will realize, "Gee, this fits with this course, and you make it bigger, you know. I think that you can really benefit versus having it all just kind of separate. (p.15)

Helen indicates that "without putting [thoughts] on paper, you never really make the connections. You can forget about it next week because it is not learned" (p.6).

Freda describes her experience with a journal assignment related to her clinical practice in maternity. The experience should have been a pleasant one involving home visits with a new mother and her baby. Freda indicates, "I wasn't prepared to go in[to the

home] and talk about anything except maternity and stuff" (p.12). When she encountered a new mom in an "abusive situation," she says, "I like writing about nice things and this was so depressing" (p.13). Without the journal assignment, Freda says it would have been "a lot easier to say, 'I can't think about this anymore today, and I'm not going to write it'" (p.13). Practice situations can be complex, and Freda says the feedback provided by her clinical instructor meant that "I was not only learning from my own experiences, I was learning from the things the instructor told me to try. . . . It was an overwhelming experience, but one that I learned a lot from" (p.12-13).

Most of the women indicate that without reflective assignments, the learning that occurs in a course is harder to retain and more difficult to understand in relation to learning from other courses.

4.4.5 Assessment of learning

For some of the women in this study, completing a reflective assignment means deciding the outcome of their course learning in terms of a grade. Helen tells me that about "85% of [her Adult Education courses]" (p.6) either require that she grade herself or provide the option for her to do so. When her first course with a reflective assignment presented her with the option to grade herself, her initial reaction was to leave the task of grading to the facilitator. Then she had second thoughts and she says, "I thought, 'Wait a minute, why am I here? Am I here to get the grade, get the piece of paper and get out of here, or am I here because I care about this and I want to learn how it works?'"(p.5). Helen decided that "opting out [of self-evaluation] was not going to help me. . . . If I was going to do this I was going to have to start sometime. If I didn't do it in this course than I would probably have to do it in the next course" (p.5-6). Helen indicates that after two

years of experience with self-assessment, she still sometimes has trouble deciding on what she calls a "fairness mark" that is somewhere "between being too hard on myself and not being hard enough" (p.21).

As Helen understands self-grading, the instructor has the right to disagree with the grade. She says, " there is kind of this maintaining the integrity of the university that is left to the instructor just to make sure that everybody isn't giving themselves A+ or whatever" (p.14). But Helen has "never had an instructor come back and say, 'I'm changing the grade'" (p.14). Laura, also in the Adult Education program says, "I think for someone else to mark my reflection defeats the purpose of doing the reflection" (p.11). If a facilitator ever changed the grade that Laura had given to herself, she indicates "I'd have to think about why this person didn't understand what I was telling them"(p.11). The principle of self-evaluation is important enough to Laura that she might go as far as "ask[ing] that [my paper] be read by an outside reader" (p.11).

Self-assessment is a less familiar outcome of reflective assignments for the women in the nursing and social work programs, although some of them have had a few experiences with grading their own assignments. Barb tells me in one of her two assignments "we marked ourselves" (p.7). She says, "I knew that I had done good work, it was accurate and I marked myself high" (p.7). Nevertheless, making the final decision about the grade was not an easy one. She indicates that "everybody had a hard time with [marking themselves]" (p.7). The learners discussed among themselves whether it was best to ask for a high grade or a low grade. Barb says "if you mark yourself high and the professor doesn't like it, they can mark you down, but they will probably never mark you up" (p.7). Barb indicates "It was a different feeling giving myself a mark. I'd rather [the

professor] look at it and give me a good mark" (p.7). However, when the professor gave Barb a "really good mark" (p.12) for her journal assignment, it meant very little to her. She says, "when I got my marks for journalling, I kind of glanced at them, but they didn't mean anything to me because the assignment didn't mean anything to me" (p.12). She tells me that "in the journal assignment whatever you put down seemed to go" (p.16).

Most of the women tell me that the marks they are given for reflective assignments are always good marks. Gail says:

> With my first reflective paper that I probably didn't get all the things into it that should have been in there, I got a good mark on it anyway, because how can you mark someone's reflection paper bad? It's their experience. If you didn't give them the guidelines, then you have to accept what's in the paper. (p.2)

Carol finds that reflective assignments are "a very easy way to get marks" (p.6). Nevertheless, some of the women are surprised by the marks they are given. Karen recalls a journal assignment for which she was given a grade of A+. She says, "I remember one of the journals that we passed in three time. . . .I made an A+ on it, and I couldn't understand how he could get an A+ out of the stuff, because I felt as if I was writing like somebody totally not formally educated, but just coming from a personal space" (p.8).

Some of the women tell me learners usually get full marks for their journal assignments as long as they complete their journal. Freda indicates that her first reflective assignment, which was a self-reflective journal, was "kind of like a freebee" (p.20). The second journal she had to keep involved integrating new information with personal experience and she assures me that was not a "freebee . . . because exploring literature is much more time consuming" (p.20). Freda points out that "it does not look good

academically" if too much value is placed on self-reflective journals (p.20). Donna also thinks that "sometimes marks are artificially high, but on the other hand if [the learner] got something out of [the process] then why not [give her the marks]" (p.16).

4.5 Factors Affecting the Experience of Reflective Assignments

The conversations with the women in this study indicate that the process of completing a reflective assignment can be supported or hampered by a number of factors. Barb tells me that, "One of [my experiences] was [positive] and one of mine wasn't" (p.12). She says about the positive experience, "I was excited about doing that one" (Barb, p.6). Donna tells me that her weekly journal writing assignment "always fit together. It wasn't disjointed, although I often didn't know how it was going to fit together until it happened" (p.5). Factors affecting the process include such things as guidelines for the assignment, confidence with the process, feedback from the instructor, and the learning environment. These factors will be discussed in the next four sections.

4.5.1 Guidelines for the assignment

Most of the women in this study indicate that reflective assignments, whether journals, reflective papers, autobiographical writings, or learning and self-evaluation papers, are given to learners with a minimal amount of instructions. Carol says "there's usually a couple of lines, a brief outline of what [the instructor] wants you to do" (p.3).

Freda tells me that the instruction for her first self-reflective journal was to "basically every week write something about our experiences from that week. . . . It was read on a weekly basis and kind of checked off" (p. 3-4). Subsequent journals required

that Freda incorporate "the literature into the writing and . . . that my experiences. . . .be backed up with the literature" (p.4).

Barb's instruction for the journal assignment in her Social Theory course was "to reflect on [the theories] . . . And then we would find articles or discuss things about certain articles and that we were supposed to reflect on them" (p.3). She tells me, "I had no background in [journalling] as to what to do" (p.2) The journal was passed in for assessment three times during the semester, and although Barb wrote in her journal that she was unfamiliar with this kind of assignment, she received no further instructions. She indicates that the experience turned out to be "one of collecting facts and putting them together" (p.5). It was not a satisfying experience because she "didn't have any connection to it" (p.16). Lack of sufficient guidelines and effective feedback left Barb feeling as if the assignment "made me stretch and look to see what might fit this theory. I'm just not sure that what I got did fit. I had a real weird feeling about it " (p.17). Eileen, similar to Barb, received very few guidelines for how to write her first reflective paper. She tells me that the instructions were "minimal" and involved "a five minute instruction about don't do this and don't do this that didn't sink in. . . . [the instructor] said 'I want you to do a reflective paper. Pick a topic, but don't make it too serious'"(p.3).

Ann indicates that her experience with journals in Psychology courses did not prepare her for being required to write her first reflective paper in the Adult Education program. She says, "I had never written a paper by starting it with [the word] I and I couldn't get my head around that [idea]" (p.8). A class discussion about how to write a reflective paper resolved the issue for Ann. She tells me "that is kind of the point that I

put the journal and the reflective paper together as the same thing, just the same as a journal, just a bit bigger" (p.9).

Helen's experience with guidelines for the assignment is different from most of the women I interviewed. She says:

> especially at the 3000 level courses, where the instructor is reasonably sure that there are going to be quite a few people in the room who are seeing this for the first or second time, [the guidelines] can be quite structured. . . . So in some courses it has been very structured, very detailed instructions on how to go about it, at least one way to go about it. (p.8)

Helen points out she finds the "guidelines are useful. It's good to give people a starting point" (p.9). She says that guidelines and structure are helpful when a person encounters reflective assignment because "any inclination to reflect on our own learning is stymied by [early learning experiences where] I can't decide what I've learned. Somebody has to tell me what I've learned or I will write a test and then I will know what I've learned. . . . I think that it's hard to shake that" (p.16). Helen indicates that it is also "important not to confine [the learner] to [a certain structure], if it's not their style" (p.9). She says "I found the instructions very useful to start. They are kind of like "training wheels for a bicycle" (p.9). Laura tells me that she has found a process for writing reflective papers that suits her style and she likes to be given the freedom to "allow my style to come out and to trust myself" (p.14).

Early learning experiences and limited guidelines are factors in the initial reaction to reflective assignments. When Gail was writing her first journal assignment she says, "I didn't even know how to do it. . . . I needed guidelines in order to give the professor what she wanted" (p.15). Without the guidelines Gail indicates that "I was groping and so did

the best I could by writing about the whole experience. And I could see how fearful I was, like what if I do this wrong" (p.15).

Karen tells me that some reflective assignments are passed in for feedback from the instructor. This means that after you get the feedback, "the next time you try to do it better" (p.7). She says, "by improving each time . . . we ended up making 10 out of 10 by the time we were done" (p.8). Gail believes that older students are not comfortable with this type of trial and error. Older students prefer to know "exactly" what is required, in order to be able "to do it right [the first time]" (Gail, p.6). Helen agrees with Gail, and she tells me about her feelings when she wrote her first reflective assignment. She indicates that she thought of it in terms of any other assignment, and says, "it was an assignment, and boy I didn't want to screw it up. I wanted to get it right" (p.7). She no longer thinks in terms of there being only one right answer and says, "what I learn and what you learn in a course might be of equal value, but be completely different" (p.7).

Most of the women tell me that in the beginning "just to say 'write a reflective paper' created a reaction of, 'Oh my God, what do I do now?'" (Gail, p.6). Helen tells me, "you can really notice the disorientation of students in the Masters program, who maybe have been out of school for twenty years, and in everything they have done previously have never had a reflective component" (p.17).

The initial reaction to a reflective assignment, by the women in this study, falls between two extremes. At one end there is Carol who felt disdain and says, "I rolled my eyes and thought, 'Good grief, at this stage of my life!'" (p.2). At the other end is Freda who felt excitement and says, "it was just open to whatever we wanted to write about, and there were no real restrictions placed on that" (p.3). Between these two extremes, the

women tell me that they felt "nervous" (Donna, p.8), uncertain (Ann, p.5; Gail, p.6), "dumbfounded" (Barb, p.2), and surprised. Helen says her reaction was "You want me to do what!" (p.2).

Donna says, "even though [the instructor] said that there were no right or wrong answers, you still kind of think, 'am I going to make a fool of myself?'" (p.8). Gail tells me about one of her courses and says:

> When I first started I thought, "my God, I don't understand anything. I'm the stupidest person in the class. What am I going to do?" So one of the ways that helped me was letting me see what somebody else had done.[The instructor] had some journals and as soon as I saw them, it was like, "oh, I can do that." (p.8)

Barb felt "too embarrassed to ask" how to complete her reflective journal assignment (p.2). Her reaction to the assignment reminded her of the feeling she had when she initially returned to school. She says, "I was trying to do essays and didn't know how to do them. I felt like give me a base" (p.12). She solved her problem with essays by attending a workshop on how to write essays. She tells me that after the workshop, the essay writing "was easy" (p.10). She wishes that the university would offer a workshop for reflective writing because she says, "we need a place to learn more about it. That would increase the value of reflection" (p.15).

Helen's experience with assignment guidelines leads her to believe that "concrete suggestions for how to do the assignment and then a kind of weaning from the guidelines" works very well, but "if it happened in the reverse order, it could be disconcerting and frustrating" (p.12). Later in the interview Helen points out that " some students need a whole lot more preparation [for reflective assignments] in terms of instructions" (p.15). Most of the women in this study would agree with her comment.

Barb says, "if the university is going to assign then, they should start at the first level courses somewhere so that you immediately start to get a feel for them. It shouldn't be just at the third and fourth level courses, and then all of a sudden you have to learn how to do them" (p.14).

4.5.2 Confidence with the process

Confidence with the process of writing a reflective assignment is affected by the learner's familiarity with reflective assignments, with the topic being reflected on, and with the program of study.

Some of the women indicate that experience has helped them understand what is required in the reflective assignments even when the instructions for the assignment are minimal. As Ann says, "once I had done [the first one], I got more comfortable in writing the other [ones]" (p.9). Barb, however, does not believe that the exercise of keeping a journal did anything to help her understand how to complete the next one that she will have to write. She says, "I was uncomfortable the whole way through and I still feel uncomfortable" (p.11).

Karen tells me that her confidence has grown because she "has been successful in so many courses" (p.11). Gail says that if she had been given more guidelines with her first reflective journal "about what they wanted me to tell them, . . I think I could have written a much better paper. But I just didn't know how to go about it" (p.15). She tells me that her more recent experiences are different from that first assignment. "I think I have just learned how to do it. . . . Maybe I went from kindergarten to grade three or whatever. I've learned to do it, maybe to refine it a little more" (Gail p.11). Helen tells me when graduate students, who are feeling confused and disorientated with reflective

assignments, ask her why she seems so comfortable with the assignment, she tells them, "it's like because one, I've been doing them for two years already, but two, here's what I like about them" (p.17).

Carol indicates that her familiarity with the content of the courses meant that there was "nothing new" (p.2) for her to reflect on, and consequently, no challenge in completing the assignments. But other women tell me that familiarity with the topic being reflected on can make the process easier for them. Barb says that the instructions for her autobiographical paper were "three or four lines in the syllabus that said something like 'reflect on your spiritual development'" (p.6). She tells me that "it seems that once I read the syllabus that things just sort of started bubbling in my mind" (p.6). She thinks she was able to complete this assignment so much easier than the journal on theories "because I'm quite aware spiritually and I've done a lot of reading on it and it was such an opportunity" (p.6).

Ann describes a situation of writing a reflective paper on a topic before she had gained confidence in her ability to write reflectively or had gained some familiarity with the field of Adult Education. She indicates that she was feeling rushed to "get the assignment passed in and receive some feedback [from the instructor]" (p.10). She now realizes that "I didn't really understand the topic that I was writing about" (p.9). Ann tells me that with her first reflective assignment in her first semester in the graduate program she can remember thinking, "I don't know anything about Adult Education [yet], so how can I ever reflect on a topic?" (p.13). Helen, also in the Adult Education program indicates that she felt more confidence with her second reflective assignment because, she says "I knew more about myself as a learner and about my styles and things like that"

(p.3). "When I learned a bit about the theory of adult education, [reflective papers] made more sense to me" (Helen, p.2). Helen tells me that her confidence in the process has increased as she understands that, "I'm reclaiming and naming a process that I use to know. Again it was very intuitive, and with the journal writing I kept a journal from the eighth grade until I got too busy. . . . It was something that I did intuitively, but it's so much more powerful now that I do it consciously" (p.16).

For most of the women in this study familiarity with writing the assignments, with the topic being reflected on, and with their program of study contributes to confidence in completing reflective assignments.

4.5.3 Feedback from the instructor

Most of the women indicate that getting started with a reflective activity can be difficult. Donna says, "I didn't know where to start, because there was so much freedom" (p.3). Without enabling feedback and attention from the facilitator the learner can end up in a state of confusion such as the one that Eileen found herself facing with the new information and nobody to assist her in processing it. Sometimes the learner can get stuck at describing the experience instead of reflecting on what she has learned. Karen describes one such assignment and says, "I gave him a step by step regurgitation of what we did and that is not what he wanted. . . . He wanted an overall picture of how [the experience] impacted on you and your learning from it and so on" (p.7).

Sometimes the whole process can seem meaningless. Barb tells me that her theory journal was passed in three times during the semester, and each time it was returned with a mark, but without any comments from the facilitator. She was glad to have the good mark but it did not mean much to her because Barb "did not know what the good mark

meant" (p.3). Barb indicates that she "kept thinking that there must be something [more to this]" (p.3).

Donna's experience with a reflective journal assignment leads her to believe that "reflective assignments are definitely a two-way process" (p.2). Donna, like most of the women in the study, was unsure about how to begin her journal assignment. She tells me that the professor suggested "that sometimes it really helps to look back at tensions in your life. And to look and see if you can see patterns, because sometimes when you look at these tensions you'll start to see some pattern there" (p.3). The journal keeping was done by e-mail and Donna indicates "I found it wonderful, and what made it wonderful was the feedback that I got from my professor" (p.1). Donna wrote an e-mail to the professor once a week, in which she reflected on class readings, class discussions, and thoughts that she was having. The professor would make a response that "was more than comments on what you had done. There was guidance as to where you might go with your thoughts" (Donna, p.4). This process enabled Donna to "re-frame and gain a different perspective" (p.4).

Gail has experienced journal assignments for which she received feedback, and also journals for which she did not receive feedback. She believes that "feedback is good because often the professor will see where you have made connections on something. Without the feedback, I might always be wondering if I did make the connections" (p.7). Gail goes on to say it is validating to see the comments that say, "'Yes, this is what we were studying about in class.' And 'Yes, yes, yes, you've got it!'" (p.8). Helen tells me that the first time she was required to pass a journal assignment into the facilitator, she felt resentful that the facilitator would expect something as personal as a journal to be

shared with him. In the end she found that the feedback she received "was very concrete in helping me to think about more things" (p.13). Experiencing the manner in which feedback can support learning, she went on to keep a "dialogue journal" with a colleague (p.13). The dialogue-journal involved sharing personal journal writing with a colleague who would respond to the entries. Helen says, "it was a very positive experience" (p.13).

Donna indicates that journals can "get a bit of a bad name, if the professor or the instructor does not give feedback that is more than 'very good' or 'that's a good point'" (p.2). She believes that the type of feedback that supports reflective assignments involves "asking [the learner] more about feelings, and not so much about content" (p.8). Donna says:

> [the instructor needs to know how to give good feedback. And what I think happens now is that there really isn't that much direction given. There isn't that much feedback other than the superficial junk that I gave [as a teaching assistant], and so you walk away at the end of it and nobody really gets anything out of it. (p.17)

Most of the women indicate that effective feedback from the facilitator supports reflective activities by guiding them to get started with an unfamiliar activity, validating their personal experiences, and enabling them to enlarge their perspectives.

4.5.4 The learning environment

Some of the women tell me that the learning environment is a factor that influences the outcome of reflective assignments. Donna says the reflective learning experience "depends a lot on the prof and the [other] students" (p.7). Talking about her reflective assignment that supported a transformative experience for her, Donna says, "the professor has had the same framework for her course before and it really didn't work well, so I think that you just need the chemistry there, and you can't predict that" (p.7).

Other women tell me that the chemistry Donna refers to affects their ability to do the assignments and also their decisions about how to represent *self* in the assignment.

Some of the women indicate that other learners can act as a resource and support the process of completing reflective assignments. Karen tells me that one way to deal with the uncertainty when "the expectations weren't outlined very clearly, were very ambiguous" (p.10) was to talk with other students. She says, "the students would complain together, we would talk it out, hash it out" (p.10) and try to figure out what was required. She continues by saying, "I think we were helpful to each other, but sometimes we worried needlessly" (p.10). When Ann felt uncertain about how to write a reflective paper she tells me, "the first thing I did was talk to other people about it. I was talking and questioning and asking about what a reflective paper was" (p.8). Helen says:

> I wasn't doing [these assignments] in a vacuum. I had a couple of good friends in the program and for me to really get a handle on things I really have to talk about it. . . . [They] would listen and ask me good questions. . . . They would ask me questions until I had kind of come around to it. (p.3)

Helen also recalls that when she was given her first reflective assignment there was a lot of class discussion. She says, "we had a lot of discussion in the class because a lot of us were at similar points and this was all new" (p.5).

Although some of the women indicate that other learners act as a resource, other women did not have this resource or were unable to utilize it if it was present. Eileen, talking about her uncomfortable experience says, "I think that we should have done some group work. . . . the class wasn't that cohesive and I don't know how comfortable we would have been to tell that confidential stuff. Maybe in the second term it would have

been different. But this happened in the first term" (p.5). She indicates that she did not feel comfortable sharing her personal experiences in that environment.

Barb indicates that she encountered her first reflective assignment without the support of a supportive class atmosphere. She says, "I never heard any of them say anything [about not knowing how to do the assignment]. I think I was the only one I ever heard that was struggling with it, and I wasn't struggling too loudly outside" (p.10). Donna says one of the necessary ingredients needed to support reflective assignments is "small classes and intimacy [between learners]" (p.17).

The teacher-student relationship is also a factor in the learning environment that affects the reflective learning activity. Gail indicates that she is more able to share herself in her assignments when she has rapport with the instructor. Talking about one of her assignments, she says, "I was very relaxed [about sharing myself] because I trusted my supervisor and I knew that she was there to help me" (p.5). This rapport is not always present between student and teacher. Ann tells me about writing her first reflective assignment. She says, "I felt like I had just gone down to the mall and taken my clothes off. . . . I had shared almost too much of what was in my head. It didn't feel good to me. Then when I got the paper back it felt worse because of the comments on the paper . . . I felt like she judged who I was as a person" (p.5).

Helen points out that when a learner has a "negative experience," she might resist doing any more reflective assignments (p.12), as is the case with Eileen. However, in Ann's case her next reflective assignment was for a facilitator with whom she felt safe. Ann points out that she has learned that "if I am going to give a self-reflective paper to

someone, I had better know them really well, and I had better feel safe with them" (p.6). Ann believes that it is important for the facilitator be "fair and open minded" (p.9).

Laura points out that "there are some instructors that you feel more that you can let yourself be yourself. I can be amusing. I can write however I choose" (p.13). Then there are other instructors that "you get an idea of what they want, and it's that pedagogical concept of give them what they want" (p.13). In order for the "right chemistry" to be present between the instructor and the student, Donna says that the instructor has to be "caring, non-judgmental, and know how to give feedback [that is helpful]" (p.17).

Donna tells me that reflective assignments are not the right learning activity for a *fill and drill* learning environment. She says, "reflective thinking is a way of thinking. It isn't a habit you can put on one day and not put on the next" (p.17). Donna believes that it has become "politically correct now to do these reflective assignments" (p.17). But her experiences lead her to believe that "in nursing, some of these [reflective] methods are still really pooh, poohed" (p.7). Before Donna experienced reflective assignments as a learner, her role as a Teaching Assistant in the nursing faculty required her to read and comment in undergraduates' reflective journals. She says, "To be honest, I thought they were ridiculous, partly because I didn't know what I was doing and none of us did" (p.13). She goes on to say that "for the most part, students don't like [the journals] and find them a waste of time" (p.17). Donna expresses a concern that the reflective activities suggest that personal experience is welcome in the academic environment when in fact it is not always welcome. She says, "if you think *fill and drill*, it is very difficult to give a reflective assignment and really want to know what the students have to say, because it is

too personal" (p.17). Some of the faculty members have indicated to Donna that they really do not want to hear about the students' personal experiences. But Donna points out that "reflection is personal" (p.17), and if reflective activities are going to be used in the learning environment, you have to be prepared to hear personal experience. Donna tells me that "the whole nursing curriculum at the undergraduate level is called a *caring curriculum*" (p.17). Her experiences as a teaching assistant leads her to believe that there is "a kind of hypocrisy of we care about you, but yet we really don't" (p.19).

The atmosphere of the learning environment affects the manner in which some of the women in this study represent themselves in their assignments. Carol, who found that the course content offers no new information, tells me "that sometimes I have written in a learning paper some of what they expected me to say, because I had to say something. . . . a lot of it was so mundane and so ordinary, so expected and so commonsense that even writing it seemed like 'well, dah!'" (p.12). She says "well, you have to write the learning paper and so you write it. Some things, I do admit, I felt kind of ridiculous for even writing it" (p.13).

Ann indicates that when she has a self-evaluation assignment she "writes a self-reflecting paper for myself, and then I redo it for the professor" (p.13). She uses this process because she believes "there is reflection that the professor is entitled to, and there is private information that they are not entitled to, not in this academic setting" (p.13). Ann says, "I have a personal biography that I have very set boundaries about what information you are going to get about me, and it is not everything" (p.13). Freda says, "I'm in a vulnerable position if I write about some personal experience that I might not want the faculty to know about" (p.22). She indicates that "I don't mind sharing [my]

lack of experience, [and my] lack of knowledge, but as far as personal vulnerabilities" (p.22) she is less apt to share those things. Freda says:

> In nursing you are dealing with a group of nurses who are looking for all kinds of signs and symptoms along the way or whatever. . . . I kind of feel like sometimes everything you say is and will be held against you. . . . If I am writing about some personal experience that I might not want the faculty to know about, I would tend to write in a way that was personal but didn't give them something to say, 'Ah, this is something about this person that we are going to keep on file'.(p.22)

She tells me that with some of her instructors, "I don't give them what I wouldn't want them to have" (p.23). Donna's comment indicates she has the same concern as Freda. Donna says, "let's face it, in graduate school you need the marks in order to get the scholarships" (p.16).

The women in this study tell me that these four factors -- assignment guidelines, confidence in their ability to complete the process, feedback given by the facilitator, and the overall learning environment -- affect the outcome of their reflective learning activities.

4.6 Summary

The participants in this study indicate that their experiences with reflective assignments are, for the most part, limited to courses in the Adult Education, Nursing, and Social Work programs. The women in the Adult Education program usually have reflective activities in each of their courses, while the women in the Social Work program indicate that their courses often have a requirement or an option for a reflective activity. The frequency of reflective assignments in the Nursing program is affected by whether the learner is an undergraduate, a graduate, or a learner in the post-RN diploma program.

Assignments include such activities as journal keeping, reflective papers, autobiographical papers, and learning or self-assessment papers. The reflective assignment experience is described by some of the women in terms of how the activity is different from the more familiar learning activities in the academic setting. A few of the women indicate that the reflective assignments they have completed did not support personal learning and development; but most tell me that reflective assignments enable validation of personal knowing, increased self-awareness, increased retention of learning, and self-assessment of learning. The degree to which positive outcomes occur is affected by a number of factors that include: guidelines for the assignment, confidence with their ability to write the assignment, feedback from the instructor, and a supportive and safe learning environment. These four factors determine whether the experience supports and enables growth and development or causes disorientation and disappointment that interferes with learning.

Chapter 5

Discussion of the Findings

5.0 Introduction

The women in this study entered the university environment with personal knowledge constructed from a variety of personal learning experiences in formal, non-formal, and informal learning environments. Traditional formal learning environments have reinforced their beliefs that external knowledge is valid because of its objectivity and internal knowledge is biased because of its subjectivity. Further, the traditional learning environments in which they have participated have shown them that learning is an intellectual process in which the thinking self interacts with received knowledge. Their experience in traditional formal learning environments have taught these women that the usual academic assignment is written from an objective perspective that ignores personal knowledge as too subjective. If the women felt unsure about their abilities to write an "academic " or "scholarly" assignment, they improved their skills by participating in one of the workshops offered by both Saint Thomas University and the University of New Brunswick. The women were unaware of any reflective assignment workshops. Consequently, they learned how to complete their reflective assignments within the learning environments that required such an assignment.

The data indicate a two-stage process in completing reflective assignments. The first stage involves making sense of writing a reflective assignment in an academic environment. The second stage involves making sense of learning through reflective assignments. Between these two stages, a resting period or plateau involves the validation

of personal experience and personal knowledge. The two stages and the resting period will be discussed in the next three sections.

5.1 Making Sense of the Reflective Writing Process

Reflective assignments support a belief that, beyond instrumental knowledge (practical, concrete information), technical skills, and practical communicative knowledge (information about human behaviour), an important goal of education is to develop self-awareness and self-knowledge about course content. The women I interviewed understood that reflection involves thinking and writing about self in relation to new information or new experiences. The academic assignments with which they were most familiar did not call for them to write about self. The women's awareness of these differences between reflective assignments and academic assignments resulted in a reaction from the women when they initially encountered reflective assignments.

Laura and Freda indicated that their initial encounter with a reflective assignment created a sense of freedom and excitement for them. However, most of the women in the study told me that their initial encounter with a reflective assignment produced a feeling of anxiety or irritation stemming from being faced with learning the course content and also learning about an unfamiliar course assignment. These feelings were related to their questions about the assignment and its purpose and about how it is written. Some questioned why they should complete a reflective assignment at this stage of their life or at this stage of their education. They wondered what a reflective assignment would look like and felt embarrassed about not understanding the instructor's expectations. They worried that their personal thoughts might sound unintelligent and that they would be

unable to complete the assignment in the "right way." They wondered how much they should reveal about themselves.

The women described having to deal with the unsettling feelings by trying to make sense of what it means to write a reflective assignment. Depending on the external and internal resources available to them, some of the women made sense of writing reflective assignments with their first assignment, while others took longer. They did this sense-making in a number of ways that included: having a personal interest in the reflection topic, turning to other learners for advice; participating in a class discussion regarding the assignment; using available guidelines for writing the assignment; learning about adult learning concepts, such as reflective learning, through course content; and trying and succeeding, with their level of success being determined by the instructor's feedback on the assignment. The fewer the resources the woman had available to her as she tried to make sense of the *what, how, and why* of writing reflective assignments, the longer it took her to resolve her unsettled feelings about writing a reflective assignment.

Seven of the ten women in this study had worked through this stage of the process. Two of the three women who had not made sense of the reflective writing process had completed only one or two assignments. Thus, it seems that the number of reflective assignments written may be important to making sense of writing reflective assignments. One of these two women, Eileen, had one experience writing a reflective assignment and indicated that she would never again write a reflective assignment because the university environment did not provide the resources necessary to support learners in the reflective process. The second of these two women, Barb, identified one positive experience and one negative experience, but indicated that the positive

experience did not make her feel comfortable with encountering another reflective assignment. The third woman, Carol, had two years of experience with reflective assignments but none had altered her opinion that reflective assignments were not supportive of her personal learning. Experience and familiarity supported making sense of writing reflective assignments for some learners but not for all.

Most of the women thought that learners need more assistance with this stage of the process than they presently receive. The more resources available to the learner, the more able she is to make sense of writing the reflective assignment. The most important of these resources was the instructor who needed to support learners in resolving unsettled feelings; and to help them make sense of writing reflective assignments by explaining the objectives for the activity, by discussing the what, how, and why of writing reflective assignments, and by providing some suggestions for how learners might begin the reflective process. If the learner was unable to make sense of writing a reflective assignment she ended up describing the observable features of an experience or critiquing a reading assignment, rather than writing about what she had learned about herself in relation to the experience or the reading. Without making sense of writing reflective assignments, the learner completed them in order to meet the course requirements and to demonstrate knowledge of the course content to the instructor.

Some of the women described academic assignments as a process of bringing together the ideas of academically-accepted, knowledgeable experts. Reflective assignments were experienced in the same way as academic assignments for those learners who had been unable to make sense of writing the reflective assignment. When the learner was able to make sense of the what, why, and how of reflective assignments,

she was able to concentrate on making sense of personal learning and development through such assignments.

Various authors in the literature support the learner's need for assistance in preparing to write a reflective assignment. Holt (1994) conducted research with ten teachers to determine how keeping a journal affected their practice. She found that, in order for journals to affect teaching practices, the learners needed preparation in how to write reflectively and what the benefits of doing so were, and a supportive environment that provided guidance to motivate reflective thinking. Walden (1995) writes that "[m]any women need guidance in getting a journal started" (p.14). Walden's course objectives, for a course called "The Personal Journal, . . . include teaching effective strategies for keeping a journal and introducing participants to adult development theory" (p.13). Kerka (1996), in reference to using journals effectively, also indicates that learners need to know what a journal is, why it is important to keep one, how to write in it, and how it will be shared with others. Taylor (1995), writing about self-assessment, indicates that learners may need guidance in the form of questions for reflection and will always need positive feedback. Powell (1985), writing about autobiographical writing says, "[i]t is important to make clear at the beginning the purpose and nature of the writing task in which students are to engage" (p.48).

5.2 Resting Period or Plateau

Most of the women indicated that the validation of their personal knowledge was a major outcome of reflective assignments. Knowledge accumulated through personal experience was understood as not being recognized as knowledge in the academic

environment. Writing a reflective assignment provided the women with an opportunity to bring unarticulated thoughts and feelings from the inside to the outside. The learner was able to see more clearly who she is, where she has been, and where she is now. The opportunity to articulate inside thoughts and feelings left some of the women surprised at how much they know. Writing a reflective assignment was a time of turning inward to discover one's thoughts and feelings, a time for the learner to become more aware of who she is instead of who she should be. It was a time of 'being,' a time of acknowledging self as an intelligent human being within the academic environment. Several of the women appeared to need the stability of this period in order to enjoy the feeling that their life journey was making sense, and to feel validated. Barb, for example, indicated that writing about her personal spiritual journey gave her comfort with her sense of self and with where she is in her life journey.

This transitional period between the two stages is not clearly visible in the data; I have projected its existence. What is visible in the data is a learner's inability to make sense of writing a reflective assignment when what she already knows is not validated. A reflective assignment requires that the learners integrate received knowledge with personal knowledge, but this cannot be done unless the personal knowledge has been validated. Of the three women who had not reached this plateau, Carol rejected the value of reflective assignments because she had heard it all before and could find nothing new to learn in the received knowledge. Barb was unable to make sense of the reflective assignments because she believed that she had no personal knowledge about the topic. Eileen encountered emotional anxiety because the received knowledge conflicted with what she thought she already knew.

This resting period is not clearly visible for three possible reasons. First, four of the seven women who had worked through the first stage of the process had chosen, or been required, to complete reflective assignments in their courses for a period of two years. The need to feel validated, as a personal knower in the academic environment, appeared to have been satisfied to some degree by the number of assignments they had completed. Second, Donna's experience indicated that this period of validation and nurturing was structured by the instructor who later nudged Donna to a new understanding of herself by introducing new information and questions that enabled her to look at what she knew from a different perspective. Third, the data indicated that the validation of personal knowledge often seemed to occur without the learner's awareness that it was happening. Some of the women, for example, indicated that their first reflective assignment, a self-reflective journal, was consistently validated by the instructor and such feedback indirectly supported this resting period.

Beginning a reflective assignment with what is known personally is important to the learning process and enables the learner to gain confidence in herself as a knowledgeable person. Bringing personal knowledge from the inside to the outside makes it concrete. The women in this study indicated that having their personal knowledge written in a concrete form enabled them to become aware of their personal knowing and abilities, and that increased personal awareness leads to increased self-confidence.

I have called this transition from stage one to stage two a resting period. However, I do not mean to imply that this period is a passive or inactive state of being. I suspect that it is a very dynamic period and plays a significant role in the whole process of

completing reflective assignments, especially for learners who have had few of their lived experiences validated in the academic environment. Further study is required to explore this transitional period.

Various authors in the literature support the importance of acknowledging personal knowledge. Knowles (1990) stresses the importance of validating the learner's experiences. He points out that because experience constructs our reality, rejecting or devaluing an adult's experiences is understood by the learner as a rejection of self as a person. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) point out that "[e]very woman . . . needs to know that she is capable of intelligent thought, and she needs to know it right away" (p.193). Litner, Rossiter, and Taylor (1992) identify journal writing, autobiographical papers and story telling as activities that support validation of personal and private experiences. They indicate that the instructor needs to act as an enabler, and needs to demonstrate a belief in the process. Validation enables the learner to recognize herself as a knowing and knowledgeable person. Validation of internal or personal knowledge sets the stage for the second step in the process, making sense of learning through reflective assignments.

5.4 Making Sense of Learning through Reflective Assignments

Reflective assignments provide the opportunity to integrate internal and external knowledge, and to make sense of what is being learned. The women in this study reported that their initial understanding of the reflection process was as an academic thinking exercise that sets internal knowledge, feelings, and intuitions aside in order to make an objective analysis of external knowledge. In this academic reflective process,

internal experience and knowledge are concealed and personal comments are supported with references to other writers. Making sense of learning through reflective assignments involves making a transition from reflection as an academic thinking exercise, to reflection as a process of connecting new information and academic experiences with personal knowledge, feelings and experiences in order to support personal development and improve future actions. Seven of the women appeared to have made sense of writing reflective assignments and had reached the resting plateau. Four of these women appeared to have made sense of learning through reflective assignments to some degree, depending on whether they understand the activity as an assignment for the instructor or as a tool for personal learning and development.

Two of these four women, Helen and Laura, were in the adult education program and two, Karen and Gail, were in the social work program. All four had two years of experience with completing required or optional reflective assignments in the majority of the courses they had taken in their programs. The two women in the adult education program indicated that they do reflective assignments for themselves. They told me that reflective assignments had become less of a final assignment done for the instructor, and more of an activity that enabled them to understand what they had learned and how they could use what they had learned.

The two women in the social work program indicated that they do the assignments for the instructors. They told me that reflective assignments deepened their understanding about the course content or the new experience, enabled them to remember information for a longer period of time, and supported self-awareness and personal development. But they also indicated that, after two years of writing reflective

assignments, they continued to think of them as assignments for the instructor. Gail told me that her recent experiences were different from her earlier experiences because "I've just learned how to do [them]. Maybe I went from kindergarten to grade three or whatever" (p.11). Later in the interview she told me:

> [In the beginning] I needed guidelines [that were not provided], and so I was groping and so I did the best I could by writing about the whole experience. I can see now how fearful I was. Like what if I do it wrong?. . . . .I'm just learning now that it's okay to be wrong. It's okay to fail. (p.15)

The more instructions and guidelines provided by the instructor, the more comfort Karen and Gail felt with completing the assignment.

All four women understood that the reflective learning process involved integrating personal knowledge with new knowledge and experiences. Gail, in the social work program, indicated that journal keeping had become so valuable for her learning that she keeps a journal even if there is no required journal assignment. But Gail and Karen expressed more concern about meeting the instructor's expectations for a course reflective assignment than the women in the adult education program. Both the women in the social work program expressed doubts about whether they are making the "right connections" between the received knowledge and their personal knowledge.

Of the seven women who had reached the resting plateau, three had written fewer assignments than the four women mentioned above and had not clearly made sense of learning through reflective assignments. Donna, the graduate student in nursing, described one of her assignments as personally transformative, but gave the credit to the instructor. And although, Donna valued her reflective learning experiences, she was not offering the same experience to the students she was presently instructing. Freda understood self-reflection as something she did for herself, rather than something she did

for the instructor; however, she indicated that her status as a learner in the academic environment was a vulnerable position, and that she concealed things about herself that might jeopardize her grades. Her cautiousness suggests that her reflective assignments are being done for the instructor. Ann, in the adult education program, kept her private information private by writing a self-reflective paper for herself and then re-writing it for the instructor with private details omitted. Ann, also told me: "I probably wouldn't do the reflection, if [the instructor] didn't force me to do it" (p.17).

Two factors seem to account for the difference between doing the assignment for the instructor or doing it for oneself. One factor is the amount of security and support felt by the learner. Laura indicated that "there are some instructors that you feel more that you can let yourself be yourself.. . . [and] there have been professors where you get an idea of what they want and it's that pedagogical concept of give them what they want" (p.13). Donna pointed out that the learning environment had to offer a variety of things in order for the learner to enter into the process: "[The instructors] have to be caring. [They] have to be non-judgmental. There has to be small classes. There has to be intimacy. I think there has to be a whole combination, and there has to be the right chemistry" (p.17). I concluded that when the learner feels vulnerable in the learning environment, she will complete the activity as an assignment for the instructor.

The second factor in the difference between doing it for the instructor or doing it for oneself is the learner's personal knowledge about reflection and the learning process, and her confidence with being personally involved in her own learning process. The two women with two years of experience in the adult education program had the opportunity to receive information about adult learning concepts and theories. They had written

numerous reflective assignments which had enabled them to integrate received knowledge about learning with their personal experiences. And they had opportunities, through self-evaluation of learning papers, to gain experience with taking responsibility for their personal learning.

The women in this study managed to make sense of learning with reflective assignments in a number of ways that are similar to the way in which they made sense of writing a reflective assignment: by trying and succeeding, by using the guidelines, and by learning about reflective learning through course content. The fewer resources the learner had available to her as she tried to make sense of learning through reflective assignments, the more difficult it was for her to have confidence in her new understanding. Dialogue between learner and instructor, and among learners themselves, was viewed as being important throughout the entire process, but was particularly important at this stage because the learner needed to know that her understandings made sense to others.

My conversations with the women in the adult education program indicated that external resources can support making sense of learning through reflective assignments. External resources include information about adult learning and development that enables the learner to learn about herself better as a learner, to validate her learning style, and to gain an understanding of the reflective learning process. The two women in the adult education program pointed out that understanding ideas and concepts of adult education, and the assumptions that support reflective learning assignments acted as resources in bridging the gap between teaching-centered experiences and learning-centered experiences. Bridging the gap enabled them to move from completing an assignment for the instructor, to being able to view the activity as a personal learning tool in the

development of a reflective practitioner. Other external resources mentioned by the participants included such things as suggestions for initiating the process, feedback that enables making connection between knowledge and feelings, and questions or feedback that enabled opportunities to re-frame ideas.

As the women gained increased self-awareness and self-confidence as learners, they also developed a personal process for reflective learning that was congruent with their personal style of learning. Laura used a process that is validated in the literature as an effective learning process. Helen used a process that she had been using in her personal life. She felt confident using her personal style of reflection in academic settings because it validated the new information she was receiving. She indicated that becoming more conscious of her personal style had allowed her to use it more effectively.

The data indicate that most of the women in this study wanted and would have benefited from more support in understanding the connections between learning and reflection. Various writers acknowledge the importance of providing information about and support for reflective learning. Making sense of learning through reflective assignments involves understanding *self* as an active constructor of knowledge, and reflection as the activity that supports the process. Loughran (1996), for example, points out that, if the aim of the program is to develop reflective practitioners, it is important to focus on "the association between learning and reflection" (p.18). The data indicate that as the learners in the Adult Education program gain an understanding of adult learning theories, they are more conscious of the association between learning and reflection.

5.5 Summary

Reflective learning activities are based on assumptions about knowledge and learning that are different from the assumptions that support the more familiar learning activities in the university environment. Until fairly recently the only model of education available was a pedagogical model in which "the teacher has full responsibility for making all the decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and if it has been learned" (Knowles, 1990, 54). Knowles describes the educational model with which these ten women were most familiar when they began their present program of study and encountered reflective assignments.

Activities that are identified as reflective assignments recognize *self* as a source of knowledge and learning, and emphasize the role of personal experience in the learning process. The conversations with the ten women who participated in this study indicated that the process of making sense of reflective assignments is a two-stage process. The first stage involves making sense of the assignment itself. The second stage involves making sense of learning through the reflective assignment. In between the two stages is a resting period or plateau where the learner can relax in the realization that she has knowledge that is important to her learning process and that is valued by the instructor.

Most of the reflective assignment experiences described by the women in this study were limited to their most recent programs of study in adult education, nursing, and social work. Therefore, one might conclude that the adult education, nursing and social work programs have accepted that, although information is important and necessary, beyond the requirement of information "[s]elf-understanding and connectedness is now deemed essential to human problem solving and even discovery of new knowledge"

(Bevis & Watson, 1989, 3). Lewis and William (1994) write that over the past decade experiential learning activities, including reflecting on experience, have become accepted by adult educators as "fundamental to meaningful learning" (p.5). Although self-understanding may be understood as important to the learning process, the women indicate that not every learning environment provides the external resources to support learning and development through reflective assignments.

Learning to be reflective as a learner supports becoming a reflective practitioner, but completing reflective assignments does not necessarily mean that the learner is developing reflective learning skills. When the learner is able to make sense of both writing reflective assignments and learning through reflective assignments, the course requirement becomes more of a tool for learning and less of an assignment for the instructor.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

The use of reflective assignments is a relatively recent development in the academic environment, and supports a belief that an important goal of education is helping learners become more aware of themselves and of their own knowledge about what they are experiencing and learning. The purpose of this study was to explore how mature women learners experience and understand reflective assignments as a learning activity. The data indicated that not all the learners in this study welcomed the opportunity to learn using reflective learning activities. Further, some of the learners, those who had experienced positive learning outcomes from completing reflective assignments, indicated that an initial encounter with a reflective assignment created a significant amount of confusion and discomfort. The data provided some understanding about the learning needs of mature women learners when completing reflective assignments, and served as a base for making suggestions to reduce learner's confusion and discomfort, and to increase learner's awareness of personal learning.

An inductive and grounded approach to the study enabled me to conduct face-to-face interviews and use a constant comparative process to analyze the data and guide the direction of the study. The data analysis identified a two-stage process in learning to complete reflective assignments, with a stabilizing or resting period between the two stages. The first stage requires the learner to make sense of what it means to write a reflective assignment. The second stage requires the learner to make sense of what it means to learn through writing reflective assignments. Between the two stages is a resting

period or plateau in which the validation of personal knowledge becomes important to the learning process because it enables the learner to recognize herself as a knowing and knowledgeable person.

Recommendations arising from the study are directed to instructors who are in positions to facilitate and enable the learning experiences of learners who must complete a reflective assignment as part of their course requirements. The next two sections describe my conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions for further study.

6.1 Conclusions and Recommendations

When I began this study I was aware that within the literature on adult learning, reflection is recognized as an essential component of effective learning. I knew that the courses in the adult education program usually have course requirements that include a journal, an autobiographical, or a reflective paper. Most of the courses that I took also included a paper, sometimes called a letter to the professor, describing what I had learned as a result of taking the course. I was also aware that some courses in the social work and nursing programs required reflective assignments. Except for one journal assignment that was required for an Intersession undergraduate course, I had no previous experience with reflective assignments. However, I welcomed these reflective assignments and preferred them over the essays and academic papers with which I was more familiar. I knew that some learners felt the same way that I did, while other learners were very uncomfortable with reflective assignments.

The interview data provided me with information about the experiences and understandings of ten women, over the age of thirty, who had completed at least one

reflective assignment. Most of the women I interviewed, when thinking back to the reflective assignments they have completed, remembered the assignments as positive experiences that supported personal growth and development. Most confirmed that their reflective assignments supported a reflective process that is different from their usual academic assignments. The women told me that a reflective process that included personal knowledge and experience increased their understanding about themselves as persons and about themselves in relation to the course information or experiences. Reflective assignments enabled personal growth and development that felt whole to the women. Apps (1996) writes that although most of us believe that we learn only with our heads, we are in fact a combination of intellect, emotion, body, and mind, and that effective learning requires that the whole person be used in the learning process.

The strongest impression I gained from the data, however, was that even though most of the women valued the outcomes of reflective learning activities, they either remembered having, or continued to have feelings of concern regarding what was expected from the assignment. I understood that they would have felt more confident and would have learned more effectively if they had a greater understanding about learning in general and reflective learning in particular. Their willingness and ability to engage in the reflective learning process increased when they felt assured that the instructor valued reflective learning activities and validated *self* as a source of knowledge and learning.

In most university courses, assignments have traditionally been understood as activities completed in order for the instructor to evaluate the learning that has taken place in the learner. Instructors who use reflective assignments, like the learners who must complete these assignments, may need additional knowledge about what can be

learned through reflective assignments and about the connections between learning and reflection. They may need mentors to enable them to make the transition from transmitting information and skills, to supporting and enabling learning and development. For example, as long as instructors retain responsibility for evaluating reflective assignments, the learners may have difficulty understanding reflective activities as personal learning tools. The two women who had taken adult education courses for two years stand out from the other women as having embraced a reflective learning stance that includes understanding the assignment as a personal learning tool.

Most of the women indicated that lack of directions and guidance from instructors increased their feelings of uncertainty about what the instructors expected them to learn from the activity. The feelings of discomfort and uncertainty created roadblocks to effective learning. MacKeracher (1996) writes that because learning is fundamental to our humanness, the role of the instructor is to avoid creating roadblocks to the process of learning; and if roadblocks do occur, to neutralize them. My learning from this study guides the suggestions in the next five sections:

1. Acknowledge the learners' need to make meaning of the what, why, and how of reflective assignments
2. Acknowledge and validate the diversity of learners in the learning environment
3. Acknowledge and validate the disorientation learners may be experiencing
4. Acknowledge and validate personal experience and knowledge as important to the learning process, in addition to introducing new information
5. Acknowledge that some learners may be unable or unwilling to make sense of the assignment

These suggestions may assist instructors to avoid creating roadblocks and may aid them to facilitate and enable effective reflective assignments.

6.1.1 Acknowledge the learners' need to know the what, why, and how of reflective assignments

The initial stage of making sense of writing the reflective assignment can be supported by initiating a discussion about what the learners understand about reflective assignments. The instructor can contribute her/his understanding about the *what*, *how*, and *why* of reflective learning. Instructors need to know their objectives for the assignment and to communicate these objectives to the learners. Instructors need to model the reflective learning approach in order support the unfamiliar learning activity. They can model this approach by building rapport, between instructor and students and among students themselves, that legitimizes differences in perspectives and partnerships in learning.

The women in this study indicated that it is helpful to have some suggestions for beginning the writing process. Some of the women found that looking at examples of reflective writing gave them confidence in their ability to do the assignments. Beginning with a structured approach to the assignment enables the learner to gain confidence in her ability and eventually find the reflective process that best suits her style of learning.

6.1.2 Acknowledge and validate the diversity of learners in the environment

Instructors are advised to avoid assuming that all learners know how to complete a reflective assignment. Learners bring their personal experiences with learning to the learning environment. Some learners may have completed numerous reflective assignments, while others may be encountering them for the first time. Even learners who

have completed a number of reflective assignments may have previously been unable to make sense of writing such assignments.

One suggestion is to facilitate periodic class discussions about learners' experiences with completing their reflective assignments. Such discussions will enable learners to articulate their concerns and will provide an opportunity for the instructor to acknowledge and validate the diversity of learners as a positive aspect of the learning environment. Those learners who have never completed a reflective assignment will not feel alone, and those with more experience can act as a support and resource for those with less experience.

6.1.3 Acknowledge and validate the disorientation the learners may be experiencing

Instructors who use reflective assignments as part of course requirements need to be aware that the traditional approach to learning can create a number of roadblocks to completing reflective assignments. Some learners have learned that internal knowledge and personal feelings are not academically sound. Some have learned how to write the expected academic paper, but do not know how to write a reflective paper. Most learners have more understanding of learning as a goal or outcome, and less understanding of learning as a process. Most have less experience with completing an assignment in order to personally understand what they have learned, and more experience with completing an assignment to demonstrate that they have learned what the instructor wanted them to learn.

Class activities that encourage the learner to attend to personal feelings about the assignment may provide opportunities to acknowledge disorientation as a reasonable response to an unfamiliar activity

6.1.4 Acknowledge and validate personal experience and knowledge as important to the learning process, in addition to introducing new information.

Learners need feedback that validates personal knowing and is sensitive to introducing ideas and questions that may support the learner in re-framing her perspective. Some learners need questions that enable them to access their feeling self. Autobiographical writing, for example, enables validation of the learner's personal experience and knowledge, and helps the learner to feel like a knower among academic knowers.

Various writers indicate that confirmation of self as a knower is especially important to the learning experience of most women. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) point out that "[i]n the masculine myth, confirmation [of the self as knower] comes not at the beginning of education but at the end. . . . For women, confirmation and community are prerequisites rather than consequences of development" (pp.193-194). Litner, Rossiter, and Taylor (1992) emphasis the importance of activities that enable learners to identify and articulate their experiences and knowledge, and indicate that when learners begin to articulate personal experience and knowledge, the instructor can begin to introduce the "teacherly contributions, the knowledge of the discipline" (p.299).

Making sense of learning through reflective assignments is supported by information about reflection and learning processes, by guidelines and feedback that enable confidence with the assignment, and by a non-hierarchical learning environment that models and values reflective learning.

6.1.5 Acknowledge that some learners may be unable or unwilling to make sense of the assignment as tool for personal learning

Despite the instructor's best efforts, some learners may be unable or unwilling to make the transition from doing a reflective assignment for the instructor to using a reflective assignment as a tool for personal learning. One of the women in the study expressed her belief that the right "chemistry" must be present in the learning environment in order for reflective assignments to be effective learning activities. The instructor who uses reflective assignments can model the reflective stance by being a reflective learner who is constantly learning from her/his practice as an instructor. Powell (1985) writes that, in his efforts to help students become reflective learners, he frequently alters his approach in "an attempt to close the gap between ideal and reality" (p.50).

6.2 Suggestions for Further Studies

Issues raised by some of the women in this study indicate the need for research that explores instructors' understandings and experiences with reflective assignments. What are the resources and obstacles to using reflective assignments as part of course requirements?

Learners from a variety of programs take adult education courses. Some of these learners have no previous experience with reflective assignments. A study that explores the experiences of these learners might contribute further to knowledge about how to enable and support learners in using reflective assignments as a tool for learning and development.

6.3 Summary

This study provides adult educators with information about the experiences and understandings of ten women, over the age of thirty, who have completed at least one reflective assignment as a course requirement. The data indicate that such experiences tend to be limited to courses in the adult education, nursing, and social work programs. Reflective assignments include such activities as journal keeping, reflective papers, autobiographical papers, and learning and self-assessment papers. Most of the women understood a reflective assignment as different from the more familiar academic assignment. Most told me that the process of completing a reflective assignments enables validation of personal knowing, increased self-awareness, and increased retention of learning. Some of the women indicated that reflective assignments provide opportunities to self-assess their personal learning from the course. A few of the women experienced reflective assignments as having no effect, or a negative effect, on their learning. The experience of not learning from completing reflective assignments appeared to be related to the lack of resources to enable and support reflective learning, to previous learning experiences, and to the learner's understanding about knowledge and learning.

The data analysis identified a two-stage process in learning to complete a reflective assignment. The first stage involves making sense of writing the assignment. The second stage involves making sense of learning through the assignment. Between the two-stages is a resting period or plateau that enables the learner to understand and validate herself as a knower and her personal knowledge as important in the learning process. External resources such as guidelines, feedback, and information about what is known about adult learning can support completing a reflective assignment and

understanding reflective assignments as a tool for personal learning. Further research is needed to help educators understand how to create a mentoring culture for both learners who must complete reflective assignments and the instructors who assign reflective assignments.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Review the outline of the study as indicated in the consent form, answer any remaining questions the participant may still have about the study, and have the informed consent form (Appendix C) signed in duplicate. One copy of the form remains with the participant and the researcher retains the other copy.

1. Will you begin by telling me about your most recent experience with completing a reflective assignment for one of your courses?

   >What types of reflective assignments have you completed?

   >How is this recent experience the same or different from other experiences?

   >If I overheard a group of learners talking among themselves about a reflective assignment they had to complete, what might I hear them saying?

2. How do you understand reflective assignments in relation to your academic growth and development?

   >What do you understand as functions of reflective assignments?

   >Will you take me through the process of writing a reflective assignment?

   >What helps the process? What hinders the process?

   > Are you aware of growth and development as a result of reflective assignments?

3. How do you understand reflective assignments in relation to your personal development?
4. When we talk about reflection, how do you understand that word?
5. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about completing reflective assignments?

Appendix B

Interview Schedule

Review the outline of the study as indicated in the consent form, answer any remaining questions the participant may still have about the study, and have the informed consent form (Appendix C) signed in duplicate. One copy of the form remains with the participant and the researcher retains the other copy.

1. Let's begin by talking about your experiences with completing reflective assignments for your course work.

   What types of reflective assignments have you completed?

   What was your first experience in doing such an assignment like?

   How is your most recent experience similar or different?

2. I would like to hear about the process you follow in completing a reflective assignment.
3. What instructions were provided for doing reflective assignments?

   What supports were available for completing the assignment?

   What problems did you encounter in completing the assignment?

4. How do you understand the purpose of completing reflective assignments?
5. How do you understand reflective assignments as a means for evaluating your learning in the course?
6. I would like to hear about the effect reflective assignments have had on your learning and development? in relation to the course

   in relation to your professional development

   in relation to you personal development

7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about completing reflective assignments?

Appendix C
Informed Consent Form

This form reviews the personal research project that I discussed with you previously. I am a Master's of Education candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick. To complete the degree I must carry out a research project and submit the analysis of the results to an examining committee. The following is an outline of the study.

Researcher: Joan Brewer, under the supervision of Dr. D. M. MacKeracher, Faculty of Education, UNB, Fredericton, N.B.

Purpose: The object of this study is to explore how mature women learners in higher education understand and experience reflective assignments in relation to their learning and development.

Benefits: I anticipate that the data will provide insights into the learning needs of mature women learners regarding reflective assignments, and may contribute to our understanding of strategies that assist all learners.

Procedure: The data will be collected in individual interviews that are expected to last 60 to 90 minutes. The location and the time of the interview will be at your convenience. Each interview will be audiotaped in order to ensure that no information is lost. Emerging analysis and conclusions will be shared with you, whenever possible, in order to clarify my ideas about the development of meanings, patterns and understandings from the data.

Rights of the participant:

- Any information shared with me will be strictly confidential and your participation will be kept confidential.
- You will not be personally identified in any report or publication of this study, and any information that may link the discussion to you will be disguised through the use of pseudonyms and by removing any information that might identify you.
- The interview tapes will not be heard by anyone else, and will be erased once the interview has been transcribed with any personally identifying information removed.
- You are free to withdraw at any time and to refuse to answer any questions. No reasons need be given for such refusal or withdrawal.
- You will have the opportunity to receive a summary of the final report if you so desire.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project.

The study described above has been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions. I have read the above outline of the study and understand it. I voluntarily agree to be interviewed as part of data gathering for Joan Brewer's research project.

_____ _____

Signature of participant Date

_____ _____ _____

Joan E.Brewer (Researcher) Phone # Date

One copy of this consent form is to be left with the participant. A second copy is to be kept by the researcher.