

My Educational Journey

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The alarm goes off at 6am. On the way outside with the dogs, the on button for the coffee pot is pushed and the day begins. I empty the dishwasher, prepare my breakfast, and start a load of laundry. As I wash my face and brush my hair, I make a mental note of the tasks of the day ahead. As an adult student, I leave nothing to chance. A plan must be in place for everything in order to manage my time and stay on task. I work two part-time jobs in addition to my full-time employment and attend a doctoral program in a research university in the United States of America. To say that life is busy would be an understatement, but I persist because I want to succeed in my program and to help other adult students do the same. Sometimes my day does not end until after 10pm. Why do I do it? The answer is simple. I love to learn. I want to show my children that you are never too old to gain or share knowledge. I want to enjoy what I do and to have a better quality of life. For many, attending a doctoral program is not possible and I am grateful to have the opportunity to continue my education, my quest for knowledge. I hope to be a role model for other adult students and to inspire others to follow their dreams. My hope is that other mature learners will have the opportunity to experience ongoing learning regardless of their age.

Background

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that "...in fall 2015, among part-time graduate students, adults age 30 and over comprised 80 percent of the students at private for-profit institutions, 62 percent at private nonprofit institutions, and 59 percent at public institutions" (The Condition of Education Characteristics of Postsecondary Students, 2017). These statistics show that there are a high percentage of adult students attending various institutions in the United States. It is inspiring to imagine a learning environment with shared dialogue among a room of diverse learners. I think about the changes that could ensue with a community of traditional and non-traditional students. I envision the sharing of experiences, interests, and goals. It is exciting to understand how similar or different traditional and non-traditional learners can be.

Method

For this personal narrative, I utilized a self-study research design. Over the course of my non-traditional learning experiences, I have incorporated journal writing and self-reflection into my studies. In addition to using my own personal experiences, I also drew from a TED talk by Richard St. John, the writings of Don Miguel Ruiz, and others to show that adult learners are strong and driven in their will to succeed. While this narrative allows for a sharing of personal experiences and stories, my hope is that it will allow other adult learners to relate to these stories and support them in their educational endeavors.

Leading With a Story

We all have a story to tell. Jack Mezirow tells us the story of his wife's return to school in the 1970's and, in examining her experience, discusses the theory of transformative learning. Mezirow (1978) shows that for adults a unique kind of learning is central to adult development ...learning how we are caught in our own history and reliving it. We learn to become critically

aware of cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives. (p. 101)

When we tell our story, we share our history and allow others to connect and relate to our lived experiences. As an adult learner and future adult educator, it is important to share my story so that others may see that they are not alone.

I returned to college after my divorce. I moved to Georgia, and people of all ages and lifestyles surrounded me. I was inspired by their drive and dedication to education. I knew that I would need to better myself to provide for my family and decided to go back to school to earn my bachelor's degree. It was not easy to work full-time during the day and attend classes full-time at night, but with the support of family, I was able to obtain my bachelor's degree in psychology. I remember rushing home from work to prepare dinner and then rushing off to classes until bedtime. I spent many weekends studying and trying to meet the needs of my family. I would take textbooks to doctor's appointments or my children's activities so that I could read while I waited. Sometimes, I wonder how I was able to keep up that routine for three years, but I like to think that I provided a positive example for my children as well as for other adults that I encountered.

During this time, I underwent surgery and treatment for thyroid cancer. I adjusted my course schedule to allow for treatment, but I did not quit. I think my cancer diagnosis increased my desire to finish my education. I wasn't going to let cancer get the best of me! Looking back, I marvel at my stamina and my continued efforts to get my degree. I know I spent many nights wondering if I was doing the right thing. I wondered if I was neglecting my family or giving less than a hundred per cent at work. There was a lot of self-doubt, but I persisted. I think I wanted to prove to myself that I could finish school and earn my degree. After getting my bachelor's degree, I wanted more. I enjoyed the process of learning. It provided me an opportunity to meet other like-minded individuals, as well as allowed me a way of expressing my hopes and dreams. It is funny to think that I grew up wanting to be a wife and mother. I thought that was my chosen path. After my divorce, I had to change my way of thinking about my life. I had to be strong for my children and to be able to provide for them. Life does not always give you what you want, but it does offer opportunities. My divorce, my move to Athens, my cancer, all of these things provided me the opportunity to explore other sides of myself that I did not know existed. I learned about my strength and resilience. I found a passion for learning. I discovered that I could be a mother and a student, ultimately deciding to return for a master's degree and now a doctoral degree. In sharing my story, I hope that I can support other adult learners on their journey. It is nice to know that we are not alone in our pursuit of knowledge or in our quest for change. Judy Brown (2008) discusses leading with a story to impart change in her guide to reflective practice

As I have worked with organizations of all kinds over the decades, I have noticed that it seems mostly in telling stories that we have something that can be offered to others in a form that they can welcome, take in, digest, and which nourishes them. (p. 120)

What is your story? For me, my story is about perseverance. I share my story so that other adult learners can see that they are not alone on their journey. It is important to find resources that help us build confidence and find the strength to succeed.

I recently watched a TED talk by Richard St. John titled 8 Secrets of Success (https://www.ted.com/talks/richard_st_john_s_8_secrets_of_success?language=en) which helps me to capture my quest for success. Richard St. John begins by stating that on being asked about success by a high school student he decided to ask all of the successful folks at TED to describe success, and he ultimately came up with a list of eight words: passion, work, good, focus, push,

serve, ideas, and persist. I will not analyze each of these eight words, but you may notice a common theme among them. Success does not generally come easily. It takes dedication and hard work. I wonder if we would attain a feeling of accomplishment if success came easily. Perhaps not, which is what makes it so meaningful.

St. John discusses that to succeed one must work. There is a lot of hard work involved in being successful especially in a doctoral program. I sometimes feel as though I am in over my head, but at these times, I look to my classmates. With the support and assistance of this community, I feel as though this work is somehow more manageable. We are all struggling to balance work, family, school, and life. No one would say that a doctoral program is easy but being able to reach out to a classmate helps to ease the workload. We are sharing in this adventure and offering each other support and guidance. This sharing of ideas and knowledge is a community of practice (CoP). Etienne Wenger describes a CoP as having three dimensions. These dimensions are mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). In other words, in order to be a CoP, all must have a shared interest or idea as well as the ability to engage with each other in a way that allows for support and accountability individually and as a group. Within my community, I see mutual respect, a shared goal of becoming leaders in adult learning or organizational development, and the establishment of long-term relationships which allow us to help each other succeed. I find that reaching out to my classmates when I am feeling down or defeated helps me to work through the doubt. We provide strength, emotional and academic support, and guidance to each other. We are a community of adult learners.

St. John also states that push is a key factor in success. You must push yourself through. "Through what?" you may ask. Whatever is in your way would be my response. I have a very Type-A personality. I work hard, like order and control, and have a tendency to be impatient. I have high expectations for others and myself. For example, I graduated with my Master's degree with a perfect 4.0 GPA. I requested the official transcript because I earned it and I wanted to hold it in my hand. I wanted to be able to look at it and refer to it when I feel overwhelmed or inadequate. When I look at this transcript, it helps me to attack my feelings of self-doubt and it urges me to continue, no matter how difficult it may seem right now. I need to push through self-doubt and overcome the feelings of being an imposter in this doctoral program. I need to remind myself that I would not be here if I were not worthy. When I recall the first day of my doctoral program, I remember hearing my classmates describe their job titles and feeling as though I did not belong. Here I was, surrounded by lawyers, associate deans, and directors, feeling as though someone had made a mistake.

I was a program coordinator, newly in my role, and I felt like I was an imposter. How would I measure up against these talented individuals? I had spent the greater part of my adult life as a stay-at-home mom. I could not believe that I had anything to offer this well-educated and accomplished group of individuals. My first inclination was to leave, but I forced myself to stay and participate with those around me and to share my voice. I found that I was able to engage in meaningful conversations with my classmates. They did not judge me for my job title or my delay in obtaining my education. They offered me support and acceptance. I would be lying if I said that the feelings of self-doubt don't creep up on me sometimes, but when I begin to feel like I don't belong, I take a deep breath and think about my family and my classmates. I remind myself that I am good enough, that I have something to offer other learners, and I continue. Sometimes, I look at the transcript showing the 4.0 grade point average to remind myself that I do deserve this opportunity, and it pushes me, it motivates me to continue.

Knowles, Holton & Swanson (2005) say, “Adults are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries, and the like), but the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, and the like)” (p. 68). These motivators are what push us to succeed. For me, I want to be a better person and a positive role model for my children. My motivation as a non-traditional student is to be proud of my work. I want to look forward to a career that provides me with more than a paycheck. I want to make a difference. The reason I am pursuing my doctorate is that I have a passion for learning. I believe that education is the key to my intellectual and professional growth. I want to influence others to achieve their dreams, which leads me to another of St. John’s keys to success.

To be successful, one needs to serve. What do I mean by serve? I need to offer something of value to those around me, whether that is my classmates, my professors, or my family. I asked myself what I could offer that held value and I realized that I could offer myself. My presence, my time, my attention, and my respect are all items of value. Opening my mind to new experiences and knowledge and sharing the knowledge that I have with others is valuable. Brown (2008) discusses rearranging the furniture in relation to dialogue. She says, “...all good work begins with rearranging the furniture--not only the physical furniture, as it turns out, but the fixed furniture of our minds, the tight edgy ways of thinking that keep us from opening out to others” (p. 209). This concept is so simple yet so complex. As an adult learner, I am called upon to change my way of knowing--to rearrange my thoughts and habits. In this way, I am offering myself for the transformation of knowledge. I am sharing pieces of myself with those around me and, ultimately, engaging in a community of other like-minded adults on this quest for success.

This “rearranging of the furniture” opens me up to ideas. I need to listen, observe, ask questions, solve problems, make connections, and be curious. This educational journey requires me to have many ideas. These ideas will be so crucial to my success. I need to keep my eyes and ears open. I am taking part in a cycle of asking questions, applying concepts, evaluating results, and observing change. I must not allow myself to be intimidated by those who are more knowledgeable than I am. I need to allow myself to learn from them. By making connections, I can gain access to data and knowledge. I need to share my ideas with my professors and my classmates. These ideas will help to enlighten others, as well as myself. They will help me to grow as a person, a professional, and as a student. In addition to my formal education, I am gaining knowledge on informal matters such as tolerance and respect for those around me. I am continually exposed to people that are different from myself. I am experiencing different cultural educational perspectives. I find my communication skills improving as I am developing better listening and speaking skills. Sometimes it is difficult to balance my obligations, but I must persist. Richard St. John says “You must persist through crap!” CRAP is an acronym, which stands for: Criticism, Rejection, Assholes and Pressure.

I think that we have all experienced this or parts of this, whether it was in our personal or professional life. While it is difficult to experience criticism, rejection, a-holes, and pressure, these things make us stronger.

Rejection is never easy. I think it stirs up feelings as far back as childhood. It reminds me of picking teams in gym class. No one wanted to be the last one chosen. It was embarrassing and belittling. In essence, it was a form of rejection. We are constantly experiencing various forms of rejection in life, whether it is for a job, a friendship, a marriage. When you are denied the job you want, you persist. You continue to apply for jobs, send out resumes, and go on interviews. No one succeeds by sitting on the couch watching Netflix. I do not think I have ever heard anyone say that

rejection was easy, but it does build character. It strengthens your resolve to succeed. Sometimes, that little voice inside you says, "I'll show her! I will get a better job!" and it leads you to succeed. I think that this holds true for my educational journey, as well. Perhaps a professor discounts your ideas or your interest in a learning process. This rejection may make you feel silly or naïve, but it drives you to overcome these feelings and prosper.

I think that learning is supposed to expose you to new ideas, whether those ideas are right or wrong, so when feelings of rejection wash over me, I remember that part of the learning process is to see all sides of the process. I must take the good with the bad. My first semester in the doctoral program I was asked to write a literature review. I had never written something like this before, but I completed the assignment in a way that I thought to be correct. Imagine my feelings of defeat when I received the assignment back with a note from the professor saying, "You totally dropped the ball on this". After I picked myself up off the floor, I set forth on re-doing the assignment and improving upon my grade. I tell this story because there is rejection all around us and we can turn dreadful into great by changing our approach or reaching out for assistance. These experiences help me to see the type of leader I want to be. I do not want to appear dismissive, so I will remember these moments and develop the skills that will help me to support my students in the future so that they do not feel rejected by my actions.

I will also remember the confirmatory moments in my life that guide me on this pursuit. For example, I am currently working with a new faculty director. After working with me over the course of a couple of days, he came to me to say that he wanted to comment on the good relationship I have with the medical students. He said that they seem comfortable with me and they trust that I will listen without judgement and provide the resources that they seek. He felt it was important to have someone like me for the students. I was touched to hear this, as I just do what comes naturally and what feels right in that moment. I think my motherly instinct kicks in and guides my actions, directs me to provide what the student needs at that time. Whatever it is that leads me, it seems that it is directing me in the right direction. I appreciate that I am seen as a leader that is kind, honest, and approachable.

The fear of rejection upon completion of this doctoral program also lingers over me. I often wonder if I will be too old to gain a professorial position. I contemplate whether the younger graduate will win. When these thoughts consume me, I think about how it feels when I am standing in front of a group of students and how wonderful it is when they "get it." These feelings help me to put the fear of rejection aside and focus on the adventure itself because I think that those that I encounter on this educational expedition will help me reach my goals. Unfortunately, I may also encounter those that do not support me or perhaps try to hinder my advancements, which leads me to the next part of the acronym, the a-hole.

We meet many of these people in our lives. It can be a pompous boss or a gossiping co-worker. Whether we want to believe it or not, these people help us to succeed. I have personally walked away from someone like that and thought to myself, "*I do not want to be that person.*" Inadvertently, that person has helped me to succeed in some way. Dealing with that type of individual strengthens your resolve to be a better being. It offers you an opportunity to build your people skills, as well. I am sure that I will encounter people like this during my doctoral journey. I think there are those that believe they are superior in knowledge and stature. I have encountered people with a doctoral degree and felt as though the title meant more to them than the quest that they took. For me, I hope to make a difference in the lives of my students. Yes, I am working my tail off to earn this prestigious distinction but being Dr. Kennedy is not as important to me as

helping others to embrace a love of learning.

Finally, there is pressure--so much pressure. There is the pressure to succeed, survive, progress, excel. There is pressure to eat well, exercise, stay fit, get married, have kids, and go to school. We cannot escape it. Bassot (2013) describes the concept of drivers in Transactional Analysis (TA)

...drivers can be seen as consistent messages we received from our parents or caretakers when we were growing up. They consist of commands about what to do and what not to do, how we should behave and how we should not, plus definitions of people and the world. (p. 76)

She goes on to share the five TA drivers—*Be Perfect, Be Strong, Try Hard, Please (people), and Hurry Up*. Sound familiar? The pressure begins at a very young age. I can remember my parents telling me to try hard and do what my teachers ask. As a parent, I am always trying to be strong for my children, which makes me wonder if my ability to be strong puts pressure on them to do the same. I think that how we deal with this pressure is what leads to success. There is a certain skillset that some of us have which allows us to handle pressure better than others. For example, I break my tasks into smaller, more manageable pieces. I do a few hours of schoolwork, throw in some laundry, take the dogs out, go back to schoolwork, maybe eat a snack; I have multiple tasks to complete on a regular basis. I have a lifetime of experience in multi-tasking.

As adult learners, we all become very proficient at juggling multiple obligations simultaneously. For example, I am a mother, a student, and an employee. I am the mother of two mostly adult children that still live at home with me. I have three dogs and two cats who need my attention, as well. I work a full-time job at a medical school, a part-time job mentoring student athletes, another part-time job as a receptionist, and I am a part-time student in a doctoral program. I have to be very good at time-management in order to meet the needs of multiple entities. The pressure to meet these multiple obligations is often overwhelming when looking at the overall picture, but dividing the tasks into smaller, more manageable pieces allows for some breathing room. If one of the tasks suddenly requires more attention, so be it. There is freedom to re-arrange these tasks. I do not allow the pressure to overwhelm me. Sure, there are times when I would like to crawl under the covers and hide from the responsibilities of life, but how would I succeed if I hid under the covers?

Always Do Your Best

In addition to the TED talk by St. John, I recently re-read *The Four Agreements*, by Don Miguel Ruiz. This text beautifully complements the talk by St. John. Ruiz (1997) discusses four agreements. These agreements are *Be Impeccable with Your Word, Don't Take Anything Personally, Don't Make Assumptions, and Always Do your Best*. He says that when we adopt these agreements we will create a "personal dream of heaven" (p. 23). While it is sometimes difficult to abide by these agreements, I find that his fourth agreement, *Always Do Your Best*, resonates with me. I try to live my life doing the best that I can do. I may not be perfect, but I can close my eyes at night knowing that I did my best, and I can hope that I made a difference. Ruiz discusses the story of Forrest Gump. Ruiz says, "He didn't have great ideas, but he took action. He was happy because he always did his best at whatever he did. He was richly rewarded without expecting any reward at all" (p. 82). I think that is how I treat this doctoral journey. I do not expect a reward and I may not always have great ideas, but I do my best and treat everyone with kindness and respect.

Conclusion

Self-study is one of a reflective practice, whereby deep and critical explorations of the self and practice generate understandings to contribute to professional learning and knowledge (Feldman, 2005). Through this reflection and narrative, I have examined some of the traits of adult learners like myself and shed some light on the challenges that we face in our pursuit of higher education. It is my hope that I have connected my story in a way that allows others to relate their own learning experiences to this exciting educational journey.

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