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I thought if I looked back through old reflective essays that I'd be able to copy paragraphs out of those essays and apply them to this essay. After reading those old documents, I realize there's no way I can completely rely on past work to write this final essay for the program. Too much has happened and too much is still happening to take snapshots. There's more going on and a few old paragraphs can't begin to cover it all. Instead, I'll let memory guide me and let the present speak as well.

Starting to be a student

I think it is obvious that my way of thinking is dramatically different from those early days in the Adult Learner class. I was in the class based on peer pressure from my co-workers—I was sick of hearing that I needed to take a class and so I thought I'd take one and get everyone off my back. I understand many great endeavors start for lackluster reasons.

It is surprising to look back at those early weeks of that first class and know that I'd end up captivated by the idea that I could go to graduate school by the end of that semester—the idea of graduate school had only occurred to me once before. I was an English major in undergraduate school and did pretty well in my creative writing courses. I considered for a period of time to pursue a MFA in creative writing. My Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores and lack of support on the home front squashed that idea. I'm not sure that a MFA was really where I wanted to go but that experience of taking a step back due to a lack of support (financially and emotionally) stuck with me. Support wasn't an issue this time around.

We learned in the Adult Learner class that it takes a learning community to really succeed in continuing education, no matter if it is one class or a degree program. During a class discussion, we took the idea of a learning community from the concept of the relationships built

between classmates and extended it to the learner's existing community-- families, friends, and workplaces. I remember during that conversation a classmate nearly broke down in tears as she described how hard it was on the home front to keep coming to class but she was determined. The last time I talked to her things were going quite well at home and in her professional life. I never asked her if her learning community grew past the strength and energy she experienced in the Adult Learning program and affected those outside relationships. I can only assume that while she was changing because of the connections formed in the classroom that she was in turn changing those outside relationships. I make that assumption because it feels like my experience—although I always had the support of my household.

In re-reading the Adult Learner reflective essay, I realize that essay was defensive. I complained too much about some things that I deemed unfair instead of realizing that every opportunity is a learning experience. I realize now that it's all about perspective and finding a way to learn. Finding fault without also finding a solution is short-sighted and it is incumbent upon me to make meaning no matter my level of satisfaction.

Initiating the journey

I was certainly conflicted about what to do following the end of the course and ultimately decided to give myself the chance to continue with my education. I remember preparing for the Miller Analogy Test (MAT) at my kitchen table and thinking this was a standardized test that I could do well. When I took the MAT in that cramped basement on campus during the summer after the Adult Learner class, I have never felt as good about a test as I did that day. Having a positive experience while taking that test was one of the first of many moments of clarity I had as I prepared my application to graduate school. As I gathered the other items necessary for the application process, I realized that I really wanted to be accepted into the program in spring

2007. When I heard from Dr. Carter that I had been accepted into the program beginning in the fall of 2006, I was surprised (because I'd missed the deadline) and thrilled.

It is interesting to look back at the reflective essay for the second class I took, Program Planning. In that essay I wrote, "Admittedly I was a little overwhelmed at the beginning of the semester, especially after Dr. Carter announced in class that I had just been accepted to the program. I actually had a sinking feeling in my stomach and wondered what the heck I was getting myself into." Although I was sure about going forward with my education, it was still a big leap into doing something I wasn't sure I would do well. It was one of those moments where you just have to take a deep breath and trust that the process will work. I had to trust that *I* would work out.

Because I was accepted on a provisional basis, thanks to less-than-stellar undergraduate grades, I received a letter telling me that I had to take Adult Development and Research Methods in the first year of enrollment into the program. I have to admit I was a little out of sorts as I felt I was being punished for being a careless twenty year old, but I knew this was graduate school and it wasn't supposed to be easy. I knew I'd have to work hard and not just go through the motions this time around. I signed up for both of those courses in the spring of 2007. As it turns out the Adult Development class was very loosely structured and quite interesting to me. I felt like I was following some very distinct steps that matched with the stages of an adult's development as outlined in Levinson's *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. I was definitely in the second adult life structure and as such I was trying to "establish a niche in society" (Levinson, 1978, p. 59). Continuing my education was definitely part of my establishment of a foothold. I had already found my *calling*: training and now I was finding something broader through my school work.

The Research Methods class was less a favorite. It was taught by a doctoral student who was teaching the course to fulfill his own educational requirements. Teaching was not where his interests lay and it showed. I know that many students in the program relish giving the Research Methods class a good tongue-lashing. I'm not above pointing out all the flaws in that experience but I have come to appreciate some of the methods we learned in that class. In the Consulting Skills class the methods of data discovery were lightly covered but the roots of that conversation came from the Research Methods class. Without the Research Methods class, our understanding of why it was important to dig deeper (or peel back more layers of the onion) into finding the underlying issues of our consulting client wouldn't have been as meaningful. I will still have to look up the differences between MANOVA and ANOVA analysis and why dependent and independent variables are important to discovering what happened in an experiment. While I may have difficulty in being able to adequately explain those ideas, I know they are factors that I need consider when reading research-based articles. Now I know that I shouldn't skim over the results section of a document to get to the discussion and conclusion section. All of the sections of the article are equally important to deeper understanding of the subject.

Although I realize that many School of Education programs require Research Methods and the Educational Evaluation courses and it's unlikely this could ever happen, it would be wonderful to create a hybrid course that allows Adult Learning students to have the best of both worlds and learn about both concepts in one course. Even though there may be some loss in the depth in each subject, I think this idea could work and would turn these classes into something more than simply data transmission with varying degrees of reception on the part of the student. As an adult learner, I need to know why I should care about either of these subjects and while I understand theoretically why these matter, I'm not sure that either of these subjects really have

meaning for me and so my level of reception of those ideas is still superficial. Of course, should I decide to pursue my education, I'm sure statistics and evaluation will become quite meaningful.

The ball starts rolling

The remainder of 2007 was taken up with the Adults with Disabilities course and the Educational Evaluation course. I'm pleased the Adults with Disabilities course is a core course to our program. I think it is an area that most of us tend to overlook. I definitely had several moments where I felt awkward and shamed because of how I've overlooked an entire population of adult learners. I think it is a strength of the program to have us face an issue that we either have a prejudice against or have been apathetic about in the past. I had never considered that I probably interact with adults with a learning disability on a frequent basis.

One of my husband's closest friends has dyslexia and while I knew about it, it wasn't something that I ever considered. I interviewed the friend for one of our class projects and found out so much about how the friend has struggled with employment and his dislike of formal education. I also found out how much he likes to learn and the ways he goes about informally learning since the usual paths are difficult for him. He's a wealth of information about the subjects that interest him and I learned from his example of what it's like to be an adult with an invisible disability—he copes so well that he leaves few clues to his reading disability. I was also reminded how important informal learning is and that as adults we are actively engaged in this activity even if we don't label it as such.

My experience in the Educational Evaluation course was a pleasant surprise after I assumed it would be similar to the Research Methods class. I enjoyed the Educational Evaluation course because the professor used a combination of lecture, group discussion, guest speakers, and group presentations to vary the methods of content delivery. The subjects we discussed were

primarily focused on the K-12 segment of students but I appreciated the professor's attempt to accommodate the Adult Learning students.

Even with these different methodologies, I remember being glad to be back to the foundation courses of the Adult Learning program in the spring of 2008. It was during the Instructional Strategies class that I realized that I was a subject matter expert (SME) in instructional design and that I needed to "get over" the feelings of inadequacy that I sometimes felt working with social workers who were writing training materials. They were their own SMEs but I was also my own SME in using instructional strategies and methodologies to create training classes. I wrote in my reflective essay for Instructional Strategies, "Last night was one of those nights that reminded me why I decided to join the Adult Learner program. It felt like home."

The feelings of home include the old adage that they have to take you back no matter what. I know this sounds a little maudlin but I really need to be somewhere that had to take me back no matter what. My organization went through a reduction in force. Then a series of poor management choices made 2008 quite rocky professionally. Coupled with the changes inside my head about what I was doing, what I wanted to do, and how I would do it; I really needed the safe place that school had become.

It was one thing to look forward to the camaraderie and conversation, but school also became the thing I really looked forward to doing. It was something I was doing well, better than I had ever done before (which shocked me), and it was something that I really cared about. I found myself being distracted by work, which had become routine and joyless, because I really wanted to spend my time working on school projects, reading texts, and finding out more. It was like a switch had gone off and I couldn't get enough of the academics. School was the exact

opposite of work—it was exciting. It was hard work that I liked doing and that gave me meaning while I was making meaning out of what I was reading, what we were discussing in class and what I was reflecting privately and on my blog.

Embarking on another journey

It was during 2008 that I seriously began thinking about pursuing a doctorate. I talked to my sister who has her PhD (she's in the hard sciences) and asked her if it was worth it even though she's ended up in a slightly different place than she originally anticipated. She said her experience was filled with hard work and sacrifice but it was absolutely the right thing for her to do. She told me that I'd have to be absolutely committed or I shouldn't start.

And, so the conversation in my head has been raging since the summer of 2008. In some ways I can't wait to begin my next step in academia. I waffle from deciding that I must put a stake in the ground and proclaim it mine and then I start thinking about all the reasons why I can't do it. The GRE scores from my undergraduate days were not very good and that test was taken when I had recently completed a college-level math course. I have, happily, eschewed math and do not care that I need to use a tool (a calculator or Excel) to do calculations--that's why we invent tools: to make our lives easier.

I have a supportive husband who thinks it will be a blast to have me continue with my education. I have an idea of what I could focus on for a dissertation and yet I can't get rid of that voice that tells me that I can't. I need to think back to that time when I originally thought about going back to school and how it felt to not do something because someone else wasn't supportive. Now I need to make myself be supportive of me. Should be easy, shouldn't it?

Concluding thoughts

I just sent an email to a classmate asking if she had a problem with writing this final reflective essay for the program. I told her the last bit has felt like pulling my own teeth. I wondered in the email if this feeling is because I need to wrap up something that's not ready to be wrapped up. I don't think I'm done yet. Perhaps, technically, I'm done with the MEd in the Adult Learning program at Virginia Commonwealth University, but I'm not done with learning and I'm probably not done with my formal education. No matter what that inner voice says to me I know I'm not done with whatever learning that's to come. I will probably rest my brain and tamp down that voice over the summer by filling myself with all those books I've been piling up since I began the program and haven't had time to read, but I won't be able to quell this feeling that I've just begun my learning journey.

Reference

Levinson, D. J. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. New York: Ballantine Books.