

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ADULT LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES WITH  
THE PORTFOLIO FORM OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To my mom, Dr. Rosemary Durica, who has provided me with the solid foundation, inspirational guidance, and impeccable modeling of the essence of an adult educator. It is with tremendous pleasure that I have been able to follow your example. Your constant love and unending support are what made this dissertation possible.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Adult learners face a myriad of variables throughout their educational journey. Distinguishing the need to recognize those variables where feasible, institutions of higher education began to implement ways to assess and recognize the prior learning of this population as a viable reservoir of knowledge, in many cases equivalent to that acquired in college-level courses. The portfolio form of Prior Learning Assessment offers adult learners the opportunity to demonstrate their college-level learning acquired during adulthood toward potential course credit. To date, few qualitative studies have been conducted on the perspectives and experiences of adult learners on the portfolio development process. The purpose of this study was to examine adult learners and their experiences developing portfolio(s) that are reflective of their prior learning at the college-level. A phenomenological approach provided the foundational research methodology. The theoretical framework for the proposed study was based on the concept of tacit knowledge, which is relevant to the process by which students uncover and demonstrate their prior knowledge. Experiential learning theories were incorporated for interpreting the participants' descriptions of their experiences with the portfolio process. In-depth phenomenological interviews allowed for the depth and breadth of experiential data from which themes emerged for analysis on the meaning making participants' discovered as a result of the portfolios. By gaining access to this insight into how the portfolio process was experienced from the learners' perspectives we can inform and improve current practices and add to the knowledge base of adult education.

*Hide not your talents. They for use were made. What's a sundial in the shade?*  
- Benjamin Franklin

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction to the Study**

One of the most unique and definitive characteristics of adult learners is experience. Experience, along with the other attributes of adult learners (life style, responsibilities, age, etc.), sets them apart from traditional undergraduate students. These ‘non-traditional’ learners make up a significant part of the undergraduate student population in the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage distribution of adults (defined as students aged 25 and older) enrolled in undergraduate programs for 2007-2008 was 39.1% (NCES.ed.gov, 2009). Representing more than one-third of undergraduate learners, this large adult learner population embodies an array of experiences, the recognition of which provides benefits for adult learners and institutions of higher education.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is a collection of methods used for assessing these non-traditional students in many institutions of higher learning. Of specific relevance to adult learners, PLA allows students to receive credit for previous learning taking place through adult life experiences if that learning is verified as meeting or exceeding the learning outcomes associated with academic course requirements at the institutions where they are seeking credit. The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL) defines PLA as: “a method whereby learning gained through an individual’s life is considered for credit toward a college degree program.” In addition, “a rising number of colleges and universities are using PLA to help adult learners earn college credit for

their demonstrated learning. Credit is given by the institution depending on the criteria set by this PLA-offering institution” (CAEL.org, 2009).

The non-traditional learner population has shifted in size and scope over time. Corresponding with social forces, colleges and universities incorporated PLA into the formal education system in reaction to the changing needs and demographics post-WWII. Consequently, the educational movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s increased the incorporation of PLA in higher education settings (Michelson & Mandell, 2004).

While numerous methods of assessing the prior learning of adults exist and will be explored later in the document, the portfolio method of PLA holds particular advantages as a means of demonstrating and evaluating prior learning, and is the focus of this study. The portfolio method can be used to demonstrate learning in areas where no standardized tests of prior learning exist, and where prior learning did not occur in sites which training has already been evaluated. It allows adults to generate evidence of their prior learning which parallels learning that is expected to occur in college courses (Freers, 1994).

### **Statement of Problem**

As the population of adult learners continues to grow, further exploration of methods assessing the prior learning should be iteratively conducted. Responding to the demands of adult/non-traditional learners, colleges and universities have established programs to support this population. Among these responses, alternative means of acquiring credit toward undergraduate course work have been established. PLA, specifically the portfolio form, provides the means from which to generate college credit based on life experiences, increasing the potential for adult learner success in retention

and program completion (Pearson, 2000). The adoption and use of portfolios for college credit in undergraduate institutions is not a new phenomenon, however, more research is needed on the adult learners' experiences with portfolio assessment, in an effort to glean a more substantial understanding of the portfolio development process.

### **Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of adult students who have completed a Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) seminar course. The study will incorporate phenomenological, in-depth interview methods in order to glean a deeper, richer understanding of the phenomenon of how learners makes sense of the prior learning that serves as the focus of the portfolio and of their experiences with the portfolio development process itself. Information obtained in this study will provide original perspectives on PLA and portfolio development that will add to the field of adult education and inform the practice of portfolios.

The aim of this study was to yield an in-depth and rich description of the learners' experiences of the PLA seminar and subsequent portfolio development process. Interviews focused on adult learners' experiences of the PLA process of documenting their own experiences and reflection in an effort to earn academic credit. The nature of the PLA process for portfolio development and evaluation served as a framework for developing interview focus.

This study adds to the existing body of knowledge on adult learners in higher education by providing different lenses through which to gather data and analyze the value of adult learners' experiences with the portfolio development process.

This was primarily guided by two research questions; one focused on the actual learning that took place and the experiences surrounding it, while the second guiding question examined participant perceptions of the portfolio development process and the accompanying new meaning-making. The guiding research questions were: 1) How do participants perceive their learning experiences with the effort to earn college credit through the portfolio development process and, 2) How do participants make sense of the process of explicating their prior experiential learning as a part of the portfolio process?

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Successful portfolios for college credit often require adult learners to effectively demonstrate their tacit knowledge in an explicit manner. Accordingly, the concept of tacit knowledge, as defined by Polanyi (2005), provides a foundational theoretical framework for this study relevant to the process by which students uncover and make explicit their prior, often unconscious, knowledge. Through documentation and analysis of the experiences of participants, the study yielded greater insight into the essence of this form of PLA. In-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted in order to capture a better sense of the meaning participants make of their experiences of the experiences. According to Seidman (2006), “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” which “provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior” (pp. 9-10). The framework described established the context and meaning of participants’ behaviors, through the phenomenological exploration of the participants’ experiences. Additionally,



theories of experiential learning were useful for interpreting the experiences of students with the portfolio process, including characteristics of self-directed learning.

### **Definition of Terms**

1. Adult learners –Undergraduate student that is age 24 or older, pursuing college credit; learner that has primary responsibilities other than student (e.g. full time employment, parent, retiree, or related roles).
2. American Council on Education (ACE) – Publishes guides for the evaluation of training experiences in business or military for college level credit at a multitude of institutions of higher education (e.g. Program for Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction (PONSII)).
3. Challenge examination – An examination assessing whether a student has the requisite knowledge of course material, objectives, and content in order to gain credit for that course without enrolling in it.
4. Experiential learning –Learning in the context of a real-life situation or learning that occurs through the events in one's life whether that is from classroom study, gaining new skills at work, through training, from online programs or from other domains of adult life.
5. Explicit knowledge – knowledge that can be articulated into formal language, including grammatical statements (words and numbers), mathematical expressions, specifications, manuals, etc. Explicit knowledge can be readily transmitted to others (Clark, 2004).
6. Formal learning – takes place in educational institutions and often leads to degrees or credit(s) (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999)

7. Informal learning – the experiences of everyday living from which we can learn something; contexts where most adult learning takes place (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999)
8. Phenomenology - the study of structures of experience, or consciousness.  
Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena”--the appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2008).
9. Portfolio – the focus of this study is on the use of portfolios as an assessment tool toward earning potential college-level credit. When used for assessment of experiential learning, the portfolio represents the demonstrated abilities, comprehension, and breadth of knowledge on particular subjects.
10. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) – A system to award college credit based on the assessment of previous college-level learning experienced during adulthood through various means. The determining factors for receiving college-level credit through these assessments include content, depth, and breadth of subject matter. There are many options for assessing prior learning, including: credit based on prior evaluation of training programs equivalent to college-level learning, challenge exams, test-based PLA methods, and portfolio development.
11. Situated learning - situated learning is learning that takes place in the same context in which it is applied; learning is situated in a specific context and embedded within a particular social and physical environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

12. Tacit knowledge - is personal knowledge embedded in individual experience and involves intangible factors, such as personal beliefs, perspectives, and value systems. Tacit knowledge is difficult to articulate using formal language since it is typically contains subjective insights, intuitions, and hunches. There are two dimensions to tacit knowledge: (1) Technical Dimension (procedural): This encompasses the kind of informal and skills often captured in the term *know-how*; (2) Cognitive Dimension which consists of beliefs, perceptions, ideals, values, emotions and mental models. This dimension of tacit knowledge shapes the way we perceive the world (Clark, 2004).

13. Test-based PLA methods:

- a. CLEP (College Level Examination Program) – Standardized examination that offers students the opportunity to earn college credit for various, typically general education, courses.
- b. DSST (DANTES Subject Standardized Tests) – Examinations for college credit in various disciplines including Business and Technical fields, but also including general education subject tests.

### **Assumptions**

My background and experiences working with adult learners in multiple educational settings, formal and informal, have influenced my perspectives on adult education. In addition, my assumptions about portfolios have been partially shaped through serving adult learners in higher education. Specifically, my role in admitting, recruiting, and presenting on the positive attributes of the portfolio process, has been influential.

Accordingly, I brought assumptions as a researcher to this proposed study. I assumed that adult learners' experiences with PLA and portfolio development would be mostly positive; I assumed adult learners inherently bring vast amounts of prior experiential learning that can be documented and assessed for college-level credit; I assumed adult learners would be able to reliably and accurately recall and reflect on their experiences with portfolio development; I assumed that adult learners would be able to accurately reflect on and describe specific examples of experiences which occurred when the original learning took place (prior to the construction of the portfolio for credit based on that knowledge, skill, and ability/). While acknowledging that I brought these assumptions, I made a conscious effort to be sure that I "listened to the data" by bracketing my assumptions as much as possible. My interest was in the stories participants have to share and my efforts to remain neutral are important to representing their stories as accurately as possible.

### **Significance of Study**

While much of the research literature on PLA to date seems to draw on transformative learning theory for a conceptual base (Kolb, 1984), (Burris, 1997), (Michelson & Mandell, 2004), (Remington, 2004), (Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010) other literature connects PLA to feminist (Michelson, 1996), emancipatory (Michelson, 1999), and social frameworks (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Previous research using a phenomenological foundation has been conducted using varying methodologies and differing in scope, depth, and focus. Kent (1996), focused on user perception of efficiency of e-portfolio system; Smith (2002), used network sampling across multiple institutions granting credit for PLA at various levels (e.g. vocational-based credit,

educational course credit, and etc.); and Angel (2008), focused on experiences of students receiving PLA credit for vocational and technical skills in community college settings in Canada. This study drew from each of these theoretical perspectives or others, as appropriate to better understand and interpret the stories of the adult learners studied. The use of phenomenological interviews presented the chance to delve deeper into the topic by allowing participants the opportunity to share their stories and experiences with portfolios that sought to understand participants' experiences without a pre-determined theoretical frame.

As posited by Michelson and Mandell, "PLA announces the possibility of access, second chances, improvisation, and know-how as part of the educational field" (Michelson & Mandell, p.10, 2004). Accordingly, this study aimed to provide access to student-centered experiences with PLA, specifically the portfolio development process. Demonstration of prior experiential learning via reflection, documentation, categorization, synthesis and explanation allows adult learners the most wide-ranging options for prior learning assessment. Portfolio development offers students the potential to showcase their entire catalog of experiences, in areas those experiences meet or exceed college-level equivalence, toward academic credit.

This study allowed direct access to participants and attempted to elicit a greater understanding of how the portfolio form of PLA is currently used, how it might be used, and how participants' experiences with the portfolio process allowed new learning to be made from their prior learning. This study also addressed an identified deficiency in the literature, research, and practice of PLA and portfolio assessment, with respect to learners' experiences with the phenomenon. The current database of knowledge and

practice in this field will be strengthened by the student-centered nature of this study. By offering insight into how the portfolio process is perceived by the participants, this research may assist educators with insight into potential improvements for practice. This research should contribute to practices in the fields of adult learning, PLA, and portfolio development in higher education.

### **Personal Biography of the Researcher**

I have more than a dozen years of experience working with adult learners. My first experience was training individuals in a corporate setting. From there, I moved into academics as a recruiter and educational support specialist for a community college district vocational and technical campus. I assisted adult learners in their transition into higher educational settings. At the same time, I earned an M. S. degree in Educational Human Resource Development with a specialization in Adult Education. I moved from community college to a private liberal arts university as an admissions coordinator for the adult undergraduate program. My responsibility was to know the plethora of ways adult learners could earn potential credit for learning acquired through adult life experiences. Currently I am a graduate advising specialist for three graduate degree programs at the institution of higher education that served as the study site. The portfolio form of PLA appeals to me as both an adult learner as well as an adult educator whose main function is to assist students as they weigh a myriad of options in choosing an institution of higher education.

### **Contents of Dissertation**

This research study is divided into six major chapters. Chapter 1 contains an introduction, focus of study, background and rationale for pursuing the research, and

researcher's biographical information. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature. The methodology and procedures are found in Chapter 3, including a framework for analyzing and interpreting data, context and study site, and participant selection criteria. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. The chapter includes an introduction to the participants of the study and a review of how themes emerged from the analyzed data. Chapter 5 delves into the analysis, interpretations, and synthesis of those findings. Key theoretical links and a revisiting of the researcher's assumptions are also explored. The study culminates in Chapter 6 with a presentation of the conclusions of the study and recommendations for both practice and further research. Lastly, some researcher reflections are shared about the journey undertaken from proposal to completion of this study. References and appendixes are also provided.

*If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.*  
- Sir Isaac Newton

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

Adult learners in higher educational settings come equipped with experiences that can overlap with the course and degree requirements of their respective baccalaureate programs. These overlaps in experience and course curriculum offer a unique means for adult learners to potentially receive college credit(s) for the learning acquired in areas that can be demonstrated for assessment of their prior learning. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) programs provide adult learners the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, acquired as an adult, through various methods of assessment toward college credit. The focus of the proposed study is to document and examine the experiences of adult learners who completed a PLA seminar preparing them to develop portfolios to demonstrate their learning and have it assessed for potential course credit.

This review of literature is divided into thematic sections. The sections represent the foundational theoretical literature as well as relevant scholarly research in related areas of practice. Dissertations, theses, and scholarly articles provide interrelated research on which this proposal is partially based. The sections include (a) review of experiential learning in adult educational settings, (b) review of literature on PLA, (c) review of the research on the portfolio process, and (d) summary and suggested areas of further research.



## **The Role of Experience in Theories of Adult Learning**

Early adult educators began to posit what it meant to be an adult learner as well as the uniqueness and barriers this population of learners brought to educational settings. Eduard Lindeman's work in adult education and theoretical writing explains that adult learners' experiences are the richest and most valuable source for their learning (Lindeman, 1926/61). Dewey (1938) describes the importance of experience in education as foundational to learning. Adult learners, by simply performing adult life roles and living lives with numerous responsibilities, bring a wealth of experiences and associated acquired knowledge to their respective institutions of higher education.

Years later, Knowles, et al (1998) described six assumptions as being distinctive to adult learners:

1. The learner's needs are the catalyst for educational pursuits
2. The learner's self-concept informs decisions on education
3. The role of the learner's experiences in educational settings is important
4. The learners demonstrate a readiness to learn
5. The learners demonstrate an orientation to learning
6. Motivation to learn is primarily internal (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, pp. 64-69).

These assumptions are viewed as essential aspects of successful adult learning. Instructors are encouraged to recognize the experiences adult learners bring to the classroom and to create bridges between adult learners' prior knowledge and the curriculum. Institutions of higher education became one such context in which programs for adult learners grew out of the demand and need to support and serve that population.

Fenwick (2001) categorized differing theories of adult experiential learning into five perspectives: Constructivist perspectives, Psychoanalytic perspectives, Situative perspectives, Critical cultural perspectives, and Enactivist perspectives. She notes, “the dominant approach to understanding experiential learning in adult education has revolved around cognitive reflection upon concrete experience, an orientation commonly known as constructivism.” (p. vii). Ideas shared by Dewey, Lindeman, Knowles, as well as Kolb, all fit what Fenwick (2001) correlates with constructivist-based experiential theories by means of what Fenwick refers to as the “central premise: a learner is believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding...of meaning derived from his or her action in the world.” (p. 9). In respect to the implementation and practice of experiential learning in higher educational settings, Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) programs represent what Warner, Weil, and McGill (1989) (as cited in Fenwick, 2001) categorizes as “accredited learning derived from experience for purpose of entry to educational progression or employment.” (p. 6). Adult learners have the option to participate in a variety of assessment methods that focus on previously acquired knowledge and skills, typically for the purpose of educational course credit(s). As further noted in Fenwick (2001) “PLA provides a rare opportunity to explore life experiences and accomplish depth” and “it helps learners actually recognize what they know and can do.” (p. 18).

Experiential adult learning theories that incorporate perspectives associated with constructivist practices serve as basis for educational practices implemented through the various methods of PLA. Accordingly, the next section will further explore the practices and process of PLA.

## **Prior Learning Assessment**

As noted in the previous section, the ability of colleges and universities to effectively assess the experiential knowledge of adult learners is fundamental in regard to identifying needs, providing support, and providing opportunities to utilize that prior learning towards academic success. As such, multiple methods of earning credit for previously acquired learning have been established. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) programs allow adult learners the possibility of earning college-level credit for experiences and knowledge acquired as an adult in various life contexts.

As noted by Michelson and Mandell (2004), virtually all PLA programs are based on experience and learning, and the various learning activities and educational practices are aimed at assisting adult learners to legitimize those experiences through earning college credit. Additionally, they suggest the learning should be self-directed, internally motivated, and flexible, in terms of how prior learning can be assessed and applied (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). This creation of academically credible knowledge offers flexibility and greater ownership of the learning process; thus mirroring the assumptions put forth by foundational adult educators like Dewey, Lindeman, and Knowles.

Suopsis (2009) describes the ever-changing landscape of PLA and the multitude of uses and applications of each form of PLA that occur as a result. “Even though the field of PLA has evolved, the definition of PLA has consistently embraced the student’s ability to document experiential learning through a critical and reflective analysis.”(p.125). Thus the key focus should be on adapting the PLA process to most effectively meet the demands of adult learners making use of PLA. Specifically, Suopsis identified an increase in critical thinking skills, higher perceptions of self-worth, positive

reflective practices, as being among the top student-reported outcomes of PLA. This research article focuses primarily on experiential learning and the foundational theories of Dewey (1938), Knowles (1980), and Kolb (1984).

According to a study of 48 post-secondary institutions conducted by the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL), “PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students.” (p. 7). The incorporation of PLA can serve to hasten the pace of an adult learners’ baccalaureate program, “depending on the number of PLA credits earned.”(CAEL, 2010). One form of PLA is exam-based assessment. The most widely recognized and accepted forms of exam-based PLA are the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST) (Prometrics, 2009). Accordingly, CAEL (2010) research reports “87% of responding institutions said they accepted CLEP exam credits, and DSST is accepted by 48% of responding institutions (CAEL, 2010). Credit is granted at the college-level, typically in course work relegated to general educational topics, through demonstrating subject matter comprehension on a standardized test. According to a study on the institutional incorporation of PLA by Klein-Collins and Hain (2009), “PLA assessments typically cost less than the cost of tuition for the course in questions...so PLA can save the student both time and money, while simultaneously providing the basis for ongoing progress toward the degree.” (p. 187). The benefits of exam forms of PLA are the low risk, high reward balance in that the cost is much less than tuition (low risk) and the reward, if successful on exams, is college credit for that reduced cost. However, exam based PLA lacks depth and breadth in respect to the exams available for assessing prior learning. The CLEP and DSST exams

are more closely aligned with year one (freshman-level) and year two (sophomore-level) courses, thus omitting a wide-range of prior learning with potential for assessment.

In addition to exam-based PLA options, many institutions of higher education will grant credit based on completion of specific occupational experiences, which are pre-approved as equivalent to the respective course objectives. One such recognized form of PLA is credit received through the evaluations of noncollegiate experiences by the national Program on Noncollegiate Sponsored Instruction (PONSI). Other examples include credit earned for military training, Emergency Medical Service (EMS) training, regional law enforcement training certifications such as the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TECLEOSE), and others areas that vary in recognition depending on individual institutions of higher education (CAEL, 2010).

The portfolio form of PLA is the focus of the currently proposed research--specifically educational portfolios developed for assessment towards college credit. Particularly in instances where exam-based PLA does not exist and students have not completed educational programs already evaluated for credit worthiness, portfolios can be used in a plethora of ways for demonstrating one's abilities, experiences, background, achievements, and much more. Findings from research conducted by Peruniak and Powell (2007), suggest there are additional benefits for adult learners that engage in the portfolio form of PLA in addition to the potential for earning credit to accelerate their degree completion. They found,

Almost all of the participants in this study conformed to the economic viewpoint of PLA in terms of motivation. However, most, although not all, respondents experienced a back-eddy effect of realizing such unintended but nonetheless

valued outcomes as self-actualization and an increased depth of learning through reflection (pp. 98-99).

In addition to evidence of saving time and money through PLA, these findings point to the need for further research on reflection.

The scope of this literature review pertains to educational portfolios for potential college credit based on prior learning acquired and the ability of the adult learners to demonstrate that learning as it pertains to specific college-level course objectives. Hence, the next section will discuss a review of the scholarly literature on the portfolio method of PLA.

### **Portfolio form of Prior Learning Assessment**

The portfolio process requires adult learners to reflect, present, and iteratively assess their own level(s) of knowledge of subject matters. Educational portfolios are more than a mere collection of documents and a subject-specific account of knowledge. Zeichner and Wray (2001) described portfolios as “purposeful collections of examples of learning collected over a period of time” providing “evidence of a person’s attainment of competences.” (p. 614). In addition to the ability to demonstrate evidence of prior learning, the process of developing a portfolio contributes to new individual learning (Zeichner & Wray, 2001).

In terms of practice and application of the portfolio form of PLA, in research conducted by CAEL (2010), responding institutions increased the incorporation of portfolio assessment from 66% of institutions using it in 2006 to 88% of responding institutions offering portfolio assessment as a means of PLA credit in 2009. (CAEL, p. 19). According to Conrad, the “portfolio is the vehicle through which learners’ prior

learning can be assessed for credit toward a university credential. More broadly, portfolios serve as repositories of achievement and methods of celebrating growth for lifelong learners” (2008, p.142).

In the literature and research reviewed for this study, four themes emerged related to portfolio development programs and courses: a) program related dimensions (i.e. management, facilitation, and features), b) the portfolio development process (e.g. e-portfolio process), c) learner outcomes, and d) reflection in the assessment or prior learning process.

### **Research on Portfolio Programs**

A quantitative study completed for the Flemish government with the goal of establishing the definition of what a portfolio is, was conducted by Sweygers, Soetewey, Meeus, Struyf, and Pieters (2009). Specifically, this study attempted to identify and inventory the varying uses of portfolios as a form of PLA. The study concluded “the portfolio is undeniably growing in use” despite not being clearly defined. “It can have many different functions and adopt different forms according to those functions.” (p. 101). A distinctive feature of this study was the two types of portfolios identified: the recognition portfolio and the acknowledgement portfolio. “The recognition portfolio mainly fulfills a formative function, while the function of the acknowledgement portfolio is primarily summative.” (p.101). Each type of portfolio can be used to assess prior learning and apply that learning in various settings.

### **Research on the Portfolio Process**

In a study by Freers (1994) the focus was on adult learners and their perceptions of the portfolio process within a particular community college’s PLA program. The

research was based on previously-collected survey data reviewed and analyzed for themes and related content. An “ex post facto” method was used to identify and analyze information in a database containing student information and student-based surveys on the PLA process and program at the study site institution. This quantitative study looked at data such as: characteristics of adult learners in the PLA program at this community college; total credits granted for PLA by the study site pre and post 1990; and what factors correspond with success in PLA credits earned, degree(s) earned/programs completed, and professional goal achievement. Freers found the workplace to be the single largest contributor of experiences/learning used as the basis for portfolios for the population of this study.

Kent (1996) conducted a critical review on adult learner’s insights on their respective PLA programs. The focus of this critical review was to aid in the transformation of PLA programs to a more efficient model and process, specifically the computer-based systems used in some PLA programs. This study differed from other studies reviewed on adult learners’ experiences and perceptions with PLA programs in that, rather than relying on the students’ experiences with the actual learning involved or learning acquired from the development of portfolios, Kent was interested in user perception of the computer system(s) used in e-portfolio (electronic-portfolio) development and how to improve the system. Although experiential-learning was implicit in assessment, the specific experiences analyzed for this study were in regard to the technology in educational settings and how it was being used to facilitate PLA programs.

Yueh (1997) looked at the relationship between the quality of portfolios and the students' use of self-regulated learning. This quantitative study relied on the feedback on



portfolios developed and submitted by 52 students within an Engineering program at the single study site. The quality of portfolios was determined using the feedback from the respective instructors and assessors of the submitted portfolios. As the subject-matter experts, those instructors provided the primary data that informed this study. The findings presented in Yueh's study supported the hypothesis that "there is a relationship between the quality of students' performance on portfolio assessment and their use of self-regulated learning" (p. 136). These findings correlate with the theoretical assumptions of Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) that adult learners tend to be self-reliant in their learning pursuits.

In a phenomenological study by Remington (2004) a collective case study was employed to research the effectiveness of ePortfolio systems. This qualitative research focused on the learners' experiences with the ePortfolio innovation, rather than the learners' experiences with the portfolio development process. The data collected consisted of interviews with administrators, faculty members, and staff at the two site institutions. The feedback provided was specific to the ePortfolio system and its effectiveness as a learning tool and vehicle through which portfolios are developed and assessed.

The findings indicated "four essential key components" for ePortfolio effectiveness: (a) system aligned with the institution's mission, values, and goals, (b) the system is supported by the institution's leadership, (c) the system is a vehicle for life-long learning, (d) and the system engages students in active learning for meaning-making. (pp. 111-114). The incorporation and subsequent research on innovative learning systems for

portfolio development reflects the value of such portfolio programs at institutions of higher education.

### **Research on Learner Portfolio Outcomes**

Research findings from studies of learner outcomes related to portfolio development and assessment include: increased persistence to degree and program completion Pearson (2000); increase in feelings of self-confidence/self-esteem (Blinkhorn, 1999; Freers, 1994; Hayes, 1994); individual growth Freers (1994); and deeper understandings of theory Lamoreaux (2005).

In regard to persistence, a quantitative study conducted by Pearson (2000) investigated predictive persistence of adult learners that completed PLA seminars and developed portfolios. The findings supported the hypothesis that “the portfolio form of PLA was significant in the prediction of persistence”. (p. 122). The aim of Pearson’s study was to develop a model to enable the comparison of the persistence among eligible students who do or do not complete the portfolio. The study found that “the PLA portfolio process is one key intervention” for adult learners to utilize in order to overcome the barriers that population of learners needs to overcome to be successful. (p. 121). In addition, Pearson described the portfolio form of PLA as “the best choice for adult students seeking the baccalaureate degree” based on findings that include greater persistence, affective and cognitive outcomes, and increased self-awareness. (p. 134). Pearson’s findings iterate the value of effective PLA programs and reflect the importance of the portfolio form of PLA as a means to persistence in educational programs.

In a case study utilizing the proposed study site, Hayes (1994) examined the portfolio development process, specifically the learning outcomes of the adult learners

participating in that form of PLA. Among her findings, Hayes notes “PLA continues to be a valuable alternative for granting college credit, especially for a diversified student body such as the homebound, rural bound, global transient worker, prisoners, on-site retraining, or those with language deficits.” (p. 126). Insights were gleaned with respect to participants’ perceptions of increased personal insight and self-esteem through the incorporation of projects that allowed them the use of their prior learning endeavors (Hayes, 1994, pp. 126-127). Although the study conducted by Hayes utilized the same study site as this study, the aim of Hayes’ research was program-based. This study will explore the experiences of participants as the primary data source, rather than investigating the portfolio program itself. Accordingly, greater emphasis was placed on the meaning-making experienced and uncovering the essence of the phenomenon.

A study by Lamoreaux (2005) aimed to develop a substantive theory related to the perceived changes reported by adult learners who completed portfolios and those aspects of the PLA process that fostered those changes. The context of this study was a portfolio course in which students develop portfolios demonstrating prior learning to be assessed for college credit. Interviews were conducted with 12 students who completed a portfolio, submitted following enrollment in a portfolio development course. The theory that emerged suggested four components of the portfolio course as most central to adult learners’ experience of change:

1. A model for reflecting on and articulating learning from experience
2. Narrative writing process that fosters objectification of experience
3. Exposure to other perspectives, especially one’s peers
4. A mentor who provides encouragement and challenge. (p. 116).

Additionally, “PLA may foster changes in learners’ problem-solving ability or changes described as developmental and transformative.” (p. 117). While Lamoreaux incorporated similar methods of analysis and research as this study, it differs significantly in depth. For example, Lamoreaux used single interviews from which to base the findings which “proved to be the richest source of data”. (p. 157). This research study incorporated three interviews per participant, while using a similar number of participants. The study will build on or extend the depth and potential for richer data from which a better understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Research Related to Adult Learners’ Experiences with Portfolio Development**

A study by Burris (1997) incorporated a multiple case study design to explore the adult student participants’ experiences of transformation throughout the portfolio development process. Burris relied on PLA literature, in-depth participant interviews, document analysis, and the researcher’s own perceptions and experiences of portfolio development. Indeed, Burris argues that portfolio development is a transformative learning experience through which students gain both academic and organizational skills. Burris maintained that the effective use of reflection, writing, and validation in portfolio development process has a powerful effect on the perceived transformative experiences of participants.

This study shares a focus and interest in examining participants’ portfolio submission(s) as well as utilizing in-depth interviews to gain greater insight as to the students’ experiences with the portfolio development process. The following study intended to elicit greater access to insights by not tethering transformative learning theory or any other specific theoretical outcome to the research. Accordingly, this study used

phenomenological interviews to allow the essence of the phenomena being studied to reveal itself as the research was conducted rather than view it through a particular theoretical lens from the onset.

In Blinkhorn's (1999) research, the study utilized an exploratory case study method to examine how learners made meaning of their prior learning for use in portfolio(s) for potential college credit. The study incorporated a purposive sampling methodology that relied on single interviews of adult learners with differing experiences with the portfolio development process. Four of the adult learners were currently enrolled in the portfolio course; two participants had successfully completed portfolios for college credits, and three additional adult learners participated that chose not to pursue the portfolio course for potential college credit based on college-level prior learning. This research was developed to explore how learners "understand and create meaning from their prior learning" (p. 15).

Blinkhorn's findings include: (a) that the portfolio development process encourages reflection; (b) that learners who engage in the portfolio process are aware of their particular learning style(s) and can describe them accordingly. Although the learners used unique and varied vocabulary, they are nonetheless "aware of their particular learning styles" (c) that metacognitive abilities are apparent throughout the portfolio development process; and (d) that cognitive development is evident while preparing a portfolio (i.e. academic skills exemplified in writing a portfolio) (Blinkhorn, pp. 121-126).

Wozney (2001) utilized an ethnographic framework within which to base her case study on the exploration of adult learners' experiences with self-reflection in portfolio

assessment. The participants in this program were a diverse group of adult learners comprised of undergraduate and graduate students. The students enrolled in the portfolio development course for various reasons that included: course credit (undergraduate level only), degree requirements, or non-academic related personal enrichment. Of the 24 adult learners in this case study, some were not enrolled in the institution, but rather were taking the course (and developing portfolios) with substantially less risk associated with the outcome and assessment of the portfolios. The students in the case study improved their abilities to be self-reflective learners as the course progressed and, as they understood the philosophy and multiple uses of their portfolios. In addition, Wozney's findings point to additional research on the "multiple strategies that can be used to encourage self-reflection among adult learners" (p. 131). This applicability of learning based on the self-reflection practices allows adult learners to utilize those skills in a variety of settings.

The participants in Wozney's study varied in substantive ways from those selected to participate in this study. The current study, in contrast, focused exclusively on baccalaureate students who enrolled in a portfolio development course with the ultimate goal of college-level credit for the assessment of their course-equivalent prior learning. Consequently, the participants in this study represented a more specific sample from whom a greater depth of critically reflective experiences could be examined.

In a phenomenological study, Angel (2008) researched the portfolio development program at a community college that trained students in various vocational and technical skills. The learning portfolios developed in this program at a community college in Ontario were closely related to the respective participants' vocational field or work or

desired future profession. This direct correlation between the current educational endeavors and the previously acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities for the participating students provides ample opportunity for that prior learning to serve multiple purposes. Angel's study was based on three research questions: (a) what are the shared phenomenological experiences of students and their perceptions of program effectiveness? (b) how effective are the portfolios developed at the study site when compared to findings in related literature? and (c) what are the implications for key theoretical frameworks that describe portfolios? (Angel, 2008, pp. 66-67).

Keeping with other research findings on the experiences of learners with portfolio development, Angel found that there were some 'shared experiences' amongst those interviewed, as categorized by themes. The themes found included: portfolio as a tool to facilitate learning, as a repository of learning, as a learning strategy useful in identifying gaps in skill, as a motivational tool, as an organizational tool, as a career preparation tool, and as a context for reflection to promote a holistic perspective of students' experiences. (p. 94). Additionally, Angel found that 84% of survey respondents "were very positive when it came to assessing their overall experience of creating a portfolio" (p. 123). The most frequent comments were related to the perceived lack of time available or, the amount of time required completing a portfolio, again mirroring findings in other research reviewed.

Key differences between Angel's phenomenological, student-centered study and the current phenomenological, experiential-based study include: (a) portfolio development was a mandatory component at the community college in Angel's study, (b) students were limited to developing portfolios that related only to the vocational and

technical skills within their respective programs, and (c) in Angel's study, the level of learning demonstrated within the learning portfolios at the community college study site used was also limited to community-college level credits (i.e. freshman and sophomore level credits awarded). Although initial individual interviews were conducted, there was only a single interview with the seven participants from which to glean the depth and breadth of experiences of a quite involved process.

A phenomenological study conducted by Smith (2002), focusing on the experiences of adult learners as the primary source of data, explored the experiences of adult learners with the portfolio development process. The goal was to capture the experiences in an effort to further develop the practice of portfolio development and assessment. Participants were selected based on network sampling, a sampling strategy in which participants in the study assist in the identification and selection of additional participants. The participants were required to have completed a PLA seminar as well as to have successfully received credit for their assessed portfolio, within the twelve months preceding the study. There were three study sites from which participants were chosen, including one college, one university, and one nursing education center. As a result, the PLA credits received by Smith's participants varied in how they were assessed for credit and how their respective PLA courses were facilitated.

Smith (2002) describes five themes identified through data analysis: (a) validation of learning, (b) valuing the past, (c) encountering support, (d) facilitating personal growth (self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-awareness), and (e) the confronting and embracing of time. (pp. 76-77). According to Smith, and as related to previous literature reviewed, the incorporation of self-reflection in portfolio development "was beneficial to the learner



as it provided an opportunity to analyze knowledge gained through past experiences.” (p. 78). Some of the negative experiences reported include the seemingly ever-present lack of time or that time required for portfolios was too limited or demanding, respectively. Locating documents and verification of learning through demonstration proved to be a challenging task for some participants. Also, portfolio assessment was a new method of assessment for the majority of the participants. The process of organizing the documents and artifacts used to demonstrate prior learning for assessment, however, was perceived to be beneficial to most participants. (pp. 82-83). The quest of this phenomenological research for the essence of portfolio development through the experiences of the adult learners was succinctly and effectively summarized with the phrase “it opened doors for me” (p. 135).

Although closely aligned in methodology and focus of study, there are significant differences between the research conducted by Smith (2002) and the current study. Those differences include the use of network sampling for participant selection rather than maximum variation sampling. In addition, of the 11 participants in Smith’s study, “the educational level varied” from “nearing completion of a community college program” to “nearing completion of bachelor degree program, to a master’s degree recipient thus, highlighting significant differences in the use of portfolios among the participants. Similarly multiple sites meant there was diversity within variables in regard to the seminar facilitation, course objectives within each of the PLA seminars, and different uses and applications for PLA programs at the varying sites.

The participants in the current study were current students or alumni of a single four-year institution of higher education. In addition, each participant in this study

completed the same PLA seminar as part of the requirements for portfolios at the study site. Rather than relying on the participants to identify additional participants, this study utilized maximum variation sampling from institutional records as a reliable means of selecting a credible sample. Overall, a more thorough exploration was undertaken via this study, including a deeper examination of the experiences of the original learning as it took place, which was used as the course of portfolios, and the process by which that tacit knowledge was explicitly demonstrated.

### **The Reflection Connection**

Throughout this review of literature there has emerged a theme of reflection as being connected to, if not foundational for understanding experiential learning in adult educational programs. The experiential learning theories of Knowles (1980), Kolb (1984), and Mezirow (1990) describe the crucial importance of reflection or reflective practices in the learning process. As Mezirow (1990) expressed it, “by far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection” (p. 13).

Programs at institutions of higher education aiming to capture those experiences include PLA methods of assessment. As noted in Fenwick (2001), “PLA also can be a helpful ongoing process of reflection and self-assessment for the learner. It focuses on competency and understandings rather than grades” (p. 18). In addition, reflective practices within PLA were found to be foundational for an increase in self-actualization and, lead to “increased depth of knowledge.” (Peruniak & Powell, 2007, p. 99)

Furthermore, of the scholarly research reviewed, Burris (1997), Yueh (1997), LeGrow (2000), Wozney (2001), Smith (2002), Lamoreaux (2005), and Angel (2008), each discuss the importance of reflection in adult learning as related to the portfolio

method of PLA. Other studies by Kent (1996) and Blinkhorn (1999) make mention of reflection in their research findings related to PLA and portfolio development. These studies pointed to the need for research with a more explicit focus on the process of reflection involved in the creation of a portfolio.

The current study sought to explore participants' experiences through their reflective descriptions of their prior learning in multiple methods. First, the participants' reflections on their experiences with the process of developing a portfolio were examined in an attempt to make further meaning and, to inform the practice of portfolio development as an educational tool. Second, this research aimed to document and analyze the participants' reflection of the original learning and learning contexts used as subject matter for a submitted portfolio(s). This peeling-back of the onion to uncover the reflections from the original learning settings was viewed as a means to potentially uncover whether the nature of the initial learning experiences influence the process of reflection during the efforts to later demonstrate that prior learning for assessment. This approach will capture a broader and deeper reflective understanding and meaning of the phenomenon being researched.

### **Summary**

This literature review began with an overview of the landscape of adult learning in higher education. A key feature of that landscape is PLA. Accordingly, the various types of PLA were described and a more focused review of the scholarly research on the portfolio form of PLA was undertaken. Emergent themes in the research reviewed include (a) research on portfolio programs, (b) research on the portfolio process, (c) research on learner portfolio outcomes, and (d) research related to adult learners'

experiences with the portfolio process. The literature review culminates with an analysis of the link between multiple themes involving reflection.

*Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.*  
- Zora Neale Hurston

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **Methods**

The aim of this research study was to more thoroughly examine and find new meaning from students' experiences with portfolio development, the process, and the reflection on the learning used in the development of portfolios. The experiential nature of these phenomena required depth and breadth in respect to methods of collecting and analyzing data. Making tacit knowledge explicit entails even further analysis and engagement with the participants' descriptions of experiences. For the purposes of the research, a qualitative design was utilized to study adult learners' experiences with the portfolio process. Specifically, a phenomenological research study, using three in-depth interviews with each participant as the primary data collection tool, was used to capture the essence of the phenomenon.

#### **Phenomenological Research Approach**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) discuss some of the characteristics of qualitative research including: that it takes place in the natural world; focuses on context; is emergent rather than tightly prefigured; is fundamentally interpretive. Similarly, the roles of the qualitative researcher include: a holistic view of social phenomena, a systemic and iterative reflection on the role(s) played throughout the research, and is mindful to his personal biography and potential influences on the study.

A phenomenological research model allows the researcher direct access to the phenomena studied as well as access to participants equally engaged and experienced

with those phenomena (Patton, 2002). The experiences examined in this study were the adult learners' experiences with various aspects of the portfolio method of PLA. The adult learners' understandings or meaning-making based on those experiences provided substantial insight toward understanding the phenomenon of portfolio development and, of the reflective meaning of an original learning experience used as the subject of a developed portfolio. As defined in Creswell (1998), "A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon." (p. 51). As such, a phenomenological approach provided the foundational research methodology.

Considered one of the pillars of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl established the notion that philosophy of consciousness, with the suspension of assumptions, helps in the understanding of the essence of a concept of phenomenon. The essence, as Husserl (1999) describes it is "an all-around clarity and distinctness that leave no further room for any conceivable questionableness" as to the meaning of a phenomenon (p. 154). The goal is to attempt to "get to the truth of matter" through the description of a phenomenon based on one's experiences of that phenomenon; the truth being defined "in the broadest sense" by the experiencer (Moran, 2000). Husserl's phenomenology has been challenged, updated, and expanded upon; Heidegger (1962), Sartre (1964), and Merleau-Ponty (1998) being among the most notable examples. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty attach less significance to a theory of knowing than Husserl, but the concepts identified by each are based on the ideas and writing of Husserl (Pietersma, 2000).

One area of Husserl's phenomenology that has since been expanded upon is his transcendental phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) describes the aim of transcendental phenomenological studies:

To determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, the essences of structures of the experiences.” (p. 13).

Relevant to the aim of this study is the dual focus on the meaning of the experience shared by each participant of the phenomenon, but also on the meaning of the experience for each individual. How the participants make-meaning of their experiences with the portfolio development process and of their reflective engagement on the context in which their original learning used as foundational to an assessed portfolio is more thoroughly explored through this twofold focus. Uniqueness among the participants themselves, on an individual basis, was also explored, using the tenets of transcendental phenomenology as described.

### **Context and Study Site**

The setting of the study was a small private liberal arts university in South Central Texas where the participants completed their respective section of the Prior Learning Assessment Seminar (PLAS) and, where each of the participant interviews was conducted. The institution has an adult undergraduate program which houses the PLA program, which and been a part of the adult, non-traditional undergraduate program at that institution since 1974. According to the former PLA program director, Dr. Susan Gunn,

The adult learning program was established at the site institution to serve adult students whose ability to attend college might otherwise be hampered by family, work, and community responsibilities. The educational experience is designed to integrate the liberal arts and career education with critical thinking and ethics across the curriculum. (Gunn, 2009).

As both a staff member and adjunct faculty member at the study site institution, I had ample access to the population from which to select a sample. This access offered an opportunity for insight to a select group of adult learners with previous PLA experiences. In addition, this study site is a familiar environment for both the researcher and the participants for use in conducting in-depth phenomenological interviews.

### **Selection of Participants**

The participants were selected through the use of purposeful sampling, specifically maximum-variation sampling, as defined by Patton (2002, pp. 230-246), among adult undergraduate students who have completed a PLA seminar at the study site. Maximum-variation sampling provided the opportunity to “document unique or diverse variations that have emerged in adapting to different conditions [and] identify important patterns that cut across variations (cut through the noise of variation)” (Patton, p. 243). According to Seidman (2006), “maximum variation sampling provides the most effective basic strategy for selecting participants for interview studies.” Furthermore, maximum variation sampling “allows the widest possibility for readers of the study to connect to what they are reading” (Seidman, pp. 53-54). Variation was sought on characteristics and variables including but not limited to gender, race/ethnicity, age, number of credits sought via portfolio/number of credits earned via portfolio, family status, enrollment



status, graduation date (if earned degree). I had direct access to the study site and to a database of potential participants. The database access was made available based on departmental and study site approval. That access was comprised of the population of adult learners that had completed the Prior Learning Assessment Seminar (PLAS) at the study site and submitted a portfolio for assessment. The sample from which participants were chosen included adult learners that completed the PLAS beginning with the incorporation of electronically-based portfolio submission (i.e. May 2010 through May 2013). This sample of students utilized the same electronic-based portfolio format for developing and submitting portfolios for assessment, therefore minimizing variability with regard to PLAS procedures.

An email message with the “invitation to participate in a study” (Appendix A) was sent to 84 potential participants to facilitate the selection process. To select a sample varying on characteristics relevant to the study, questions on the invitation to participate included: the number of credits sought and earned in the portfolio process, and variables including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and academic major. Additional short-response questions were emailed to prompt respondents to reflect further on portfolio-related experiences and, on the practice of reflection itself. The reflection-based prompts served as a means of further assessing the prospective participants’ abilities to communicate their experiences with developing a portfolio, as well as, descriptively reflecting on experiences of prior learning for portfolio development.

The responses to the invitations to participate were evaluated for appropriateness based on aim of study and the aforementioned maximum variation characteristics. There were a total of 23 responses received; 18 of those 23 indicated an interest to participate in

the research study. Follow-up communication was sent to those 18 and, that sample was narrowed to twelve potential participants who were sent the Participation Consent Form (Appendix B) to complete, sign, and return in order to participate in the study. Although all 12 consented, three potential participants had to withdraw from participation in the study, either just before or just as subsequent data was being collected for the study. Accordingly, there were nine participants interviewed for the purposes of this study; detailed participant information will be covered in a subsequent chapter.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure potential participants were informed about the study and, to assuage them of any fears of penalty related to participation in the proposed study, both the invitation to participate and the consent form disclosed that there were benefits or penalties for choosing to participate or not to participate in the study.

Selection to participate required each participant to sign a consent form for the research interviews and to permit the use their portfolio-related documentation for the purposes of the proposed study (Appendix B). All research records, including transcriptions of interviews, were stored in physically in locked-files and, electronically saved to both an external hard-drive and an electronic dropbox. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.

### **Data Collection**

Methods of data collection included the preliminary invitation to participate described above, a series of three open-ended personal interviews with each participant, portfolio documentation submitted by the participants, and interview field notes. As noted by Miller and Glassner in Silverman (Ed.) (2004), “a strength of qualitative

interviewing is the opportunity it provides to collect and rigorously examine narrative accounts” (p. 137). Marshall and Rossman (2006) aptly state, a study focusing on individual lived experience typically relies on an in-depth interview strategy; “the primary strategy is to capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants’ own words” (p. 55). This form of qualitative interview produced vast amounts of data quickly, which provided access to immediate follow-up and clarification with participants.

A phenomenological in-depth interview was implemented to better understand the essence of the phenomenon. Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain, “the primary advantage of phenomenological interviewing is that it permits an explicit focus on the researcher’s personal experience combined with those of the interviewees” (p.105).

### **Interview Design**

The aim of the interview was to elicit descriptive information pertaining to the participants’ experiences with portfolio development. The rationale for utilizing phenomenological, in-depth interviews stems from similar meaning-making research. “The method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of relatively few participants” (Seidman, 2006). The goal is to understand and make meaning of the participants’ lived experiences and communicate those understandings via contextually-based, in-depth interviews for the researcher to make further meaning and discovery. “Interviewing provides a consistent means of obtaining participants’ ability to make meaning via language.” (Seidman, p. 16).

This study incorporated a three-interview method designed by Dolbeare and Schuman (Seidman, 2006). The three-interview design allowed for iterative member-checking, multiple sets of data to collect, analyze, and compare, and saturation of data collected, given the number of participants. Accordingly, each subsequent interview relied on data collected from the previous interview(s) in order to capture the in-depth information phenomenological interviews provide. For logistic purposes and participant convenience, the first two interviews were typically conducted in a single interview session with the third interview conducted at a later date. This still allowed for member-checking with participants. Accordingly, this interview design provided the opportunity to gauge consistency and validity of data as it was collected. Seidman (2006) describes the three-interview process: “The first interview establishes the context of the participants’ experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context within which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them” (p. 17).

**Interview one: Life history.** How did the participant come to be a student in the PLA seminar? A review of the participant’s history as a college level learner up to the time he or she enrolled in the PLA seminar.

**Interview two: Contemporary experience.** What was it like for the participant to develop a portfolio? What are the details of the participant’s experiences of completing the PLA seminar and portfolio development process? Describe the original learning context of the prior learning used as foundation for portfolio(s).

**Interview three: Reflection on meaning.** What does it mean to the participant to complete a PLA seminar and portfolio(s)? Based on the previous two interviews, how does the participant make sense of his or her present life in the context of the portfolio development experience?

### **Additional Modes of Data Collection**

The invitation to participate served as a tool for both the participant selection process and for data collection. Questions used for the participant selection included open-ended items asking for brief descriptions of reflections on PLA-related experiences. Additional documents and artifacts reviewed included the participants' submitted portfolio(s). The information in the portfolios submitted were used to trigger memories and increase potential for reflection. The original *request for assessment* for the portfolios submitted contained: the number of credits requested for evaluation by the participant; the number of credits earned for the portfolio; academic major; and other information related to the guiding research questions.

Field notes taken during the interview and during the analysis of the interviews were reviewed and analyzed. Observations during the interview and subsequent reflections on the interviews, conducted while transcribing or reviewing transcribed interviews, were captured using *analytic memos*, described in Marshall and Rossman (2011) as a document where “the researcher writes his thoughts about how the data are coming together in clusters or patterns or themes he sees as the data accumulate” (p. 213). These memos provided the ability to more readily identify intra-participant connections and patterns, as well as, discovering themes from inter-participant responses, as they emerged.

## **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis strategies typically move from the “totally inductive” at the beginning of the process, to a “deductive mode” toward the end. The ability to deduce in reasoning tends to coincide with the “sense of saturation” that occurs when in the final stages of data analysis (Merriam, 2009).

The inductive analysis began with the chronologically or topically ordered data, presented in a narrative that was descriptive of the observable data. Moving on the spectrum from inductive towards deductive analysis, a more abstract analysis, involving the use of concepts to further describe phenomenon, was incorporated. As discussed in Merriam (2009), “this is the process of systemically classifying data into some sort of scheme consisting of categories, or themes. The categories describe the data, but to some extent they also interpret the data” (p. 188).

According to Creswell (1998), “phenomenological data analysis proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings.” (p. 52). In accordance with Husserl (1999) and Moustakas (1994), Creswell also expresses the importance of bracketing the previous experiences and prejudgments of the researcher while, “relying on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience.” (p. 52)

Data analysis included open-coding, as defined by Corbin and Strauss (2008), followed by clustering into categories or themes for comparison. The grouping of concepts into categories benefits the analyst by providing “analytic power with the potential to explain and predict” and, they depict the problems and matters that are important to those being studied (p. 113). As described by Marshall and Rossman

(2011), a coding scheme, based on the myriad of sources, “including the literature review, the actual words and behaviors in the data,” was developed. This initial thematic list provided the foundation of analysis on which to iteratively build. The literature provides themes for analysis. In addition, *in vivo codes*, or codes that “likely emerge in the real-life data” were examined (p.213).

A coding mind-map was created to ensure connections among codes and their respective categories were identified for analysis. Initial coding was done on individual interview transcripts, then for the collection of three interviews for each participant, and finally across all 27 interviews. In addition, a running list of codes was created and then further developed to include over-arching categories under which significant data were clustered for further analysis, based on the coding process described by Saldana (2009). This process allowed for the foundational categories to emerge and for codes to be solidified. This process also provided *in vivo codes* that were incorporated into the analysis of the data. The ability to utilize the actual words of the participants to help describe the data, as well as the phenomenon itself, proved advantageous for this phenomenological study.

In his description on phenomenological data analysis, Creswell (1998) discusses additional means of investigation to “develop a textural description ‘what happened’, a structural description, ‘how’ the phenomenon was experienced; and to develop an overall description of the experience, the *essence*” (pp. 148-149). The methods of analysis discussed above allowed for richer descriptions of how the phenomenon was experienced in verifiable ways.

## **Trustworthiness**

This research on the phenomenon of participants' experiences with the portfolio development process and their reflections on the original learning context used as basis for portfolio(s) assessed, provides the researcher the ability to gain the trust of the readers using the research methods previously described for the basis of this phenomenological study.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) fundamental to trustworthiness of research and researcher in qualitative research are credibility, that is "activities that make it more likely that credible findings and interpretations will be produced"; and transferability, the ability to provide a "thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as possible" (pp. 301-316).

In regard to the credibility of the study, I utilized an activity, discussed in Lincoln and Guba (1985), intended to "increase the probability of high credibility"--the triangulation of sources. This activity helps to ensure the validity of the sources by comparing it with other sources of like-kind. Additional evidence was evaluated by comparing each source to other related evidence about the source (pp. 305-306). For the purposes of this study, the sources for use in triangulation include: each interview transcription, responses to the invitation to participate, interview notes, and analytic memos. Each participant provided data that was used as both a source to be compared to other participants, but also as a basis of comparison against the set of sources documented in their respective portfolio submissions.



The second criteria used to measure the soundness and authenticity of qualitative research is transferability. As mentioned previously in this chapter, maximum-variation sampling was used in the selection of participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that a responsible researcher needs to use a method of purposive sampling allowing for a vast range of relevant data to be included in analysis. Accordingly, this maximum-variation sampling provided a wide-range of information to aid in the “thick description” crucial to transferability.

Adherence to the principles described here substantially advances the likelihood of credibility, based on audit trail, and transferability, and on thick and rich descriptions, therefore establishing the trustworthiness sought in qualitative research by responsible researchers in addition to the potential for yielding insight to inform practice of PLA and related adult education programs.

### **Summary**

This chapter explained the methods utilized in conducting this research study. Relying primarily on participants’ experiences with the portfolio process, a phenomenological in-depth interview model represented the most effective means of capturing that target data. Accordingly, the process of analyzing the data incorporated open coding, triangulation of multiple sources of data, member check-ins, and other methods to ensure trustworthiness throughout the study.

*When you make the finding yourself - even if you're the last person on Earth to see the light - you'll never forget it.*

*- Carl Sagan*

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study is to add to the field of adult education and prior learning assessment, specifically the portfolio form of PLA, by way of adult learners' experiences with the phenomenon. It utilizes participants' thick and rich descriptions of their experiences developing portfolios to demonstration prior learning equivalent to college-level learning for potential college-credit(s). In order to effectively collect and analyze the detail and breadth of information desired, in-depth interviews were conducted to capture the descriptive learning experiences of the research participants. This chapter provides the findings of the research including a presentation of participant profiles, emergent themes based on the guiding and subsidiary research questions, a summary of the findings and, discoveries on the essence of the phenomenon.

### **Participant Profiles**

The participant selection methods, outlined in the previous chapter, resulted in twelve potential participants, of which nine actually participated while three others withdrew from participation for various reasons unrelated to the study. The nine participants included seven females who ranged in age from 38 to 56, and two males aged 26 and 47. Eight participants identified themselves as White/Non-Hispanic (Caucasian), and one participant identified herself as African-American. At the time of the study, two participants were single, seven were married, and five of the seven married participants also had a child or children. The number of credits sought via portfolio ranged from 3

credit hours to 48 credit hours; the number of earned portfolio credits similarly ranged from 3 credits to 47 credits. The average number of credits earned among the participants was just over 16 credits, the equivalent of more than five three-credit hour college courses (six participants earned twelve or fewer course credits, the equivalent of four three-credit hour college courses). The participants earned 151 of the 155 credit hours requested, which represents a 97.4% success rate on portfolios submitted.

**Table 1**

***Participant Demographics***

<b>Demographic Information for Study Participants</b>					
<b><i>Participant Name</i></b>	<b><i>Age</i></b>	<b><i>Gender</i></b>	<b><i>Race/Ethnicity</i></b>	<b><i>Credits Earned/Credits Sought</i></b>	<b><i>Family</i></b>
Cassie	56	Female	Caucasian	3/3	Married/Kids
Gretchen	45	Female	Caucasian	12/15	Married/Kids
Jolene	43	Female	Caucasian	9/9	Single
Marshall	26	Male	Caucasian	12/12	Single
Randi	42	Female	Caucasian	12/12	Married
Sandra	40	Female	Caucasian	29/29	Married
Shelley	46	Female	Caucasian	12/12	Married/Kids
Tiffany	38	Female	African-American	15/15	Married/Kids
Wallace	47	Male	Caucasian	47/48	Married/Kids

**Cassie**

Cassie is a 56 year old female who married and entered the workforce upon graduating high school. Her entry into higher education happened later than traditional-aged college students. This delay in transition into higher education was partially attributed to the fact that she was able to earn “incredible money” in the Information Technology field without the need of a college degree. She was also able to accomplish

this while being one of a very few females in her field and overall work environment. She attempted to juggle school and work initially, with limited success. Cassie stated,

The big problem with me has always been time; it's not ability or desire [for a degree], it's been time. At my age, it's not like I have a lot of time...the portfolio [program] was just what I needed to give the push off the fence to say it's either now or never and, that gave me the ability to say 'it's now.'

Cassie went on to say that another motivation for completing her degree was avoiding regret.

Just before my father passed away, the family was around him and talking about his life; and we said 'what is your one big regret?' and he said "I never finished college." So when my younger one was nearing [high school] graduation, my husband and I started having conversations about your one big regret whenever somebody asks you...over time one big regret is that you never got a college degree.

At the time this study was conducted, Cassie was projected to graduate at the end of the semester.

### **Gretchen**

With a career spanning three decades in various social service oriented positions, Gretchen describes herself as an "old soul" who "always wanted to go into some sort of helping hands social work sort of field." She followed her father's model in regard to higher education--that is, she did it "step by step."

The one thing I did in a rather mature angle was decide to take my college education, beyond high school, sort of step by step. My father basically did the

very same thing that I am doing now and held off on his college education until he was well into his forties.

This approach allowed Gretchen to more easily fund her higher education, in addition to providing her the opportunity to continue working while pursuing her higher education part-time. Gretchen's enthusiasm for her field of work and her related college major was readily apparent. She described the ability to potentially incorporate prior learning towards degree requirements as "Huge for me, absolutely." Continuing to demonstrate her dedication to lifelong learning, Gretchen is currently pursuing a graduate degree in an area related to her profession.

### **Jolene**

Jolene entered the workforce upon graduating from high school. She went on to complete an associate's degree from a technical institution, with a focus on law and paralegal studies. The skills and learning from that degree led to a career in the legal field spanning more than thirty years. Jolene enrolled in bachelor degree programs three times while continuing to work full-time; she successfully completed her four-year degree requirements in her third attempt. She discussed her experiences with earning her degree:

I'm very proud of the fact that I don't just have a degree that I got when I finished high school and didn't have to work...I actually earned my degree while working full time over a span of a number of years. I think that that shows tenacity, and shows that I can balance a number of responsibilities. I think it says something about my character that makes me feel proud.

She described the ability to incorporate portfolios for college credits:

I was intrigued even at the time of the idea of the portfolio. The idea of being able to get some credit...was very appealing to me. I felt like [portfolio] was probably the most doable with keeping a full-time job.

## **Marshall**

At age 26, Marshall was the youngest participant in the research study. He attempted one year of higher education before deciding to join the military. In regard to his initial higher education experience, he stated:

I was pretty rudderless. I was an undeclared major with very vague ambitions of transferring up to [another university] into their department of radio, television, and film. I was going to college, but I wasn't really in the mindset for going to college. Part of the reason I didn't do well was because I wasn't focused on it. School had always felt like I was doing it for someone else rather than myself, so I didn't really put that much effort into it...so it was very easy for me to fall behind.

He served four years in the military, which included multiple deployments overseas. While serving in the military, Marshall formulated his plan to return to higher education and complete his degree.

I wasn't interested in doing it [military career] for twenty years; I was just interested in doing those four years, get that out of my system, having the experiences, and then going back to school. It had always been in my equation, it's always been something I knew I wanted to do.

Marshall incorporated learning gleaned from his time in the military into a portfolio that earned twelve credits, and he eventually earned his bachelor's degree in May 2014.

**Randi**

Randi's initial entrance into postsecondary education was in the form of a cosmetology school. She began that program upon graduating high school, and she married a few years later at age 21. With regard to her decision to forgo a four-year degree, Randi stated:

When I was 18 there was no way I could go to college. I could technically, but I just wasn't a college person at that time. I kind of just wanted to get out of the house and do something else creative, but no more school.

In regard to her decision to pursue higher education:

I probably was stuck in traffic one day and then I'm like, 'I don't know if I want to do this for the rest of my life.' There was going to be a time where I was going to want to do something more, and I wasn't going to be able to do it without having a degree.

In regard to the value in the potential to earn college credits for prior learning, Randi stated:

It's like really tapping into what you know and how to let people know that. You know a lot more than you think you know, so that [PLA] seminar was really helpful. I have been through a lot. There is a lot I can talk about, and after writing that first [portfolio]...it made all the other ones so much easier because I understood what to put in my information.

## **Sandra**

Growing-up in Europe and the Middle East provided Sandra the opportunity to learn from and engage with a wide variety of cultures, philosophies, and educational systems. Of that education she stated:

I grew up in a very diplomatic lifestyle. My friends were the children of ambassadors. I had to be very attuned to local customs and the way different countries do things and so I kind of had this whole education before even graduating from high school on the way people treat each other, and civil rights, and human rights. We had people from all over the world...a very interesting educational system. It was really, really cool.

Sandra moved to the U.S. upon graduating high school and immediately entered the workforce. Her self-described “love to learn” led her to enroll as a part-time student while working full time. This lasted, on and off, until her abilities to juggle her high-demand jobs conflicted directly with her educational endeavors. While the decision to stop-out of school was difficult, Sandra stated:

I always thought ‘I don’t care if it takes me til I’m 40 years old, I’m going to get my degree. I’ll do it as I can, when I can. I never viewed leaving school as a finality point. It was always something I was going to go back to.

Sandra was able to incorporate prior learning drawn from her background, steeped in multi-cultural experiences, to earn 29 credit hours by portfolio. She described her portfolio development planning:

I didn’t write a portfolio on anything that I wasn’t 100% confident that I had the experience. I chose my degree plan based on that, as well as, a secondary



consideration was how many of these do I think I could portfolio out of because I already had skills. I already do this work.

The opportunity to utilize her prior learning to earn nearly 30 hours of college credit was integral in Sandra graduating in the spring of 2013.

### **Shelley**

Shelley and her high school sweetheart married when she was 22 years old. She tried one semester of college, but dropped-out soon thereafter. She attended a community college in pursuit of an associate's degree on a part-time, but was only able to attend sporadically while she started her family. Two kids and ten years after beginning that educational journey, she earned an associate's degree and decided to return to school for a bachelor's degree. She described her experiences with higher education as an adult learner:

I'm actually really grateful that I waited until now to do it because I can be totally focused on it, and I'm really, really enjoying it, and so I think it all worked out the way it supposed to. And, it's also more meaningful to me, too. Another motivating factor for me is showing [my children] that you can go at any time and its okay if you don't want to go right now. None of this would seem applicable to me, where right now I can turn around and go to work the next day and apply it in some way, and so it just seems more meaningful for me to have waited til now to go back.

Shelley received twelve hours of college credit based on the demonstrated learning in her portfolios. She is projected to earn her bachelor's degree in the year 2015.

## **Tiffany**

Employed with a state agency while still in high school, Tiffany's nearly 25-year-long career has been speckled with enrollment at institutions of higher education. She began with community college courses upon graduating from high school. She enrolled part-time as she continued her full-time state position. In regard to her goal of completing her college degree, Tiffany stated:

I always wanted to finish college, and then of course I always knew that I wanted to finish college before my kids graduated high school...so that they could see how important it was to finish college and to continue on with their education, no matter what the age.

Tiffany described the moment she realized that her prior learning matched both her degree aspirations, as well as multiple courses within that degree:

You know, it felt like it probably all made sense. It was like a 'woo-hoo!' moment because it was like, okay, this is where I want to be, not a maybe, this is the field I want to be in. That's how I felt when it all kind of came together. It wasn't a maybe, or 'I'm gonna think about it'...it is 'no, this is what I want to do.'

She earned her bachelor's degree in spring of 2012 and, incorporated 15 hours of college credit from her portfolios.

## **Wallace**

Wallace's initial experiences with higher education centered on the new-found freedom associated with attending college away from home. "Wow, social life is fun, classes aren't really fun. So, I majored in socializing and fraternity life, and enjoying myself, and I didn't even minor in course activity," Wallace jokingly recalled of that

first-time college experience. He made the decision to leave higher education during his third year, to work full-time. Although no longer pursuing his college degree, Wallace did continue to work in the communication field, which was directly related to his original educational pursuits. He returned to school in order to model the way for his son and because “it was always eating at me to finish my degree,” Wallace said. In regard to the importance of the portfolio process, Wallace stated:

It was a nice opportunity to take stock and catalog. It was all just kind of, wow, this all translates. It meant the portfolio process to me meant a major factor in me being able to achieve that goal which was to earn my degree. It was an invaluable factor; without the portfolio program, I probably wouldn't have been able to achieve my degree as fast as I did, in the time frame that I needed to do it.

Wallace earned, by far, the most credits via the portfolio program than any other participant. The 47 credit hours he earned went a long-way in allowing him to realize his goal of earning a college degree.

### **Emergent Themes**

The following themes and subthemes developed as the data were analyzed. In addition to the data analysis outlined in the previous chapter, this phenomenological study utilized data to aid in thematic discovery and meaning-making, throughout the data collection and analyzing processes. Four main themes emerged, with each theme composed of additional subthemes. The first theme relates to the participants' motivation(s) for pursuing the portfolio process. The second theme captures the participants' experiences with the elements of successful portfolios. The third emergent theme reveals the foundational importance of *making connections* via the reflective

practice and tacit learning involved in the portfolio process. The final theme uncovered by this study was the identification of the essence of the phenomenon as experienced and described by the participants. The summative term used to describe the quintessence of the portfolio process was *validation*. The themes and subthemes are reflected in Table 2.

**Table 2**

***Themes & Subthemes Emergent in Findings***

Theme	Subtheme
I. Motivation for Pursuing Portfolio Process	
	A. Save Time, Save Money
	B. ‘My Turn’
	C. Goal Completion
II. Elements of Successful Portfolios	
	A. Self-Directed Learning
	1. Honest with Self
	2. Avoid Procrastination
	B. Expectations vs Realities of Portfolio Process
	1. Time Consuming
	2. Feedback Loop
	C. Support
III. Making Connections	
	A. Reflections on Learning
	1. Embedded Learning in the Portfolio Process

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2. Taking Stock

3. Transferable Learning

B. Tacit-to-Explicit: Challenging, but Changing

IV. Essence of the Phenomenon: Validation

A. Increased Confidence in Self

B. Sense of Achievement

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### **Motivations for Pursuing Portfolios**

The adult learners who participated in this study represent different cultures, educational backgrounds, ages, races, as well as varying reasons for pursuing their educational goals. Several participants, including Marshall, Wallace, Shelley, and Gretchen included the portfolio program as a motivational factor in deciding to matriculate. Exemplified here in a response from Gretchen:

The idea that a university could respect that my hands-on personal experiences were equitable to what they would be teaching me in a course anyway, I think it was tremendous, and that was one of the primary reasons I chose [the institution].

This section will describe the thematic findings related to the participants' motivations for pursuing the portfolio process. The following three subthemes were developed from the descriptions of motivating factors provided by the participants in their respective interviews.

**Save time/save money.** The first subtheme, save time/save money, was by far the most often cited motivator for pursuing the portfolio process. When asked to respond to an interview prompt regarding the reason for pursuing credits via portfolio, each of the

nine participants conveyed the desire to save time and/or save money in at least one of the three interviews conducted per participant. Typically the respondent mentioned the opportunity to save both time and money as motivation to pursue portfolio credits.

The first interview covered a brief life history and the transition into (back into) higher education, specifically their educational pursuit at the study site. The initial interview prompt asked participants to provide a condensed education-specific “life history” beginning from where the participant considered they entered adulthood up to the point they decided to pursue their education at the study site. As part of her response to that prompt Cassie expressed:

The big problem for me has always been time; it’s not ability or desire, it’s been time. The thing that appealed to me the most was the ability to get credit for prior learning experiences because I had that; I had so much experience that I had learned...through my working career.

To the same interview prompt Gretchen noted, “it was time to come back to school and finish my bachelor’s degree, which I was able to do leading me to the portfolio process, making that happen a little bit faster.” Similarly, Jolene’s response included:

Because I had the financial support, I have tried to knock it out as quickly as possible and...graduate. Of course, the portfolios, I guess, that was the biggest thing it had going for it was that it seemed like it was doable with a full-time job.

When Tiffany was asked about her rationale for entering the portfolio program she responded:

What convinced me was basically, I was a little bit on the nervous side when it came to actually writing a paper that entailed all of my experiences, because I

didn't understand how I was going to write five portfolios...but I knew that if I could 1) save my agency a semester worth [of] the money, that would be awesome and, 2) books, and of course graduate a semester early then I was going to do it. I wasn't coming out-of-pocket for the money, but if I could save the agency [thousands] of dollars, okay, yeah.

Wallace mentioned the portfolio program as one of the deciding factors in pursuing his education.

I felt like it was going to take me years to finish. That's when I really looked at [the institution] and I went 'that's perfect,' because I see everything I've done already, and then when I learned about the portfolio program I went 'wow! I can apply that--my applied knowledge--to get my degree much faster.'

For interview two, participants were asked to describe their experiences with the portfolio program. Again eight of the nine participants quoted the priority of saving time and/or saving money. Wallace conveyed this message about the portfolio process to a hypothetical prospective student:

Look into it and look into it seriously because for two reasons: number one, from a time standpoint you can achieve your goal much faster than you could traditional learning and doing classroom learning, if you have the availability and the background to portfolio a good bit. And two...from a financial standpoint it makes sense to look at portfolio, too. And if you've already learned it, why would you sit in a classroom to learn it again? If they really look at the portfolio program they could get their degree a lot faster.

Jolene's experiences with the portfolio process echo the sentiments and advice Wallace offered. She cites the opportunity to incorporate prior learning assessment credits as "extremely satisfying" and, described how time was a deciding factor: "I really looked...the portfolios as a way to fast-track getting my degree and I was extremely grateful to have those options; it was a great way to keep me, you know, focused and pushing forward."

Similarly, when asked to describe benefits of the portfolio process, Marshall replied, "The credit, the time, and the money are obviously the most tangible benefits to the portfolio. Time is a valuable thing." He further elaborated, "It's a high potential for a little risk, and you're already going to get the benefit of the time, money, and energy, that's good enough."

Randi expressed the following in interview two:

Well, it's definitely worth it especially if you have a lot of past experience. You save a lot of time; I mean I saved almost a year by doing those four [portfolios], so it's definitely worth it and, the money I saved is amazing.

She went on to note, "I mean the biggest reason for me doing it was the time and the money."

The third interview was a reflection on meaning that was used to elicit descriptive responses about meaning-making in relation to their experiences with the portfolio process. This interview provided an opportunity to convey any last thoughts or feelings, etc. that participants' might have in regard to their portfolio experiences and, in regard to their experiences with the study. A few of the participants took that opportunity to speak, yet again, about the opportunity to save time and/or save money using portfolios.



Shelley described the monetary and time saving rewards she experienced as part of the portfolio process:

It just made me very excited about what was still in store for me with going back to school and what classes I still had to take. It was nice to have gotten these out of the way and the financial benefits, of course, of not having to take those classes, and the fact that I was going to reach my degree faster...just made me very enthusiastic and excited about the whole process.

She further discussed the money saving motivation for pursuing portfolios when she stated:

I just wrote [the tuition per class] on a post-it note and stuck it on my monitor and, that's what I was going to save by doing portfolios...so that was how I got myself motivated.

Sandra notes the money saving opportunity inherent in the portfolio process in her recommendations to prospective portfolio students. "Everybody can do one. Everybody can do at least one, and even one is going to save you a lot of money."

Wallace's descriptions of his experiences with the portfolio process include saving time as being noteworthy:

Well, obviously, it was a tremendous step on completing the ultimate goal, which was receiving my bachelor's degree. It was, without being too blunt about it, it was a means to an end, but it was also a great opportunity to get that degree much more quickly, and also to be able to apply real life learning to the degree; so, it was a means to an end, but it was also a wonderful opportunity to reach my goal more quickly.

Wallace reiterated this motivation for pursuing portfolio when he stated: “obviously the benefit was being able to accelerate the acquisition of the degree.”

Similarly, Gretchen stated she wanted to expedite her academic pursuits and, the portfolio process was a means for her to do so: “Obviously it was an important part of me being able to hasten the education which I know I deserved.”

Randi also mentioned saving money and time as factors in her decision to pursue portfolio:

I don’t know if it’s the deciding factor, but part of what made the portfolios so exciting, besides the time, is the money. [Tuition] is expensive so like, being able to not have to take that class was great in the money aspect. I could probably get out of it with a portfolio, but maybe I should take [the class], but nope it’s too expensive, I’ll be in school longer; let’s see if I can get out of it [via portfolio].

The subtheme of saving time and money was the most pervasive. As noted in this section, participants’ responses overwhelmingly cited saving either time or money, if not both, in each of the three in-depth interviews conducted for this study. While not a surprising finding, the level of persistence of use as a motivating factor for pursuing portfolio warrants further discussion.

**My turn/my time.** Adult learners typically have multiple roles and, with each of those roles, competing priorities. The priorities discussed in the interviews conducted for this study included children, marriage, family responsibilities, and work or professional responsibilities. Additional time-consuming activities included church and volunteer service. Many of the participants expressed that their motivation to return to higher education, made ever more possible by the expedited nature of the portfolio program,

through the message of ‘it’s my turn now.’ They have seen colleagues, family members, siblings, and friends graduate and complete their respective educational programs; ‘it’s my turn now’. Within that same vein is the notion of ‘catching-up’ to those peers or friends that earned their degrees in the more traditional means and timeline. Certainly, other factors such as job loss, or having children can delay the timeliness to completion, but those ‘life happens’ moments or time periods of greater sacrifice provided a catalyst to pursue a degree in higher education.

Cassie’s description of the timing of her return to college exemplifies the ‘my turn’ subtheme:

I went to night school for 17 years, taking a class, passing one, getting an A, dropping one because of work schedule and, eventually it just got away from me. And then came my kids ready for college and so all of the focus was on them, the finance to put two of them through college...finally a couple of years ago my husband and I decided, ‘okay, the kids are through, you’re not getting any younger.’

In relaying her reasons for pursuing higher education, in addition to the portfolio process, Jolene touched on the notion of ‘catching-up’ to one’s peers and the pride associated with that end, “I think that it would make me feel more equal to a lot of my counterparts who have degrees, or think a degree is sort of standard.” The incorporation of portfolios allowed Jolene to accelerate the pace of her academic journey thus hastening the progress of her ‘catching-up’ to her colleagues. Marshall describes a similar motivation for including portfolios as a means of catching-up:

I finally just had that feeling of okay, I'm ready now. I've gotten that vibe that it's time to go back--internal motivation kick. Also, I was in the army for four years so, all of my civilian friends and comrades had already done their degrees and what not, and I was like, okay I don't want to wait around forever to get done, so I'll do one [portfolio] now and another...I took the detour from college, now I'll get back on track.

Similarly, on the topic of 'catching-up,' Wallace noted:

At a point it was just kind of like, do I, like I said, do I go to school, or do I eat and pay rent? It was a hard decision, but a conscious decision to go [work] full-time and leave school behind.

When Wallace was offered the tuition assistance by his employer, with the stipulation that the degree was earned expeditiously, he realized that the portfolio program could offer the 'fast-track' to completion he needed.

[My supervisor] said, 'if you can fast track that, if there is any way you can fast-track that then, I'm happy to move you up into the upper management roll.' I said, "Great." That was the opportunity I needed for me to really commit to returning and getting my degree.

The incorporation of prior learning assessment can provide additional flexibility in regard to students' schedules. Adult learners can find it difficult to balance academic priorities with competing life priorities. Here is Sandra's description of that battle for balance:

You just kind of wear-down after a while and I felt like I'm not doing myself, my education, or my work any favors by running this kind of a schedule. Can I do it?

Sure. Should I be doing it? Probably not.

Sandra went on to state:

Portfolios was obviously as big part of that cuz that takes a whole section that I don't have to sit through these classes because I can show that I already have these skills. The fact that [the institution] offers that was huge to me; it was instrumental in my decision to come here.

She offered further insight to prospective portfolio students in regard to increasing the likelihood of balancing priorities, "do the portfolio, don't waste your time and money on a class that you don't need."

In the reflective final interview, Shelley iterated the critical role flexibility of schedule plays for adult learners:

I have a very flexible job. I work two miles from my house. Those two things, my kids being grown and, work being so flexible; I don't know how I would have done it even if I just had one of those. It would have been very, very difficult to do...so not having that flexibility at home and a work would have made it much more difficult for me.

Shelley cites a professional need to earn her degree, but also indicates that it is 'her turn' to pursue higher education:

For me to move [professionally]...I need to have a four-year degree, and maybe even more than that, at some point. My youngest being in high school is just about to finish. My oldest one is going to be 21. It just seemed like a perfect time,

and it really has been. I'm actually really grateful that I waited until now to do [portfolios], because I can be totally focused on it, and I'm really, really enjoying it, and so I think it all worked out the way it was supposed to.

Tiffany recounts her experiences with the portfolio program and her mental preparedness as an adult learner compared to when she initially entered academia as a youth:

I took classes at [community college], but mentally I don't think I was really ready; I didn't take it as serious as I took it when I started at [study site]. I kind of took the approach a little bit different. Now, I passed the classes, but I just don't think I was ready mentally to really finish school. I also think that if I had the opportunity to go to school full-time, right out of high school, it probably wouldn't have been the same outcome. I can't see myself at 18 going away and actually finishing college. So, I think portfolios to me was very good to me.

The participants conveyed a shared sentiment of wanting to catch-up to peers, re-engage with learning at a high level, and enroll in a program that offers a flexible schedule feasible to maintain their prior obligations. The portfolio program was deemed to be a viable means to those ends, based on participant responses. While the portfolio process cannot be all things for all people, it does provide a large canvas on which adult learners that participate can be involved in the creation of their educational paths.

**Goal completion.** Whether the aim is toward modeling the way for their children, or to keep a promise they made to themselves to finish something they started years ago, a resounding finding was desire to complete a degree. Seven participants provided goal completion related responses to prompts in the first interview, including Tiffany, whose *model the way* response was mentioned previously in this chapter. Portfolio offered her a

way to utilize the learning she had acquired in the work place to expedite earning her degree. Similarly, Wallace stated,

For my family standpoint, I'm married and I have a son. I wanted to show him that education was important. I needed to set the example and say I can't expect you to go to college and say it's important if I don't go and get it done.

Shelley mentioned both her own level of readiness to return to higher education and, the want to provide a positive example for her children. She stated,

Every class I take I think, like, my oldest one [doesn't] want to pursue higher education, at least not right now, and that's another motivating factor for me is showing them that you can go [to college] at any time, and it's okay if you don't want to go right now. None of this would seem applicable to me, whereas right now. I can turn around and go to work the next day and apply it in some way, and so it just seems more meaningful for me to have waited til now to go.

Cassie described the travails she experienced while pursuing her degree. While she benefitted from the flexibility of the portfolio program, she credits a constant pursuit of her goal as a motivation prior to enrolling in portfolio.

Well, my experience is that I've had where I have learned that you just need to sit there until you understand, and if you can give that to somebody else, then they can pass that on then we won't have so many quitters and early quit [equals] early defeat. That is it, perseverance. That's a really strong word and one that I'm really attached to.

When discussing the benefits of the portfolio process beyond the potential to earn course credits, Gretchen mentioned the importance of setting a positive example in regard to completing a degree. She stated,

It's serving as a model for my step daughter as well that, even though she is just started out at [college], kind of testing out the basics, you know some things like that, that it's a good reason for her to really push herself to try and get through college and things like that, because she sees how it's helped me...My daughter has a daughter, again that's something else that I reflected on that, you know, I'm going to show her the importance of getting your education.

For the participants in this study, achieving a degree goal, stemming from either professional or personal desires, coupled with the ability to utilize prior learning assessment, was discovered to be of significant importance. The paths each took to reach their goal were varied, but each respective journey incorporated the portfolio process to help facilitate their successes.

### **Elements of Successful Portfolios**

This section provides insight into what the participants of this study expressed as being fundamental to their success in the portfolio process. Three subthemes were uncovered stemming from the findings related to key elements of earning credit via portfolio: self-directed learning, having realistic expectations of the portfolio process, and having a support system while pursuing portfolio goals. Participants expressed the same or similar responses in regard to the elements of a successful portfolio.

**Self-directed learning.** One of the key findings relative to the elements of a successful portfolio was that a high degree of self-directed learning is required to



complete the process. Elements of participant response can be seen as linked to some of the assumptions about adult learners posited by Knowles (1989). Knowles' descriptions of traits exhibited by adult learners include need-based decision making, the demonstration of both readiness and orientation to learning, and the internalized nature of the motivation to learn (Knowles, et al. 1989). Accordingly, the portfolio program the study participants completed is inherently an adult learner-based opportunity, requiring demonstration of learning typically drawn from professional experiences that demonstrate college-level learning equivalent to specified course offerings. While need-based decision-making in regard to pursuing both higher education and portfolios was discussed in the subtheme above, elements of readiness to learn, orientation towards learning, and internal motivations converge in this section.

Participants were prompted to discuss what they experienced as essential to a successful portfolio. Sandra stated,

In school, you have teachers who tell you what competency is. In the portfolio process, you don't have that; you have yourself to tell you what competency is. [Self-direction] is critical, yeah; I mean if you can't do that you're probably not going to get credit for your portfolio.

Wallace furthered,

What I found really intriguing about it and enjoyable, was the fact that there was no limit, meaning I that, if I was motivated enough and I wanted to turn in ten portfolios, I could. If you think you can do it, knock yourself out, nobody's gonna tell you now, but just know that the more you commit yourself to doing, the more

work you're going to have to do, the more you're going to have to really polish and make sure that portfolio shines.

Similarly, Randi mentioned the lack of “hand-holding” involved in the facilitation of the portfolio process when compared to her experiences in traditional classroom settings.

Shelley illustrated a similar point:

If you're not one to do a self-paced class, then you know it may not be a good fit because you really have to be [sic] you're on your own. There's nobody giving you any deadlines...yeah, you really have to be able to self-motivate.

Tiffany echoed,

So there's a lot of, obviously, self-direction involved with the portfolio, but also as an individual, you're responsible for filling-on those gaps. There's not necessarily a resource for that; that you can create the resources and provide the information hoping that it connects the dots...that would be much more fulfilling.

The in-depth interviews yielded layers of findings related to this subtheme. Two additional subthemes were noted, *be honest with yourself* and *avoid procrastination*, as discussed below.

***Honest with self.*** In regard to how to approach potential topics for a portfolio, participants' advice resonated with the adage, honesty is the best policy. When asked about the key things she would convey to prospective portfolio students, Jolene replied:

I guess most of my advice would be, you know, for people to be honest with yourself about where you really have the learning and experience. It's too much work to do one, in my opinion, to do it on a faulty foundation.

Jolene also offered this:

I would advise people that if they have questions about a subject area, or don't feel certain about it, to really weigh whether taking the course would be a better option for them than trying to do the portfolio.

Cassie provided further insight:

Don't waste your time, don't waste your instructor's time, and don't waste the evaluator's time. Really, really prove to yourself, before you invest too much time, that you've got enough...that you can prove those objectives. So, my advice is to not chase after too much to save money. Whittle it down to what the real valuable ones are, that you're really a candidate for, and then go after those with everything you got.

Reflecting on her own portfolio submissions, Sandra noted:

I didn't write a portfolio on anything that I wasn't 100% confident that I had...I only did portfolios where I knew I knew the material. I may not know the name of the theory that would be taught in the class, but I know the subject, and I know the subject cold. So, I didn't attempt anything that I was iffy about because I don't think that's what the process is for.

In her recommendations of the portfolio program to prospective students, Tiffany included an honesty clause:

As long as, you know, making sure that you are following the syllabus that is provided to you, and that you are putting as much meat and information in there, you know, you are being honest and truthful, and you're putting all of that in your [portfolio] paper, I can't see why you shouldn't try it.

The participants' feedback on the importance of honesty in the critical self-reflection involved in the portfolio process reinforces the validity of this form of prior learning assessment.

***Avoid procrastination.*** As previously discussed in this chapter, the desire to save time when pursuing higher education was described in various ways as being an important motivating factor. While avoiding procrastination is inherent in saving time, it was cited by participants in this study as an important pitfall to circumvent while creating a portfolio. Accordingly, this section addresses that topic as a subtheme of self-directed learning.

Marshall described a self-critical reflection involving his pursuit of the portfolio process when he said:

I know that I procrastinate, but because I am aware of it, I'm also able to get around it, because I'll find ways to basically trick myself to getting around it...that's the way I get around the procrastination; for example, the way that I would look at the portfolio process is that, I know I'm not going to sit there and analyze something to death.

Marshall also stated,

The two things that prevent a portfolio of ever going-through is procrastination and perfectionism. Procrastination is dangerously easy...but you can stop yourself from doing that. Sort of being able to kick myself in my own ass is a very valuable skill to have.

Gretchen, when describing insights about the portfolio process, stated:

I mean, I think the only other thing to kind of challenge students that might be looking at portfolio options, would be to have them have a sense of who they are, and what their tendencies are. If they are a procrastinator, like I could see...their advisor for the portfolio program would be, like, you need to be [in] class so that you're held to deadlines...Look, if you know you're a procrastinator, you may really want to challenge yourself to be in the classroom [first], or going through the [portfolio] orientation course.

Furthering this point, when Gretchen was prompted for her advice to prospective portfolio students she responded, "Well, assess their level of procrastination and commitment. You know, the procrastination piece can really work against you and, in some very short periods of procrastination."

Tiffany offered similar advice when she said:

Do not procrastinate, be organized, write down everything; even if you need to write it down on a post-it note, write it down, because it's not harmful if you add it...always be ahead of the game. So, if there is a portfolio that you need to write, start writing.

These findings reflect the participants' experiential feedback that the ability of a portfolio student to avoid procrastination is linked with an increase in chances for submitting a successful portfolio.

This section discussed the elements found to be critical for self-directed learning inherent this study found to be inherent in the portfolio process. Those elements include being self-critical and honest of your prior learning and, avoiding procrastination throughout the portfolio process.

**Expectations vs realities of the portfolio process.** Saving time, energy, and money have already been identified as potential outcomes of successful portfolios. However, even with potential to save time, the portfolio process was also described by participants as time-consuming. The reality is that demonstrating prior-learning at the college-level was found to be cumbersome and tedious at times. Participants' responses depicted a connection between these realities and the nature of their experiences with the portfolio process.

***Time consuming.*** While participants did find their experiences with the portfolio process to be significant in expediting goals of degree-earning potential, they also discussed the time-consuming nature of the process. When describing the artifact collection aspect of the portfolio process, Sandra noted:

It's very time consuming, and you have to have an idea of what evidence you're going to turn in, and so there's a whole process of, okay, this is the class [and] these are the objectives; what would be a suitable piece of evidence to prove those course objectives? Where do I find it? Do I still have it? Who would I contact if I don't?

Shelley recalled dedicating the most time to the essay writing portion of the portfolio process. However, she also mentioned the time consuming nature of collecting documentation for portfolios when she stated:

I guess, writing the essay, I just keep thinking of the one I was struggling with really took me a long time to write, and then of course compiling all of the supporting documents that I was going to need--certificates and what have you.

That could be time consuming. There were a few pieces that took me a little longer time find, but I think writing the essays [took] the longest.

Wallace addressed the importance of having time to dedicate to the portfolio process in his advice to prospect students. Wallace said,

You really need to make sure that you're going to have the time commitment to do this. While the portfolio process is a wonderful process to accelerate your degree plan, it is not an accelerated process by itself. It does take work, it does take effort, it does take research, it does take writing.

Wallace continued, "If any adult learner that came to me and said, 'I'm thinking about doing this program,' what would I say? I'd say, absolutely, but be prepared to invest your time and yourself, your resources." Gretchen's offered similar advice on pursuing portfolio, which included, "Go do it. Be ready. Be ready to put the time and effort into it." Jolene discussed the level of investment required in the portfolio process. She mentioned,

I felt like I was risking, doing the portfolio, and not just my personal investment in it, but also the investment of time, you know. I wasn't investing that much time preparing for the [CLEP] tests. I invested, you know, a fairly significant amount of time, between the PLA seminar and putting together the portfolios.

Cassie noted,

Gathering the data was very time consuming. Combing-through it to make sure that I was categorizing it correctly, and then I guess the bulk of the time was spent on trying to insert and delete based on documentation that I could find.

Randi stated,

I guess the idea of the portfolio is that it's going to be quick. I guess that's what my preconceived thing was, that it was kind of quick, you know. It's a lot faster than taking a class, I guess; it wasn't that quick...a little longer than I thought it was going to be in my head, I guess.

The portfolio process provided the participants a way to hasten the time to earning course credits and, for many of them, their degree. However, the need for adult learners to demonstrate their prior learning via portfolio requires effort and, in some cases, a lot more time than originally conceived.

***Ambiguous feedback loop.*** Portfolio assessment relies on the learners' ability to demonstrate their prior learning to an anonymous portfolio assessor. While there are required templates, forms, and guidelines for portfolios, the amount of and types of artifacts possible for use in portfolios creates a time-consuming assessment process. Accordingly, portfolio artifacts can be numerous and dense, which increases the amount of time involved assessing portfolios. While feedback on portfolios was described as "awesome" by Tiffany, and as an overall positive experience by Sandra, Jolene, and Randi, the time involved in the review and subsequent feedback 'loop,' and the anonymity of the portfolio assessors proved to be a negative aspect of the portfolio process described by participants. Cassie shared her perspective based on her experiences with portfolio assessment:

I was trying to speak to an audience that I didn't know-- the evaluator. You don't know who the evaluator is going to be, and so you're trying to speak in such a way that your answer would stand regardless of the experiences and background of the person who's evaluating you, and that's kind of weird because normally



when you're writing a paper, or you're writing something persuasive, the first thing you set out to do is find out who your audience is. So you're kind of doing it in a blind fashion.

She also noted,

I think that it changed the process for me because I had to be able to speak to an audience that perhaps was not even in my background--an expert in my field. I had to be speaking to someone who was, well, I couldn't cut corners, in other words. I couldn't just slap some jargon out there because the person might not have a [similar] background. And so I needed to really make sure that I toned-down all of my writing and my examples, to speak to someone who may not have a [similar] background.

Randi described a similar experience with the portfolio feedback process:

Well, I was a little worried, I guess...I was a little worried that 'am I explaining it enough? Is this really what they want? Is this what I would have learned in class?' I mean, because I have no idea. I don't really know...so, I guess my thing was I hoped; I just kind of hoped that I was explaining that I had the learning.

She also noted her experiences with the time involved in receiving feedback:

It seemed kind of like a long time because after you turn it in it's like you just kind of want to know if you get [credit] or not. You spend all that time and you're like, 'I've got to wait a few weeks,' or whatever it was before I know if I got credit or not, or if I actually have to take the class, or if I have to re-do it, or whatever. So, it kind of made me anxious a little bit. I know you can't know instantly, but I kind of want to know.

Jolene described the sense of ambiguity involved in the assessment process, but noted her enthusiasm for the feedback received:

Getting feedback was for sure the best. Getting feedback from the evaluator...because it's a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, and there's the fear that it's not going to be adequate, and it's not going to get credit, so that's why the most exciting part of it is getting feedback.

She continued,

It was the best part because, you know, writing, it, I think there was, for me, a sense of, you know, 'Am I really doing this right? Do I really have the learning?' So, getting that reinforcement back from the evaluator, and they were good the ones I had, in terms of writing a fair amount of commentary, which made me feel like it wasn't just rubberstamped.

Sandra expressed,

You have no idea who this person is, or what their expectations are. You have a syllabus; that's it. And of course your advisor can help guide you, but they can't tell you what to write. They can't tell you what the [evaluator] expects. They can't say 'do x, y, and z and you're going to get credit.' That [would] just completely invalidate the process. But, because you're going-in completely blind, you have two sheets of paper that have a list of learning objectives on them. That's it; that's all you have, and so it's just like you have to take ownership of it. You have to assume the position of the professor and say what's good enough...so you have to act as the student and as a professor at the same time...and it's a weird balance.

The experiences described above reflect the dual-nature of the feedback process as it pertains to portfolios. While the feedback provided was labeled positively by participants, the ambiguity of expectations coupled with the anonymity of the portfolio evaluators, resulted in anxious experiences for participants.

**Support.** As noted in this chapter, portfolios are work-intensive and time consuming to produce. Accordingly, it stands to reason that adult learners engaged in the portfolio process would benefit from support as they navigate and develop their work. The types of support noted by participants included PLAS assistance (e.g. faculty, academic advisors), help from family and friends, and flexibility and understanding at the workplace.

Jolene described her experiences with portfolio advising support:

I don't even remember now what [the advisor] said, but again, she put me at ease, and I think made me feel like it was doable. She was a supportive one. I feel like my experience at [the institution] has been that everybody wants to see me succeed...I guess I just feel like the professors and the staff here back it up with, you know, practical...when they say it, they actually mean it, and follow-through...I appreciated being treated like an adult, with respect.

Wallace mentioned,

With like commitments and pressure, people that are married, or in a relationship, and they've got a career, perhaps they've got kids, or they are in a relationship and their partner has kids, or they have more commitments, it's a little scary. It's a little daunting. From a time commitment, from a financial commitment, from a support commitment because, especially if you're not a single person with no

commitments, people rely on you, you know...if you don't have a support network to understand that and, to go 'don't worry, I'll feed him tonight, you go to class,' or 'don't worry, we'll go to the park, you work on your portfolio this afternoon,' that's hard to do.

Wallace went on to note:

Talk to your family and say, 'if it's a possibility, I'm going to need your help because I can't do this by myself.' Without the support of my boss and my job, and without my family, it would have been very difficult for me to do it, too, because they gave me the emotional support and the time support to go do it.

Gretchen noted, "my portfolio advisor was always open." She also stated,

My workplace definitely was supportive in the idea, 'we know you're going to school, whatever, as long as you give us enough heads-up you need off by a certain day.' So I was able to do it on weekends, just do it after work, squeeze in a lunch hour if there was something I wanted to research or whatever.

Cassie described her experiences of sacrifices and support involved in both the decision to pursue her education and, the commitments involved with the portfolio process:

It was a lot of conversations with my family because my family has suffered through this. We've all given up a lot so that I can do this. We've given up vacations. We've given up many, many things that we all used to do so that they are all lined up right behind me and making their own sacrifices so I can go to school.

She went on to note:

What I have left to do over here is doable; I can see the end...the portfolio was what tipped the scales for me to make the decision to jump and, my family was like 'we're behind you.'

The findings indicate that, along with a support system, having realistic expectations of the time and work required, provided a foundation for the participants to be successful with their portfolios. The level and types of support varied, but was consistently mentioned, and the insight about time and effort commitments differed for each participant, but was similarly pervasive in the participants' descriptive experiential feedback.

### **Making Connections**

The portfolio process requires students to recall previous learning as well as communicate and demonstrate that learning as it relates specifically to course objectives. Inherently, the portfolio process incorporates reflection-based tools, prompts, and according to participants, ultimately learning. Portfolio students create a career history, academic record, degree plan/degree goals, list of hobbies, and other experiential lists from which to potentially draw prior learning for portfolios. To further establish actual learning from previous contexts, portfolios require a learning essay which connects the learning to the objectives. Participants found the process of making their tacit knowledge explicit for the purposes of validating their prior learning difficult, yet rewarding once completed. The participants' responses reflect the relationship between tacit knowledge and the difficult nature of explicitly articulating prior tacit knowledge as it relates to academic course objectives.

**Reflections on learning.** Reflection serves as the foundation to the portfolio process. Without reflection, prior learning assessment would not exist. The participants' responses tended to be favorable with regard to their experiences with the reflective nature of the portfolio process. The participants' reflections on learning yielded three subthemes: embedded learning in the portfolio process, learning from taking stock of prior learning and, transferrable learning uncovered by the portfolio process.

***Embedded learning.*** The portfolio process provided participants opportunities to strengthen and reevaluate prior learning while actively reflecting on how to demonstrate their acquisition of that prior learning for use in a portfolio. Of her learning during the reflection process, Shelley stated:

It was actually kind of re-teaching myself, kind of going through that process and then using that in the portfolios...I can put it together in my documentation. So, that was constant learning, putting together proof that I already knew something-- but I was still learning while doing it.

Randi described a meta-reflective moment:

I was just thinking about, like, the portfolio, like I can portfolio my past experiences, right...but I don't know that I could do a portfolio on a passed class, or something like that, and I think it's because, well, I think it really comes down to that reflection and really being involved in something; that's really when you learn something. I think that the portfolio really I mean again with that validation, really shows that you learned something in your life.

She furthered,

I think just, the biggest thing was the fact that I had learned a lot and that I never really thought about it...it was really, like, you have to go back and anytime you've taken a class, or your hobbies, and everything, so you really have to think about the stuff that you've done. I'm like, wow, I've done a lot. I didn't really think about it so, I thought that was kind of cool.

***Taking stock.*** This subtheme focuses on the participants' descriptions of the reflection-based practice of compiling and categorizing their prior learning. This provided starting points from which participants were able to further explore their prior learning experiences for potential use in portfolios. Wallace described his experiences with reflection-based learning stemming from the portfolio process:

I think from a personal note, it allowed me to do some self-reflection, and also to take, for lack of a better word, to take stock of my professional life, from beginning of my career until now, and really take a look at, for lack of a better term, what I've accomplished. I think a lot of us in today's society...we don't really look back and, you know, it's just something we've done, or we've worked, or we've accomplished, but we don't really think about that as part of our whole life existence.

Gretchen mentioned a sense of rediscovery while engaged in the reflective process. She said, "I think just the reflection on, wow, I didn't realize that [prior learning] was equitable to what I would be sitting in a classroom." She went on to state:

What I described prior learning, I mean just more that, wow, I've got this knowledge and I didn't have to go sit in a classroom to get it. I think it was more kind of that 'oh wow' aspect...it allowed me to dig-out some information...and

yet, as I'm going through this stuff I'm kind of saying 'it this going to fit?' Kind of rediscover, 'oh yeah, I've been there, done that.'

On her experiences with the reflective process, Shelley stated:

I think somebody can say that they reflect on things all the time, but it seemed like I could pull more meaning from the way it was structured, and having that kind of frame to it, and these data forms that we had to fill out. It was just very organized to me and it really helped me to pull things out of my archive that I had and I kind of forgot were there.

Jolene explained,

I had a lot of artifacts to choose from so it was difficult to narrow it down. Which ones were most relevant and which ones I could write about that would also track to one of the goals or learning outcomes of the course I was trying to portfolio. So, I think that was the most time consuming part, figuring out what and how the learning outcomes that I was trying to show that I had achieved tracked-to examples that I actually had.

She also noted, "Looking at, again, my own artifacts and seeing where there were match-ups and, how I might exploit those artifacts for use in my portfolio."

Cassie expressed her approach:

So, the only trepidation I had was making sure I thoroughly understood what the objectives were and, that I would be able to categorize my learning under each objective. That was the only grey-area, or the only question I had, in terms of 'what do I need to do for the portfolio?'



She continued,

That's what the hardest part of the whole thing was, I mean as far as going down and doing kind of a brain dump of the things that I had learned over the 30 years, that was voluminous, but it was still direct. Then, it was taking all that and presenting it in a way that I was able to demonstrate that I met this objective.

Also noting,

So, that was the challenging part, coming-up with all of that and then having to reassemble the paper, what I consider to be great scenes, like I'm editing a movie and I'm having to cut-out some really great scenes because I couldn't prove it.

Reflecting on her learning experiences during the matching-up process, Randi said:

Well, just the different experience from taking a class, I guess. It's just the reminding of yourself of what you learned and kind of relearning what you learned, I guess, you're thinking about it again. It's kind of like retaking a class, I guess, you know you're just kind of reinforcing what you know, in a way. It's just a different way of doing it when you just kind of go back and reflect on it, you know, if you have to give a lot of examples of documentation and stuff like that.

So, I was revisiting some...you know, past stuff that I had done, so it was kind of cool to see all of that.

Shelley described how the reflective process helped her motivation during the portfolio process. She said, "Once you start connecting those dots you want to keep connecting the dots and not take a break in between."

Tiffany noted her experiences with matching-up in her advice to prospective portfolio students. She stated,

In the portfolio process, I would explain to them that, you know it may seem challenging in a negative way, but you know it's more challenging in a positive way, you know, being able to take the portfolio from A to Z and write the paper, make sure that you are organized...and just make sure that you are very detailed and on-point when it comes to the course syllabus and those bullet [points] when it comes to writing the portfolios, that you touch-based on each one of those areas on the syllabus.

Tiffany described how the reflective aspects of the portfolio process affected her:

I think the reflection was kind of like you don't realize you do a lot until you actually write it on paper. I mean, you go to work and you do your 8 to 5, or whatever, and then you go home and you don't really realize...exactly how much you do...so, just reflecting on, wow, there is a lot you do, you just don't think about it mentally that you really do all of that stuff that you really do.

Marshall's approach was to "chip-away" at the learning essay as he made connections between his prior learning and the course objectives. He recalled,

I took the course objectives...just throughout the whole day, off and on, I would go and throw whatever new paragraph, or whatever little story tidbit came to my head, in reference to that objective. I'd say, 'oh yeah, there was this one time I learned this, or I did that, I had this experience which showed me x, y, and z.' By breaking it up like that it didn't make it seem like an arduous day-long task; it was just, okay, chip-away at this and then I'll do something else.

He went on to state,

The main reason I chose to break it up, other than the fact that it makes it easier to cut the paper into segments, was also because I wanted to make my argument easy enough to follow, and organized for the assessor to look at and say, ‘right, yeah, I got that, I got this, I got that.’

Cassie described her approach to communicating her prior learning in her portfolios:

I couldn’t go general to specific; it was too hard, too much data to compile, too many experiences to summarize. So, I went the other way and I took the list of objectives and then I just started brainstorming under those objectives; irrespective of the time period in my life [the prior learning occurred]. So, in essence the summary of the list of objectives became my outline for my [learning essay]...then it was more manageable, and I was able to bring it all together...after I did all of that I was able to start writing the paper and from that point on the paper is like any other research paper that you do, it just happens to be on my life.

She went on to state, “the most fruitful for me was the reflecting on what I’d done and realizing that I’ve experienced a lot. That was the most important part of the whole thing for me.” Cassie’s description reflects the intimate connection between the learning demonstrated in portfolios and the adult learners’ personal and professional life learning experiences that serve as portfolio artifacts.

Based on the experiences documented above, the ability to match prior learning with course objectives is critical for successful portfolios. While reflection itself is inherent in the portfolio process, participants described a sense of depth related to the reflective-based learning experienced.

***Transferable learning.*** The participants' responses indicate diverse forms of learning take place during the reflection-based process of developing portfolios. Jolene described her learning from the reflective process. She said, "I think some pride is involved in that, you know, I've been doing this long enough that I can now look back and see how far I've come." Marshall conveyed,

In a more general sense, by taking time to reflect on my learning and tie-in my previous experience and sort of look at what I have in my past and, be able to tie that into my learning objective, and being able to make a portfolio out of it and, explaining, 'I've already got that learning experience,' the ah-ha sort of general moment was that it's one thing to have a skill, it's another thing to explain how that skill is useful, or how that skill pertains to other things, and I think that happens a lot...that was a beneficial aspect of the portfolio process was speaking about explaining yourself, really.

He went on to state,

Through all that work of looking at your own history, the process helped me, it forced me, in a very positive way to be able to explain my history and how it ties into, not just the course learning objectives, but also potentially a job I might want.

While also an opportunity to catalog and serve as a reminder of past accomplishments, the participants described a deeper connection to their prior learning, which was made possible by the reflection-based learning inherent in the portfolio process

**Tacit-to-explicit: Challenging, but changing.** The ability to explicitly describe and demonstrate how you know something and why you apply that know-how the ways in which you do, serves as the foundation of assessable prior learning for portfolios. Accordingly, successful portfolios require the student to clearly communicate how they know what they know in relation to specific college course requirements. As part of the PLAS each participant completed in advance of this study, they were provided with exercises and examples on how to effectively establish your prior learning for use in portfolios.

This section reveals the participants' experiences with that aspect of the portfolio process. While it was noted as being a straightforward process by a few participants, "it's very straightforward, but there are no shortcuts," Wallace said, the tacit-to-explicit process challenged several others. Despite the challenges, the reflection-based process proved to be a rewarding learning opportunity for participants. Each participant undertook a thorough review of their experiences, encompassing the entirety of their adult lives, in order to utilize and glean-from those experiences some actual learning. Furthermore, participants needed to connect that prior learning to course objectives. In regard to challenges, Sandra expressed,

There's obviously learning that has happened, but applying that to like an academic theory when you might not know the name of the theory. You know how to do it, you just don't know what to call it, and that was kind of the main concern. What do you want as evidence?

She noted the personal connection to the learning that served as the basis of reflection for potential use in portfolios. Sandra said, “I have to prove through my words how this experience changed me, so it’s a lot more personal. It’s a lot more detailed.”

Randi mentioned experiencing the reflective process as therapeutic. Randi stated,

I guess I didn’t really think about myself, but I feel like I’m almost in therapy or something. I feel like I’m always thinking about myself a lot, like just thinking about what happened and then thinking about how it effects this, and so it’s just another part of what I feel like I’ve been doing...that whole reflective thing.

Jolene found that part of the portfolio process difficult, she stated: “I felt like it was quite difficult to explain how I know what I know, and I find it frustrating and tedious.” She went on to say, “I’ve had numerous opportunities to write for my job, so yeah, it’s been spread over a long period of time and, I found it difficult to describe how I know what I know.” In regard to the learning essay, she expressed:

The writing of the [learning] essay was, again, challenging, and a little frustrating and, I wouldn’t relish doing it again, but I am extremely grateful for the opportunity, for the option, so I feel like maybe I shouldn’t complain, but there it is.

However,

On the flip-side of that I certainly felt prouder of my achievements in getting credits for the portfolios. Seeing the credit awarded was more satisfying, personally...what was being evaluated with the portfolios was not only my past experiences, but my ability to articulate those experiences. So, it was a different aspect of my abilities that were being evaluated.

Shelley stated,

I wasn't connecting what I knew to the vocabulary that needed to be used, and [advisor] kept saying, 'well, make sure you use the textbooks,' but I am using the textbooks, but still just could not seem to grasp it. But then I finally did, which I just found so rewarding about the whole process was learning about myself.

She also noted, "again, it's just, framing it and using the language, I just felt so smart afterwards. Yeah, that was really good." She furthered,

I think that was harder for me, to translate that into the language that it needed to be in that portfolio...I had the hardest time writing that essay for that and the problem I was having was using that language that they used in the textbook. I was really having a hard time...I forget what the words were, but they had different meanings to me and so I wasn't using them in the right context in my essay, but I did eventually kind of worked that out, and so I think that was the most rewarding because it was the hardest one for me to do.

Randi noted,

The main paper is just very intense, I think...it's a little more broad, but I mean, you're telling your life story and you hope some random person says, 'yep, that's the course,' so I think it's a little bit more intense.

Gretchen mentioned the challenges and rewards she experienced with portfolios:

Absolutely, I think that was a good discovery out of things, and of course, it did challenge me; if there was an element in the curriculum...that I know I may not be as skilled in that little area. I did try to challenge myself to, you know, go pick-

up a book before I continued with that portion of the portfolio, so that I could add that into it.

She stated, “There’s nothing easy about it; there are no shortcuts to it. The whole experience was more about...evaluating my life, and evaluating my experiences, and feeling confident in myself and that portfolio.”

She further commented,

Well, the portfolio process taught me that I needed to put my money where my mouth was. Obviously, it didn’t change the experiences, but it changed my ability to communicate those experiences...it was positive because it made me stretch. If it would have been so easy, it wouldn’t have had near as much impact on me, and nowhere near the learning experience.

Marshall described his experiences with the tacit-to-explicit process:

It’s a whole sort of mental and analytical process into figuring out what it is you know...figuring out what you know, and also what you know is called, and in the end, having somebody recognizing that; it’s almost a seal of approval. Whoever stamps this “approved”, bam, you got it. Not only have you figured out what you know, but ‘we recognized that we now know what you know.’

This section revealed the participants experiences with the reflective process as it pertained to creating their portfolios. It further examined the struggles and positive outcomes associated with that reflection-based learning. Although the process of matching-up prior learning to course objectives was described as difficult or cumbersome, the laborious and sometimes frustrating nature of that process proved to offer participants opportunities for growth. The application of the reflection used in



portfolios is the re-examining of and ultimate deconstruction of one's knowledge and skills to allow for explicit description and demonstration of those skills. This deep, focused reflective process was found to be an opportunity for participants to learn about themselves, recall and reapply their prior learning, categorize and re-categorize their skills, and create new meanings from that original learning.

### **Essence of the Phenomenon: Validation**

The aim of this phenomenological study was to identify the essence of the portfolio process. In order to do so, participants' descriptions of their experiences of the phenomenon were captured and analyzed. Overwhelmingly, a sense of validation was found to be the essence of this process for the participants of this study. Under the overarching umbrella of validation two subthemes emerged: increased confidence and sense of achievement. The participants described how the use of their prior learning toward current course credit requirements at the college-level positively impacted how they viewed themselves and how they view their prior learning contexts as more meaningful in light of the portfolio process.

**Increased confidence in self.** As mentioned in previous sections of this chapter, the portfolio process requires a deep engagement of prior learning. That immersive reflective practice allows students the opportunity to 'take stock' of their learning and potentially apply it to new contexts. While the goal of portfolios is to earn college-credit for prior learning, additional benefits seem inherent to this phenomenon, including an increase in self-confidence associated with successful portfolio(s). Participants described their deep elation and foundational impact the portfolio process provided for their experiences as an adult learner in higher education.

Shelley described the validation and increase in self-esteem she received from the portfolio process when prompted to explain what the portfolio process meant to her. She stated,

It meant a few things. It meant validation that I did have some knowledge before pursuing my degree, that I did have some knowledge worth credit. It was also rewarding...an opportunity for me to set some goals for myself and I was able to achieve them which was just helpful for self-esteem, and confidence, and again, just more validation that I was on the right path and that this was the right thing for me to be doing.

She furthered, "I just think overall it's been really good for me, and I keep saying self-esteem, but this whole process has been about self-esteem...I just really feel good about myself after I did that. It really helped my self-esteem." Shelley also mentioned, "I just wanted to make sure we got to talk about how great I felt when I was done...people should just try it just to build-up their self-esteem, because it felt really good when I was done." To summarize Shelley's experiential description of the essence of the phenomenon, she said: "it was just the validation and I think my biggest takeaway was that it just built my self-confidence in that process of validating what I knew." Cassie described how the learning about oneself during the portfolio process provided her with a sense of safety. She stated,

If I can say it in one sentence, it's that education is the light that chases away the shadows. Otherwise, you're walking in the dark, and something is going to reach out and bite you, and you're always walking with fear and trepidation because

there's too many shadows. And that education just obliterates them, so you don't have to walk in fear.

Gretchen reflected on her validating portfolio experiences. She noted, "it was kind of the pride of reflecting on where I had taken myself from and, of course, the validation that I got when I got the credit for the classes." She went on to state,

Oh, it means a tremendous amount; the idea that obviously my personal experience was respected enough to say that it met the education criteria that I would of gotten otherwise if I had to complete the formal classes and things like that, and I think it is important...the idea that a university could respect that my hands-on personal experiences were equitable to what they would be teaching me in a course, I think it was tremendous.

Gretchen also said,

There was a little bit of those 'wow! A-ha!' moments, you know, and yet again the confidence of kind of going 'yeah, I've been doing this all this time.' I mean, again, it was a level of validation and it was the level of 'wow, I got this' and, you know, 'a-ha, this is what they're learning in class and I've been doing it the whole time. Great!'

She furthered,

The ability to recognize and feel confident that you have skills to contribute, skills to help you feel confident that you've not just been somebody floating around in the career world. It definitely is something that you can show yourself and to others, that your experiences, your skills are worthy and meaningful. I think that might be kind of a good way to describe that...you've then moved the portfolio

forward and the professor's checked-off that you've got the learning; there's validation in that.

Jolene described how the portfolio process provided her with a sense of respect that increased her self-esteem. She stated,

I think especially when I felt more or less insecure and more sort of embarrassed of not having a degree, that it was good validation for me. Particularly at that time, to be able to go 'you know, I may not have a degree, but here's a respected institution saying that some of my experiences and non-collegiate schooling could entitle me to some college credit.'

Jolene also noted:

New meaning just in terms of this experience of earning college credit...I think also the ability to portfolio classes that I think were [upper-level] standing, I think probably made me feel like the rest of my experiences, even the experiences I didn't portfolio about, had some additional validity.

Tiffany discussed what she felt captured the meaning of the portfolio process. "I think the meaning to me is like self-worth; something you can pull-together with little help and actually finish it." She furthered, "I think I learned about myself that I, let's see how can I put this, not settling or not selling myself short."

Sandra summed-up her experiences with the portfolio process: "it's going to give people confidence, but it's also going to teach them some skills. Yeah, it's great. I could not be happier with my results from it."

An increase in confidence stemming from hard work and prior learning provided the participants with a sense of validation and self-worth. While those experiences are

supplemental to any credit earned, they permeated the interview responses for each participant, indicating a foundational importance in regard to the role played in the portfolio process.

**Sense of achievement.** In addition to finding an increase in self-esteem via the portfolio process, participants expressed their sense of validation from accomplishments and achievements relived from the exploration of prior learning. Gretchen's description of increased esteem and sense of achievement as a result of her experiences with the portfolio process provides a nice bridge between the two subthemes in this section. Gretchen stated, "I think it's helped in a lot of ways that, you know, not only being able to be proud of the fact that I made that accomplishment...my hope is that it really has added to the esteem of my family, I think, in general." Similarly, Cassie noted, "The valuable part, though, in...remembering what I had accomplished back on those days...I look back and say 'wow, I climbed that mountain, so this is just a little hill compared to that mountain,' so it helps. It was a confidence-building exercise."

Randi stated the following in regard to the feeling of validation and accomplishment she experienced as part of the portfolio process: "It was cool. All that work that I had done not only for class, of for the paper, but just in my life, it actually is worth something...it's like cool, you know, kind of the validation of the learning that I've done before school." She went on to state,

I learned that I knew a lot more than I realized. I learned that I've learned a lot, you know, even though I hadn't gone to school, and that you do learn a lot at work and you don't think about it because it's not a class; somebody's not actually teaching you, but you learn a lot. You pick stuff up so, actually having to

write it all down and kind of categorize it, then think about examples, you realize that you've learned a lot in your life.

She furthered,

I was validated after I turned it in and got credit for it, like, oh wow all that stuff that I had done...I got credit for all of that so, it feels like, 'hey, you didn't just waste your time.' You worked and you know a lot of stuff, so it's kind of cool.

She concluded about her experiences with the portfolio process:

Well, it was a lot of work and it was kind of emotional because you're thinking about all of your past...just thinking a lot about stuff, but it was cool, like, again you're like, 'oh wow, I accomplished a lot' and 'I just accomplished this.' But, yeah, I would definitely recommend it to people.

Wallace stated,

I think, as self-serving as it sounds, I think getting the notice in the mail that everything you've worked for you got the full credits for all of it. It validated, personally, the work that I did was good, but it also validated to me that what I had done for a profession for twenty plus years actually meant something. It actually translated into something and somebody else saw value in that.

He added, "I think it was an opportunity for me to really earn some validation for the things I had accomplished in my professional life over the years; that they amounted to something." Sandra expressed, "the portfolio process was validating for all that time you were out of school, because you just, like, look I really did do something with that." She went on to say,

So, the portfolio process, for someone who is [an adult learner] can be very validating of that time they spent outside of school and saying you actually did do stuff that was productive. You did learn things. You did gain skills outside of your specific job and so I think it can be very validating.

Marshall stated, "Completing the portfolio is a tremendous weight lifted off my shoulders, because it feels like a big task, and it actually is, but all-in-all, it is a task that I am glad to have completed." He furthered, "it's just nice, not just doing the work, but also being recognized for knowledge that I've already gotten."

Tiffany said, "It means a sense of, like, an accomplishment; a sense of completion that I've set something, a goal, and I actually accomplished it." She went on to state, "I think the essence of the portfolio process, I would describe, it's kind of like a blessing...the blessing is more just being able to mentally and, more in feelings, being able to accomplish the task on your own."

Jolene mentions a sense of pride regarding the portfolio process. She stated, "I think it's a point of pride that I could adequately put-together the documents and the learning essay, and the other information that was required to, you know, gain credit for a class that way." She also noted,

Realizing that it was more doable and then going through the process of putting it altogether, I felt some sense of accomplishment, for sure; both in what I've learned outside of school and also my abilities, by putting it together in the required format and getting credit for it.

Jolene summarized, “being able to see the breadth of my experience and learning over the past 20 years outside of school, outside of college anyway, gave me a sense of accomplishment and validated what I learned.”

The portfolio process is intended to provide adult learners the opportunity to earn course credit for prior learning at the college-level. However, this study found the essence of the phenomenon is the validation of those skills and prior learning. Participants described their key meaning-made in regard to the portfolio process as validation. They expressed a sense of worth and value gained from their experiences with the portfolio process, which will be explored further in this text. To summarize this section, Shelley’s description of the essence of the portfolio process: “Just self-validation.”

### **Summary of Findings**

The participants in this study addressed their motivations for pursuing the portfolio process, which included the potential to save time and money, and the opportunity to achieve their goal of degree completion. The adult learners interviewed for this study also described the elements involved in being successful with the portfolio process. Those insights included avoiding procrastination, taking an honest and critical approach to your prior learning, realizing the amount of work that is involved with the portfolio process, and respecting the feedback loop associated with the process. A critical variable to success in the portfolio process was found to be support; whether it is support from portfolio staff, support from work, or support from home.

The ability to identify prior learning and then make connections between that prior learning and identified course objectives is fundamental to the portfolio process.



The reflective process inherent in that practice was found to contribute to learning. There is the learning embedded in the portfolio process, the learning through rediscovery of self and skills involved in the 'taking stock' portfolio exercises, and there were transferrable skills learned as a result of reflecting on prior learning and needing to apply that learning to new and different contexts. That practice was found to both strengthen the original learning, but also on occasion be the catalyst for new applications.

The findings included the power to change involved in the challenging practice of making tacit learning explicit for the purposes of assessing prior learning. The uncovering and reassessing of prior learning proved to be inspirational, motivational, and a source of positive change for the participants. While the subsequent chapter will discuss the essence of the phenomenon more thoroughly, an increase in self-confidence and the sense of achievement described by participants was found to be the core of the portfolio process.

*It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.*  
- Henry David Thoreau

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Analysis, Interpretations, and Synthesis**

The purpose of this study was to reveal the essence of the portfolio process as it was descriptively conveyed by the participants. In order to best capture the experiences of participants with this phenomenon, open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted, in keeping with the nature of phenomenological qualitative research. This method of collecting data allowed access to perspectives held by participants regarding the portfolio process, and enabled meaningful analysis and interpretation of the findings.

The following chapter presents a discussion on the key findings of the study and a description of the development of the analytical categories. Subsequently, the analytical categories will be explored, beginning with the analysis of the *my turn* theme, then the *how-to* analysis, followed-by the analysis of *making connections*, and culminating with the analysis of the essence of the phenomenon, *validation*. The chapter ends with revisiting the assumptions presented in chapter I and a summary of the interpretation of the findings.

### **Discussion of Key Findings**

The previous chapter identified the research findings for this study. For the purposes of analysis and interpretation, key findings will be further analyzed and synthesized. The critical finding of this phenomenological study was the sense of validation participants derived from the portfolio process. However, in order to arrive at

the core of the study, it is imperative to discuss the findings that lead to the discovery of the essence of the phenomenon.

The significant findings include elements of why participants pursued portfolios, their descriptions of learning experiences inherent in the portfolio process and their insights into how to be successful with portfolios and how to incorporate prior learning into explicit course-related requirements and contexts. The motivational factors to pursue credits via the portfolio played a seemingly critical role in how participants made sense of the portfolio process and their prior learning utilized for portfolios. The ability to learn how to navigate the portfolio process and how to incorporate relevant and applicable prior learning was conveyed as critical both to successful portfolios and for making-meaning throughout portfolio development.

The participants described the process of making tacit knowledge explicit as fundamental to not only creating a successful portfolio, but also inherently linked to learning opportunities about themselves and their prior learning. The use of their prior learning in different frameworks provided the participants with fertile ground from which to grow new meanings and acquire new knowledge.

Participants conveyed the principal value of the portfolio process as validation, that is, the process allowed them the opportunity to validate their prior learning as something meaningful, beyond the potential of earning credit for that learning. The findings reflect an increase in the self-worth and confidence of participants. In addition, participants described their experiences with validation in regard to a sense of achievement, beyond the scope of earning course credits, inherent in the portfolio process.

## Analytic Category Development

The phenomenological model used in this study presumes the researcher will allow categories to emerge organically, that is, finding the essence of a phenomenon as the descriptions and meaning-making are analyzed, without pre-conceived notions of theoretical connections. The interpretive analysis and synthesis tools and protocols discussed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) provided the structure and foundation for this chapter. Specifically, their analytic category development tool was used in conjunction with analytic memos to identify the key analytic categories based on the findings of this study (pp. 174-184). Once identified, the analytic categories were used as a theoretical framework from which to view the key findings. Analysis of findings was conducted on three levels: Level 1 was an analysis of the key findings individually to ascertain the meanings; Level 2 was an analysis of findings as they related or were interconnected to one another; and Level 3 was a cross-case analysis of the findings as they related to participants and the similarities and differences among participants. This three-level method of analysis was described by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) as “a multilayered approach,” thus allowing the researcher an opportunity to analyze the findings more effectively and completely.

The guiding research questions, *how do participants perceive their learning experiences with the effort to earn college credit through the portfolio development process* and *how do participants make sense of the process of explicating their prior experiential learning as a part of the portfolio process?* provided the foundation of investigation for this study. The first two analytic categories, *my turn* and *how-to*, stem from the first guiding research question. The *my turn* category was derived from an

analysis of findings related to why participants pursued the portfolio process. The *how-to* analytic category identifies the learning process experienced by the participants during the portfolio development process. The findings related to this category provided insight into successful portfolio development and the participants' learning related to their experiences with the phenomenon.

The third and fourth analytic categories were formed from the key findings related to the second guiding research question, which aimed to investigate and explore how participants made sense of their prior learning in regard to its use and relevance throughout their experiences with developing portfolios. Having established the why and the how of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon, the *making connections* category explored the next logical step in the interpretation of the findings, which is the unraveling of tacit knowledge in order to make sense of that prior learning for use in a new or different context. This reflection-based learning proved integral to the success with portfolio development, but it also provided the participants with learning opportunities inherent in that reflective process. The final analytic category examines the finding of the essence of the phenomenon, *validation*. The descriptions of participants' experiences of being validated as a result of successful portfolios provided abundant examples of the positive impact the phenomenon had on their lives.

### **Analytic Category One: My Turn**

The participants' underlying desires to return to higher education were found to be based on more than the cost-effective and time-to-completion elements that were explored in the previous chapter. There was a drive to either complete something the participant had begun earlier in life or to engage in higher education to model the

inherent benefits of pursuing a degree. The portfolio process offered the participants a means to accelerate the time to degree completion, while also offering them insight into their own prior learning, which was found to play an integral part of motivating these learners. Participants viewed the opportunity of earning credits for previously acquired knowledge as their turn to pursue goals that had become more attainable. These motivations described by the participants were related to the assumptions of adult learners described by Knowles, et al (1998):

1. The learner's needs are the catalyst for educational pursuits,
2. The learner's self-concept informs decisions on education,
3. The role of the learner's experiences in educational settings is important,
4. The learners demonstrate a readiness to learn,
5. The learners demonstrate an orientation to learning and,
6. Motivation to learn is primarily internal. (Knowles, et al. 1998, p. 4)

Wallace's motivations relate to the first, second, fourth, fifth, and sixth assumptions from the above list. He stated,

It was always there, it was always eating at me to finish my degree. A lot of good friends from college and my fraternity, and everybody that graduated, I've always felt incomplete, personally. But professionally, I always felt like it would hold me back.

Similar sentiments were conveyed by each participant that reflected a connection between the assumptions of adult learners pursuing their education and the participants' motivations to pursue portfolio. While the motivations to return to higher education are varied and multiple, this study identified multiple impetuses for participants choosing to pursue portfolios and the expectations adult learners bring with them to educational

settings. Similarly, Angel (2008) found that portfolios were used “as a motivational tool to facilitate learning.” (p. 94). Accordingly, this information could prove integral to how prior learning assessment programs are developed, promoted, and facilitated.

Correspondingly, Wlodkowski (1999) wrote, “Because we can neither observe motivation directly nor measure it precisely, we can only infer from what people say and do. We look for signs—effort, perseverance, completion—and we listen for words: I want to...,” (pp. 1-2). The in-depth phenomenological interview methods incorporated for this study provided access to the participants’ descriptions of motivations related to pursuing the phenomenon. Goal completion, the ability to persevere, and the desire to model the way for others were all presented as rationales for engaging in portfolios. Wlodkowski pointed out that “most adults have multiple reasons for learning” and that there is a deeper link between adult learners’ identity and their motivations for higher education (p. 15). Furthermore, Wlodkowski wrote, “Adults by social definition, individual need, and institutional expectation are responsible people who seek to enhance their *identity* through learning that further develops their competence. For adult learners to experience intrinsic motivation, they need to connect who they are with what they learn” (p. 12). Cassie’s description of perseverance exemplifies the relation to identity enhancing opportunities for adult learners. She stated,

I’ve always had a high regard for accreditation, degrees, certification where somebody has gone in and gotten a lot of training and I know what it’s like to persevere...so that’s why the getting the degree and staying in school, and supporting the [portfolio] program is important to me, because you’re not fraudulently getting anywhere. You’re getting there by blood, sweat and, tears.

The tethering of constructing identity and forming new meaning through the experiences of the portfolio process was found to be connected to the assumptions of adult learners expressed in the adult learning theory of andragogy. Moreover, the descriptive experiences provided by participants reflect a significant link between the reasons to pursue higher education and the decision to attempt portfolio development.

The connection between the participants' ability to learn how to be successful with the phenomenon is related to the assumptions that the learner is ready to learn, that the learner has an internal motivation for pursuing the learning opportunity, and that there is a demonstrated willingness to learn (Knowles, et al., 1998). Exemplary of the internal motivation assumed to be inherent in adult learners, Wallace discussed the importance of innermost incentive in the portfolio process, "if you aren't self-motivated, or you aren't confident working on your own, given the instructions that you're given, you know you may struggle."

Wlodkowski (1999) stated that a, "learning experience in an engaging format about a relevant topic is intrinsically motivating because it increases the range of conscious connections to those interests, applications, and purposes that are important to learners" (pp. 76-77). This individually generated desire to learn was found to be a catalyst to more than just the initial desire to pursue portfolios, but was also a driving factor in sustaining focus throughout the development of a portfolio.

### **Analytic Category Two: How-to**

Having established the participants' motivational factors related to the portfolio process, this section will further analyze the findings on how participants navigated the development of their portfolios, and the learning they experienced as a result. The



findings related to this analytic category are similar in foundation to the assumptions of adult learners posited by Knowles (1998), discussed in the previous section. Additionally, previous research on self-directed learning by Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), Brookfield (2013), Knowles (1998), Wlodkowski (1999), Yueh (1997), and others was found to be linked to participants' experiences with the phenomenon.

According to Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), portfolio assessment engages adult learners in self-directed learning in which the learners are active and independent learners, capable of monitoring their progress based on characteristics and internal factors. This allows self-reflection and self-evaluation of their learning to be conducted throughout portfolio development. The prior learning assessment opportunity created opportunities for the participants to chart their own paths, at their own pace, and in respect to their reflective analysis of what knowledge, skills, and abilities they possess equate to course objectives. Brookfield (2013) explained that “self-directed learning is learning in which decisions around what to learn, how to learn it, and how to decide if one has learned something well enough are all in the hands of learners” (p. 90). This deeper investigation of previously acquired learning as it relates to new learning contexts was found to be almost entirely self-directed.

According to a study by Yueh (1997), portfolios focus on the reflection and use of the transferability of prior learning, which is “a continuous process of growth and development” (p. 88). Portfolios were also found to be a “powerful tool to portray students' growth and development and to illustrate their learning progress and improvement” (Yueh, p. 88). The current study's participants' experiences with

portfolios and the self-directed learning involved with the process align with those findings. Sandra espoused,

You have to take ownership of it. You have to assume the position of the professor and say what's good enough, but do I think it's good enough...you have to act as the student and as a processor at the same time, and you have to be critical of your own work.

That insight based on her experiences with portfolios also relates to what Brookfield (2013) wrote:

To be truly self-directed is to be empowered—to decide what is most important to you, how you want to go about learning it, and when you're done. The learning is done not to earn grades but because it has to be done if people are to lead meaningful lives (p. 92).

Similarly, the descriptions of the empowerment related to self-directed learning opportunities relates closely to the participants' descriptive experiences with their portfolios. Sandra stated,

I definitely think people who are self-directed are going to be more successful. I think it makes you better at your essays and you're other classes, because you're going-in blind, because you have to be self-directed, because you have to be self-critical, and you have to be reflective to do all of these things.

The critical finding that this analytic category was based on provided numerous examples of the connections between participants' ability to be self-directed learners while constructing portfolios and success with their respective portfolios.

### **Analytic Category Three: Making Connections**

In order to be successful with the portfolio process, participants were required to reflect on, select, and reincorporate their tacit knowledge into new and varying contexts. Accordingly, the participants' experience with making tacit knowledge explicit for the use in portfolios is an essential lens through which to view this phenomenon. In the seminal work on the subject originally published in 1967 by Polanyi (2009), he defined tacit knowledge as containing an array of abstract and physical information. The combination of that theoretical and sensory evidence can be adapted to make meaning of something. Polanyi (2005) wrote,

If an ultimate logical level is to be attained and made explicit, this must be a declaration of my personal beliefs. I believe that the function of philosophic reflection consists in bringing to light, and affirming as my own, the beliefs implied in such of my thoughts and practices as I believe to be valid; that I must aim at discovering what I truly believe in and at formulating the convictions which I find myself holding; that I must conquer my self-doubt, so as to retain a firm hold on this programme of self-identification (p. 281).

Similar to the work of Polanyi on tacit knowledge, Donald Schön's (1983) work on *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* described how new meaning can be created through reflective practice. Schön penned, "reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning" and that, "through reflection...can criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences...and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience" (p.

61). This new meaning could then be applied to varying contexts through additional reflection and action. Schön wrote,

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (Schön, p. 68)

Shelley articulated her experiences with gathering tacit knowledge from her prior learning and transforming it into new meaning within new contexts. She stated,

I hadn't had a need to really frame my knowledge and present it in any way. It was all just in there, and so this process just kind of helped me to frame that, and to really see it as something, you know, instead of just in my head...it made me think about jobs I'd had, and what I used to do, and just kind of where I am now, so it was all very interesting.

Additionally, she described the learning associated with making her tacit knowledge explicit.

Finding out what I knew, but then also being able to change the way I communicate that information. So, not only was I proving I knew something, I was actually learning from that process on how to present what I know. You know get it out of *here* and onto *there* was really, really exciting.

Correspondingly, studies conducted by Angel (2008), Blinkhorn (1999), and Peruniak and Powell (2007) on adult learners' experiences with the portfolio form of PLA indicate new meaning is created as a result of the reflection on and adaptation of

prior learning. Blinkhorn (1999), found that “the portfolio process encourages reflection” and that “the learners were reflecting on their prior learning throughout the construction of their portfolios” (p. 154). Furthermore, “through reflection, the portfolio process allowed these learners to create meaning from their prior learning” (p. 155). Similarly, Angel (2008) concluded that portfolios were “a context for reflection to promote a holistic perspective of students’ experiences” and “participants indicated that the portfolio was a useful tool that facilitated their learning” (pp. 94-97). Additionally, a majority of respondents of Angel’s study “indicated that creating their portfolios helped them to: identify gaps in their learning, self-evaluate their learning, reflect on their thinking and learning process, and learn new skills” (pp. 103). In an article by Peruniak and Powell (2007), they describe the tacit knowledge and self-directed learning in the portfolio process as a *back-eddy effect* grounded in adult learning perspective. They posited that,

“the process of developing a portfolio is a significant educational experience, which may lead to self-affirmation, recognition of the importance of reflection in the deepening of knowledge, and enhanced self-directed learning” (p. 99).

Similarly, Burris (1997) described what she deemed “bonus” learning by participants in her study on their experiences with portfolios. She noted that, “in all cases it was as if the learning and new meaning perspectives were viewed as a “bonus” or unintended positive side effect of the portfolio experience” (p. 157). Exemplifying these sentiments, Randi stated,

I just didn’t think about it before at all. They were just stuff I did in the past. I didn’t think about it as learning, actually, until [portfolio] class, and I’m like, ‘it’s

learning!’ I learned, but I never thought about it that way at all. I just thought it was just stuff that I had done, not really stuff that I had learned.

Cassie described similar experiences with the process of converting her prior learning into new meaning as it applied to her portfolio and course requirements. She stated, “the experience was a learning experience in-and-of-itself in taking objectives and seeing whether or not you matched them.”

Interpreting the analytic category of *making connections* necessitates a cognizance of Polanyi’s work on tacit knowledge, Schön’s fundamental work on reflection in practice, and the research studies referenced in this section. Accordingly, I was able to make sense of how the participants’ came to understand their prior learning, often from informal educational settings, and apply that formerly tacit knowledge into concrete demonstrations for use in portfolios.

#### **Analytic Category Four: Validation**

The portfolio process allowed participants the opportunity to more fully recognize their knowledge, skills, and learning while also providing the chance for new meaning to be made related to their prior learning. This foundation for new application through the engaged reflection on prior learning seems to be both affirming and confidence building for the participating adult learners. Accordingly, the crux of this phenomenological study examined the participants’ experiences with validation in the portfolio process.

Mezirow’s (1991) work on transformational learning theory provided the foundation for analyzing the participants’ descriptions of validation related to their experiences with the phenomenon. Mezirow remarked,

Meaning schemes, made up of specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that constitute interpretations of experience, become more differentiated and integrated or transformed by reflection on the context or process of problem solving in progressively wider contexts” (p. 5).

He furthered, “learning may be understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (p. 12). Additionally, Mezirow (2012) emphasized that perception change regularly occurs after some combination of these phases:

1) a disorienting dilemma; 2) self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame; 3) acritical assessment of assumptions; 4) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared; 5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; 6) planning a course of action; 7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; 8) provisional trying of new roles; 9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and 10) are integration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (p. 86).

The ability of adult learners to be aware of their world and their ability to incorporate differing *dimensions* of their prior learning into new and more complete meanings, results in a sense of transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Elsewhere, Mezirow (1997) wrote,

There is an inherent logic, ideal, and purpose in the process of transformative learning. The process involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it (p. 11).

Lamoreaux (2005) found that participants' experiences with prior learning assessment exemplify the open-minded investment in new meaning-making opportunities fundamental to transformational learning. She remarked,

for participants in the study, "trying on" other perspectives was part of the writing process; exposure to other perspectives was also part of peer review and faculty feedback. Trying on multiple perspectives is part of the substantive theory for fostering change related to PLA (p. 134).

She concluded, "the substantive theory that emerged in this study to describe how a portfolio course contributes to learners' experience of change is consistent with transformative learning theory," and "that PLA has the capacity to foster transformative changes in learners" (p. 137).

For participants in the current study, the new, more complete meaning that stemmed from their prior learning created more than just a resource for use in portfolios, but an increase in the sense of worth and value of that prior learning and, of themselves. Gretchen summarized it this way:

This is some of you getting to know yourself, being able to feel proud of yourself and that your role in the world is meaningful...the portfolio process is about education and academic, but, you know, the fact that it offers a way for you to reflect on your life and know that every portion of what you've been through is important, not only to yourself, but to what your role is in the world.

Theoretical explorations of transformative learning by Dirkx (1998) and Cranton (2006) provide additional insight to this study. Dirkx (1998) maintained that for adult learners, "to be meaningful, what is learned has to be viewed as personally significant in



some way; it must feel purposive and illuminate qualities and values of importance to the person or group” (p. 9). This aptly describes experiences conveyed by the participants in regard to the phenomenon. Jolene stated:

The idea of being able to get some credit for my previous experience...it just seemed like a cool way to get some credits, and I think even then that it felt like to me [the institution] was saying ‘we value you and, appreciate that some of your experience is actually equal to college credit.’ I think that was meaningful to me in terms of feeling a certain level of respect

Similarly, Tiffany expressed:

I think I place a totally different value of, not necessarily self-worth, but just appreciation of the whole portfolio experience. Because you haven’t met who is reviewing your [portfolio]. You actually don’t know. So, knowing that someone actually read your portfolio and took your experiences to value and say, ‘okay, she really knows what she wrote in this paper.’ I think that’s a totally different value or feeling versus sitting in a class. It’s a totally different feeling of appreciation.

Dirkx (1998) proffers, “transformative learning has neither a distinct beginning nor an ending. Rather, it represents a potential that is eternally present within ourselves and our learners” (p. 11). Consistent with this perspective, Cassie said:

I mean, that’s the whole thing about the portfolio process is, yes, there’s an output and you might get something out of it, but more importantly, there’s the reflection. I mean, even the chronology; I had forgotten how far I had come in my life. I had forgotten some major events in my life, and when I had to sit down and

write it all our like that, I almost felt closer to myself...yeah, it's just like therapy. I mean, it's like self-therapy because therapy is supposed to be about helping you through your issues. Well, so often we don't ever work-through them. We just scurry around them. Portfolio made you, even aside from the subject matter, made you [work-through] that and that was a pretty awesome experience.

In describing the fundamental connection between an adult learner's *self*-concept and learning Cranton (2006) wrote, "Self-concept is frequently mentioned in relation to adult learning. A low self-concept is seen as inhibiting learning, and increased self-concept is described as a goal of adult education" (p. 5). Similar to the participants' experiences with portfolios, Cranton posited that "transformative learning has to do with making meaning out of experiences and questioning assumptions based on prior experience" (p. 8). Previous research on adult students' experiences with the portfolio process has yielded similar findings. Burris (1997) conducted a multiple case study exploring participants' experiences with portfolio development. She surmised:

It seems reasonable to conclude that transformative learning was generated by the portfolio experience in these cases. The transformative learning experienced by these participants related to revised psychological perspectives and, possibly to some extent, revised epistemic perspectives (p. 158).

Based on responses from the participants in Blinkhorn's (1999) study of learners' experiences with portfolios, he found that,

All of the learners who completed portfolios believed that they experienced an increase in self-esteem. This increase in self-esteem was a realization on the part

of the learners that they had accomplished so much throughout their lives. This realization was incurred throughout the portfolio process (p. 165).

Similarly, Smith (2002) identified five themes from the participants' responses to their experiences with portfolios, including validation of learning, valuing the past and, facilitating personal growth. In a similar vein, Jolene in the current study stated:

I think there was lots of feeling of validation and a feeling of relief that I'm glad that what I had put-together and submitted was adequate to receive credit, but in the process of doing that I feel like I actually learned some skills...that I have now been able to apply.

Shelley explained:

Well, I think after I did the first one I started feeling the effects of building my self-esteem and putting that knowledge down on paper, that I really looked at it as if I did not get credits for it, I'm still really getting something valuable out of this...I could see some value in doing this. Just even in my self-esteem and knowing that I actually knew something that I didn't really know I knew.

An increase in self-worth, self-esteem, and confidence can only benefit adult learners in higher education settings. The realization that this type of validation exists as part of the portfolio process could prove important to practice, as well as a model for use in other adult learner-focused educational settings and programs.

### **Revisiting Assumptions from Chapter I**

The phenomenological qualitative research model used for this study began with an inductive analysis and culminated with deductive analysis. Accordingly, it is useful to reexamine the assumptions presented in Chapter 1, which were identified at the onset of

this study. My background and experiences provided the foundation for these assumptions.

The first assumption positing that adult learners' experiences with portfolios would be mostly positive was found to be the case for the participants in this study. While the sample of the nine adult learners whose experiences were used as data for this study does not provide generalizability of the findings, their descriptions of the phenomenon were overwhelmingly positive.

The second assumption suggested that adult learners inherently have vast amounts of prior learning that can be used for potential portfolio credits. The findings of this study verified that the participants' ability to identify, categorize, and make-meaning of their voluminous prior learning did play a critical role in their success with portfolios. Participants described the time-consuming nature of sifting-through all of their prior learning in order to most effectively demonstrate correlations to course objectives. Additionally, the participants unequivocally stated that they would advise adult learners to attempt portfolios, given the intrinsic prior learning prospective students have acquired.

The third assumption was that adult learners would be trustworthy in their descriptions and recollections of their experiences with portfolios. This phenomenological study relied on a three-interview model that allowed for member checks, follow-up inquiries, and the scaffolding of data as they were collected. Consequently, I was able to validate the data as they were collected and analyzed. The transcripts of the 27 interviews used as the foundation to this study demonstrate that the

participants were able to consistently reflect and describe their experiences with the phenomenon.

The fourth and final assumption, that participants would be able to reflect on and accurately describe specific examples of their experiences of the original learning that was used as the basis for portfolio(s), was also found to be valid. Similar to the reasons discussed for the third assumption, the research methods utilized for this study provided both the researcher and the participants the resources and opportunities to most effectively ensure the data collected was representational of actual experiences with the phenomenon. The depth and breadth of the descriptions of individual interview response and similarities of experiences across interviews of participants confirmed this assumption.

Consequently, the assumptions I had about the phenomenon, while bracketed as much as feasible during the study, appeared to be supported by the detailed description of the participants' experiences with portfolios.

### **Summary of Interpretation of Findings**

This chapter explored the identification and interpretation of the analytic categories derived from the major findings of this study. The analysis and synthesis incorporated a three-level system for exploring the findings individually, as they related to one another, and how they pertained to participants in regard to the similarities and differences of experience with the phenomenon.

The story that unfolded from this phenomenological study began with the participants' impetuses for pursuing course credit via prior learning assessment. The first analytic category, *my turn*, provides insight into the motivations the participants had for

pursuing portfolio credit. The subsequent section, focusing on the analytic category of *how-to*” explored the participants’ experiences with navigating the portfolio process. The third category focused on the reflective process inherent in the portfolio process that required participants to identify prior learning related to course objectives. Tacit knowledge was typically the source of the prior learning, which the participants then needed to make explicit for use in their portfolios. The ability to make those connections between their prior learning and explicit new meanings correlating with respective course objectives was critical to success with the phenomenon. Having established the *why*, the *how-to*, and the process of connecting prior learning to new contexts, the final category captured the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. There appeared to be links among the motivations for pursuing portfolio, the navigation of the portfolio process, the connections between prior learning and course objectives, and the core of what the experiences with the portfolio process meant to the participants. Participants defined the meaning of the portfolio process, in the contexts of their experiences with the phenomenon, as validating—in both the sense increased self-esteem associated with success with the portfolio process and the sense of accomplishment heightened, rediscovered, or newly self-attributed due to success with the portfolio.

*Knowledge is of no value unless you put it into practice.*

*- Anton Chekhov*

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **Conclusions, Recommendations, and Researcher Reflections**

The focus of this in-depth qualitative phenomenological study explored the experiences with the portfolio form of prior learning assessment of nine participants. The emphasis of this study was on the meaning-made by the participants as it pertained to the essence of the phenomenon and the additional meaning deciphered from the individual and collective participant responses. The guiding research questions for this study were: *How do participants perceive their learning experiences with the effort to earn college credit through the portfolio development process and how do participants make sense of the process of explicating their prior experiential learning as a part of the portfolio process?* Accordingly, a series of in-person interviews were conducted with each participant to elicit their reflections on the learning they acquired from their experiences with portfolios.

A three-tiered interview process allowed me to uncover a breadth of information of the phenomenon that would not have otherwise been feasible. While I reviewed other sources of data, including participants' learning essays and other portfolio related artifacts, those resources provided limited influence on the findings of this study. The first interview captured a brief life history from each participant, beginning at adulthood up to the point they decided to pursue the portfolio form of PLA. Those interviews provided comprehension of the participants' motivations for following their formal education goals and how those goals were connected to their decisions to attempt credit by portfolio. The second interview explored the participants' experiences with the

portfolio process. Participants further described their motivations for pursuing portfolio credits and discussed the details of each aspect of portfolios from their perspectives as adult learners. I was able to deduce apparent links to previous research and adult learning theories from those valuable insights. The third interview more thoroughly examined any new meaning-making and learning gained by the participants during their experiences with portfolios. The breadth of information and the depth of experiences captured in the responses of the third interview were critical in the discovery of the essence of the phenomenon of this study. The semi-structured interview design provided the participants the opportunity to progressively uncover the learning and the process of constructing that new learning involved in portfolios.

This chapter provides discussion on the conclusions drawn from the findings uncovered by this study. Subsequently, this chapter presents recommendations, for both practice and research, stemming from each conclusion. Afterward, the researcher's reflections of the experiences and the journey undertaken during the study are presented. The chapter culminates with a summary of those conclusions, recommendations, and researcher reflections.

## **Conclusions**

The unencumbered access to the participants' reflections with their experiences with the portfolio form of PLA proved to be fruitful in respect to the voluminous amount of data and feedback captured by this study. The four conclusions that emerged from the findings are discussed in this section. The conclusions include further discussion on the *impetus* for pursuing the portfolio form of PLA and a deeper look at the role *self-directed learning* plays in developing successful portfolios, as described by the participants.



Additionally, an exploration of the findings of the essence of the phenomenon in the section, *validating more than prior learning*, and conclusions are presented on the *reflection on learning and learning from reflection* that was found to be integral to the portfolio process.

### **Impetus**

The first major finding of this research was that participants overwhelmingly described the time and money savings they associated with their experiences with earning credit via portfolio as the main reason they pursued this form of PLA. They conveyed sentiments of being incomplete or lacking in something they needed, in respect to not having yet earned their degree or furthered their formal education, which explained why time to completion was of importance to the participants. Associated with that finding, participants' discussed the desire to seize the opportunity to pursue their educational goals, now that they felt ready.

Moreover, the participants' responses suggest that successful portfolios provided them concrete proof that they could succeed in higher education. Hence, the learning they experienced throughout the portfolio process was very personal and meaningful to them, since it was their prior learning being assessed, and they now had the know-how to apply that new learning to new contexts. The realization that their informal learning experiences could translate to being recognized as formal education course credits provided the participants with additional motivation toward their educational goal aspirations.

I conclude that the portfolio form of PLA offers adult learners the opportunity to earn credit while also saving time and money, which are critical determining factors to

enrolling in portfolio programs for these learners. Additionally, portfolios provide participants the potential to have motivational experiences in respect to their sense of ability to succeed in higher education. The fact that the content of portfolios is a demonstration of the lived acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities of that adult learner only strengthens that sense of motivation.

### **Self-directed Learning**

The phenomenological research methods utilized for this study allowed any similarities to adult learning theories to be discovered organically through inductive analysis of the findings. Consequently, the synthesis of the findings of this study presented the importance of the link between self-directed learning and success in portfolios. The findings included similarities between participants' descriptions of their experiences with the process of developing portfolios and the characteristics of self-directed learners described by Knowles et al. (1998). The findings also indicate an apparent link between self-directed learning as described by Brookfield (2013) and participants' detailed reflections on the phenomenon. Portfolios are largely an independent undertaking. They require adult learners to sustain motivation and be persistent with their pursuit of portfolio completion. The ability to navigate the *how-to* of the portfolio process was found to be associated with self-directed learning among the participants of this study.

Beginning with their motivations to pursue portfolios and throughout the self-regulation, self-monitoring, and self-assessment participants described experiencing while developing portfolios, attributes of self-directed learning theories were discovered.

A conclusion of this study was that effective self-directed learning was important to the participants' success with portfolios.

### **Validating More than Prior Learning**

Assessment is the culminating phase of the portfolio process. A student's ability to demonstrate prior learning in a portfolio, as it relates to specific course objectives, is evaluated for potential course credit. However, the findings indicated a deeper sense of validation was experienced by the participants of this study. They described feeling an increase in their self-esteem and developing a more positive lens through which they viewed themselves. The participants expressed a sense of worth in regard to their prior learning that derived from reflecting on their life learning experiences. The findings indicate participants experienced both personal and institutional validation from their portfolios. They described experiencing a sense of value in regard to their prior learning being assessed as college-level by the study site institution. In addition, the personal sense of worth the participants described reflected a deeper, more personal sense of self-validation stemming from their experiences with portfolios. The recognition of additional value and new meaning associated with the clearer perspective from which they were able to frame their experiences proved to be rewarding for the participants.

Previous chapters of this document discuss how an increase in self-value is linked to success for adult learners in higher education. The increase in self-esteem, the greater appreciation for life choices and experiences, and the deeply felt sense of validation participants described experiencing with their portfolios, provide for a holistically positive journey of the exploration and demonstration of their prior learning.

## **Reflecting on Learning and Learning from Reflection**

Although this study yielded findings that reflect a connection between experiences with portfolios and transformational learning, those discoveries serve primarily to strengthen previous research on the phenomenon. A key contribution of this study is the conclusion regarding the current learning involved in the process of making prior learning explicit from tacit knowledge. The ability of the participants to demonstrate previously acquired tacit knowledge was found to be a key dimension of success with portfolios. Moreover, the iterative and deep-levels of reflection essential to portfolio development provided participants with additional learning opportunities, including the strengthening of their connections with and understanding of their prior learning. Additionally, the participants described their experiences of constructing new meaning and realizing different applications for that prior learning.

In addition to the insights into participants' more complete understanding of prior learning drawn from their experiences with portfolios, another essential conclusion was that portfolios provided participants an opportunity to critically examine and reconstruct their learning. This opportunity was not only integral to their success with portfolios, but it was also found to be "therapeutic" in nature, and it allowed the participants a fuller perspective from which to view themselves in regard to their vast amounts of validated prior learning.

The study concludes that the reflection foundational to the portfolio process provided the participants with the opportunity to deepen their awareness of prior learning and increased the ability to recall that prior learning. Furthermore, the reflective engagement required to make tacit knowledge explicit for demonstration in portfolios

created the chance for new meaning to be constructed from that prior learning. The applications of which extend to contexts beyond the assessment for potential course credit.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the conclusions explored earlier in this chapter, recommendations for both practice and research are discussed in this section. The first recommendation for practice was derived from the conclusions that the portfolio process can be a transformational learning opportunity. The second recommendation for practice describes the importance of more thoroughly incorporating reflective learning opportunities, specifically the conversion of tacit knowledge to explicit demonstration, in portfolio facilitation. The third recommendation for practice is related to the ambiguity and sense of frustration described by the participants in regard to the feedback process involved with portfolio assessment. The final recommendation for practice is a cautionary note about the depth of the reflective process involved with the portfolio process and the potential for unintended consequences. Additionally, a discussion of who will be responsible for carrying out the recommendations and who will oversee the implementation will be presented. The areas of further research identified from the findings of this study include research focused on the learning experience associated with demonstrating tacit knowledge in portfolios. Similarly, a recommendation for further study on the potential for broader application of newly constructed and explicitly demonstrated prior tacit knowledge is presented.

## Practice

In conjunction with the potential for transformational learning experiences and a sense of validation, the reflection integral to the portfolio process should be a primary focus of facilitation. As Mezirow (1991) put it,

When learners suffer from tunnel vision, when they encounter troublesome issues, when they have difficulty in learning or lack motivation, they must be helped to become aware of the relationship of new data to what they already know...and to understand why they see the new data as they do. This means that the educator must actively encourage reflective discourse through which learners can examine the justification for their meaning schemes and perspectives as well as focusing on the new data presented. (p. 200)

Facilitators of portfolio seminars can make further use of the reflection involved in the portfolio process. Through modifications of the *taking stock* aspect of portfolio development, meta-reflective or meaning-making exercises or examples could be implemented to increase the changes of deeper understanding or new applications for the adult students' prior learning. Whether the exercises include additional writing samples or just a more thorough immersion in the lists of prior learning experiences, there are opportunities for portfolio students to further explore and possibly apply their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

As noted in chapter four, the findings indicate that participants experienced a sense of ambiguity in regard to the feedback process once their respective portfolios were submitted for assessment. Accordingly, a recommendation for practice would be for facilitators of portfolio seminars to more thoroughly educate their students in respect to

the assessment processes and protocols. Providing portfolio students with realistic expectations of the timely portfolio assessment process, to include the typical time range for assessment and some examples of outlier time-frames, could help to eliminate a lot of the stress and anxiety described by the participants of this study.

One cautionary note regarding the facilitation of the portfolio form of prior learning assessment is recommended. As noted by Mezirow (2012), “Transformative learning, especially when it involves subjective reframing, is often an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions undergirding our ideas, and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change” (p. 75). While this sentimental connection can prove harmless, nostalgic, or even fruitful, the practitioner needs to be mindful and sure to note in facilitation of portfolio development that emotional impact may unexpectedly occur. A couple of participants from this study described their experiences of developing portfolios as being similar to a therapy session. Those experiences are representative of the deep and genuine connection the portfolio participant has to the prior learning they are reflecting on and reconstructing for new contexts. However, learning experiences may be tethered to any type of memory including association with potentially unpleasant memories. It is therefore recommended that facilitators of portfolio seminars address the potential for the uncovering of unintended recollections. In addition, knowledge of appropriate resources for student counseling services would be advised.

## **Research**

The literature review conducted for this study reflected a need for additional qualitative research on the phenomenon. Specifically, the need for research on the adult

learners' experiences and perspectives of portfolios was found to be critical.

Phenomenological research provided the framework on which this study was constructed.

The methods of capturing, analyzing, and synthesizing data associated with phenomenology create opportunities for deeper investigation, and ultimately greater understanding of the topic of research. The findings that emerged organically and the conclusions drawn provide insights from which subsequent studies may be suggested.

Two recommendations for research are each associated with the insight provided by this study on the new learning created by the participants during the process of making their tacit knowledge explicit for use in portfolios. In addition to being a key finding of this study, greater insight of the potential source of knowledge from which adult learners pursuing portfolio might draw from has implications for furthering the understanding of that phenomenon.

First, I recommend further exploration of the potential for new learning and meaning-making resulting from the reflective process of making tacit-knowledge explicit for portfolios. Further studies on this topic would aid in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of that meaning-making and how that learning could be more effectively mined, and applications for that newly constructed knowledge. The analysis and synthesis of the findings discovered in this study were based on the 27 interviews conducted with the nine participants. This small sample should be taken into consideration in regard to the implications of the study beyond the participants' experiences with the phenomenon explored. Inferences generated pertain to the experiences of those that participated in this research, each of whom had previously earned credit via the portfolio form of prior learning assessment. Consequently, the



experiences with and perceptions of those who were unsuccessful with the portfolio process are not represented in this study. Accordingly, qualitative research on both larger and smaller scales (i.e. more participants interviewed in-depth and additional individual or small-group case studies, respectively) including individuals who did not earn credit following portfolio submission would provide a greater understanding of this phenomenon.

The second recommendation is for research on other opportunities to incorporate the deep reflection-based learning inherent in making tacit-knowledge explicit. The conclusions of this study are representative of the nine participants. However, the findings of this research also reflect opportunities outside of the contexts of this study for the reflection, retrieval, and application of prior tacit knowledge. The recommended supplemental research could provide further understanding of prior learning assessment, psychology or counseling-related education, and informal educational applications related to career and professional training. It is through the identification of new applications and the construction of new meanings of prior tacit knowledge that greater understanding exists.

### **Researcher Reflections**

As I reflect on my experiences with this study, I am struck by the level of naivety with which I originally approached this research. While I have experienced facilitating portfolio seminars and have earned certifications for prior learning assessment, I was not expecting the depth and breadth of description I would be immersing myself in, in order to most effectively tell the stories of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon. While obviously a generous 'problem' to have, it did require substantial amounts of time

and effort to ensure the conclusions that were drawn were representative of the large quantity of data provided by the participants.

For sharing such incredibly detailed and vast amounts of tangible insights, I would be remiss if I did not profusely thank my participants. The nine individuals that generously afforded me access to their time and their experiences should be credited for making this research both possible and enjoyable. The value and volume of information they provided me established an incredibly solid foundation from which new learning and discoveries were uncovered. Accordingly, this presentation of research offers both findings that correlate to previous research and significant insight into how adult learners describe their experience of this phenomenon.

This experience was like no other experience I have had in the more than fifteen years I have worked in the field of higher education. As a researcher, I was able to tap-into the transformative experiences of these participants in order to extract meaning and foundations upon which to build. While the process was challenging at times, the critical thinking and problem-solving aspects proved to be not only achievable, but fertile ground for learning, too.

### **Summary**

This final chapter presented the four key conclusions of this study, including that the impetus for the participants' pursuit of credit via portfolios appears to be related to the desire to save time and money while also serving as an opportunity to demonstrate related prior learning. The second conclusion drawn from the findings was that self-directed learning seems to be integral to the portfolio process thus, participants that demonstrated the ability to self-monitor, self-assess, and self-motivate were successful

with portfolios. The findings also revealed self-directed learning skills as key in adapting prior learning into new contexts. A third conclusion was that portfolios provide the opportunity for validation of prior learning, both in what is assessed for portfolios and what is evaluated internally throughout the process. The sense of accomplishment experienced, the participants' descriptions of increased self-esteem, and the overall sense of validation they felt in regard to their prior learning was found to be as rewarding, if not more so, than receiving course credits for successful portfolios. The most significant conclusion generated from the findings was that new learning appeared to have occurred for the participants' during their reflective processing of their prior learning for potential use in portfolios. This new learning was seemingly linked to the participants' abilities to accurately reflect on prior learning and demonstrate that knowledge, skill, and ability. This process required participants to adapt tacit knowledge into explicit formats in order for it to be assessed. The participants' experiences with portfolios resulted in a deeper understanding of their respective prior learning. In addition, participants conveyed discovering new and different applications for their prior learning. The major conclusion was that the deeply reflective nature of portfolios offered the participants the opportunity to construct new and valuable meaning from their prior learning, primarily from a tacit-knowledge reservoir.

Recommendations for both practice and research were discussed in this chapter. For practice, it was recommended that opportunities for further exploration and development of transformational learning opportunities be incorporated into portfolios. In a similar vein, additional focus on and practice with the conversion of tacit knowledge to explicit demonstration could benefit adult learners pursuing portfolio. It was also advised

that facilitators of portfolio seminars and portfolio advising staff be mindful of the potential for learners to uncover unwanted memories. The recommendations for further research were for additional small-scale and large-scale qualitative research on learners' experiences with making tacit knowledge explicit and the new learning acquired through during process. Additionally, research on the applications of tacit knowledge for both formal and informal educational settings was recommended. The depth and breadth of tacit knowledge adult learners have the potential to expand upon and create from warrants further exploration.

Finally, the researcher's reflections on the experiences of conducting this study were presented. While the project was arduous at times, I found the positive experiences of discovering insights and new knowledge resulting from the study offered the essential take-away.

## **APPENDIX SECTION**

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## **Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in Study (E-Mail Message)**

Study of Adult Learners' Experiences with Prior Learning Assessment and Portfolio

Development Process

Researcher: Benjamin A. Jimenez

*Subject line:* Study to understand your experiences with PLA & portfolio development process.

Hello,

As a staff member and adjunct faculty member of the New College department, I am iteratively looking at ways to improve and inform educational practices. This focus on improving learners' experiences connects to my own academic research interests.

Specifically, my proposed research will explore the experiences of adult learners with the reflective practices and reflection-based nature of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and, the portfolio development process. This message was sent to you because you completed the PLA seminar between the spring 2010 and spring 2012 semesters, you submitted a portfolio for assessment for potential credit, and I hope you will consent to participate in my proposed study.

All participation is completely voluntary and, confidential. A consent form is attached and needs to be completed, signed, dated, and returned (via email) by anyone who agrees to participate in the study. If you are interested in participating, please describe your experiences with the portfolio development process; specifically, reflect on the learning experiences you used for your portfolio(s) and, why you chose those specific prior learning situations to use for your portfolio. Your insight and reflections on your

experiences with the portfolio process are greatly appreciated! Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions at: *email/phone*.

## **Appendix B: Consent Form to Participate in Research Study**

*Texas State University Student Researcher:* Benjamin A. Jimenez

*Title of Proposed Study:* Study of Adult Learners' Experiences with Prior Learning Assessment and Portfolio Development Process

You are invited to participate in a research study to examine adult learners and their experiences developing portfolio(s) that are reflective of their prior learning at the college-level. By gaining insight into how the portfolio process is experienced from the learners' perspectives can inform and improve current practices and add to the knowledge base of adult learning. You were invited you to participate in this study because you completed the PLA seminar between the spring 2012 and spring 2012 semesters and you successfully submitted a portfolio for assessment for potential credit.

Participation in this research study includes two or three in-person interviews; each interview may take up to 75 minutes in duration. In addition, documentation submitted as part of your PLA portfolio will be used for (a) reflective prompts, (b) researcher and participant meaning-making and, (c) providing content as well as context of the prior learning phenomena being researched. Documents to be accessed for the proposed research will be limited to documents used in the PLA seminar or as part of a portfolio previously submitted and assessment for credit.

All participation is voluntary and participants may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice or jeopardy to your standing with the study site, St. Edward's University and any other relevant organization/entity with which the participant is associated.



Participants may choose to not answer any specific question(s) for any reason throughout the study. Furthermore, any questions related to participation in a research study, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser (phone: 512-245-3413, email: [lasser@txstate.edu](mailto:lasser@txstate.edu)), or to Ms. Becky Northcut, Compliance Specialist (phone: 512-245-2102).

Participants' names will be kept confidential and known only to the researcher. Accordingly, pseudonyms will be used to identify and reference participants throughout the proposed study and in any professional presentations or publications. All data used for or collected as part of the proposed research study will also be confidentially secured. All research records, including transcriptions of interviews, will be kept in locked-files at the study site or secured home office. All recorded material will be stored on a secure external hard-drive. All data collected (invitation to participate, audio recordings etc.) will be kept for a period of no longer than two years after the completion of the proposed study.

Participants who want access to the findings of the research study will be given instructions as to how and when results of the study will be available. All participants will receive a copy of the consent form.

IRB Approval Number:

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Student Researcher (signature/printed name):

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Study Participant (signature/printed name):

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## **Appendix C: Interview Guidelines and Sample Questions**

### **Interview One: A Condense History**

1. When did you complete high school or earn your G.E.D.?
2. If you began college classes at an earlier point in your life, please elaborate on those experiences
3. What were some of the reasons you did not begin [complete] your college education previously?
4. What are some of the factors that led you to resume your education when you first enrolled at St. Edward's University? What led you to choose the New College program?
5. What kinds of work did you do between the time you stopped school and the first time you enrolled at St. Edward's University?
6. Did you earn credit for prior learning in any other way beyond the portfolio (exam-based, evaluation of prior workplace or military training, etc.)?
7. What other notable life experiences have you had that you thought in entering the portfolio process might relate to college-level learning?

### **Interview Two: Contemporary Experience**

1. What were some of your questions or concerns at the outset of the portfolio process?
2. What was it like to develop your portfolio?
3. Tell me about some of the strategies you used in putting together your portfolio
4. What was the most challenging thing about developing the portfolio?

5. Some students say that getting in touch with what was learned earlier and how is one of the most challenging aspects of developing the portfolio. Did you experience this challenge, and if so could you elaborate on it?
6. What areas of life experience did you draw on in creating the portfolio(s)?
7. What did you enjoy most while completing the portfolio process? Or what did you find to be some of the most memorable moments in development of the portfolio?
8. If you were talking to someone just beginning the portfolio process, what advice would you give them about putting together the portfolio?
9. Select one portfolio submission that stands out in your mind and tell me more about how you reflected back on (or uncovered) the learning you wanted to demonstrate in the portfolio?

### **Interview Three: Reflection on Meaning**

1. What does it mean to you to have completed a portfolio(s)?
2. Based on the previous two interviews and your reflections subsequent to each, how do you make sense of your life in the context of the portfolio development experience?
3. In reflecting about your journey from your initial interest in this field to the day you filled out the admissions packet, what experiences informed your actions most and why?
4. What meaning(s) did you make of your decisions along this reflective journey of portfolio development?

5. Based on your reflection, how were the course objectives for the portfolio(s) you submitted applicable or relevant with your experiences with the actual learning in its original contexts?
6. Please describe any reflections you have experienced on the previous two interviews.

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