GOING THE DISTANCE: WHY STUDENTS’ STORIES MAY HOLD THE KEY TO CREATING MORE EFFECTIVE ONLINE COURSES FOR ADULT LEARNERS

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Abstract

Online education and the number of adult students seeking a college degree have both skyrocketed in recent years. Also known as nontraditional learners, many of these students are turning to distance learning because of how accessible, affordable, and flexible it is. Yet despite being an attractive option, they are not succeeding online with attrition rates significantly higher in distance courses than face-to-face classes. The purpose of this narrative study was to listen to adult learners’ stories about their educational experiences, both past and present, to gain a better understanding of how these experiences have shaped the way they approached their distance coursework. Using the theoretical framework of andragogy the following question was posed: What are the lived experiences of working adults who have taken online courses in pursuit of their associate’s or bachelor’s degree after time away from formal education? Findings from this study show that adult students are goal-oriented, problem-centered, and proactive learners and that they gravitate toward distance learning because it is flexible and accessible. Many are going back to school for career advancement or to expand job prospects. Participants in this study had a much more positive experience in their distance classes than they had in their early education because they had chosen to go back to school, had more control over their learning, and were more confident in their abilities. Some of the same challenges they had in K-12 still existed, but they were able to handle them better. This research confirms that nontraditional learners possess unique characteristics and approaches to learning that educators should consider when designing distance classes for them.

**Keywords:** adult students, nontraditional learners, distance education, online learning, attrition rates
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Record numbers of adults are going back to college to earn their degree so they can gain the skills needed to compete in this fast-paced global economy we now live in. In 2007, 38 percent of the undergraduate population was 25 years of age or older and this number is expected to increase to 43 percent by 2020, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Choy, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Also called nontraditional learners, the majority of these students are attending school part-time and have substantial family and/or work obligations (Harrell II & Bower, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009).

Because of their busy lives, many are turning to online education with an estimated 40 percent currently enrolled in distance courses (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011). Yet despite the flexibility, accessibility, and affordability these programs offer them, many of these students are not finding success in distance learning as retention and attrition rates clearly show (Chyung, 2001; Hart, 2012; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Park, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Adult learners drop out of online courses more often than face-to-face classes (Simpson, 2004; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Some scholars (Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001) even put the overall attrition rates for distance courses as high as 20 to 50 percent while others (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Carr, 2000) believe the withdrawal rate is about 10 to 20 percent higher than traditional classroom instruction. These numbers should be especially alarming for colleges and universities serving large adult populations since almost 80 percent of online students are 25 years of age or older (Smith, 2014).

Research Problem
Although distance educators have been concerned about high attrition rates for some time now (Morris, 2011), they have not focused specifically on the experiences older learners are having in their online courses despite the fact so many adults are enrolled in distance programs (Boston et al., 2011). These statistics will not improve unless more attention is given to these nontraditional students and how they make sense of their learning. The purpose of this study was to begin this process by listening to adult students’ stories about their lifelong educational journey and the ways in which these experiences have influenced how they viewed and approached their distance classes. The hope is that by embracing older students’ personal narratives, online educators will have a more intimate window into their world so more effective distance courses can be developed for them.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

Much of the research done on online adult learners has focused less on their personal stories and overall educational experiences and more on outside forces that might be contributing to their high non-completion rates. Factors such as family obligations and work commitments have been cited numerous times as reasons they drop out of their distance classes (Kemp, 2010; Nash, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009). Some adults also struggle with technology issues as well as a lack of extensive computer experience, which can make it difficult for them to complete their courses (Angelino et al., 2007). As older learners, they may not always have the technical background needed to easily navigate assignments and in some cases, they may not have easy access to a computer that can provide them with the high speed Internet and tools required for their classes (Angelino et al., 2007; Harrell II & Bower, 2011).

Other studies have concluded that to succeed in distance courses, students must have certain skills and abilities and adult learners may not always possess these attributes. Researchers
have found students who do well in online classes tend to be self-regulated, are motivated to learn, and have developed learning strategies to help them achieve positive outcomes in their courses (Wang, Y., Peng, Huang, Hou, & Wang, 2008; Williams & Hellman, 2004).

Tinto’s (1975) research on social integration has often been cited as a possible solution for improving attrition rates for online adult learners, although scholars appear to be divided on whether his model could be easily applied to this particular population. Tinto believed the more students were academically and socially integrated into an institution the more likely they would be to persist to graduation. However, some researchers question how effective this approach would be with adult students whose motivations and learning characteristics are very different than those found in the more traditional student body that Tinto focused on in his retention work (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003).

Deficiencies in Evidence

Although research has been done using Knowles’ andragogy and other adult learning theories to gain a better idea of how older students approach their education (Pratt, 1993; Ross, 1987; Taylor & Kroth, 2009), few if any studies have applied these frameworks to distance learning in particular (Boston et al., 2011; Frey & Alman, 2003). Some scholars believe addressing students’ distinct learning styles is the key to lowering attrition rates in online courses (Serwatka, 2005). There has also been little examination of how colleges and universities might be able to help adult learners develop qualities that have proven to be important for online success such as self-efficacy and learning motivation (Kemp, 2010).

There has not been much research on how to improve online retention rates for adult students (Nash, 2005). Studies have focused on addressing retention and attrition rates for distance students as a whole but not for adult learners specifically (Boston et al., 2011; Nash,
2005). In addition, scholars have not explored adult persistence in online courses (Harrell II & Bower, 2011). Finally, little research has been done on the characteristics of those who drop out of distance classes (Hart, 2012). Researchers have not taken a closer look at the unique traits of these nontraditional online students and what can be done to more effectively support them (Hart, 2012).

The goal of this research was to get a stronger sense of who these adult students are, how they learn, and what their educational obstacles are so distance educators can develop courses that provide more meaningful and engaging learning experiences for them. Ultimately, the hope is that by listening to their individual narratives and allowing them to share their experiences, adult learners’ needs and concerns will be better addressed and they will have greater success in their online courses.

**Audience for Research**

The audience for this study is distance education instructors, course developers, and college administrators, especially those working in community colleges where there is a large population of adult learners, many of whom are enrolled in online courses (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014). Adult students themselves could also benefit from this research as it might help them make a more informed decision about whether online learning is the right fit for them. These findings could also prove to be useful to adult learning theorists who are looking for ways to make higher education more effective for older students.

The data collected could also help in developing training programs for both course designers and instructors so they can adjust their instructional design and pedagogy in a way that is more in line with their students’ learning styles. In addition, this research could provide
valuable information to institutions about what kinds of academic and student support adult learners need to succeed online with the ultimate goal being to improve retention rates.

These findings might also be helpful to distance educators and administrators working at the colleges and universities represented by study participants since all of the schools cater to adult students and offer several online programs as part of their curriculum, according to information on each institution’s website. The schools might also be able to use the results of this research to create more effective online courses so older learners have an even better chance of succeeding in them and can perhaps move one step closer to completing their college degree.

**Significance of Research Problem**

President Obama has stated that our country will only be able to create new jobs and continue to compete globally if we have an educated workforce. By 2020, 65 percent of the jobs in the United States will require some level of post-secondary education and yet only about 42 percent of the population currently possesses an associate’s degree or higher. Although our country is making progress to close this gap, the workforce will still be short 5 million degree holders by 2020 if we continue under the current rate of degrees being conferred (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Hoffman & Reindl, 2011).

Despite this discrepancy, President Obama was not deterred, setting his sights on having the highest number of college graduates in the world by the year 2020 (The White House, n.d.). It is not yet clear if the current administration under President Trump will continue with this goal. Obama was supported in his efforts by the Lumina Foundation, which has focused much of its energies on the adult population and working to ensure 60 percent of all Americans hold a college degree, certificate or other high-quality postsecondary credential by the year 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2015).
One way President Obama had hoped to reach his goal was by strengthening what he saw as the gateway to success – our nation’s community colleges. As part of his American Graduate Initiative unveiled in 2009, he called on the federal government to invest $12 billion in our community colleges with the hopes this would lead to an additional 5 million graduates by the end of the decade. This money would be used to support infrastructure needs, improve partnerships with local businesses, strengthen alignments between high schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges, and develop a universal database of online courses that students could access to gain academic credit or other valuable credentials (Chen, 2016).

The President also wanted to work toward making community college free through a federal-state partnership called America’s College Promise (Executive Office of the President, 2015). All of these initiatives are aimed at helping more students obtain their degree and should be welcome news to adult learners who make up roughly 40 percent of the community college population (Gittell, 2013).

Statistics show more than one third of those currently enrolled in all of higher education are adults and this number will continue to grow in the years to come. As it stands, nontraditional students, the majority of whom are adults, make up roughly 73 percent of the college population when they fit at least one of the following criteria. They are attending school part-time, have dependents other than a spouse, are a single parent, work full-time, are financially independent, have delayed college for at least a year, or did not receive their high school diploma. In addition, almost half these students are trying to complete their degree through distance education programs and yet many are not succeeding, meaning this is clearly an area that warrants more attention (Boston et al., 2011; Choy, 2002).
In New Hampshire, where this research was conducted, the data on adult students in the Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH) almost mimics that of the national statistics on higher education with 40 percent of those enrolled being 25 years or older. Students can take distance courses through any of the system’s seven campuses throughout the state and online course credit is transferrable to each of the schools (Gittell, 2013).

CCSNH is also following the lead of both President Obama and the Lumina Foundation with its adoption of the “65 by 25” goal, which seeks to have 65 percent of New Hampshire’s adult population with a postsecondary credential by 2025. Currently, 51 percent of the state meets this criteria and Governor Sununu has signed a bill in support of the “65 by 25” initiative, which has also gained approval from both the NH Coalition for Business and Education and the Business and Industry Association of NH. Some of the objectives of the “65 by 25” plan are to improve college affordability in the state, create better pathways between K-12 and associate and bachelor’s programs, and increase enrollment and completion rates (Community College System of New Hampshire, 2016).

This research could potentially help CCSNH with its goals and assessment and retention efforts by providing more detailed information about adult learners’ experiences with higher education and more specifically, their online courses. Students’ narratives could also be used to help distance administrators and instructors determine what changes need to be done to further enhance the online experience so even more students are successful. When attrition is high at an institution, both the school and individuals lose out, not only financially but personally as well (Boston et al., 2011; Thompson, 1999). A high dropout rate affects a college’s reputation as well as its bottom line (Angelino et al., 2007; Moody, 2004; Tyler-Smith, 2006). For adult learners, the implications can also be devastating. Students might never get back on track with their
studies and as a result never finish their degree, which in turn affects their potential for upward mobility as well as their lifetime earnings (Looney & Greenstone, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2011). Not completing their courses and in turn their degree can also lead to significant debt, which can further complicate their already precarious financial situation (Schnoebelen, 2013).

**Research Questions**

In order to determine appropriate research questions for this study, it was first important to look at the problem of practice that was being examined. Many adult students are turning to distance education to complete their college degree because of the flexibility and accessibility it offers them (Boston et al., 2011). But despite being an attractive option, they are not succeeding in their online courses as retention and attrition rates clearly show (Chyung, 2001; Hart, 2012). In fact, the chances of adult learners dropping out of their distance classes is significantly higher than if they took courses on campus (Simpson, 2004; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005), meaning that in its current state, online education is not working for them.

The goal of this study was to determine how to make distance education more effective for adult students by listening to their stories about their educational experiences as a whole and considering ways in which these experiences have influenced their online learning. Although some research has been done on both the internal and external pressures these students face in the virtual world, their experiences as online learners is an area that still has not been fully explored especially with regards to how they approach their distance learning. Many older learners have work and family commitments that make it difficult to find the time to complete their courses (Kemp, 2010; Nash, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009) while others do not possess the technology skills, learning strategies, and self-direction needed to be successful in online education (Clark, 2005; Hart, 2012). Adult students also tend to prefer learning that is highly
interactive and experiential because of their work and life experiences (Morris, 2011; Rhode, 2009).

For this thesis, qualitative research was conducted in the form of a narrative study involving in-depth, open-ended interview questions that focused on the lived experiences of adult students who had taken online courses while obtaining their associate’s or bachelor’s degree (Creswell, 2012). Because this is a narrative methodology, the sample size was small with the researcher conducting interviews with six participants, determining that this number was adequate for data saturation. Subjects ranged in age from their late 20s to their 40s and included four women and two men who had taken online courses at institutions ranging from community colleges to four-year institutions. During data collection, special attention was paid to how participants structured and told their stories (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Central Research Question

For purposes of this study adult students were defined as students 25 years of age or older and distance education and online courses referred to college-level classes that were asynchronous and 100 percent online or mostly online with the exception of residencies. Malcolm Knowles’ andragogy was used as a theoretical framework to better understand how adults approach their learning and the narrative was chosen as a means to fully explore these students’ experiences with both distance education and education as a whole. In applying this particular theory and methodology, the following central research question was asked: What are the lived experiences of working adults who have taken online courses in pursuit of their associate’s or bachelor’s degree after time away from formal education?

This question was determined following a review of the literature that showed a significant gap in the research on how distance education could better address the needs and
learning styles of adult learners. In asking this specific question, the goal was to find out how adult students’ experiences with education have influenced the way they perceived their online learning and in particular, how they approached their courses and the assignments given to them. The hope was that the open-ended nature of the question would allow adult learners to feel comfortable and fully share what they saw as the main barriers to their success.

**Positionality Statement**

As the high attrition rates show, educators need to do more to make distance learning more attractive and successful for adults, especially when considering the large percentage of older students now enrolled in online programs (Boston et al., 2011; Choy, 2002; Simpson, 2004; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). The goal of this study was to explore how adult students approached their online courses by listening to their personal narratives about their experiences both with distance education and education as a whole to determine how well these classes are suiting their needs and learning styles.

Before conducting this research, it was important for me to address my own bias and understand how my background and experiences would affect not only how I gathered and interpreted my findings, but also how I presented them (Briscoe, 2005; Machi & McEvoy, 2012). To begin with, the focus of this study was adult students who are also referred to as nontraditional learners because of certain characteristics they possess. These students are 25 years of age or older, are attending school part-time, are working full-time, and have substantial work and/or family commitments (Harrell II & Bower, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009).

They are also very different from myself, both now as a 49-year-old woman completing my doctorate online and when I was an 18-year-old traditional college student, which is something I tried to take into account when doing this research (Briscoe, 2005; Fennell & Arnot,
2008). Although I have definitely changed myself as a learner over the years in that I am a more self-directed and active student, which fits within Knowles’ andragogy, I am still a different type of adult learner than those I have studied. Unlike them, I have years of experience in education, which has helped me to develop the skills and learning strategies needed to be successful. In contrast, participants in this research have been away from formal education for some time and have gone back to school for their associate’s or bachelor’s degree, attending programs within CCSNH, the University System of New Hampshire (USNH) or other institutions that cater to adult learners.

Instead of pretending to know what they have gone through and how they feel, I needed to acknowledge that my experiences both in life and education are not the same as theirs and I was wary of this as I conducted my study. My positionality is much different than theirs and this in turn affected both my perceptions and perspective and ultimately, how I framed my research (Briscoe, 2005).

Unlike my study participants, when I attended college, I did not have to worry about juggling work and family responsibilities with my studies. I could focus on my courses because I was a full-time traditional student as opposed to the nontraditional adult students that are part of my research. I also come from a position of privilege or what Parsons (2008) describes as the “norm.” I am a Caucasian woman of European descent who grew up in a middle-class suburb north of Boston where most kids went to college right after high school and their parents could afford to send them there.

My parents are also highly educated so going to college was an important part of my upbringing. When I was growing up, my mother was a high school English teacher who had her master’s in Education and my father was a businessman with an MBA from MIT. Both were first
generation college students, but they came from families that emphasized education so like myself, it was expected that they would go to college right after high school. In fact, my mom’s father died when she was four and her mother raised her and her two brothers with the help of her sister and was determined that all of her kids would get their college degree, which they all did.

In addition to having what is considered a privileged childhood, I also graduated from a four-year private liberal arts college where all of the students were traditional-aged and came from well-educated and affluent families. This is in sharp contrast to the undergraduate students I interviewed for my research.

Although I have some perspective on what it is like to be an adult taking distance classes in that I am working on my Ed.D. online at Northeastern, the circumstances are so different that it is hard to imagine I could relate much to what the students I interviewed have gone through. Even though I have juggled many responsibilities while trying to obtain my doctorate, my situation is not the same as the students in my study who are pursuing or have completed their associate’s or bachelor’s degree as adults and in some cases, have been away from formal learning for many years.

In addition to having to re-acclimate themselves into the academic world, some have faced the pressure of financing their education and have gone back to school to improve their job prospects. Many also worked full-time while seeking their degree. I, on the other hand, continue to live a privileged existence in that I can afford to go back to school because of my family’s income situation. Both my husband and I are highly educated and we have both had good paying jobs for most of our adult lives.
We are considered part of the dominant group with the most access to power in contrast to the adult students in this study who are seen as the other or the oppressed because they did not have the advantages my husband and I did (Briscoe, 2005). As a privileged researcher, I had to make sure I do not to view this sharp divide in a way that marginalized or saw these adult learners as inferior to myself, which is a trap scholars often fall into (Briscoe, 2005). Instead of creating damaging stereotypes and putting everyone together into one group under one label, I needed to try and see my study participants as individuals who have had distinct as well as common experiences that are unique from my own (Briscoe, 2005; Parsons, 2008).

They are all adult learners, but each has different thoughts, emotions, motivations and reasons for delaying their education. In addition, they might come from various cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Simply because they are adult does not mean they are the same and have had the same lives and as a researcher, I needed to recognize and account for this (Fenell & Arnot, 2008).

Acknowledging my privilege in relation to the adult students I interviewed also allowed me to gain perspective and approach my problem of practice with less bias (Briscoe, 2005). But getting adult learners to open up to someone who has not been through the same experiences was not without its challenges. How could I understand what they have been through? I finished my college degree when I was 22 and did not have to work full-time and deal with family responsibilities while taking courses. In doing this study, I had to ask myself: How can I get adult students to trust me and open up about their experiences with distance education and the challenges they have faced?

During the interview process, I tried to make sure I do not misinterpret what they told me or denigrate them in any way since I could not completely understand what adult learners have
experienced. I needed to recognize that despite my best efforts, I would never fully interpret the meaning of what they said and did because I am not them and I have not gone through the same things they have (Briscoe, 2005; Jupp & Slattery, 2006).

My experience teaching adults is also limited and I needed to factor this in as well. I have taught an online course at one of the universities study participants attended and a hybrid course at another institution and both had adult students in them, but there were only a few and I did not have much contact with them beyond the class since I was an adjunct.

When I taught at a different college in Massachusetts, I had a couple of adults in my Communication courses, but the majority of students were traditional-aged. However, many of many students were dealing with some of the same challenges adult learners face. Most worked 30 to 40 hours a week in addition to going to school, which affected their ability to complete their courses. Like many adult learners, all of my students were women and a good number were first-generation college students. Most were minorities and came from low-income backgrounds so I do have considerable experience working with populations that are seen as oppressed in the eyes of society as well as the research world (Briscoe, 2005).

However, even though the adult students in this study have some similarities to the students I have taught, they are different and as a researcher, I needed to take the time to understand their distinct histories and cultures to appreciate the lens through which they see the world (Fennell & Arnot, 2008). I had to let go of past narratives that have been created about adult learners so as to fully see who they are (Parsons, 2008).

My work has also fueled a passion in me (Machi & McEvoy, 2012) to change the hierarchy that exists in higher education and work to close the gap between those who are succeeding in college both academically and financially and those who are not. I am lucky to
have been able to focus on my studies when I was in school and graduate debt free and as an educator, I have also seen what can happen when students gets bogged down by loans and debt and have to work instead of go to class so they can pay their tuition with the hopes that someday they will be able to finish their degree.

Seeing these inequities is the main impetus for this research. Adult learners represent a large portion of today’s undergraduates and like my previous students they have many outside responsibilities and financial pressures that are hindering their ability to complete their studies. Distance education offers them the flexibility and affordability they need, but they are not always succeeding in this medium and one of the goals of this study is to help change this.

But I also know in doing this research I could not let my emotions and passion for this topic cloud my judgment. I needed to detach myself from my personal experiences and allow the adult students I researched to tell the story (Briscoe, 2005; Machi & McEvoy, 2012). I also believe that despite the fact that I am from a different background and am coming from a position of privilege, I can still help adult learners bring their stories to life. Some scholars feel researchers should only examine the group they are part of, but I agree with those who say we should not be exclusive (Briscoe, 2005). None of us are without bias even when we study those we are similar to.

In fact, positionality is such a complex, multi-dimensional concept that putting each of us into one distinct group can be difficult. We all take on different identities depending on our situation, our environment, and where we are at any given moment in our lives. I am a woman, which puts me in a place as the other or the oppressed, but I also have many parts of me that are considered privileged. As a researcher, what is important is to realize that positioning always affects how we view and report on things (Briscoe, 2005).
But this can be a benefit as well. Our pasts. Our lives. Our experiences. All of this can enrich how we see things and give us insight and potential understanding into issues and individuals we might have very little in common with (Maxwell, 2005). As a person of privilege, I have been given many blessings. But like any person who has lived long enough, my life has had both joys and struggles and it is these experiences that help me to better see the perspectives of those who are different from myself. Because in the end, it is our experiences as human beings that not only give us common ground but can also help us to better understand each other and the world we all live in (Parsons, 2008).

**Theoretical Framework**

In recognizing my limitations as a privileged researcher whose experiences are quite different than those who are part of this study, it seemed only appropriate to examine how older students view and approach their online learning through the lens of the adult learning theory andragogy. By using this theoretical framework it was possible to get a clearer sense of who these nontraditional students are, how they learn, and the ways in which their past educational experiences have influenced their online learning.

**Knowles’ theoretical framework.** Although several adult learning theories have emerged in the past few decades from self-directed learning to experiential learning to transformative learning, the most well known and most often debated is andragogy (Cercone, 2008; Henschke, 2009). The term, which dates back to 1833 when German high school teacher Alexander Knapp discussed the necessity of lifelong learning, was first introduced in this country in the late 1960s by Malcolm Knowles who became a pioneer in the field of adult education (Chavez, 2009; Henschke, 2009). Influenced by the work of American educators Eduard Lindeman and Cyril Houle and inspired by his own observation of older students, Knowles saw
andragogy as a continuum of pedagogy believing both play an integral part in one’s educational journey (Clawson, 2006; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

As opposed to pedagogy, which focuses more on the teaching of children, andragogy addresses the unique educational needs of adult students recognizing that they tend to learn differently than their younger counterparts. Whereas children often respond more to instructors who disseminate information and lecture to them, adults want to be more involved in the learning process and as a whole, take a more utilitarian approach to their education. They are also more discerning, more questioning, and more resentful of being told what to learn than younger students and they want to know how their learning will benefit them (Blondy, 2007; Clawson, 2006).

Knowles’ definition of andragogy is based on six assumptions about how adults learn. The first, and what many scholars consider the most important, is that older students are self-directed meaning that unlike many young people, they tend to be autonomous, independent, and self-reliant when it comes to reaching their goals. For this reason, they need to play an active role in their education, guiding the process with help from their instructor who should act as both facilitator and creator of the framework for their learning so as to maximize success (Cercone, 2008; Lieb, 1991; Merriam, 2001).

The second assumption is adult students come to the classroom with a wealth of life experience that should be seen as a great resource for enhancing learning. In fact, they will most likely learn more and be more engaged and satisfied with their classes if their coursework is connected to their experiences because then it will become more relevant to them. The third belief is adult students’ learning needs are constantly changing based on where they are at in their life and what their goals are at that particular moment and this needs to be taken into
account when designing and facilitating classes. As learners, they are goal-oriented meaning they respond well when course objectives are clearly stated and outlined early on in the semester. Most adults come into their classes knowing what they want to learn based on their current needs and therefore, their courses should be oriented to their personal goals (Cercone, 2008; Clawson, 2006; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

The fourth assumption is adult learners are more problem-centered than subject-centered. They want to know how what they learn can be applied to their current situation. They also want to know why they need to learn something and how they can benefit from it. Adult students must believe they are learning information that will prepare them for future tasks that are going to be more challenging and complex than what they are currently doing. Some are enrolled in college because they want to advance in their profession so they need to know how their courses will help them do this (Cercone, 2008; Clawson, 2006).

The fifth belief is that internal not external factors motivate adult students to learn. Unlike children whose educational pursuits are often influenced by their parents or their teachers, adults are motivated by the promise of increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, and quality of life (Cercone, 2008). They are the ones who have chosen to go back to school and they are doing it for their own reasons not someone else’s. Since they are internally motivated as opposed to feeling pressure from external forces, they also want to know that their contributions to the classroom are being valued and recognized as they have a personal stake in ensuring their educational experience is worthwhile and beneficial to them (Cercone, 2008; Huang, 2002). The sixth and final assumption is that as people mature, they need to see the relevance in what they are being taught and for this reason, adult students should be involved in the planning and implementation of their learning (Taylor & Kroth, 2009).
Andragogy’s influence. Since Knowles’ seminal work *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* was first introduced in 1973, a number of researchers (Brockett, 1983; Burge, 1988; Henschke, 1987, 1989; Lieb, 1991; Ross, 1987; Taylor, 1986) have applied andragogy to their own examination of adult students. Henschke, who is currently Chair of the Andragogy Doctoral Emphasis Specialty in the School of Education at Lindenwood University in Missouri, has written extensively about the importance of andragogy in understanding nontraditional learners and even developed an andragogical assessment instrument called the Instructional Perspective Inventory to help adult educators determine the effectiveness of their teaching methods (Henschke, 1989, 2009). Knowles’ research has also had an impact on the works of Kolb (1984) and Mezirow (1997) and their adult learning theories of experiential learning and transformative learning.

Despite his influence, Knowles’ assumptions about adult learners are not without its critics. Several scholars (Brookfield, 1995; Hartree, 1984; Jarvis, 1984) have raised concerns about andragogy’s practical applicability since Knowles based his theory simply on observation without ever really testing its validity while others even question whether it is a theory at all (Davenport, 1987; Hartree, 1984). They see andragogy more as a set of principles of good practice or a description of how adults learn (Hartree, 1984). Even Knowles himself would later acknowledge it was less of a theory and more of a conceptual framework from which various theories could be constructed (Merriam, 2001; Merriam and Caffarella, 1999).

Another concern was the generalization and limited scope of andragogy and the belief that one theory alone cannot fully explain who adult students are and how they learn (Frey & Alman, 2003; Pratt, 1993). That other adult learning theories such as self-directed learning, experiential learning, and transformative learning should be taken into account as well and
together could create a more comprehensive framework for better understanding older students’ educational needs (Clawson, 2006; Merriam, 2001).

Although Knowles’ research has been met with criticism over the years, recently there has been renewed interest in his work with the advent of distance education and the large number of adult students gravitating to the virtual world. Many scholars (Aragon, Johnson, & Shaik, 2002; Blondy, 2007) have stressed the importance of developing online programs based on adult learning theories such as andragogy with the hopes this will improve students’ chances for success. However, how these theories will be teased out and applied to specific adult populations taking distance courses still has not been fully explored (Cercone, 2008; Frey & Alman, 2003). As Merriam (2001) noted, not all adult learners are coming to the online environment with the same skill set and their needs and learning styles may be different depending on whether they are pursuing their bachelor’s or master’s degree. Some students may be more self-directed than others or they may have varying motivations for learning and this will have an impact on which adult learning theory is most applicable (Merriam, 2001).

**Andragogy and online adult learners.** In terms of how andragogy has been applied to adults taking undergraduate courses online, which is the population examined in this study, most of the research has centered on how Knowles’ principles can be used to create classes that encourage self-direction and incorporate students’ experiences into their learning (Cercone, 2008). Many have stressed the importance of the instructor in making this happen (Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001). One major concern scholars have raised about andragogy’s applicability to distance classes is the fact it ignores the crucial role interaction plays in online learning (Frey & Alman, 2003). Studies have shown that the more adult students are able to interact and connect
with both their instructors and peers, the more engaged they are in their coursework and the more likely they are to persist in their classes (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Nash, 2005; Rhode, 2009).

In looking at how Knowles’ theory of andragogy fit into this study specifically, the focus was on adult learners who have been away from the educational environment for a period of time so his six assumptions were viewed in relation to this particular population. In other words, adults who have taken online courses for their associate’s or bachelor’s degree like those recruited for this research might approach their learning very differently than older students working on their doctorate, especially when it comes to skills such as self-direction. Although studies have shown that in general, adults enjoy the collaborative nature of being included in the learning process, other research suggests those who have been away from the classroom for a while may require more guidance and structure from the instructor and this was considered when applying adult learning theory to this research (Rhode, 2009; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

As a whole, andragogy was used as a guiding force to help better understand adult learners, but the qualitative nature of this study made it critical to also see these students as individuals as opposed to a group who fit neatly into generalizations about adult learning theory. In approaching this research from a constructivist/interpretivist perspective, the goal was not to view adult students in absolute terms but rather to explore the unique and distinct experiences each has had in his or her online courses. Part of this process also involved listening to their stories about their prior learning experiences as a means to help them make sense of the experiences they have had as adults taking online courses (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005).

At the same time, aspects of andragogy were important to this research in terms of gaining a clearer sense of how adults approach their distance courses. For example, in listening to students’ narratives, close attention was paid to whether they were allowed to share their
experiences and incorporate them into the curriculum and class discussions and if so, was it beneficial to their learning. In addition, were they given the opportunity to relate what they were taught to their professional goals and was it helpful since adult learning theory says older students tend to be more project- than subject-oriented learners. Also, how much interaction between instructor and peers did they have in their distance classes and did it enhance their understanding of what they were being taught, as prior research has indicated (Morris, 2011; Rhode, 2009; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

Conclusion

Overall, this study supports the notion that listening to adult students about their learning experiences both past and present is an integral part of developing effective distance programs. Many older learners are going online for their educational needs so it is crucial that distance courses be designed with them in mind. The goal of this research was to help in this effort by hearing from adult students themselves and trying to determine how both their past educational experiences and the ways in which they learn have influenced how they approached their online classes.

For instance, one of the principles of andragogy is adults are independent and proactive learners in part because they have been in the work force as opposed to the classroom for many years. But the question is are today’s distance courses being designed and taught in ways that fit with how these students learn. Also, what role does adult learners’ experiences play in their online learning? This study looked to answer these and other questions by asking the central research question: What are the lived experiences of working adults who have taken online courses in pursuit of their associate’s or bachelor’s degree after time away from formal education?
Hearing older students’ narratives about how they perceived their distance learning in relation to their educational journey as a whole was an important focus of this study not only as a means to determine what aspects of adult learning theory truly do apply to this population, but also to gain a greater understanding of the real challenges these learners are facing online. Choosing narrative as a methodology provided as full and detailed a picture as possible of the experiences these students have had with education, how they make sense of these experiences, and the impact this has had on their online learning. The hope was that in allowing them some control over the conversation, adult learners would be given a voice so they could be more directly involved in creating distance classes that better fit their needs and learning styles.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

On paper, distance education looks like the perfect fit for adult students who are often juggling work and family responsibilities while trying to earn their college degree or take courses to advance their professional careers. Yet despite its accessibility and flexibility, the majority of adult learners are not succeeding online and the reasons for noncompletion are multifaceted and still have not been fully explored (Chyung, 2001; Frew & Weber, 1995; Hart, 2012; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Park & Choi, 2009).

Although roughly 40 percent of adult students are currently taking online classes, they are not finishing them as attrition rates clearly show (Boston et al., 2011). Older learners are much more likely to drop out of distance courses than face-to-face ones with some scholars reporting attrition in online classes as high as 20 to 50 percent (Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001). Others believe the numbers are more conservative, saying overall student withdrawal rates are about 10 to 20 percent higher than traditional classroom instruction (Angelino et al., 2007; Carr, 2000). Either way, the reality is students are not completing their distance courses as often as those they take on campus and this is especially concerning for adults who make up roughly 80 percent of the online population (Smith, 2014).

Before trying to get a better understanding of the experiences adult learners are having with distance education, it is important to have a clearer sense of who they are. To begin with, these students are considered nontraditional because they are 25 years of age or older, are attending school part-time, and have significant work and/or family obligations (Harrell II & Bower, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009). They also represent somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of the current college population (Choy, 2002; Pelletier, 2010) with this number expected to
increase in the next decade as the nationwide push continues to create a more educated workforce (Lumina Foundation, 2015; The White House, n.d.).

The purpose of this literature review is to look at what studies have been done on adult students taking distance courses to determine what areas need further examination and whether there is any consensus on what factors may be impacting their online experiences, both negative and positive. Attention was also paid to what gaps exists in the current research so as to assess the value and relevance of the work done in this thesis and how it might fit into the larger context of adult distance learning and perhaps contribute to the broader discussion of best practices.

In terms of the reasons some adult students are not finding success online, the answer is a complex one as a review of the literature shows. Both external and internal factors appear to be playing a part, yet researchers seem divided as to what the main barrier is (Park & Choi, 2009). Several studies have focused on outside forces such as job and family commitments, but there does not appear to be consensus on what level of impact each of these factors ultimately has on adult learners’ ability to finish their courses and in turn, their degree (Martinez, 2003; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Some scholars have found work obligations (Kemp, 2010) to be the main obstacle to course completion while others (Kember, 1989; Parker, 1999) have determined family responsibilities as the biggest hurdle to overcome.

In addition to various personal struggles, other researchers believe adult students are dealing with added internal challenges that might be hindering their capacity to complete their classes. They cite issues such as a lack of proficiency in technology (Harrell II & Bower, 2011; Tyler-Smith, 2006) as well as struggles with creating learning strategies and developing self-regulation skills (Clark, 2005; Wang et al., 2008) as possible reasons for them dropping out. Studies have shown students who do well in online courses tend to be self-directed and have
acquired the skills needed to approach their studies in a way that will lead to positive results in their classes (Clark, 2005; Wang et al., 2008; Williams & Hellman, 2004; Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

While scholars have spent considerable time researching the reasons adult learners are not completing their distance courses, they have not focused much of their attention on ways to improve the situation (Nash, 2005). Despite growing concern about the high dropout rates (Morris, 2011; Simpson, 2004), most researchers have spent their energy addressing attrition and retention rates for online students as a whole without giving much thought to the unique challenges and needs of adult students (Boston et al., 2011; Hart, 2012; Nash, 2005). Some of the areas that have not been fully explored include adult persistence in online courses (Harrell II & Bower, 2011) as well as what the common characteristics are of those who drop out of distance classes and what can be done to more effectively support these nontraditional students (Hart, 2012).

This is not the first time adult learners have been overlooked with regards to attrition. Studies dating back to the 1970s show limited research being done on adult students’ attrition rates in the traditional classroom and now the problem has moved online with still little understanding of the complex reasons they drop out of their courses (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Another area that has not been addressed much in the research is how adult students approach their online classes and what changes could be made to distance education to better suit the way they learn (Boston et al., 2011). Some scholars even believe that online attrition rates will not improve until educators do a better job addressing students’ learning styles (Serwatka, 2005). Few studies have also examined the ways in which colleges and universities might be able to help adult students develop the learning strategies and self-efficacy skills that are needed to be successful in the online environment (Kemp, 2010).
Some promising research exists suggesting a correlation between adult student satisfaction and distance course completion, but this relationship still has not been fully explored (Morris, 2011). Although the quality of instructor and ease and interactivity of their classes all seem to play a role in how happy and engaged students are in their online experience, much of the research is anecdotal and only involves a small sampling of students and overall, no major studies have been done in this area (Hart, 2012; Morris, 2011; Rhode, 2009).

Based on the case developed in this literature review using sound evidence, existing knowledge, and reasoned argument, it is clear distance education instructors and administrators need to do more to understand the distinct experiences adult students are having online. They need to devote more time and energy to listening to older students’ narratives about their educational experiences so they better understand how these nontraditional learners approach their distance classes and whether the current models fit within how these students learn. Although a good deal of research has been done on the numerous factors that can interfere with adult students’ capacity to complete their courses, there has been less investigation into what the online experience as a whole is like for them.

An examination of the literature shows that institutions need to come up with real solutions to support adult learners as well as discuss ways in which online courses might be redesigned to better address both their learning and personal needs. For example, the role of instructor has been shown to play an integral part in adult students’ success online so this is an area that should be examined further (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; DeTure, 2004; Hart, 2012; Morris, 2011). One way to begin addressing these issues is by including adults in the conversation and listening to their stories about what they saw as the advantages and disadvantages of their distance learning.
To get a clearer picture of who these adult students are and the unique experiences they are having as online learners, this literature review is divided into four sections, followed by a summation. The first section will take a closer look at these nontraditional learners and why they are drawn to distance education. The second section will explore the myriad of reasons adults are dropping out of their online courses. The third section will discuss some of the potential ways to improve attrition based on aspects of distance learning that seem to be working for older students. Finally, the last section will consider ways in which online classes could be adapted to better suit adults’ needs and learning styles.

**The Distance Education Draw**

For decades, adult students were the exception and not the rule at colleges and universities and yet in recent years, these nontraditional learners have become the driving force in higher education (Rovai, 2003; Williamson, 2009). As the overall number of traditional students continues to increase slowly, adult enrollments in undergraduate programs continue to rise at a much more rapid pace, especially online, marking a dramatic shift in the college landscape (Lumina Foundation, 2005; Pelletier, 2010).

Instead of classrooms with 18-to-22-year-olds who are living on campus and attending school full-time, many instructors especially those in community colleges and a number of public universities are dealing with students who range in age from 25 to 75 and are taking classes part-time often because of substantial work and family commitments (Harrell II & Bower, 2011; Morris, 2011; Pelletier, 2010).

In fact, between 2000 and 2011, the number of students 25 and older attending college grew 41 percent and enrollments are only predicted to go up (Mason, 2014). The adult undergraduate population is expected to increase by roughly 23 percent by 2019 while traditional
student enrollment is expected to increase by only 10 percent (Hoppes, 2014). Many of these nontraditional learners are enrolling in community colleges where the average age of students is currently 28 and 63% of the population is over 21 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). They are also going online for their educational needs with roughly 40 percent of adults taking distance courses whether it is at their local community college, a four-year college or university, or a for-profit institution such as the University of Phoenix (Boston et al., 2011).

Adult learners are turning to distance education in such large numbers because they can take courses that are completely online and asynchronous, meaning they have a certain level of flexibility in terms how they approach their coursework and when they complete their assignments (Boston et al., 2011; Capra, 2011). Adult students are also often drawn to online programs because they tend to be less expensive than traditional brick and mortar schools since there are no room and board costs and sometimes fewer fees involved (Eastmond, 1998). Part of the reason many of these students delayed their education in the first place was for financial reasons so going back means going back in the most economically efficient way possible (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA), 2012).

Many adult learners do not have the time to come to campus and participate in face-to-face instruction and for this reason the distance model really works for them. They also have been out of school for several years and in many cases, have no interest in being part of a campus community. Their main motivation for going back to college is either to advance in their current profession or to change the direction of their career (Graham & Gisi, 2000; Rovai, 2003; Tyler-Smith, 2006).
Yet despite all the potential online learning offers adult students, they are not finding success in distance education. Several researchers have found attrition rates to be much greater in online courses than face-to-face classes (Boz & Shami, 2006; Diaz & Cartnal, 2006; Hiltz, 1997; Willging & Johnson, 2004) with some scholars putting drop out rates as high as 20 to 50 percent (Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001). One recent study (Patterson & McFadden, 2009) found drop out rates to be six or seven times higher in distance courses. Others believe the numbers are more conservative, saying student withdrawal rates are about 10 to 20 percent higher than traditional classroom instruction (Angelino et al., 2007; Carr, 2000). The most startling figures can be found at for-profit institutions like the University of Phoenix where the online graduation rate is only 7.3 percent despite the fact that the school has a 19 percent student loan default rate, which is 5 percent higher than the national average (Allen, 2015).

In teasing out just how many adult students drop out of their online classes, two major studies by Xu and Jaggars (2010; 2013) indicate that the numbers are significant. In their first study, they found that from 2004 to 2008, students taking developmental math and English online at Virginia’s 23 community colleges were more likely to drop out than those taking the same courses in person (Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Attrition rates for specific age groups were not examined, but Jaggars and Xu (2010) did determine that the majority of those taking these developmental classes from a distance were 25 years of age or older.

The second study followed more than 40,000 students enrolled in nearly 500,000 courses at community colleges and technical schools in Washington State in 2004 and found similar results (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). As was the case in their first study, noncompletion rates were higher online than face-to-face. Xu and Jaggars (2013) then took their research a step farther and looked at results for various age groups and found that older students dropped out of their
distance courses more often than their younger counterparts. Although adults were slightly more able to adapt to their online classes than the younger students were, their completion rates were worse (Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

Determining the reasons adult learners do not finish their online classes has been a difficult task and one that the literature shows distance educators need to address if they want to improve attrition rates for these students and help more of them persist. The factors affecting their course completion tend to be much different than those traditional students are dealing with and many researchers agree this needs to be taken into consideration not only when course designers are developing these classes but also when instructors are teaching them (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Boston et al., 2011; DeTure, 2004).

As Rovai (2003) points out, unlike many young people who have followed a more typical school path and see college as a required rite of passage, many adult students see it as a means for furthering their career. For this reason, they not only need to see value in what they are learning but also feel less pressure to stick with their courses or complete them within a certain timeframe (Rovai, 2003).

**Why Adult Students Drop Out**

Although the reasons adult students drop out of their online courses would seem straightforward when considering all the outside responsibilities they have, the issue is more complicated than this. Some studies (Greer, Hudson, & Paugh, 1998; Parker, 1999) have shown family issues as the major factor for noncompletion while others (Kemp, 2010) have determined work commitments are the greatest stressor or that it is a combination of the two (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Tyler-Smith, 2006).
In each case, the reasons appear to vary and often include both external and internal forces that are inhibiting their ability to be successful (Harrell II & Bower, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009). In fact, most researchers seem to agree that it is usually a mix of factors that lead to these students dropping out of their distance courses (Kemp, 2010; Martinez, 2003; Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, & Sherrill, 2002).

With regards to outside forces, many adult students themselves say their job and family obligations make it difficult to manage their time and keep up with their online courses and as a result, they often have to withdraw from their classes. Some scholars believe that support from both their work and family are crucial and without it, adult learners will not be successful in their distance courses (Hart, 2012; Nash, 2005).

Internal issues such as a lack of skills in both technology and approaches to learning can also create serious barriers for adult students (Angelino et al., 2007). Some older learners may not have extensive computer experience or be up on the latest technology the way their younger counterparts are, which can make it challenging for them to navigate their online classes and complete their required assignments (Tyler-Smith, 2006). This is especially true for those who are considered digital immigrants as opposed to digital natives who were born after 1980 and have been exposed to technology their entire lives starting with the introduction of computer bulletin board systems and Usenet (Prensky, 2001).

Although adult students who are 25 and 26 are considered digital natives, they still may lack the technology skills required in online learning as is evidenced by a report released in June 2015 by Change the Equation, a non-profit consortium of business and education organizations. The study found that 6 out of 10 digital natives could not complete basic computer tasks such as
sorting, searching for, and emailing spreadsheet data and 58 percent could not solve a multi-step task requiring more than one computer program (Change the Equation, 2015).

Educators are concerned that adult students who lack the appropriate computer skills will not get much out of their online courses because they will not know how to properly access or use the information given to them (Stine, 2010). Some scholars even argue that adult learners might be experiencing cognitive overload because of all the technical skills required of them (Tyler-Smith, 2006). Unlike their traditional counterparts who have been involved with technology since they were young, some adult students do not find working with a computer to be a natural process so they can feel overwhelmed by it all (Tyler-Smith, 2006). Not only are they entering the school environment for the first time in years, but they are also adapting to the digital world and an entirely new mode of delivery for their learning (Angelino et al., 2007; Harrell II & Bower, 2011; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

For this reason, understanding and interpreting what is being asked of them can be difficult. As an online student, they have to begin by becoming an e-learner and from there, they have to negotiate the technology, the course website, the course content, and finally, all of the course interactions from discussion boards to forums (Tyler-Smith, 2006).

In addition to adjusting their mindset, some of these students do not have easy access to the tools needed for their classes such as high speed Internet or updated computers with appropriate software (Angelino et al., 2007; Harrell II & Bower, 2011). As a result, they get overwhelmed when they cannot open attachments or when it takes awhile to log onto their courses and eventually they give up (Angelino et al., 2007).

Some adult learners also face the obstacle of not having developed learning strategies to help them through their online classes. Studies show students who are most successful in
distance programs are those who possess certain attributes such as the ability to be self-directed and create learning solutions when faced with difficult assignments or ones they do not understand (Park & Choi, 2009; Wang et al., 2008; Williams & Hellman, 2004). In other words, they are able to come up with strategies to approach their learning in ways that result in positive outcomes. For many adult students, creating appropriate learning strategies can be challenging for two reasons. First, they have been out of the educational environment for a while and second, they may have never developed these skills in the first place, which is one of the reasons they have struggled with school in the past (Kember, 1989; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

Self-direction is another concern. As a whole, adult learners are good at self-regulation as Knowles’ andragogy suggests since they are older, more mature, and have worked for several years, but again, being able to guide oneself in an online course with limited human contact is a lot different than learning in a classroom setting or staying on track at a job where there is usually lots of opportunities to interact with and get support from people on a daily basis (Kember, 1989; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Many adult students do not have the appropriate technical or educational skills required in distance education to completely guide their own learning especially at the beginning when they are getting used to the online environment (Hart, 2012; Tyler-Smith, 2006). They need to become more comfortable with the technology and how the courses are presented before they can become more independent and more involved in the learning process (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). In fact, this is an area where instructor support can be crucial in helping to develop those self-direction skills over time so adults are more successful in their distance classes (Caruth, 2014).

Part of the reason self-directed students do well is they tend to have strong self-efficacy skills and are also resilient, meaning they can function and perform well in their courses even
when they are dealing with difficulties or struggles in other parts of their life. They deal well with adversity and can more easily bounce back from academic setbacks and failures (Kemp, 2010).

Although adult learners exhibit resilience in many aspects of their life, they might not have the same capacity in the academic world partly because they do not have the same level of experience in this environment. Educational resilience requires social competence, strong problem-solving and communication skills, independence and a sense of purpose all of which allow students to complete the task at hand. One possible solution to help adult learners develop stronger academic resiliency is through more exposure to instructors or advisors who can guide them in this area (Kemp, 2010).

Another important piece of self-efficacy is persistence and interestingly, adult students seem to exhibit more of this when there is a lot of interaction in their online classes. Studies show the more they are able to connect with both their instructor and their peers, the more engaged they are in their coursework and the more likely they are to persist and finish through to the end (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Nash, 2005; Rhode, 2009).

In many cases, when adult learners do not receive a lot of feedback or support from their professors or there is not enough opportunity to interact with classmates, they feel isolated and disconnected from what they are learning (Angelino et al., 2007; Pelletier, 2010). Some scholars believe this is partly because adult students are used to being connected to others through their work and life experiences and they tend to be experiential learners who like to share their stories and function in an environment that involves a lot of give and take (Pelletier, 2010; Tyler-Smith, 2006).
In addition to highly interactive classes, adult learners like courses that are seamless and logical since many do not have the time to figure out online assignments and lectures that are confusing or convoluted. Between working and taking care of children, adult students have limited hours to spend on their education and they need to feel it is worthwhile. For the most part, they want to go into their distance classes knowing clearly what is expected of them and where they can go for support if they have questions or concerns (Angelino et al., 2007; Morris, 2011; Nash, 2005).

**Ways to Improve Attrition Rates**

Perhaps one of the keys to improving attrition rates for online adult learners lies in student satisfaction. Studies show that there is a correlation between course completion and how happy adults were with their distance classes (Hart 2012; Morris, 2011). Researchers found they were satisfied with their online classes when they had frequent and worthwhile interactions with both instructors and classmates through avenues such as discussion boards, blogs, and peer reviews (Morris, 2011). Both formal and informal interactions were important as together they made adult students feel actively engaged in their learning, which resulted in a desire to finish their courses (Rhode, 2009).

In addition, these students had more positive results in their classes when weekly assignments and objectives were easy to navigate and were designed in ways that provided clear expectations (Morris, 2011; Pelletier, 2010). Part of the reason for this is adult learners tend to be goal oriented so they respond best to syllabi that are as detailed as possible with step-by-step instructions for each assignment as well as an explanation of the relevance of what they are learning and how it relates to their personal objectives (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).
Researchers also believe assignments in entry-level distance courses should be connected with those in higher-level classes so students see how each builds on the next and they will be able to develop the skills they need to be successful online. As a rule, distance education instructors should communicate with adult learners as much as possible so they know what they are going to learn and how it is going to help them (Caruth, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Studies have show the more interaction online educators have with their students, the more likely they will be to complete their distance courses (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Rhode, 2009).

According to Anderson’s (2003) Interaction Equivalency Theorem, deep and meaningful learning can happen in the online environment when at least one of these connections is at a high level (student–teacher; student-student; student-content). If a student is not feeling strongly linked to their instructor, their peers, or their course material, they will not be satisfied with their distance classes and in turn, will not benefit from this educational experience (Anderson, 2003; Rhode, 2009). Perhaps what is most fascinating about Anderson’s research is that it only takes a strong connection in one of these areas to make a difference. Having good interactions in all three is ideal, but he found that it only takes a powerful connection in one to create a positive learning experience for students (Anderson, 2003; Rhode, 2009).

Tinto’s (1975) research on retention has also been cited as a possible solution to improving drop out rates for adult students in online education programs. However, some scholars are skeptical about how applicable it would be to this population considering Tinto focused his work on traditional college students who were living on campus as opposed to adult learners taking courses from a distance (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003). Tinto believed the more academically and socially integrated students are into their institution, the more likely they will persist to graduation and he felt this was also possible in the
online environment (Nash, 2005; Tinto, 1975). In addition, he felt that student engagement was intrinsically linked with persistence (Angelino et al., 2007).

Bean and Metzner (1985) focused more on adult student retention determining that external factors had the greatest impact on attrition, but again, they did not examine online learners. They also looked more at the reasons for noncompletion as opposed to exploring why some nontraditional learners persisted and were successful in reaching their educational goals, meaning this research model has limited applicability not only to this study, but to understanding the overall experience adult learners are having online.

It might also be difficult for colleges and universities to really help with external circumstances such as work and family commitments because they have limited exposure to this aspect of online adult students’ lives. Instructors and administrators can provide support and encouragement, but it is from a distance, which can present challenges in terms of being able to check in with them and closely monitor their progress (Kearns, 2012).

Although Tinto’s retention model has not been directly applied to adult learners, his research does have the potential to offer some real solutions for helping them, as does Anderson’s theory regarding student satisfaction in online courses. Both show a direct and positive link from student integration, to interaction and engagement, to satisfaction, and ultimately, course completion. Or put another way, the more integrated adult students are in their academic experience through strong interactions either with others or their course material, the more engaged they are with their classes and thus more likely to be satisfied and complete them (Angelino et al., 2007; Boston et al., 2011; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

One major challenge is determining the most effective ways to get adult learners more connected and involved in their distance classes. Many scholars believe it starts with early
contact and communication (Angelino et al., 2007; Hart, 2012). Instructors should create a pre-course orientation that allows them to get a good sense of each student’s abilities, course perceptions, and comfort level with technology (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). They should also set up phone calls with each student during the first week or two of class so they feel connected to both the course and the professor (Angelino et al., 2007). Informal online chats where everyone is free to share questions and concerns can also be used to make adult learners feel more comfortable and part of the class (Angelino et al., 2007).

Adapting Courses to Fit Adult Students’ Needs

Some researchers believe the best way to address adults’ needs and keep them engaged is by creating distance courses that are more learner-centered and constructivist in nature despite concerns that have been raised about the importance of teacher involvement in these classes especially as students adapt to the new technology and learning environment. Instead of relying solely on the instructor guiding the direction of the class, students in learner-centered courses take an active part in their education, which in turn leads to greater involvement (Angelino et al., 2007; Diaz & Bontenbal, 2001).

Scholars believe this model of learning could be extremely effective for adult learners who tend to prefer a more collaborative and inclusive approach to their education because this is what they are used to from their own work and life experiences. For them, learning often happens through the sharing of ideas and reflection and so it is important to involve them in this process (Angelino et al., 2007; Diaz & Bontenbal, 2001; Pelletier, 2010).

One approach instructors can use at the start of their courses to get students involved is to set up virtual icebreakers to open the lines of communication as early as possible. Also, professors should post their own introduction and require students to do so as well so everyone
becomes familiar with one another at the beginning the course. This can help set up a situation where adult students feel empowered and included in their learning and more likely to stay motivated to continue (Angelino et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002).

Learning communities are another way to engage adult learners in their courses. Online educators should consider developing group projects and other assignments that encourage students to connect with one another with the goal being to help them explore and expand their existing knowledge together (Angelino et al., 2007). Peer-to-peer networks where students are set up with former students who successfully completed their distance courses could also be beneficial (Harrell II & Bower, 2011). The hope is that some of these activities will help adult student feel less isolated and more part of a community where they are supported and able to freely express themselves as learners (Angelino et al., 2007; Serwatka, 2005).

Another potential strategy to keep adult students involved and motivated is by including activities in their courses that directly relate to their professional life. Scholars have found the more online educators can tie relevance to what they are learning in their classes to their work experience, the more adult learners will respond to what they are being taught. By nature, adult students are practitioners not scholars so they prefer learning that is practical and experiential as opposed to academic in nature (Park & Choi, 2009; Pelletier, 2010).

Making them feel comfortable with technology and the online experience is also important. Most adults students are not particularly savvy with computers so the more instructors can ease them into their distance classes and help them navigate the course content and assignments, the more successful they will be (Angelino et al., 2007; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Many will even begin to become more self-directed and want to be more involved in the learning process (Caruth, 2014). Going slow and making sure adults master the skills needed to complete
their online courses can also help build self-esteem, which is also an important component if they are to succeed (Workman & Stenard, 1996).

In fact, one idea that has been suggested is to conduct an on campus workshop before the start of the semester to give adult students the chance to become more familiar both with the technology and set-up of the course. The idea would be to get them used to the format and ensure they know how to access assignments and use all the online tools at their disposal. It would also give them the chance to ask questions and work through any concerns without the time constraints that often exist once the term starts. Holding an informal workshop could also help with engagement as it would connect adult learners with both their instructor and their peers before the course even begins (Tyler-Smith, 2006; Workman & Stenard, 1996).

Adult students should also feel supported by the institution as a whole and services should be set up from the beginning to help them better navigate their distance courses and their overall college experience (Aragon & Johnson, 2008). They should be provided with educational counseling, technical and financial support, and assistance in areas such study skills and how to effectively access library resources so as to give them the best possible chance to complete their online classes (Angelino et al., 2007; Rovai, 2003). It is also important for advisors and other institutional services to be aware of the unique needs and challenges facing adult learners so they know how best to guide them during their educational journey (Caruth, 2014).

Some researchers even believe colleges and universities should go farther in their support of adult students by providing them with as much information as possible so they truly feel connected to the institution. When they start their distance classes, they should be given details about the school and its educational programs and courses. The names, email addresses, and phone numbers of all the instructors, advisors, and technicians involved in the online program
should also be readily available to them. In addition, instructors should respond to emails in a prompt manner or set up an automatic reply system that lets students know when they will get a response to their questions or concerns (Workman & Stenard, 1996).

Another idea educators should consider so adult students feel more connected to their online experience is the distribution of identification cards. Workman and Stenard (1996) suggested that having ID cards might help adult learners identify more with the institution as a whole, which can lead to a sense of belonging. The cards could be used to access the college’s facilities should students find themselves on campus or maybe it would even encourage them to visit the school. It could also be used to take advantage of discounts with some of the institution’s online merchants that sell books, computers or software (Workman & Stenard, 1996).

Finally, taking the time to fully understand how adult students approach their learning might be another way to help them be more successful in their distance courses (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; DeTure, 2004). One suggestion might be to have schools set up exit interviews for adult learners who have taken online classes to get a sense of their impressions as well as connecting these students with instructors or advisors who they can discuss their thoughts and concerns with. Of course, scholars caution that setting up and teaching online classes can already be time-consuming and this needs to be taken into account when determining what other responsibilities distance educators might be asked to take on (Nash, 2005).

Overall, it is important to recognize adult learners are a unique population of students with distinct needs and experiences that most likely have had an effect on the way they learn and see the world. This needs to be taken into consideration when creating distance programs if online educators truly want to see more positive outcomes. In fact, some scholars believe
addressing their learning styles is exactly what educators need to do if they want to improve online attrition rates for these students (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; DeTure, 2004). However, thus far, little research has been done in this area (Boston et al., 2011; Serwatka, 2005).

One place educators can go to find ideas and suggestions for teaching online adult students and improving their programs is the MERLOT project, a consortium of higher education institutions that offer best practices in distance education. The group has a website (http://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm?action=find) where online instructors and course designers can discover lots of valuable information and share strategies about what is working in their distance classes (Serwatka, 2005).

Conclusion

Although a good amount of research has been done on the many external and internal factors that may be hindering adult learners’ ability to be successful online, not enough attention has been paid to the students’ themselves and what they think about their distance learning experience. Studies have shown work and family commitments (Kemp, 2010; Park & Choi, 2009) as well as struggles with technology and learning strategies (Angelino et al., 2007; Harrell II & Bower, 2011) can all play roles in their decision to drop out or persist in their online courses, but researchers have not reached a consensus on what the main barrier is, proving that the issue is a complex one that clearly warrants more examination (Angelino et al., 2007; Hart, 2012; Kemp, 2010; Park & Choi, 2009).

In addition, scholars seem divided on what can be done to help adult students be more successful in their distance classes. Studies show that providing them with more academic and technical support early on and throughout their courses can have a positive impact as can frequent interactions with those connected to their classes (Park & Choi, 2009; Tyler-Smith,
Researchers have also found that adult learners are more likely to complete their distance courses when they are satisfied with them and this often begins with these students feeling engaged in the learning process through constant communication and feedback from both instructors and peers (Morris, 2011; Rhode, 2009).

But supporting and keeping adult students connected to their online courses requires time and effort on the part of both the distance community and those directly involved with it. For this reason, it is important not only to support adult learners, but instructors, course designers, and online administrators so they are not overwhelmed and are also appropriately trained to handle students’ concerns. Improving online courses will be time-consuming and this needs to be factored into people’s workloads (Capra, 2011; Nash, 2005).

Despite the added commitment, however, many scholars agree more time and effort needs to be made to better understand online adult learners and the distinct personal challenges and learning barriers they face (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; DeTure, 2004; Schmid & Abell, 2003). These nontraditional students are and will continue to be an integral part of the higher education landscape and in particular the distance environment and it is important to find solutions to make them more successful.

As the research shows, finding ways to help more adult learners persist in and complete their online courses is not only crucial for student success but for the well being of the institution as a whole (Boston et al., 2011; Thompson, 1999). Schools that struggle with attrition and retention issues can suffer both financially and reputation-wise so it behooves them to make a concerted effort to help adults stay motivated and focused on their learning (Angelino et al., 2007; Moody, 2004; Tyler-Smith, 2006).
The purpose of this study was to help colleges and universities in this effort. Thus far, few researchers have focused their attention specifically on adult students and what can be done to help more of them succeed in their distance courses (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; DeTure, 2004). Studies that have been conducted have either explored what educators and researchers believe are the best practices for online learning (Conaway & Zorn-Arnold, 2015; Howell, 2003) or have focused mostly on collecting quantitative survey data from hundreds of students (Morris, 2011; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2011; 2013) without much regard for the real lived experiences adults are having in these classes.

A review of the literature found very little research has been done talking directly to older learners to get their thoughts on what they feel is working and not in their distance courses (Zembylas, 2008). Adult students have not been part of the process to the extent they should be and this study hoped to change this by allowing their stories about their educational experiences both past and present to be told in a way that was as authentic and as unscripted as possible through the use of the narrative methodology. Their stories were also viewed through the lens of andragogy as a means to better understand how adults approach their learning and the impact their past experiences may be having not only on how they shape their online learning narratives, but also on how they perceive their distance experience as a whole.

By asking open-ended questions and allowing adult students to speak freely about their educational experiences through the narrative, this qualitative researcher hoped to bring a more human element to this issue. In addition, the goal was to collect enough anecdotal data so colleges and universities have a clearer sense of who these older learners are and what they need both personally and educationally so as to develop online courses that give them the best chance for success.
Chapter III: Research Design

Introduction

Record numbers of adult students are going back to college to gain the skills they need to compete in this fast-paced global economy we now live in (Pelletier, 2010). About 40 percent of them are turning to online learning for their education because of the flexibility, accessibility, and affordability it offers them (Boston et al., 2011). Yet many are not succeeding in this medium finding that distance education courses can not only be isolating and technically challenging, but also does not necessarily fit with the way they learn (Angelino et al., 2007; Chyung, 2001; Clark, 2005; Hart, 2012). In fact, some scholars say attrition rates can be as high as 20 to 50 percent in online classes (Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001). The question is how do educators and administrators change the current distance education model so these nontraditional learners have a greater probability of doing well in the online environment?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this narrative study was to try and provide an answer by listening to adult students’ stories about their overall experiences with education and examining how their responses relate to the central research question being asked, which was: What are the lived experiences of working adults who have taken online courses in pursuit of their associate’s or bachelor’s degree after time away from formal education?

Using the theoretical framework of adult learning theory, in particular andragogy, the following sub-questions were also explored as part of this research.

1. What were adult students’ experiences with education prior to taking online courses?
2. How did these experiences influence the way adult students approached their online courses?
3. How did adult students’ past educational experiences affect how they perceived their learning in their distance classes?

4. What aspects of distance learning work best for adult students?

5. What areas of online learning are challenging for adult students?

6. Based on their past educational experiences, what would adult students like their future learning to be like?

The overall goal of this qualitative study was to better understand how adult students approach their distance courses by listening to their stories about their educational experiences both past and present and considering the ways in which these experiences have influenced their online learning. The hope is that in allowing older students to share their narratives, distance educators will be able to develop online programs that better suit their needs and learning styles. Participants in this study were learners 25 years of age and older who are currently pursuing or have completed their associate’s or bachelor’s degree and have taken distance classes that were asynchronous and completely or mostly online.

**Research Design**

In using the narrative methodology, the objective of this research was to gain a clearer sense of the lived experience adult students have had both in their online courses and in their past educational lives, acknowledging that their stories are unique and subjective based on the individual meaning each has brought to what they have experienced (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Interviews were done from a constructivist/interpretivist perspective, which is the hallmark of qualitative inquiry (Ponterotto, 2005). Instead of asking participants lots of very specific, pointed questions that controlled the direction and tone of this study, the discussion was as fluid as possible, focusing on very open-ended questions so as to get adult learners to speak
freely and comfortably in a way that authentically reflected their experiences (Bell, 2002; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). The qualitative approach also allowed more attention to be paid to the individual adult student as opposed to viewing them as one homogenous group, thus providing a richer and deeper understanding of the experiences older learners have had in their distance classes and how these experiences have been impacted by their overall educational narrative (Creswell, 2012).

**Research Tradition**

Both case study and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) were considered for this study, but neither seemed completely appropriate for this research. The main goal was to focus on the students themselves and listen to their stories about their experiences with education and narrative seemed like the best way to capture this information. IPA has some similarities to narrative in that both are interested in the lived experience of the individual, but it is less about hearing participants’ stories and more about understanding their perspective. IPA also puts emphasis on how the researcher interprets the way participants make meaning of their experiences. In addition, this method is less about listening to stories and following a narrative to understand an experience and more about trying to make sense of it through the eyes of the person going through that particular experience (Creswell, 2013; Dowling, 2007; Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011).

Case study could also be used to better understand adult learners’ experiences with online education but tends to focus on the various players involved in a phenomenon and would most likely include interviews not only with students, but distance educators and administrators as well. In this methodology, the objective is to study a real-life case as a means to explore an issue or problem. For example, a researcher using case study might consider exploring why the
majority of adults at a particular community college are dropping out of their online courses and as part of this process, the researcher would talk to the major players involved in the school’s distance learning program to get a clearer sense of what might be happening (Baharein & Noor, 2008; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yazan, 2015).

Overall, narrative worked best for the problem of practice being addressed in this research because it allowed adult students to reflect on their journey as learners and consider ways in which these experiences may have impacted the way they perceived and approached their distance learning. Although input from online instructors, course developers, and administrators can be valuable, it is the students, the ones having the experience, who can offer the best perspective on what may or may not be working in their distance classes. Understanding how they construct as well as make meaning out of their experiences is imperative to improving online learning because what they see is most likely different than what other people involved might be seeing (Creswell, 2013).

Lastly, narrative inquiry was chosen in part because of its strong alignment with journalism. Josselson (2007) says narrative researchers often face some of the same ethical dilemmas that journalists do and as a former news reporter and editor, this rings very true to me and is one of the reasons I was drawn to the narrative. Although there are clearly some distinct differences in how information is gathered and presented, being a narrative researcher is similar to the role of a journalist in that you are listening to people’s stories and trying to capture how they are being told as well as write them in a way that accurately reflects what you are hearing.

In its simplest terms, the purpose of narrative research is to understand how people bring meaning to their experiences through their lived and told stories (Clandinin, 2006). But for many scholars using this methodology it goes deeper than this recognizing that these narratives are
often shaped by the societal, cultural, and institutional environments in which they are being told and that the sequence of events as well as the ways in which these stories are being presented are also important to take into account (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1991).

With its focus on the individual as opposed to the group, narrative inquiry is a natural fit for qualitative research (Spector-Mersel, 2010). This methodology also works nicely within the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm and the belief that everyone’s experience is unique and should be recognized as such instead of generalized in a manner similar to that used in positivism (Fraser, 2004; Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997). In fact, narrative inquiry is in many ways the antithesis of positivism, embracing the constructivist notion that there is not one absolute truth but rather multiple realities that can help explain a phenomenon (Yang, 2011).

Although people have been telling and sharing stories for centuries, narrative as a methodology did not really come into its own until the postmodern age in the latter half of the 20th century as scholars began to question the modernist philosophical assumptions revolving around positivism, and universal truths, and rational thinking. Instead of using scientific empirical methods to problem solve, postmodernist researchers began to embrace the idea that reality involves varying perspectives and that truth is grounded in everyday life based on interactions among individuals. Context also plays an integral part in this equation in that it helps shape the social construct of reality and knowledge (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

Narrative research gained mainstream recognition thanks in part to the social sciences, which in the late 1900s began to embrace a more constructivist approach to research involving individual experiences as opposed to the more data driven, absolute view that is the hallmark of positivism (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Despite being rooted intellectually in the humanities and
other fields under the heading “narratology,” scientists in the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, organizational studies and history started putting narrative into practice as their interest grew in how people make meaning of their experiences through language (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Ontologically speaking, some scholars believe narrative inquiry fits very well into the social sciences, which involves disciplines that have been broadly shaped by both realism and idealism (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton-Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). They see it as almost a natural alignment since realism is based on the idea that an external reality exists that is distinct from the one, we, as individuals, see and bring meaning to (Ritchie et al., 2013). In recent years, narrative research has become more interdisciplinary expanding into areas such as education, nursing, medicine, law, teaching, social work, counseling, therapy, and psychotherapy (Casey, 1996; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Unlike other types of qualitative research, narrative inquiry is a fairly new methodology that is in many ways still evolving. As Chase (2011) explains, it is still “a field in the making” (p. 421). It is also more fluid and less structured than other research approaches, which has its positives and negatives. Because of its open-endedness and lack of distinct boundaries, it gives scholars more of an opportunity to discover new aspects of their topic they might not have anticipated, but at the same time, narrative can be hard to pin down in terms of what its parameters are and how researchers as a whole view it as way of collecting data (Bell, 2002; Trahar, 2009).

In its entirety, the field of narrative inquiry has more complexities than commonalities with scholarly disputes about its origins and precise definition making it challenging for researchers to reach consensus on what exactly it encompasses and what are considered its best
practices (Barone, 2010; Riessman & Speedy, 2006). Some scholars believe the all-inclusiveness of narrative inquiry has blurred the lines leading to ongoing disputes about its epistemology, ideology, and ontology (Bell, 2002; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

As a methodology, narrative research is both exploratory and descriptive in nature focusing on examining people’s told and live stories and how these stories shape their identities and bring meaning to their lives (Trahar, 2009; Yang, 2011). In the case of retelling stories, narrative scholars are often interested in how participants recall events and how this may impact what they are experiencing now and in the future (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Each narrator is telling a unique story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end and includes a sequence of events that are unique to this particular individual’s interpretation of their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1991; Sandelowski, 1991).

In addition, by telling stories, we impart meaning not only on ourselves but our world and help form our personal identities. How we shape our narratives is how we see ourselves and act within our world. For example, if we narrate ourselves as change agents, we will behave very differently in the real world than we would if we shape our life stories based on victimhood (Spector-Mersel, 2010).

Some narrative scholars look beyond the stories themselves to the way they are being told. They feel that much can be learned by examining the nuances of participant’s language, things like word choice, repetitions, the use of pronouns as well as their mannerisms, which might include things like hand gestures or laughter (Bell, 2002; Chase, 2011; Riessman & Speedy, 2006).

In addition to observing how people tell their stories, some researchers also view these narratives within the cultural, societal, and institutional contexts in which they are being told.
They believe this is important to do because people often shape their narrative based on the environment they are living in. Since setting is a part of their overall narrative, these scholars feel it cannot be ignored in understanding the bigger picture of what is happening in the telling of people’s personal stories (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Narrative can also be used in therapeutic ways as a means of helping people process and heal from their experiences through a recollection of events and the feelings and emotions they elicit (Chase, 2011; Gergen & Gergen, 2006). In recent years, narrative therapy has garnered attention in the areas of psychoanalysis and cognitive behavior analysis (Spector-Mersel, 2010).

Another approach to narrative inquiry that has gained interest is the autobiographical narrative, which is closely linked to autoethnography, a process that involves researchers turning the lens on themselves and telling and examining their own stories and the contexts in which they are shaped (Chase, 2011; Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Some have expressed their narratives through performance art and the writing of poems and novels (Gergen & Gergen, 2006). This creative more therapeutic expression of narrative has led to criticism of the methodology as a whole however, with some arguing that it is not analytical enough or as authentic as researchers often make it seem (Spector-Mersel, 2010; Trahar, 2009).

**Recruitment and Participants**

For this particular study, a more straightforward approach to narrative was used focusing mostly on how adult students make meaning of their educational experiences, how they interpret them, and how they share their stories with others (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne 1995). Participants were chosen through a purposeful sampling strategy that reflected the qualitative nature of this research (Creswell, 2013).
Before subjects were recruited, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) request was made to Northeastern University. Once approval was granted, IRBs and letters (see Appendix A) were sent out to several area community colleges, all of which agreed to be part of the study, but ultimately this process only garnered one participant despite the researcher putting up fliers (see Appendix B) and sending out mass emails to try and recruit subjects. Snowball sampling was then conducted as a next step and this resulted in several people agreeing to participate (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews were done with seven participants, but one ultimately did not meet the selection criteria because she had taken online courses as part of her second bachelor’s degree. Convenience sampling was also done, recognizing that subjects would most likely be picked based on how readily accessible they were (Suen, Huang, & Lee, 2014).

To achieve maximum variation, this research also tried to include a range of different stories both from adult students who have been successful online as well as those who have struggled. The goal was to find older learners from various backgrounds and demographics including those from under-represented populations such as women, minorities, first generation college students, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and students with limited technology experience (Creswell, 2013).

Both typical case sampling and criterion sampling were also be applied to ensure the adult learners who were interviewed were not picked at random and possessed the appropriate characteristics for best answering the questions raised in this study. Since the goal was to hear from average, every day older students taking distance classes, typical case sample proved to be an appropriate strategy (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The following specific criteria was used:
1. Students had to be 25 years or older.

2. Students had to be in the process of or had already completed their associate’s or bachelor’s degree while an adult.

3. Students had to have completed at least one course that was completely or mostly online and asynchronous.

Initially, the researcher had only wanted to interview adult students who were currently pursuing their associate’s or bachelor’s degree and taking online courses as part of this process. But the study criteria was ultimately expanded to include older learners who had already completed one of these degrees after several months of trying to recruit participants did not yield results.

Opening up the selection criteria ended up being an effective strategy as the subjects who were interviewed helped the researcher to reach maximum variation. Participants ranged in age from their late 20s to late 40s and included two men and four women who have attended or are currently attending various types of institutions in pursuit of their degree from community colleges to four-year schools. These include colleges within the Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH) as well as the University System of New Hampshire (USNH) in addition to other institutions that offer both online and hybrids programs.

Roughly 40 percent of those currently attending CCSNH are adults 25 years or older, based on information obtained on the organization’s Web site. As of 2015, 1,271 CCSNH students were exclusively enrolled in distance education courses either seeking their degree or a specific certificate, according to a report released by the New Hampshire Department of Education. Although the report did not break down the number of students taking both online
and traditional courses, total student enrollment at CCSNH is 14,771 (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2016).

In looking more closely at one of the CCSNH schools participants attended, the most recent published enrollment data shows that 651 students were enrolled in online courses in fall 2013 as compared to 3,817 students in face-to-face classes. Ninety-five percent completed their distance course and 74 percent received a C or above in the class. The college is made up of 40.3 percent adults and 72 percent of students are enrolled part-time.

To help older learners prepare for the college experience, the school has created a three-week, tuition-free transition program where they can receive tutoring and instruction in math, writing, and technology skills. They can also learn more about financial aid and the college’s expectations. The College Transitions Program is offered to students taking courses either on campus or online and is geared to those who have been out of school for at least three years or graduated with a GED or Adult Diploma. The college’s course catalog also includes a section about what students should know about online learning before enrolling to ensure they make an informed decision about it.

According to the college’s strategic plan, the school wants to substantially increase the number of adult students over the next decade as well as focus more efforts on technology and in particular distance education initiatives. One of the college’s ongoing strategic goals is to ensure faculty and staff continue to be well trained and well versed in Blackboard, which is this software program used by all of the schools in CCSNH. Future plans involve hiring a Blackboard Coordinator who will work directly with instructors and course developers to create more effective online classes so students have the best chance at success.
The college is also linked up with CCSNH’s Web site, which provides students with a 24-hour Distance Learning Support Center as well as information about online etiquette, library resources, tutoring, and how to use Blackboard. There are also several articles to help students decide whether online education is the right fit for them based on their learning styles and educational needs. Students can gain access to all of these resources by logging onto http://www.ccsnh.edu/online-learning-blackboard/students. Despite having all these support mechanisms, officials at the college acknowledge in their strategic plan that they would like to do more with their online programs especially with regards to student assessment, but that a lack of funding has made this challenging.

USNH, another organization participants attended, enrolls approximately 33,000 students and is the largest provider of postsecondary education in the state. It has four colleges and universities including one dedicated specifically to adult learners with 73 percent of undergraduates reported as being 25 years or older (Granite State College, 2017). According to the N.H. Department of Education report, the number of students exclusively enrolled in distance education at USNH is 2,175, and like at CCSNH, the data does not tease out how many students are taking both distance and traditional courses. Both CCSNH and USNH also have a partnership called The New Hampshire Dual Admission Program that allows students to transition from one of the state’s community colleges to one of USNH’s four-year institutions (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2016).

The remaining colleges and universities study participants attended also cater to working adults offering various programs from ones that are completely online to hybrid options including one school that is the second largest nonprofit provider of online education in the
nation. All of the participants in this study enrolled in their respective programs part-time so as to best balance their work, family, and academic responsibilities.

The hope is that this research can provide helpful and concrete data to school administrators in institutions that cater to adult learners so they might be able to better assess these students and respond to their distinct needs and learning styles. Since this is a narrative study, the sample size included six participants who were interviewed and observed at length so as to capture their lived experiences in as rich and meaningful a way as possible (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997). By focusing on a few adult learners as opposed to many, their stories were brought to life more fully, which in turn enhanced the value of the experiences they were having (Fraser, 2004).

However, this approach did have limitations. Although the narrative can bring older students’ stories to life in a powerful way, the small sample size is not representative of the overall experience the adult population is having in their online courses and therefore, it is difficult to generalize the results, which is a challenge qualitative research often faces (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2002). Instead, this study provides a detailed and unique picture of what it was like for a few adults to go through the distance experience with the hope that the results can offer some perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of this type of learning (Creswell, 2013).

Protection of Human Subjects

Protecting participants was also an important part of this research. When recruiting adults, the researcher was as upfront as possible about what her study was about, what she planned to ask, and how the data she collected would be analyzed and presented (Josselson, 2007; Trahar, 2009). Students who were interested in participating were given a consent form that explained the purpose of this research as well as outlined the privacies and protections that would be provided to them (Creswell, 2013). The form emphasized that participation was
voluntary, students could withdraw at any time, and that all information gathered and collected would remain confidential. In addition, they were informed that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities and that the names of the institutions they attended would be changed or not mentioned at all to strengthen the anonymity of the study (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The form also included details about the approximate time it would take to conduct the interviews and researcher contact information should participants have questions or concerns throughout this study. Finally, it outlined both the potential risks and benefits of participating in this research (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012) (See Appendix C).

**Data Collection**

Once participants’ questions were answered and consent forms were read and signed, the researcher began the interview phase of this study. Participants were reminded that each conversation would be taped as outlined in the consent form. In-depth interviews were the main source of data collected since this is the most common method used in narrative research although diaries, letters, autobiographies, and field notes and reflective memos from observations and conversations that happen naturally between researcher and participant can also be included in this methodology (Creswell, 2013). In fact, some narrative researchers have even collected artwork that participants created as an expression of their experiences (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). In each case, it is participants’ stories that are the data, helping narrative researchers to paint a clearer picture of what is happening within their specific problem of practice (Bell, 2002; Chase, 2011; Josselson, 2007).

This particular study focused mainly on extensive interviews involving a three-interview protocol so as to get a full picture of adult students’ educational experiences. Each interview
lasted roughly an hour and participants were interviewed individually (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In some cases, the protocol was modified and interview sessions were combined into one or two longer sessions based on participants’ availability. As much of the research shows, adult students are usually juggling multiple responsibilities, which was the case with participants in this study, so the researcher decided that adapting the protocol was acceptable in order to recruit enough subjects while also meeting the demands required of narrative inquiry. The researcher also made sure enough time was given to each participant to tell their story, agreeing to sit for as long as was needed to complete their narratives.

The first set of interview questions focused on participants’ past experiences with learning. The second included questions about participant’s present experiences with education, giving specific attention to their online experience. This was followed by questions about what they would like their future learning to be like based on the experiences they have had with education up until this point in their lives (see Appendix D). Connecting the past, present, and future seemed especially relevant to this study considering it focuses on viewing adult students’ experiences with distance education through the lens of adult learning theory.

The final part of the interview process was devoted to any follow-up questions the researcher felt were necessary to clarify and complete the story. Time was also spent member checking to ensure participants’ narratives were told in way that was as authentic and accurate as possible (Creswell, 2013).

The study also included field notes from the researcher’s direct observations of the ways in which adult students told their stories and shared their educational experiences. Attention was paid to how adult learners’ narratives were structured as well as the words and emotions they used to convey their stories. For visual purposes, as needed, artifacts such as class syllabi and
assignments were examined on participants’ computers so the researcher could get a clearer picture of what was happening when adult students were talking about their online experiences and the specific assignments and course objectives involved (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews were conducted in person and recorded using a digital audio recorder. Although the researcher took down a few notes to help with follow-up questions, the main focus was on recording the interviews so full attention could be paid to what participants were saying. The researcher also asked permission to record participants and also gave them the opportunity to ask any questions they had before taping began (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

With regards to the interview process itself, questions were designed with the narrative in mind ensuring study participants were able to tell their story authentically without direction and interruption. Interviews began with an open, non-directing question such as: Tell me about your (past, present, future) experiences with education (see Appendix D). As a whole, narrative tends to be less structured than other qualitative methodologies and this study followed this practice (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Fraser, 2004).

Instead of going into interviews with a set of specific, concrete questions, this research tried to embrace the narrative tradition and be more fluid, allowing the process of discovery to unfold organically, focusing instead on several overarching questions that lead to unique and layered answers from each participant (Fraser, 2004). The goal was to allow adult students to open up and tell their story as opposed to controlling the situation and limiting their ability to fully share their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) method of responsive interviewing was used to ensure a level of trust was developed between researcher and participants since one of the main objectives of this study was to get adult students to open up and really share their stories. The tone of the
interviews was friendly and non-confrontational and began with lighthearted conversation to put participants at ease. In addition, interviews were held at a location that was convenient and comfortable for those adults who agreed to participate so they were more likely to speak freely and candidly about their educational experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The pattern of questioning was flexible with a limited number of questions prepared in advance to allow the interviews to be as open and natural as possible. Instead of having a set of structured, pointed questions, the goal was to really listen to what each adult student was saying and allow them to guide the narrative and then when needed, the researcher asked appropriate follow-up questions. Responsive interviewing also allows for follow-up interviews if the answers given require clarification or elaboration so adult learners’ stories are fully captured. By having an open channel of communication and a lot of give-and-take, the hope was that those who were interviewed were more than willing to share their stories and the researcher was able to get as full a picture as possible of their lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

However getting adults to talk candidly about their experiences requires a strong level of trust between researcher and participants and this can be both good and bad. On one hand, this close relationship can help participants to speak more freely and tell their stories in a way that is honest and forthcoming, but it can also lead to concerns about bias and subjectivity when collecting and interpreting data. Narrative researchers are not separate from the process in the same way they might be in other qualitative methodologies and in some cases, it can be difficult for them to remove themselves from the experience as they interact with and observe participants (Chase, 2011; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Josselson, 2007; Ritchie et al., 2013).

There is a lot of gray area in narrative and as a result, some scholars continue to raise questions about its validity and the potential ethical dilemmas it poses. One way this study tried
to address these concerns was through the use of an honest and thorough positionality statement that acknowledged the inherent conflicts that can exist in this type of methodology (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To further ensure accuracy and authenticity, the researcher cross-validated the interviews with participants by letting them look over their narratives once they were transcribed (Creswell, 2013). All six participants informed the researcher both verbally and through signed member checking forms that their stories were indeed correct.

**Data Storage**

The personal nature of narrative and the need for trust also extended to how data was stored in this study. Since confidentiality and privacy are so imperative in this type of research, the researcher and her advisor are the only ones who have access to interview transcripts, recordings, and field notes. The data was collected and stored on the researcher’s computer in her private home and is password protected and will be destroyed once the study is complete. Pseudonyms were used for participants and consent forms will be kept in the researcher’s possession in a locked box in her home for at least three years in compliance with Northeastern’s IRB guidelines.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed using Rev.com and data was analyzed using the qualitative software program MAXQDA. The program’s intuitive set-up and ability to easily capture codes such as In Vivo as well as see patterns in participants’ answers during the interview process make it a natural fit for narrative research. In seeking to fully understand how adult students’ experiences with education impact their online learning, several levels of coding were conducted to gain a clearer picture of what was happening. Because Saldaña (2016) believed doing more than one type of coding can result in a “richer perspective on the same data set” (p. 73) interview
transcripts were analyzed using In Vivo as a first level of coding followed by a second level of axial Pattern coding in an attempt to accurately represent the stories being told by participants.

Full paragraphs from adult learner’s interviews were also included in this study so as to allow their own words to guide the narrative. Analytic memos were used in conjunction with field notes to help the researcher get a better sense of what participants were saying about their distance learning experiences and the ways in which they were telling their stories (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2016).

Transcripts were first analyzed using In Vivo coding to help bring participants’ stories to life. Capturing short phrases of what adult students say about both their online experiences and their experiences with education as a whole helped enhance their narratives and brought authenticity to the data because it came directly from them and also helped determine which larger parts of the interview should be pulled out and highlighted in paragraph form in the research (Saldaña, 2016).

In Vivo seemed like an appropriate choice for a first level of coding to really capture each participant’s voice and allow he or she to tell their own unique story about their educational journey. One of the goals of this research was to really get a sense of how adults approach their distance classes so In Vivo seemed like the right starting point to help bring their stories to life and more thoroughly understand the process they go through when taking these classes. By choosing In Vivo, the researcher was able to more clearly see and understand participants’ educational experiences through their own eyes.

This first level of coding was also coupled with triangulation and rich, thick description involving more extensive excerpts from participants’ answers to get as full a picture as possible of what their experiences with education have been like. In each case, the researcher allowed
participants’ own narratives to tell the story of both their early educational experiences and how these experiences have affected their learning as adults. Doing this resulted in a much more authentic and credible depiction of their overall educational experiences (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014).

For example, in the initial set of interview questions, participants were asked about their backgrounds and past experiences with education and the answers they gave led to some revealing observations about how they perceive their early learning and the ways in which it now informs their present approach to education. The use of In Vivo also proved to be a beneficial first level of coding as it helped capture verbatim the feelings of insecurity and indifference most participants had about their early years of learning.

Once In Vivo coding was complete, a second level of axial Pattern coding was done on the data to see if any themes or repetitive ideas came out of what each adult student was saying about their experiences. Doing this next cycle of coding helped ensure the integrity of the data by reanalyzing and reorganizing it in a way that further enhanced and synthesized what was captured in the first round of In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009). The use of axial Pattern coding also provided a fresh new perspective on participants’ answers about their experiences both with online learning and education as a whole and helped to clarify both the similarities and differences each have had during their educational journey.

The researcher also determined that axial Pattern coding was an appropriate next step as a means of seeing connections between the lengthy list of codes collected in the first In Vivo round of analysis and then bringing these codes to a more focused, conceptual level (Miles et al., 2014). Also, as Saldaña (2009) explains, this type of second cycle axial Pattern coding can also be helpful in determining which codes in the data are most significant and dominant. To further
strengthen the themes that were chosen in this second level of coding, aspects of In Vivo were integrated into each specific topic so as to more clearly show a link between these first two phases of analysis.

Pattern coding was followed by a third level of Provisional coding, which was used to categorize codes and examine them in relation to both the literature on adult learners and online learning, and andragogy, the theoretical framework chosen for this study. For example, one of the principles of adult learning theory is that adults tend to be more proactive than children about their learning so attention was paid to what codes might fit within this framework (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016).

The reasons for applying several codes to the data came from the desire to fully explore the problem of practice raised in this research and address its complexity in as clear and detailed a manner as possible. Since the goal of this study is to come away with a deeper and more layered understanding of adult learners’ perspectives on distance learning, the use of various types of codes seems warranted and clearly lead to a more rich analysis of the topic being examined (Miles et al., 2014).

Following coding, the next step was to develop themes based on the data analysis that was conducted and the codes that were applied with the hope that this process would lead to a more concise list of superordinate themes (Saldaña, 2016). These overarching themes were then used to help answer the study’s central research question, which is: What are the lived experiences of working adults who have taken online courses in pursuit of their associate’s or bachelor’s degree after time away from formal education?

Trustworthiness
Several strategies that have become hallmarks for conducting qualitative research were used to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of this study (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These include rich, thick description, member checking, triangulation, and clarifying researcher bias (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). All of these methods were chosen because they can bring much needed authenticity and credibility to the narrative process as well as support this type of inquiry (Creswell, 2013).

For example, rich, thick description, which involves presenting findings in a comprehensive, layered manner, can help narrative researchers more accurately reflects how participants make meaning out to their experiences. By describing people’s stories in detail instead of a few words or phrases, this strategy allows narrative investigators to truly capture an individual’s unique experiences and the words and language they use to describe them (Creswell, 2013).

In the case of this study, instead of pulling snippets of information out of the transcripts, full paragraphs from participants’ interviews were included in the findings so as to create a more detailed picture of adult students’ educational experiences both online and in the classroom, which then allowed the data to breathe and come to life (Bell, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). However, a significant downside of narrative and this all-inclusive, open approach to research is participants can often feel more vulnerable or exposed. In some cases, most, if not all, of their story, will be told instead of a small part of it and this is why transparency is so paramount in narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2013).

Another strategy that was used in this research and can help in building trust and bringing validity to the narrative is member checking (Creswell, 2013). Participants were given the chance to review and comment on interview transcripts as well as the researcher’s findings and
data interpretations (see Appendix E) so they felt part of the process and could add and delete information as they saw fit, which in turn enhanced the study’s accuracy and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016). However, this researcher recognizes that member checking is not without its downsides including potential disagreements about the study’s findings and therefore, she tried to be as transparent and communicative as possible with participants throughout the data collection process (Creswell, 2013).

Confidentiality is also imperative in narrative inquiry as is the promise to protect participants from possible repercussions. This is why consent forms that are explicit and understood are so important. To work effectively, the narrative methodology requires both trust and cooperation between researcher and participants (Creswell, 2013; Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Josselson, 2007).

Triangulation is another way to help bring validity to the narrative and was used in this study through the addition of observations and field notes that were included along with the interview data that was collected. The final strategy that was used to strengthen the narrative process was clarifying researcher bias in which the researcher recognized and acknowledged her own bias and how it might affect the results of the study and vice versa (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014).

Lastly, to ensure the credibility of this study, the researcher tried to remember that as a methodology, narrative focuses less on showcasing patterns and commonalities and more on understanding how participants’ stories shape their experiences (Sandelowski, 1991; Yang, 2011). As a narrative researcher, it is important to look at things like the sequence of events that people use to describe their experiences as well as what aspects of the story participants have included and left out (Polkinghorne, 1991). Narrative inquiry is about seeking nuances in the
data as opposed to generalities. It is about understanding a phenomenon through the unique eyes of individuals as opposed to looking for themes and trends within a larger group dynamic (Chase, 2011; Fraser, 2004).

**Limitations**

Although various strategies were conducted to help bring authenticity to this research, the narrative methodology is not without its limitations. As is the case in most narrative studies, the sample size in this research was small including in-depth interviews with six adult learners making it difficult to transfer results into generalizations about the overall experience older students are having in their online courses. Although participants were able to fully share their stories about their distance learning and their educational journeys, the focus was more on the individual narrative as opposed to the group and may not be representative of adult learners’ experiences as a whole. This is especially true when considering those interviewed attended a small group of schools, most of which are in the same state (Creswell, 2013).

Interpreting narrative data can also be challenging and this too was taken into account when conducting this study. When analyzing interviews, narrative researchers need to recognize that they are retelling someone else’s story, or restorying if you will, and that this in turn imposes another level of meaning on the experience (Bell, 2002). It is the participant’s narrative, but it is being told through the researcher’s eyes. They are the ones choosing what to include in the final analysis and trying to capture the essence of what is being said (Trahar, 2009).

This is one of the reasons why it is so important for the researcher to acknowledge their bias and ontological beliefs when doing a narrative study. Because in the end listening to others’ stories in order to bring meaning to their experiences is never going to be without some level of distortion of the truth. (Josselson, 2007; Spector-Mersel, 2010).
Another important thing to remember when examining narrative data is that the story being told is a recollection of a particular event or experience. In essence, the participant is retelling their experience within who they are in that moment in time, meaning that it only provides a small window into the person’s overall beliefs and experiences. Narrative scholars must also be aware they are working with participants’ conscious stories and that deeper stories exist within each of us that people might not even be aware of (Bell, 2002).

In addition, researchers need to be cognizant of the fact that narratives are shaped by all sorts of circumstances from the environments they are being told in to the social and cultural context within which they are being relayed (Bell, 2002). Narrative analysis also involves interpreting how the story is told, the sequence of events, and who is mentioned and who is left out (Polkinghorne, 1991). Every story has missing parts and missing details and this needs to be addressed when analyzing people’s recollection of events (Spector-Mersel, 2010).

How participants express themselves during the telling of stories can also be used in the analysis of narrative data. Everything from mannerisms to body language to the words and phrases used can help researchers gain a clearer understanding of the ways in which participants process and shape their narratives. But this type of information can also be open to interpretation and narrative researchers need to be wary of this when using this kind of data in their final analysis (Riessman & Speedy, 2006).

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, narrative inquiry has earned its place in qualitative research and continues to evolve as a methodology. What started out as a field with limited acceptance has
grown into one that is now flourishing, providing researchers with another way to explore human nature and how we perceive the events and experiences that shape our world (Chase, 2011; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

In looking at its postmodern foundation of interventionism, narrative research also has the power to bring about change even in small ways (Spector-Mersel, 2010). As a method of inquiry, it has often been used to give voice to those who have none or who have been marginalized in our society (Bell, 2002; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Perhaps Spector-Mersel (2010) said it best when she said through narrative, we gain a sense of continuity and identity, a connection with others, a better understanding of our culture, and a chance to change our behaviors.

As both a scholar-practitioner and change agent, this researcher believes narrative was the most appropriate way to explore her problem of practice. The purpose of this study was to help adult students be more successful in their online courses and the hope is that through their stories, through their experiences both with distance education and education as a whole, a clearer picture will emerge of what they see and feel when they learn. For it is only then that these nontraditional students will be given a much-needed voice that may help bring about change in distance learning so they not only find more success online, but perhaps move one step closer to finishing their college degree.
Chapter IV: Analysis of Data and Findings

Introduction

As the number of jobs requiring at least some post-secondary education continues to grow, more adults are going back to school to earn their degree with a large number turning to online education because of its flexibility, accessibility, and affordability (Boston et al., 2011; Hoffman & Reindl, 2011). Yet many of these non-traditional students are not succeeding in the distance environment, raising the question of how effective this type of learning really is for this particular student population (Hart, 2012). The purpose of this narrative study was to examine the lived experiences of adult learners by listening to their stories not only about their current education, but their educational journey as a whole and how these experiences have impacted the ways in which they have approached their distance learning.

Viewed within the theoretical framework of andragogy, the following central research question was posed: What are the lived experiences of working adults who have taken online courses in pursuit of their associate’s or bachelor’s degree after time away from formal education?

Participants

Interviews were conducted with six participants who fit the criteria for this study. Seven participants were initially interviewed, but upon closer observation, one did not meet selection criteria because she had already completed a bachelor’s degree before pursuing a second bachelor’s online. Four of the participants who met the guidelines for this study were women in their 30s and 40s and two were men, one of whom was in his 20s and the other, who was in his 40s.
Interviews were done face-to-face at a time and place that was convenient for participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities and any other names and locations that were mentioned in their answers. Participants were also informed both before and after the interviews that they could opt out of the study at any point and were made aware that they were being taped throughout the conversation (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Rachel

Background information. The first participant, Rachel, is in her early 40s and is currently taking courses for her associate’s degree while working as a waitress and caring for her two teenage daughters. She is married but says her husband has not been as supportive as she would like him to be about her educational pursuits in part because she says he does not understand why she is doing it because he himself never went to college. For financial reasons, she and her family currently live with her husband’s parents, which she says has put added stress on her ability to complete her degree because like her husband, her in-laws question why she is going back to school.

Rachel also had very little educational support when she was growing up. Her mother got pregnant with her when she was 17 and never finished high school and she says her father was an alcoholic who often demeaned her, which affected her confidence. As she said, “The hardest part was growing up with my Dad.”

It got harder for me to make friends and with my father being the way he was about my esteem issues, I wouldn’t talk to people, I wouldn’t put myself out there because I’m like, well, either I’m going to move or they’re going to think I’m too ugly or whatever to be my friend. That’s affected me even to this day.
Rachel spent her formative years moving around New England from school to school because her father was in the Navy. By the time she got to high school, she had attended “17 different schools,” which she describes as being “rough” not only in terms of making friends, but also focusing on her studies as she thinks she “probably had ADHD.”

There were times when my father would come in to pick me up from school in the middle of the day and say, ‘We’re moving. I just got stationed somewhere else.’ I never really got to say goodbye, never really made many friends, because they never knew when I was going to move. I became very shy, very… I didn’t want to know anybody because I could be gone tomorrow.

**Past experiences with education.** Rachel says her past experiences with education have been more negative than positive because of the environment she was raised in and how often she moved as a kid. To put this in context, the longest she stayed in one school was a year and a half. As she recalls now, “I can’t remember half of the schools I’ve been to.”

By high school, she had attended more than a dozen schools and says she was struggling with her confidence as well as her academics because she did not have any stability in either her friendships or her schooling.

In her own words, here is how she describes her past experiences with education:

I never really cared about school once I hit high school. I was more like, Oh, I’ve got a boyfriend and I’ve got my friends and then my senior year, I had a few medical issues and I ended up not graduating. I went back that summer, again got really sick, couldn’t finish summer school, so I didn’t graduate. I went back to school in the fall, regular high school, and something just kept happening where I could just never finish, so I dropped out completely.
Rachel also says her family dynamic did not help.

Nobody in my family graduates [high school]. It was just the thing. Nobody graduated. I thought it was OK. It just kept eating at me. I didn’t graduate. I feel like a loser. Job applications would ask: Did you graduate high school? I always just wanted to click yes and I couldn’t. Finally, I just said, my daughter was having issues, that’s when I said, ‘I’m willing to do it.’

**Grade, middle, and high school experiences.** Rachel says her earlier years were not that difficult both socially and academically, but that when she got to middle school and high school, things got “harder” because she was moving all the time.

I did a lot of sticking to myself. Making very little friendships. As soon as I got to the higher grades, it was a lot harder. In one of my junior highs, it was like four different towns in one school so I was like a number. I wasn’t a face. I wasn’t a person. I was a number.

Although Rachel has loved reading since she was a kid and often devours a book in one or two sittings, she says math and science have always been “awful” for her. In fact, it was a biology class that kept her from graduating high school.

I had taken my third biology class and the rule was, if you fail with a teacher, you don’t get them the next year. I’m going into my senior year and that’s the only class I need to graduate. Only class. I got the same teacher from the year before. I can’t learn from this guy. You can barely understand what he’s saying. He didn’t type up his tests, he hand wrote them and then photocopied them. I couldn’t read his writing and 90 percent of everything was essay.
Rachel tried to switch to another teacher, but says, “Nobody would help.” She says “the only one who cared” was the vice principal who was one of only two people who she felt supported her during high school.

He had me in his office more times than anyone because I was late or I skipped class or I had to get detention and if I skipped the detentions, I got an in school suspension. He looked at me I think my second try of my senior year and he goes, ‘I am not retiring until you graduate high school.’ Poor guy I didn’t graduate until 2014.

The other person she says was determined to help her graduate high school was her math teacher who she calls “amazing.”

If the schools had more Mr. Smiths, I mean come on. Your kids could do so much. Now teachers just go in, yep, yep, yep, look at this video, writer a paper on it. They don’t care. Some of them have just gotten to the point where it’s like, they’re so disillusioned with the schools. They’re not getting support so they don’t care. They’re just passing kids to get them out of school.

**Time when early learning came easy.** Rachel says she “blocked out a lot” of her early schooling, but she does remember that her English classes came easy to her because she “loved to read.” She says she was not good at spelling and grammar, but that she was good at expressing herself through writing.

She also credits one of her high school teachers for helping making the experience of learning English easier for her.

He made it fun. I mean he still did the ‘OK, we’re reading Three Sovereigns for Sarah,’ which was about the witch trials. But then he said, ‘I want you to build a Salem witch village out of milk cartons.’ I’m like dude, I haven’t done that since first grade. Let’s go.
I can’t wait. He would make it hands on and it’s easier hands on than just having somebody stand up there and lecture.

Rachel says her math teacher Mr. Smith, who she referenced earlier, was another educator who engaged her as a learner. “He’s like, OK, what’s the problem? We did graphing. I hate graphing, but he got me to understand it and I passed all my tests. He took the time to explain it.”

**How experience helped her as learner.** Rachel says those early learning experiences that came easy to her made her realize how much she appreciated having teachers who had “passion” for what they were doing and took the time to help her understand things. She says the fact they treated her like a person helped her gain confidence as a learner. “They [students] weren’t just a file. They weren’t just a grade in a book. They were people and they [the teachers] connected with them.”

**Time when early learning was a struggle.** Rachel’s biggest early learning hurdle was math. She says in grade school it was “fine” when she was learning addition and subtraction but that it started to get more challenging when she got into high school and had to take courses like algebra and geometry.

When you bring the alphabet into it, OK that’s a whole new story. We have figured out how man started, but we still cannot solve for x. Come on. I don’t want to solve for x. I got my own husband, I don’t want to deal with your x, you know? Come on. Do I really need to know what a+b=c, d, e, f, g to tell somebody that they’re crazy? I want to be a psychologist. I don’t need algebra. I don’t need to do parabolas. I don’t need to do geometry. I’m not building a house. If I was going to be an engineer or a contractor, an
architect, fine. Then again, if I was going for that and I stunk at math like this, you don’t want me building you a house, because it’s going to fall apart.

Rachel says she does not think people “should be forced to take math” if they are never going to use it in their career. “I mean you’ve got calculators. I can talk to my phone and say, ‘OK, add three plus three.’ I don’t need to write it all down and know it.”

**Barrier(s) to early learning.** Rachel says two barriers to her doing well in math were she was “lazy” and she always had trouble focusing on anything for very long.

I’ve had my IQ tested. They say I’m intelligent. I just don’t use it. I’m lazy, I guess. I was lazy with everything. I would put it off to the last second. I think a lot of it, I probably had ADHD and still have it, but it was never really a thing back then. There were times that I would sit in a classroom and I’d be like this the whole time: Oh, look, squirrel. I would never pay attention. I was so unorganized.

Rachel says sometimes it takes her longer to “read something and understand it” and that combined with her inability to focus made it hard to do well. “It takes longer for me to absorb something.”

**Current experiences with education.** Rachel is currently working on her associate’s degree at a local community college and has been taking both online and traditional courses there for three years. She is close to having enough credits for her degree but recently had some issues with her financial aid that she says she has to “get figured out.” She says her family lives “week-to-week, paycheck-to-paycheck.”

After years of trying to graduate from high school, Rachel finally finished in 2014 when she was in her late 30s. She says she decided to go back and get her GED when her “daughter started having problems in high school.”
I said, ‘OK, that’s it. I’m going to go back to school.’ I signed up for the adult ed. program and I wanted to show her that if she left school now, and she tried to do this at my age, it’s 10 times harder. I take care of my daughter, and her sister, and her father, plus coming home and cooking dinner and working a 40- or 50-hour week at a restaurant.

Although Rachel has had to juggle a lot of responsibilities while in college, she says she now “loves” school and is “having fun” in part because she is doing it on her own terms. She is also glad she is doing it as an adult as opposed to when she was in her 20s.

It’s actually changed me a lot. I have confidence in class now that I didn’t used to have. I do raise my hand. I do talk and I do notice that I feel my face getting really, really hot when I start talking and the teacher looks at me or even the students. I’m 41 years old and I still don’t like to be looked at.

Experiences with online learning. Rachel says one of the reasons she likes online learning as opposed to face-to-face instruction is that “it’s easier to hide behind the computer.” She says she has never liked speaking up in class but finds it less difficult to do virtually. “You can say whatever you want and people aren’t staring at you like ‘Oh my god, I can’t believe you just said that.’”

Rachel also likes the fact that online courses allow her to keep working full-time while still going to school.

I never thought I would like the online, but I do. I don’t have to be here [school] every day of the week. The only thing is I’ve got to keep reminding myself, don’t forget to go on Blackboard. Don’t forget to check your assignments. Don’t forget.
Rachel says some of her online courses have been “harder than being in class” because she did not have an instructor there to remind her to do her work.” As she explains, “You have to be the one in charge. You’re the teacher in a way.”

She has also found online learning to be isolating at times and says that “feedback” from her instructors is important to her.

My anthropology teacher, he wouldn’t give me feedback on my discussion board posts. There was a new post every week. We had to do like a mini paper, and he would never give me feedback and it would freak me out. I need to know how I’m doing. I want to know if there was something else I could have done. I sent him an email and said, ‘I don’t mean to be that student, but I need you to give me feedback every day.’

Her instructor did respond to her request for more feedback and she says she learned more in the course as a result. “I’m not in a classroom. I’m not watching him teach. I’m not copying what he’s saying. I’m working on a computer. I need to know how I’m doing.”

**Time when online learning came easy.** When asked to share an online learning experience that came easy to her, Rachel did not hesitate and quickly responded, “my anthropology class.” She says her instructor was “very connected” to students and was always available if you needed him for anything. She says she also appreciated the fact that he allowed her to “control” her learning and take an active part in her education.

We were studying culture and we had to do a final paper. I did mine on Irish mythology. I’ve always been interested in it and I got to pick my topic. It made it fun. It made it easy. It wasn’t one of those here’s a list of topics, pick one and once you do, let me know and I’ll write you an outline. When I had control of picking my topic and the research and making my own outline, I was more into it. If you get a list of topics and you look at it
and you go, ‘I already don’t like any of them, I’m already going to fail’ then you don’t want to put your own creativity into it.

Rachel says when she had instructors who did not let her participate in her learning it “felt like I was sitting in parochial school all over again in that little uniform and being told exactly how to write and what to write. It’s just like no!”

**How online experiences helped her as learner.** Rachel says her anthropology course made her realize how important it was for her to be involved in her learning, especially online where she did not have the same level of contact with her instructors.

It makes it fun. It makes it engaging. It doesn’t make it a job. Don’t take over the process. Give me feedback but don’t control everything. One teacher gave us a list of topics that we could write a paper on and then she said she’d do our outline. My daughter goes, ‘Why are you so mad if she’s writing your outline?’ and I’m, ‘Because it’s not my work.’

Now my topic has been chosen by this teacher, now my outline has been written by her. Why doesn’t she just write my paper?

**Time when online learning was a struggle.** When Rachel was asked to share an online experience she struggled with, she immediately answered, “human development.”

It was the hardest one for me. That made me so mad that I did not pass that class with an A. I think I got a C in it. That made me angry because I know I could have done better. I tried it twice. I think if they had more options for teachers for students who can only learn certain ways.

**Barrier(s) to online learning.** Rachel says the biggest barrier to her online learning was “the teacher.”
I would send messages, what am I doing wrong? I’m doing the research, I’m doing the citations. She’d get back to me, but it wasn’t really anything helpful. She’d give me a list of how to do it. That’s not what I was asking. I was asking for what do you think I could do that could be better. Not what do you want me to do.

Rachel also says her instructor was not good at “getting back” to students, which added to her frustration about the course.

She wasn’t very engaging. You’d send an email and I know they say 24 to 48 hours during the week. It could be anywhere from, say you send an email on a Friday, you may not hear until Tuesday. It just felt like sometimes I wasn’t getting emails for a week after I would email the teacher. I get it, you have a lot of classes, but if it says in your syllabus 24 to 48 hours, don’t make it seven days. Let me know, ‘Hey, I’m busy, I’ll get back to you.’

**Future learning.** Rachel says she would like to see “more choice” in both courses and instructors in her future learning.

I’d like to have more choice in which classes I get to take or don’t have to take. Teachers, I think it should be like a menu, à la carte. I want to take psychology, but I want to take it on Monday, but I want to take it with this teacher. I know that’s going to be a pain for a lot of people but there are ways to do it. There are ways to make it, so OK this teacher teaches this class but only on these days. Then this teacher does this class but only online because people really like this class but they can’t really make it here all the time, or it doesn’t fit in.

She says having various instructors teach the same course as well as offering different sections of it would also be helpful.
I think you should have more choice of teachers. Not just the same teachers for the same classes over and over and over again. I think you should have more choices for classes. Because they only offer certain things at certain times and it makes it hard, for when I do want to do my math, they didn’t have my math this semester. I couldn’t take it because they didn’t have it. They didn’t have the one I really wanted to take over the summer. They didn’t have the one I needed last semester.

**Additional thoughts on educational experiences.** Rachel says she hopes to be a role model for her daughters when it comes to their own education and although she says it is “hard” to be working toward her degree later in life, she is glad she is doing it now as opposed to when she was younger.

School was harder for me when I was growing up because I wasn’t ready for it. I was not meant for it. It’s easier now. I took a College Composition class. I was never good at punctuation or nouns or pronouns or any of that, but she [the teacher] made it easier and I actually learned a lot faster. I didn’t think I was going to, but I got an A in the class.

When I looked at my grades online I’m like, ‘Holy crap.’ I’ve never gotten As before and now it’s like, I strive to make it an A every class.

Still, going back to school as an adult has not always been easy for Rachel especially with all of the responsibilities she now has in her life. “It’s been rough. I’ve gone through a lot, but I don’t say that to get attention, I say that to tell people, don’t drop out. It’s hard. It’s hard at 41 years old, with two kids, a dog, a husband.”

**Tricia**

**Background information.** Tricia, the second participant in this study, had a more stable upbringing than Rachel but also did not have role models when it came to higher education. Now
in her late 40s, her parents were not college educated and she also says most of the women in the neighborhood she grew up in did not work. Although her mom spent two years as a nurse in the 1960s, she became a stay-at-home mom when Tricia’s older sister was born and Tricia says she never talked to her kids about her education or work experience. “I didn’t have a lot of exposure to women working. Most of the mothers in the neighborhood were stay-at-home moms. One of my friend’s mom was a teacher and the other was a secretary for an attorney.”

Tricia grew up in a fairly small town in southern New Hampshire in the mid-1980s at a time when not everyone went on to college. Since she did not have much guidance about what to do after high school, she followed her two older siblings into the work world after graduation.

When my older sister graduated, she went to a program in Florida to become a travel agent. And then my brother, who is kind of like my own kids, went right into working as a mechanic. And then I come along and I don’t know what I want to do. I decide I’m going to work for a while and figure it out.

Tricia says she basically fell into a part-time job in admitting at a hospital after hearing about it from a friend. “All of my friends knew what they wanted to do. Like they, it’s like, I don’t know, how do you know what you want to do?”

**Past experiences with education.** Tricia’s past experiences with education were more positive than Rachel’s, but she says she never loved school and considered herself an “average” student.

You know I was an average, I was an honor student. I wasn’t high honor or anything. I did my work and I played some sports. Varsity volleyball and softball. I enjoyed school. I was one I did my homework. I knew what I needed to do. I was able to manage doing
athletics and making sure I had my homework done. I still had a social life and was able to go out after school. I was able to get what I needed done, done.

Tricia says she used her “time wisely” when she was in school and would often try and do at least some of her work during study hall so she did not have to do it when she got home. In many ways, she says the way she approached her learning back then is similar to the way she addresses things now in her adult life. “I tended to just carry that on through my adult life. Knowing what needs to be done and planning. What is a priority, what can I do tomorrow, and what can be put off.”

**Grade, middle, and high school experiences.** Tricia had a few teachers in her early education who she describes as “mentors” because of how supportive they were to her.

The first was her fourth grade teacher who she says was “amazing” and “everybody loved her” because she made learning fun and seemed to really care about the students. Tricia realized this even more years later when this same teacher ended up being a patient at the hospital Tricia worked at.

I went into her room and I was getting her information and I’m like, ‘You probably don’t remember me.’ And she goes, ‘No, I remember you.’ She knew my name. I go, ‘How do you remember me?’ I mean, that was so neat. She’s like, ‘I remember you.’ So we get to chatting and I go, ‘You read this book to me and it was my favorite book.’ She came in the next day to have her wound checked and she brought me the book. I wasn’t there and she left the book and a card. I still have the book.

Another person who had a positive impact on her in her early education was her eighth grade social studies teacher.
He was just one of those teachers that you could just tell anything to. He made learning fun. You just couldn’t wait to go to Mr. Colton’s class. He also did a lot of things with us that weren’t actually in the classroom. He would take us outside, in the schoolyard, and teach us things and also did some mentoring.

In high school, Tricia remembers taking a lot of administrative type courses, partly because she “didn’t know what she wanted to do” when she graduated and she figured she would at least have some practical skills. “I was in the typing class and the shorthand classes. I wasn’t into like the health classes, which is funny cause that’s where I ended up.”

**Time when early learning came easy.** Tricia says writing was something that came easy to her in her early education.

I was able to write a paper pretty quickly. I could put my thoughts, you give me the idea, and I could put my thoughts down on paper rather quickly and know that I had what I needed. Where other kids would be struggling with I don’t know how to start this sentence.

**How experience helped her as learner.** Tricia says her early positive experiences with writing made her realize that this was how she learned and how her mind worked, which made her more confident that she could do well on these kind of assignments. “It just came easy to me. I could just put my ideas down. Put them in outline format. Get my thoughts down. Organize things. Anything that had to do with organization, I was able to do.”

**Time when early learning was a struggle.** Tricia says math was a challenge for her in her early learning. “I was not a good math student. I just always struggled with it. In college, online math was excruciating. It was the only thing that I did not think I was going to pass.”
Like Rachel, Tricia says her early years of math were fine. It was when she got to high school that she says it started to become difficult and “didn’t make sense” to her.

I just didn’t get it. I think when you start going down that path where you don’t understand one concept and then they keep adding more concepts on top and you are not getting it, it gets to the point where you’re just barely getting by to get out of it. I did. I got through the two Algebra classes I had to do for my requirements and I didn’t do anymore math.

**Barrier(s) to early learning.** Tricia recalls that back when she was in K-12 in the 1970s and ‘80s, math was taught only one way, which was definitely a barrier for her. She says none of her teachers took the time to explain things and that maybe if they had, she might have understood it better. As she says, “They definitely could have been more helpful.”

**Current experiences with education.** Tricia went back to school to get her degree when she was told that she would not receive a leadership promotion at work because she did not have her bachelor’s. At the time, she had been at the same hospital for more than 20 years since she had graduated high school and had been promoted to the highest level she could based on her education. She decided to go back to school to change this, but ultimately left the hospital when they told her she needed an RN degree to do the job she wanted.

I did it all, the reason I left was, I had really, they couldn’t put me any place else. Cause I didn’t have an RN degree. I wasn’t a nurse so they couldn’t elevate me any further in the emergency department. At one point, they were going to make me an assistant director, but then it came down that because of all the nursing, they couldn’t have a non-nursing director. I wasn’t qualified. I would have stayed, probably would have made it my career.
In order to expand her professional opportunities, Tricia went back to school in her late 30s, first completing her associate’s degree online and then continuing on to her bachelor’s. The only way I could do it was online because I was working full-time and had kids. I just intended to do my associate’s degree and be done with it, but once I got my associate’s degree, I was told I couldn’t go any further cause I needed a bachelor’s so I just went.

**Experiences with online learning.** Tricia says her experience with online learning has been “interesting” and “very easy” for her.

Once I got into the rhythm. One of the things I liked was that, the beginning of the class, I had the syllabus that told me what was going to happen every week and what the assignments were, when they were due. It was very structured for me, so I knew I had a paper due every week and it was due by, you know, I had to have it submitted by midnight on Sunday night. And it didn’t matter when I worked on it throughout the week, as long as I had it done by Sunday.

The distance model worked well for Tricia because she says, “it was easy to plan” everything out in her life.

I worked full time. I had small children. It was easy for me to plan my life and when I was going to do my school work, because I had certain times I had to be in the forum to talk to other students and answer questions, and I knew what the expectations were.

She says her courses were “mapped out perfect for” her. “I knew what articles I needed to read, what books I had to have and the syllabus was great.”

When she started her associate’s degree, Tricia says communication from her instructors was key to making her feel at ease in her new learning environment. “Going into it, I didn’t
know what to expect so being able to email questions to the instructors any time of the day or
night was great.”

She also says feedback from them on assignments and discussion posts was both
“valuable” and “helpful” to her.

I liked getting their feedback, like suggestions for improvements. I found for the most
part, I had good instructors that gave me some valuable feedback. I think I may have had
one or two that I was like, ‘Um, did you even read my paper?’ I think being out of school
for so long and getting their feedback and learning from them on how to write a paper to
the specifications of how they want it, was so helpful. Because I knew the expectations so
I could write the paper.

**Time when online learning came easy.** Tricia could not recall a specific learning
experience that came easy to her but says the online experience as a whole was “easy” for her
because she felt like it played into her skill set of being “organized” and a planner.

I think almost the entire program came easy to me. Once I knew how to write the college
paper. Learning the skills that I had had through my job helped. Learning how to
prioritize. Learning how to be organized and setting goals for myself. A lot of things
were PowerPoint. It wasn’t just a paper, you needed to put the 12 slide presentation
together and you have to do this and it had to have graphics and they wanted so much
stuff that it got overwhelming, but it was easy for me.

**How online experiences helped her as learner.** Tricia says doing well in her online
courses confirmed what she already knew about herself as a learner and what approaches work
for her in order to be successful as a student.
The more I did it [the courses], the more comfortable I got with them. When I first started, it would take me awhile to compose meaningful responses to questions. It took me awhile to write the papers because I wasn’t comfortable with making sure that I was citing things correctly and how to do the research, the citations and all that. Once I got that under my belt it was OK.

Tricia says knowing what the course “expectations” were also proved to be helpful. For me, I did outlines, and I knew that so many words meant so many handwritten pages in my notebook. I could judge most of my papers had to have a certain number of words so I would know OK, I need to write four pages. OK, I’m at two-and-a-half, I’ve got a problem because I need to find something else to say. So once I understood what I needed to do, I did it.

**Time when online learning was a struggle.** Like Rachel, Tricia did not hesitate to answer when asked what her greatest online struggle was.

Online math is horrible. It was awful. I’m not a strong math person. I think that your brain, you’re either strong, you’re either left or right brained. And I’m not. It’s just a struggle for me. I actually had to get myself a tutor to get through it.

Tricia had to take a math class as part of her business major requirements and says she had such a tough time with it that she was worried she would fail the course.

**Barrier(s) to online learning.** Tricia says one of the barriers she had in her online learning struggle was the math program students were required to use.

It was basic college math and you had to show your work online. It was a math program and you had to put in all the formulas and you had to...It would take me a half an hour to solve one problem and then I’d have to put it in the computer. Then it was wrong. I
literally, kid you not, I spent every weekend of that class, for nine weeks, and it was like
from 7:30 in the morning ‘til like, 5 at night, just doing math. And I still...I got a C and I
jumped for joy. Every other class was an A and that was a C. And I’m like, God, I passed
it, that’s all I care about.

Tricia says another barrier to her learning was the instructor who she says was “not
helpful.”

It was not the best person for the class and it was very hard. If you didn’t get one concept,
you weren’t going to get the rest. I bought Algebra for Dummy books, I bought any kind
of resource I could get to get through this class and I barely got through it.

Tricia believes that she would have been more successful in the course if she had taken it
in a traditional setting where she might have had more support and more opportunity to interact
with the instructor. “I think I probably would have done better if I had done a face-to-face. Gone
someplace. Because it was a struggle and the computer program itself was hard.”

**Future learning.** Tricia says she would like to see technology used more in her future
learning as she feels like it would have helped make her online experience more “interactive”
and engaging.

Maybe throw in some Webinars. It seems in my every day work life, it seems like we’re
doing WebAxis and Webinars. And they’re interactive where you can share screens and
you can see things. I don’t know, maybe they’re doing that now.

She also says she would like to see even more “real life” experiences integrated into her
learning.

A lot of the topics we were discussing you could interject your real life experiences and it
was helpful. I did that a lot, where I would use my real life examples that were happening
in my work life or my personal life depending on what the class was. It was helpful and it really stirred a lot of conversations. Then, seeing what other people were doing, it helped me in my work life. I’m like, Oh, I didn’t think of it that way. I could do that too.

**Additional thoughts on educational experiences.** Tricia says as an adult, she appreciated her education more because she was able to play a much more active role in it. She also valued the ways in which her teachers contributed to helping her as a learner.

When I got some really good, constructive feedback and they challenged me, it made me challenge myself to do better. I felt like I had...There was confidence, so if I wasn’t sure, I was able to reach them and that they were able to give me the support I needed. Then they’re like maybe next time you could have tried this or I really like your response, however...So I think, for me, that motivated me.

She also says her education “meant more” because she was “paying for” it and doing it “cause she wanted to do it.”

I had to do well. Do better than well. So, it was a total different learning. I had motivation. Motivation, I wanted to excel and that I was doing this for me, and it was my decision to do it all. And I think for the most part, all the teachers I had were helping me to get that, to meet that goal.

**Rick**

**Background information.** Like Rachel and Tricia, Rick, the third participant in this study, did not have role models when it came to deciding whether or not to go to college. Both his father and grandfather were “master electricians” so it was assumed that he would go into the family business when he graduated from high school. He attended a vocational high school in Massachusetts but instead of becoming an electrician, Rick, who is now in his late 40s, decided
he wanted to become a mechanic and open his own auto body shop when he graduated. “I selected collision repair, because when I was younger, they [my father and grandfather] used to make me go to work with them. By that point, I was like, you know something I don’t want to be an electrician.”

Like his father, his mother only had a high school degree and was a stay-at-home mom when Rick was a child.

The only thing she did after high school was occasionally she cut hair. She did that for a couple years, but she was a housewife. Before the divorce. And after that she was like, ‘What do I do?’ You know?

Rick says his mother went back to school “as an adult” like he did and “graduated at 42 with an associate’s degree.”

Although Rick had a fairly stable upbringing, he did have some early upheavals like Rachel in that he moved several times during his elementary and middle school years when his parents got divorced. He says this was tough both in terms of adjusting to different expectations at each school as well as trying to make new friends.

My parents got divorced when I was seven and things went kinda right out the window after that. I moved in with my father and did the latter half of elementary and half of middle school with him. And then went down to my mother’s when my father decided to find a girlfriend. It was a nightmare and I think it was worse because it was the middle of my seventh grade year so I’m walking right into the middle of it.

**Past experiences with education.** Rick describes his early education as “incredibly boring” and although he says he was a “voracious reader” and got “straight A’s,” he “absolutely hated school.” He says high school was a little better because he was in a vocational program so
during the auto shop part of school he could move around and do things. But he still had to go to his academic classes like English and math and sit and listen to his teachers lecture, which he says was really difficult for him. “I’ve never been somebody who sits still. I don’t have ADD or anything like that, but I’d be sitting there listening to someone going on and on.”

Rick recalled his algebra teacher being particularly hard on him.

He used to, he’d pick on me. He’d say, ‘Hey, come work this thing out.’ I’m like, ‘What?’ And he’d go, ‘Up on the board.’ And I’m like, ‘Sorry, I lost myself.’ He’s like, ‘Stop lookin’ at me like I have two heads. Do it.’ So I’d sit there and like, get up and do it. He was like, ‘Well, all right. I can’t say that you were paying attention in class, but you seem to know what you’re doing.’ I’m like, ‘Well, all right,’ and go back to sleep.

Rick says part of his boredom was because he did not find the academic work in his vocational program to be “challenging.” “They had me in the most advanced classes that my high school could offer. I did all of the work. I got straight A’s.”

**Grade, middle, and high school experiences.** Rick says his most positive early educational experiences were when he was in high school taking vocational classes because it involved practical learning and moving around “doing” things as opposed to “sitting” at a desk listening to teachers “go on and on.”

In the vocational high school, you’d do your academics one week and then all the next week, shop. So you’d be in the shop all week. So it kind of broke things up. But you had a lot more homework during the academic week. We wouldn’t have any homework at all during the shop week because you’re gonna be covered with paint and thinners and everything like that. And trying to sit down at a desk was almost impossible.
Even though Rick says the vocational school was “known as the drug den,” he “absolutely loved it” after struggling through years of traditional schooling in the two communities he lived in after his parents’ divorce. Going there also confirmed his desire to pursue a trade when he graduated from high school.

All the druggies went to voc. I just did it to get the hell out of the uncomfortable junior high. I loved it. I absolutely loved it. I selected auto body collision repair and refinishing, stuff like that. So I went through three years of that. I had no intention of doing anything else when I graduated.

**Time when early learning came easy.** Rick could not recall a specific time when his early learning came easy but says because he was a “voracious reader” he was good at figuring things out in school even if he did not love what he was learning.

I’ve always been a self-starter, a self-teacher. I can read something and learn it pretty easily. I’ve always been that way. A lot of stuff during high school, I would read the textbooks and say, ‘OK, yeah, I understand that. All right. You know, I see how that works.’

**How experience helped him as learner.** Like most study participants, Rick says knowing what his strengths were and what he liked helped shape him as a learner in his early education. He says from early on, he knew he was a “self starter” who could “see how” to do things but got easily bored so constantly needed to learn something new.

In high school, I always wanted to learn something else. Even body shop. I was learning the body shop stuff, but I was looking over at the mechanics. And I was looking over at the machine shop to see what they were doing.
**Time when early learning was a struggle.** Rick says his early learning troubles were in English and writing, especially since he had “poor penmanship.”

There were plenty of subjects I hated. You know, I wasn’t a big fan of math. But I did it. And I know how to do it. But…didn’t like English. You know, English was a pain because it was all just sentence structure and everything like that. I was never one for punctuation and things like that. Sentence structure. I didn’t really learn that until I was in college, really. I don’t think I even ingested it in high school.

Rick says he “hated” writing. “I remember them going through with a red pen, ruining what you wrote.”

He says he also “never liked” Shakespeare. “I was never a big fan. Definitely struggled to understand it.”

**Barrier(s) to early learning.** Rick’s greatest learning barrier was that he often did not feel “challenged” in his early schooling and was therefore easily bored and uninterested in doing the work. “It was boring. At the time, I was only interested in hair bands. Hair bands, ice hockey, and the body shop. Those were the only things that interested me besides reading.”

**Current experiences with education.** Rick says he decided to go back to school in his mid-30s to get his bachelor’s degree in Fire and EMS Management so he could be promoted to a leadership position at the fire department he worked at.

We had a chief at the time and he says to me, ‘I see a lot of potential in you. He’s like, ‘You should really set your career goal to replace me. I’m like, ‘How the hell do I do that?’ I’d only been a full-time firefighter for four years.

Because he had family responsibilities and was working full-time, Rick chose a bachelor’s program that was mostly online but required students to participate in weekend
Experiences with online learning. Rick says his online experience was “phenomenal” and that he has recommended the program to several people he knows. “I met a lot of interesting people and a lot of people doing different focuses for their degree.” Rick also liked the fact that the school he attended gave him credit for his experiential learning and professional development certificates, which helped toward his degree. He says having weekend residencies was also an important part of his success in the program. “During the portions that were online, you didn’t have the ease of asking the instructor a question. You literally, sometimes, you would have two or three days before that person would get back to you.” When he started the program, he says having support was crucial because he had never done distance learning like that before. “I was worried frankly. I’m like, ‘Is this something I’m gonna be able to do?’ The only experience online I really had was AOL.”

Time when online learning came easy. Rick says the discussion posts was an area of learning that came easy to him because he is a “voracious reader” so being assigned articles and discussing specific topics each week worked to his strengths as a learner.

Usually I could get the reading done pretty quickly then I’d look at the discussion question and figure out how I wanted to answer it. Then I’d start it on a Word file and save it. Usually Saturday at midnight it [the discussion board] would open up. Some people would start posting and not check their work. And you’re going, you’re sitting there, you’re reading a post and I have no clue what they’re saying so I’d call my wife over, I’d say, ‘Come over here, look at this. It’s gobbledygook.’
How online experiences helped him as learner. Rick says being able to quickly read and digest the information needed to participate in the discussion posts made him realize how important it was to be able to multitask when taking online courses. You’ve got to keep everything organized on your desk because you’ll get overwhelmed fast. And if you don’t keep up, if you don’t start your next discussion post or do your reading, you’re not gonna get a leg up. You’re not gonna have enough time to make it through the week.

Time when online learning was a struggle. Rick says there was not a specific online course or subject he struggled with, but that “management of his time” was his greatest challenge. Everything is pulling in all kinds of directions. Especially having a family. The job, the family, the discussion posts, other people having such an effect on your own final grade. There’s a couple classes, the grades in my transcripts, that should have been better, but it was relying so much on other people getting their butts online and posting cause you...part of your grade is your responses to other people.

Barrier(s) to online learning. Rick often saw other students as barriers to his online learning in that they did not participate in the discussion boards until late in the week, which often made it difficult for him to respond based on his schedule as a firefighter. If nobody does it or they’re waiting until the last minute then you’re scrambling. And if I’m working a Saturday night shift. 24 hour shift on Saturday, I can’t touch the computer so I have to have everything in by Friday. And if everybody’s waiting until Friday night, I’m already asleep. You know, I gotta sleep before work.
Rick says students were not required to post their responses by a specific deadline and instructors were not actively involved in the discussion forums, which he felt created another barrier to his success.

I tried to explain to them [instructors] that responding to posts is so dependent on other people. They kinda didn’t want to hear it. It is what it is. And I took a couple of hits and a couple would say on my transcript, ‘Oh, if he would put more into the class, his grade would reflect that.’ I’m like, ‘Well, putting more into the class. You know, OK.’

He says there were a “few weeks” where he “missed” responding to other students because of his busy work schedule.

I did my initial response. I do those right away. But if nobody else responds it pushes it down to the end of the week. And the deadline, literally, the discussion board shuts off at midnight on Saturday so you’re, game is over.

**Future learning.** Rick says he would like his future learning to be more structured and to have more guidance from his professors especially at the beginning of a course.

I literally walked into my first class and there was a discussion post. I’m like, ‘OK, what the hell am I even, where are the instructions?’ You’re going...You’re scratching your head. That’s the first day. Obviously, I figured it out.

He says in the future, he would like to see his professors start each semester by spending more time introducing themselves and explaining the syllabus including what is expected of students and what will be required for each assignment.

Depending on the instructor, some gave no hint at all. They pretty much let the course run on its own. They threw the syllabus out there and you know, went, ‘OK, here you go.’ I
had no idea. There was not even a bio on any of them. Not even knowing what their backgrounds are. You know, just kind of facilitators.

Rick also likes the idea of having a specific course dedicated to helping adult students transition into higher education since many of them have been away from school for a while. “Like, a college success class. You know, how to study, how to get back into that. What you need to take out of a paragraph in a text book to write down and take notes.”

**Additional thoughts on educational experiences.** Rick says he “highly recommends” online learning for adults and although it took some getting used to and was overwhelming at times, he would do it again if he had the chance.

I’m used to running my own show so going into a college environment was a huge adjustment. I’d say to myself, ‘Focus on this class, focus on your degree plan. Put that damn degree plan into your desk and don’t let it come out until you’re ready to start the next class. And then you sign up for the next class. You gotta focus on the what you’re doing and why.

Like Tricia, doing it on his own terms with his own money was also a great motivator for Rick.

If I’m payin’ money, I wanna get something out of this goddamn course. It’s important for people to go into a college class and realize that they have to do work. If you don’t have good study habits and you don’t read very well, and you don’t have an attention span that can actually get through a paragraph of a book then maybe that’s not for you.

Rick says his online learning took “ten times the amount of discipline” than sitting in a classroom ever did but that he was successful because he made the choice to do it and also felt
challenged by the courses he was taking. “I like the online format better because it is more demanding. Because it seriously is. It’s a phenomenal demand.”

Nicole

**Background information.** The fourth participant in this study, Nicole, grew up in a small rural town in New Hampshire with a group of kids whom she had known since kindergarten. Now in her mid 40s, Nicole had about 300 students in her graduating high school class and many did not go on to college. “I spent the whole 12 years of my education in the same town. We never moved away and it was small. It was nice in that all the kids knew each other and were there for each other.” Although she says she “liked” school overall, there was not a lot of support or guidance when it came to things like keeping up with homework or applying to colleges. Like Tricia, she says she “didn’t really know what she wanted to do” when she graduated from high school. She also says her parents were not as involved in her education as she now is with her own children. “They didn’t have any idea really. Other than, OK you need to study or OK, you need to do this.”

**Past experiences with education.** Nicole’s prior experiences with education seemed similar to Tricia’s in that she says she did “fairly well” and considered herself a decent student who did her work but did not necessarily love school. “We had some really good teachers and we had some that were absolutely horrible. And some that were in the middle.” Nicole also recalls having to be extremely self-sufficient when it came to her education because she did not get a lot of direction or guidance from either her teachers or her parents.

I don’t remember there being a lot of support back then like there is now. I don’t remember having any. I mean you just either did your work or you didn’t do it and that was the end of it.
Grade, middle, and high school experiences. Nicole’s most vivid memories of K-12 were some of her teachers who she says really “cared” about her both as a person and a student. She believes this was one of the benefits of growing up in a small town where everyone “knew each other.”

They [the teachers] were all really close to the students, they got to know the students really well because it was such a close-knit community. I felt like we all knew each other. They were really involved in the school and got to know the kids.

Nicole recalls two teachers in particular who had a positive impact on her. The first was her middle school science teacher who she says was “awesome.”

The material he taught was interesting and he was just a little more personable than some other teachers. And he cared about whether you understood what he was saying as opposed to the math teacher who stood up there and wrote it all out and then handed out a quiz.

She also had a high school history teacher who she says was her “favorite.” I don’t even love history, it’s not my thing, but he was just great. He was interesting and he was excited about what he was teaching and he was also nice to the kids. Like interested in them and I think that combination was good. He was a really good teacher.

Time when early learning came easy. Nicole recalls that her learning came easy to her in a high school English literature class because the books they read “were really good.”

They were interesting. I liked the class and I did well in it because it was so interesting. Some people don’t like reading books. I do. I don’t even remember who the teacher was in the class. It was the subject matter that interested me.
**How experience helped her as learner.** Nicole says the experience she had in her English literature class made her realize how important it is to have “confidence” in order to be a successful learner.

I think confidence helps people a lot. If you feel like you’re doing well, that gives you confidence to go out on a limb a little bit more or try a little bit harder because I think if kids especially. I see it in my own kids. If they think they’re not good at something, then they kind of put themselves in a box, right? They don’t try as hard or they don’t do that extra thing. But if they think they’re doing well and have that positive re-enforcement, it just really helps.

**Time when early learning was a struggle.** Although Nicole says she disliked math, the course she struggled the most with was typing and that it was “the only class she ever flunked in her life.” “I remember that you’d make mistakes and you couldn’t correct them. Or you could use that tape and I would always make a mess of it and I flunked.”

**Barrier(s) to early learning.** Nicole says the biggest barrier to her success in her typing class was her teacher.

I just felt like she didn’t like me and I’m sure that was just my perception, but she was very stern. She and I did not get along and she was very disapproving. That’s always how I felt. She just thought I was not trying hard or I wasn’t, I don’t know, but yeah, typing was bad.

**Current experiences with education.** After years working as a nurse, Nicole says she decided to get her bachelor’s in her early 40s because recent “corporate changes” in the industry were making it more challenging to work in the profession without a degree.
I really had no anticipation of getting my bachelor’s degree at all because you know, there’s very little reason to do it unless you’re working maybe in Boston. But then with all of the corporate kind of changes, crazy things, I thought you know what, I don’t want a big hospital to come and take over this hospital and all of a sudden they say, ‘By the way, you’re going to lose your job because you don’t have a bachelor's degree.’

Nicole says the fact she could “do it online” also played a part in her decision to go back to school.

I have two kids at home and if I had to go to a class or quit my job and only work two days a week or you know, then I probably wouldn’t have done it. But I just started looking into it, because I was on a nursing committee and somebody came and talked to us about the fact that were three or four hospitals in New Hampshire that are requiring their nurses all to have bachelor’s degrees and how they were encouraging it.

**Experiences with online learning.** After looking at a few online programs, Nicole says she chose the one that she felt was the most supportive based on her initial interactions with administrators at the school.

The admissions advisor was great and then after that I had a nursing advisor and she was great. If you had a question, you could email them, call them. They checked in on you every class and made sure you were doing OK and you weren’t having any issues.

Overall, Nicole says her experience online was “very good” as well as “more difficult” than she thought it would be.

There was maybe one class where I wasn’t in love with the subject matter or the teacher. A lot of it was difficult. A lot more difficult than I anticipated, but all in all I felt like it
was a really good experience. I took one class at a time because I knew that any more than that was more than I was able to handle.

Nicole says most of the instructors were “really good” and gave feedback and were involved in discussion boards, except for a couple, including one who was always having technical issues throughout the course.

Every few days, she’d email you and tell you her computer was having a bad hair day. And so she would always say things like my computer crashed or I couldn’t get back to you because of this or this. And because of that I think it was more just her problems with technology than anything else that made it difficult.

**Time when online learning came easy.** Although Nicole says her online experience was “a lot more difficult than she anticipated” with lots of paper writing and discussion boards, she felt that overall, her coursework was manageable and recalls one instance in particular where her learning came easy to her.

It was a physical assessment class and it was hard for a lot of people because there were a lot of different computer programs. There was actually a computer program where you’d have to pretend to assess this patient and you’d have to type out the questions you’d ask and so that one I liked and a lot of people didn’t like it.

**How online experiences helped her as learner.** In asking what about the experience helped her as a learner, Tricia says she realized that part of what made the class easy for her was the fact that she liked what she was learning. She also thought the technology part of the class made it more interesting as opposed to more frustrating, which she says wasn’t the case for other students in the course.
I think it was hard for a lot of people, but I just liked it. It wasn’t as difficult for me as it was for some people like the other nurse that I worked with. I think it drove her crazy. But she’s not a computer person at all, so I think sometimes 15 or 10-year age difference makes a big difference.

**Time when online learning was a struggle.** Like Rick, Nicole says her greatest online learning struggle was not a particular course or subject but rather what she saw as the challenge of doing “group projects.”

I’m a little bit of a control freak. And so the idea of giving up part of my grade to somebody else just drove me crazy. And also trying to be, what’s the word, you know, not be rude, but to say this isn’t good enough because sometimes it’s not.

Nicole says group projects were also difficult because you “didn’t know anybody” and never had the chance to meet them face-to-face.

I mean you kind of on the discussion boards, you would realize that you’d be in the same classes as the same people sometimes and there was always new people and always a couple people that had been in a class before, but you don’t know any of these people.

**Barrier(s) to online learning.** Nicole says the online platform itself was sometimes a barrier for her in that some aspects of it were “boring” and also made her “frustrated,” especially when she did not have immediate access to an instructor when a concept she was learning did not “make sense” to her.

There were a couple of PowerPoints that were really rather useless. I mean it was boring. And then I never felt like people were pointing out what was the important stuff so then you’d have a quiz and then you’d be in the book and you would, you would have plenty of time to look stuff up and you still couldn’t get it right, right. When you have a quiz
from a PowerPoint presentation or a book that was hard because it didn’t always make sense. There were a couple of times I just remember being so frustrated because you have all the time in the world to look it up, but if you can’t figure it out from the PowerPoint presentation, or the book that’s in front of you, then you’re kind of stuck.

**Future learning.** Nicole says in her future learning she would like to see more instructors who are “comfortable with technology” and are willing to provide more communication and feedback to students.

The instructors need to be very good at computers and very good at getting back to people and, like, I found that to be very discouraging when you’d have somebody who would say, ‘My computer’s not working so I can’t do this’ or ‘I can’t respond to you’ or you know, that availability. You’d have some people who would give you a text number and say, ‘Go ahead and text me, but don’t text me on the weekends,’ which that I think is acceptable.

Nicole says she had one professor who did not “understand technology” and “it was very frustrating.”

I think that is one thing that I would say that it’s important. That they have to make sure that people are comfortable with the technology. Especially the instructors. And I think they [the instructors] were all pretty available. Other than her, but they were all pretty available and willing to explain things and if you were doing something not quite right.

**Additional thoughts on educational experiences.** Nicole felt similar to Tricia and Rick in that being in control of her own education impacted her desire to do well in it.

When I started it, I wasn’t gonna start it and not finish it. I remember the other nurse who works here kept saying to me, ‘Well if I don’t finish it, it’s fine’ and I’m like ‘No, if I’m
gonna start it, I’m gonna finish it’ you know and that’s the end of it. I’m not gonna just do half of it and all that money for no good reason. So I wouldn’t have let myself not do it. You know I was surprised at the amount of work that it ended up being and I remember my son saying to me, ‘You know we don’t see you anymore.’

Nicole says going to college as an adult was a much more productive experience for her. “It definitely makes a difference being a grown-up.”

**Bill**

**Background information.** Bill, the fifth participant in this study, is the youngest of the group and had the most support with regards to his early education. He is now in his late 20s and spent his younger years in Connecticut followed by a few years of homeschooling with his mom during the latter half of elementary school when the family moved to northern New Hampshire.

From seventh grade through high school, he went to a private Christian school in Vermont where classes were small and he says he had a lot of one-on-one “attention” from teachers. Although Bill had some strong educational role models and support from his family in his early education, he says moving from Connecticut to New Hampshire was “hard” as was “transitioning” from public school to homeschooling to private school, especially since the private school was a good distance from his home.

You know, going from having lots of friends in K through third grade. Being in a big neighborhood with lots of kids walking to school even at one point because it was so close, to going to home school. Clifton, [New Hampshire] was a little isolated, kind of out in the woods. Homeschooling, obviously, no friends at school. My mom’s teaching so I don’t have multiple teachers. It was very different. Then going to the private school. It was better because I had friends, but it was still a 45-minute drive.
**Past experiences with education.** Like other participants’ past educational experiences, Bill describes himself as an average student who did not love school but did well enough to get by. He says his biggest challenge was “transitioning” from homeschooling to private school in that he not only had to adjust to having classmates and traveling a distance to school, but he also had to learn how to sit still for long periods of time during lectures. He says he “remembers getting in trouble” for things like rolling his pencil on his desk.

It was just different from, obviously, home schooling where you can have your tics, whatever, playing with a pencil or whatever. Where in a class you can be distracting. Good thing about home schooling, you get up, go outside, play sports, take a break whenever you want.

Bill says playing sports at his private school helped him to get his energy out, but even then, it was still challenging to focus during class time. “Sitting down for hours on end, I’ve never been good at. Even in college.”

**Grade, middle, and high school experiences.** Although Bill enjoyed being homeschooled by his mother, his most memorable experiences from his early education were his private schooling, which he says made him a much stronger student.

Private school was much harder than the public system. I felt like I had to put in a lot of effort so then when I went to college, it was the exact same thing, just different classes. But I didn’t change what I did too much.

He says the courses he took in private school were “instructive” and that his teachers “prepared” him well for college. “I remember things from AP English, my English teacher, compared to the English classes I took in college were easy. Easy compared to what I did in high school. I’m like, Wow, Mr. Connors set me up for this.”
Bill also says the small size of his private school really allowed his teachers to give students lots of help and “attention,” which he felt benefited him as a learner.

It was good because the teachers could focus more on you and they could see everybody and meet with everybody throughout the day. Like each teacher could do that. It wasn’t as if you had a guidance counselor you had to go to. I mean you did, but every teacher could pay special attention to you because we were so small. I though that was a bonus.

**Time when early learning came easy.** Like several other participants, Bill says the subject that came easiest to him in his early learning was English and more specifically, his writing classes.

The classes had very creative writing involved in it so we were doing research papers, but at the same time, we had like, every month we had to write like a five to 10 page paper on a creative story that we came up with. As far as writing, we could be creative, but our teacher was also teaching us how to write papers correctly and that came easy to me.

**How experience helped him as learner.** Bill says doing well in English early on gave him confidence in that particular area of learning that later translated to success in the same subject as he continued on with his education.

I just feel like I had a solid education as far as how to structure a paper, research a paper. I felt like I was very prepared for papers when I hit nursing school and they wanted all these scholarly article, fact-based research papers. I feel like a lot of people got frustrated in school but like I said, high school and college as far as papers go almost got easier for me.
Time when early learning was a struggle. Bill was another participant who struggled with math. He also had a tough time in science even though he really enjoyed it and knew he wanted to go into some type of health profession when he graduated.

I was definitely never a math student. I was interested in science, but I had a really hard science teacher so it was mostly frustrating, you know? I put a lot of effort into science. I knew I wanted to go into the medical science type field or sports kind of thing, but that kind of ties into what we were learning in science, you know? Anatomy and those things.

Barrier(s) to early learning. In both math and science, Bill believes his teachers were the barriers to his learning.

They [math and science teachers] had basically their own learning style and that’s the pace they went at. I remember my math teacher getting frustrated if you didn’t understand something. She didn’t really modify the way she helped you understand it. She would just say, ‘Well, you should get a 2 here.’

Bill says he “likes” math but just “needs time in order to understand it.”

I guess that was the downside of going to school is teachers move on no matter where you are, you know? You can always go and see them but the fact is they have a problem, they’re teaching it. Everybody in the class gets it. If you don’t, they move on and you have to go back and try to figure that out but they’re already moving on to something else. That was the hard thing. That continues on until today.

Current experiences with education. Bill went back to get his bachelor’s for similar reasons that Nicole did. Now in his late 20s, he first got his associate’s in nursing taking both distance and brick and mortar courses and then went directly into a fully online bachelor’s program, which he is currently in the process of completing.
I knew I wanted to be in the health field. I made it into the hospital setting as an LNA and then decided to go to community college for nursing. I was part-time and I was working full-time. I learned that with the online learning I had more chance to make my own schedule, study when I’m ready to study, when I’m motivated to study versus forcing it into my schedule.

He says he also has “more time to read over stuff” in his distance classes, which is “really a benefit” because it tends to take him longer to do things.

**Experiences with online learning.** So far, Bill says his experience with online learning has been positive, but like traditional classrooms, he has had some instructors that are more engaged than others.

I could tell even online how much the teacher cared. Some teachers would email you and just be very available. I feel like one class I didn’t talk to the teacher once. I just did the homework. Some were more personable and some you didn’t know if they were even there.

Bill says he has learned the most in courses where instructors were available to students and gave feedback on assignments. As he says, it “made a difference.”

**Time when online learning came easy.** Writing papers was a learning experience that came easy to Bill in his online courses. He says his English teachers earlier in life prepared him well for writing, but that some of his online writing assignments were easy simply because the instructor did not challenge or push him to get better.

I’m good at writing and I have a solid basis in that. I finished this eight-week course online and it was kind of one of those where I started off putting great effort into my writing. Doing great papers and answering the discussion questions in full like three
paragraphs. Then I started picking up shifts at work and getting more busy and three paragraphs became two, became one, and I’m still getting 100s on all the assignments and the only feedback is ‘Good job.’

**How online experiences helped him as learner.** Bill says his online writing experiences made him appreciate those instructors he had who pushed him to be a better writer and were “more critical” of his papers.

I put less effort into that class because less effort was acceptable. I got an A in that class, but I wonder if I learned anything. I wonder if I took it with somebody else if I would get an A or if they would actually grade it differently. I’d rather get feedback and improve, just constantly improve my skills because I could have a teacher next semester who is totally different, who wants very good papers and I can do that, but I’m not used to doing it after that class.

**Time when online learning was a struggle.** Bill says he struggled with statistics, which he says he “made the mistake of doing in online.”

I passed it but it was...I put so much effort into it. I spent tons of time on statistics. Some days I would wake up in the morning, eight o’clock, start it, finish around like four or five. Take a small break, but I had to put that much effort into it to get it done online. Sometimes it’s hard to read the answers and see where you did problems wrong because there’s nobody circling it.

**Barrier(s) to online learning.** Although Bill says math is “a constant battle” for him, he believes that in this particular statistics course, it was the professor that was the barrier to his learning. “He was almost non-existent. The program we used was called MyMathLab and I had taken college algebra through that. I did better on that than statistics, but that teacher was more
available.” Bill says it “would have been nice to have somebody to ask” when he had questions. “It was funny. Like at the end of the semester it was like, ‘Thank you for a great semester.’ Like that was it. It’s like, is he real?”

**Future learning.** Bill says he would like to take more hybrid courses as part of his future learning. He took some of these types of classes while pursuing his associate’s degree and liked the fact that he had the flexibility of the online coupled with the accessibility of talking in person with his professors.

My nursing classes were in class, and there’s absolutely no way I could be a nurse now if it was 100 percent online. Something like that obviously has to stay an in-class clinical setting. I really did like the hybrid though. Obviously, it was going in for a lab, but the teacher that was teaching the lectures online was also my lab teacher. I could ask her questions in person about the lecture as well.

Bill says he might have been more successful in his statistics course if he had taken it in a hybrid form.

I think if I was able to go in, see the teacher, be in class, watch him do the problems versus staring at an e-book, which has the problems filled out, replicating it on paper, and then trying to know all the steps for the test. If I had a person to see and I asked those questions I feel like he wouldn’t have just said, ‘Well, refer to the book.’ I wonder if testing he would have given me more time in class versus the online.

Bill says one benefit of having at least some face-to-face interaction is “it forces them [the instructors] to be a little more human.” He says connecting in person with professors can also help with student success by “motivating you to keep going.”
**Additional thoughts on educational experiences.** Bill says he wishes more online courses existed that cater to students’ specific learning needs and styles.

It’s kind of like in high school if you didn’t get it you’re going to be left behind. I did things diligently every week but if I didn’t understand one thing, that would transition to the test. While I’m trying to learn new things I’m on the test. The timing, still going to have enough time to learn. The tests were also timed, which I know they would be in school as well. You can’t just take a test forever but if I had enough time to do the problems I knew how to do them but as I wrote them all out, put in the answers, I would get every question I did right, for the most part, and then I’d have a bunch that I didn’t get to because I didn’t have enough time.

Bill says he would like to see more personalized online learning opportunities that address students’ unique needs like for example, if someone requires more time to take a test or do an assignment. “In nursing, I remember they had a program where if you struggled with testing they gave students an opportunity to take the test in a different location and even have a longer period of time.”

Bill believes that having instructors who are supportive and understanding can also help learners be more successful whether it is online or in the classroom.

I messaged my statistics’ teacher and asked him if that was a possibility, to have more time, you know? He said, ‘Refer to the syllabus.’ Very computer-like. Yeah. I felt like if I had more time I could have done so much better in that because I learned it, I’m just slower at it.

**Jessica**
Background information. The sixth and final participant in this study is Jessica who is in her mid-30s and like Nicole, grew up in a small rural town where everyone knew everyone. However, Jessica moved when she was in middle school when her parents divorced, which she describes as being a “hard” transition. Although her new school system was only a couple of towns away from where she had grown up, it was much bigger than the one she had gone to in elementary school. She says it wasn’t a difficult adjustment academically, but it was socially since she went from a town where she knew all the kids in her class to not knowing anyone.

It wasn’t hard to transition schools as far as academics, but the age was really hard for me because I had grown up in Tolland my whole life. Then we had moved where we knew no one. So that was hard, that part of it was hard, but not necessarily the academic part of it.

Jessica says both of the communities she was raised in were not “super challenging” academically because they were in rural areas of Georgia where there was not a lot of opportunity for educational growth. Most kids did not go on to college and those that did went to a nearby community college. “We were in the country. There wasn’t a lot around. The education was fine. It was nothing wonderful, but it wasn’t bad. Just kind of a basic.”

Past experiences with education. Jessica also saw herself as a “pretty average” student who enjoyed school but didn’t feel like she was very good at it. “Learning never comes super easy to me. It always was a challenge, but I enjoyed learning. I wasn’t an A student but not like a C student either. As and Bs and Cs sometimes.” Although she describes her early education as “kind of basic,” she says her teachers were “very supportive,” which Jessica says was “helpful” to her learning.
I felt like the teachers were all really close to the students. They got to know the students really well because it was such a close-knit community. I felt like we all knew each other. They were really involved in the school and got to know the kids.

**Grade, middle, and high school experiences.** Jessica’s recollections of her early education also revolved around her teachers. In high school, she remembers having several instructors who were “passionate” about what they were teaching.

We had some really great teachers in high school, and teachers that really forced me to grow a lot. One in particular, I guess he taught all grades, but I had him for eleventh and twelfth social studies and history, and he was really good. Just the way he ran his classes, he treated us more like an adult than a kid. He let us kind of learn that way. That was really helpful. He was very visual in the way that he taught.

Jessica says he was “always available” to students whether they had to make up a test or if they needed extra help on assignments. She says he was also “patient” with students, especially those who were tough.

I remember thinking in his classes, ‘How could you be so nice and so patient to those kids that are frustrating and just disrupting class?’ But he was. He could deal with those kids very easily, and he just kind of was very patient with them.

Jessica also recalls a high school English teacher who had a positive impact on her learning. She says she was the “hardest teacher” she has ever had, but that she learned more from her than from any other teacher she has experienced since.

She was known for being really hard at the school, but she taught us a lot. We went through a lot of literature in her class that otherwise we probably wouldn’t have gone
over, that no one had, Shakespeare, no high schooler would have wanted to learn about, but she really pushed us in that class.

She also had a science teacher in both middle school and high school who she describes as the perfect combination of tough and “fun.”

His classes were always really fun and energetic. His joke was that he always drank coffee, so that’s why he was always energetic. He always had his coffee cup with him, but yeah, he was the same way. His classes were more, it was lots of note taking. So kind of not very exciting, but his personality made the class exciting. He really pushed us and taught us a lot. He was a lot of fun. His personality made the class fun, and you wanted to go learn because he was fun.

**Time when early learning came easy.** Jessica says social studies and history came the easiest to her in her early learning because she says it was “definitive.”

It was like this is what happened on this date and it was easier to remember that for me. And the teachers I had were good. When we were able to research a topic and write a paper based on the research, I always felt more confident about that sort of assignment.

**How experience helped her as learner.** Having these experiences also made Jessica realize that as a learner, she liked assignments that had concrete answers as opposed to open-ended ones. “There’s a wrong answer and there’s a right answer. It’s either yes or no. There’s no like, ‘Well, it could be this or that.’” Jessica says she also came to realize that she is a “visual” learner who does best when she writes things down.

Anything that’s visual and that I can look at. A piece of paper and read it, and if I wrote notes out, I could remember kind of what I had wrote, how I wrote it. So anything that,
like dates were visual, and I could write out the date and what happened. So like history, I could remember those things. That definitely helped.

She also says that she “learned more” when her teachers taught in ways that were “visual” as opposed to auditory.

I remember our history and social studies teacher, there were times where he would let us take a notecard and write the answers that we thought may be on our test. I learned more from doing that than I ever learned by not having some sort of visual cheat sheet.

**Time when early learning was a struggle.** In general, Jessica says learning “never came super easy” to her and was “always a challenge,” but that like some other participants, math was the toughest hurdle.

Math was pretty difficult, just something I didn’t really understand. I just didn’t feel like I had a good grasp on it. I understood the basics, and nothing beyond that. So it was a challenge for me. It doesn’t come natural to me. I really have to work at it.

**Barrier(s) to early learning.** Like Tricia, Jessica says the fact that math was only taught a certain way was a barrier to her understanding it.

Looking back I could’ve benefited with something that rather than this specific technique, and this is how you have to do it, if there was another technique or way to learn it, I could’ve benefited from that. The teachers were fine. I don’t remember anyone being particularly bad or anything, but it was just always a hard subject for me. I just didn’t understand how it worked.

She also says that she never understood the relevance of math and why she needed to learn it. “I didn’t understand why you would want to do this. How is this going to relate to life, to later in life? Why do I need to know this?”
**Current experiences with education.** Jessica went back to get her bachelor’s in her late 20s when her daughter, who is now 8, was a toddler. Her husband is career military and he was the one who suggested she return to school when they were living on a base in South Carolina that had a satellite campus for a college that was offering online courses.

I was excited because I felt like I was older and more mature and I was paying for the education so I was more willing to work harder at it, and I was just older, and mature, and in a different place in life. I was excited to have something in hand at the end of it that I had worked really hard for.

**Experiences with online learning.** Jessica says she “loved” her online experience because it allowed her flexibility and gave her some level of control over her education.

It was odd to get used to doing everything online and not seeing faces, and you never meet your professor in person, but I loved it, because I was able to work when I wanted to work. I was able to make my own schedule. They give you an assignment, and it’s on your time when you do it. It just has to be turned in by this day. So I was able to just work on it as I could.

Before her first class, Jessica says she was “nervous” that she would not be able to navigate the technology.

I remember being nervous because I had never done this, just how to operate everything and just being able to get used to it, but it was super easy. And every class would bring up a tutorial on how Blackboard worked. And if you’ve never seen that, it can be intimidating. Like I have to turn in everything through this program that I’ve never used before.
Jessica says she really liked the discussion boards because the forums helped her “interact” and feel more connected to her classmates and many of the topics they discussed were “relevant” to real world issues. “It kept you engaged in the class, and the subject, and what you were talking about and current events. Most of our discussions dealt with things that were happening in the field at that time.” She also appreciated the fact that most of her instructors were working in the professions they were teaching in.

Because it was online classes, they all worked in their fields during the day, and then taught online classes in their spare time. I feel like it was a lot of good experience that they could share because they were working in the fields that they were teaching in. I mean probably 95 percent of the professors I had online all had jobs outside of working online.

**Time when online learning came easy.** Like Rick, Jessica says the discussion boards were the easiest part of her online learning.

It was kind of like homework. You didn’t have to put in a ton. It wasn’t like writing a paper. There wasn’t a ton of effort that went into it, but it still kept you engaged in the class, and the subject, and what you were talking about, and kind of current events, too.

**How online experiences helped her as learner.** Jessica says the discussion boards helped her as a learner because of how interactive they were. She says the fact that she not only had to post a response but also had to respond to at least two other students helped her mind stayed “active” and engaged with the topics being discussed each week.

The discussion boards just kept your mind always thinking about whatever you were going to write about that week, because you would get the subject on Sunday night. So you had a couple of days to think about it, and think about what you were going to write,
and read the article, or whatever it was that they gave you to read, and then put your
thoughts down. So just being able to keep your mind active thinking about all of that was
helpful.

Jessica also says the discussion boards brought relevance and meaning to what she was
learning because her professors often shared “what was going on in their field” in the forums.
I feel like, it was a lot of good experience that they could share because they were
working in the fields that they were teaching in. They knew whatever, if it pertained to
the standards, or the technology, or whatever they were dealing with, they knew what it
was right then and there. They would raise questions about what was going on in their
field then and ask good questions about whatever thing we were talking about at the time,
whatever current event, or whatever it was. That was helpful.

Time when online learning was a struggle. Like Bill, Jessica says she struggled with
her online statistics course because “it was up to you to learn.”
I mean, there were assignments and things that would help you, but it was basically up to
you to learn how to do it. It was up to you to do the homework and to figure out what you
were doing wrong. I mean, you could always ask, but for the most part you had to figure
it out.

Barrier(s) to online learning. Although Jessica says her instructor was “always there to
help” and was clearly more involved with the class than Bill’s, she says taking the course from a
distance was definitely a barrier to her learning.
I felt like for the most part it was me going over my homework and figuring out what I
did wrong, and lots of looking things up in the textbook, ‘Okay, how do I do this?’ I think
for me, again, math probably would have been easier to take a traditional class. So it was
definitely harder because it was kind of more self-led. But she was there. She was always there if you needed help.

Jessica says she probably needed even more support and feels like she would have gotten it if she had taken the course in person.

I wish I could have stopped in the middle of whatever we were learning about that week and said, ‘Wait a minute. Can you explain it again?’ You couldn’t really do that. It was me reading, and rereading, and rereading to get all of the steps down in how to do whatever we were doing.

**Future learning.** Jessica says in her future online learning she would like to “interact” more with her peers and instructors.

Being able to interact with classmates more, and form a study group, or just being able to, if there was a group project, which was pretty often that there was a group project, being able to interact in some way other than email with your classmates.

Jessica says none of her courses had synchronous components to them and she would have liked to see more opportunities to use platforms such as Google Hangouts or Blackboard Collaborate.

You don’t get that other feedback from other students when you’re in those online classes. That would have been really helpful to have for me, just getting other people’s perspectives, or even people that would say something and I’d be like, ‘Oh, yeah. I remember talking about that. That was helpful on this test, or this assignment.’ So definitely. That [connecting online] would be a good idea.
**Additional thoughts on educational experiences.** Like several other participants, Jessica says she valued her education much more as an adult because she was paying for it and doing it for herself.

After being out for so long, and having Riley [her daughter], I was excited, because I felt like I was older, and more mature, and I was paying for the education, so I was more willing to work harder at it, and I was just older, and mature, and in a different place in life. So, I was excited. I was excited to have something in hand at the end of it that I had worked really hard for.

**Findings**

The findings from this first level of In Vivo coding suggest participants’ experiences with education are much more positive and productive now than their earlier experiences were. In describing their more recent educational experiences, and in particular their online learning, subjects used words like “fun” “rewarding” and “loved it” as opposed to “boring,” “absolutely hated,” and “liked it,” which is how they recounted their K-12 experiences. Participants as a whole also said going back to school later in life “meant more” not only because they were “paying for” it, but because they “wanted to do it” and had made the “choice” themselves to pursue a college degree. After analyzing this first phase of In Vivo coding, a second level of axial Pattern coding was done to determine if any themes or repetitive ideas emerged from participants’ responses (Saldaña, 2009; Saldaña, 2104).

**Second Cycle Axial Pattern Coding**

The second cycle of axial Pattern coding was also conducted to ensure the integrity of the data by reanalyzing and reorganizing it in a way that further enhanced and synthesized what was captured in the first round of In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009). This next level of coding also
provided a fresh new perspective on participants’ answers about their experiences both with online learning and education as a whole and helped to clarify both the similarities and differences each have had during their educational journey.

Axial Pattern coding also felt like an appropriate next step as a means of seeing connections between the lengthy list of codes collected in the first In Vivo round of analysis and then bringing these codes to a more focused, conceptual level. Also, as Saldaña (2009) explains, this type of second cycle axial Pattern coding can also be helpful in determining which codes in the data are most significant and dominant. To further strengthen the themes that were chosen in this second level of coding, aspects of In Vivo were integrated into each specific topic so as to more clearly show a link between these first two phases of analysis. In looking at what patterns and themes emerged from this second round of coding, the researcher first separated out participants’ answers to the questions about their early education with those asked about their more recent experiences including those with online learning.

Early Education Themes

Participants were first asked about their past experiences with education, or more specifically their K-12 experiences, and were also asked to recall a time in their early education when their learning was easy for them and also a time when it was difficult. Based on their responses, six key themes emerged that helped create a clearer picture of what early learning was like for these individuals.

**Theme 1: Support.** The first theme that became apparent was Support. Some participants said they were supported in their K-12 education while others were not and this affected not only their perceptions about their early schooling but also how they approached their learning.
For example, Rachel did not feel supported in her early education both from within her own family, who was constantly “moving” around, as well as in the dozens of school systems she attended during her formative years. Tricia, who stayed in the same school system for her entire K-12, felt more supported than Rachel, but did not feel like she had “a lot of exposure” to the importance of education and in particular, the need for women to get a college degree. As she explained, most of the women in her neighborhood were “stay-at-home” moms and even her own mom, who had been a nurse until her children were born, never talked about her work experience.

Rick had a similar experience to Rachel’s in that most of the adults he grew up around did not have college degrees and it was expected that he would become a “master electrician” like his father and grandfather when he graduated vocational school. Like Rachel, he “moved” around some as a kid and did not feel like he had a great deal of support for pursuing higher education.

Nicole grew up in a small town where she felt “supported” by the community as a whole, especially her friends who she had known since kindergarten, but it was also a place where she says she had to be fairly self-sufficient when it came to her learning. She says both her teachers and her parents were not incredibly involved in her day-to-day education to the same degree she now is with her own children.

Like Tricia and Rick, Bill had several different educational experiences when he was younger, attending public school then homeschool and finally private school and although he says he had a good amount of support in his learning, he also felt that there could have been more, especially as he tried to “transition” and adjust from being taught at home to sitting in a classroom and adapting to various teachers’ expectations and learning styles.
Similar to Nicole, Jessica grew up in a small town and says many of her early teachers were “supportive” because everyone knew each other, but that the academics was “kind of basic” and not a lot of emphasis was put on furthering your education in part because it was a rural area with not much opportunity around.

**Theme 2: Stability.** The second theme, Stability, is somewhat connected to the first theme of Support. In Rachel’s case, Support and Stability are almost interchangeable. Rachel did not have a stable upbringing, enrolling in “17 different schools” when she was younger, and this resulted in her not feeling supported or secure in her education. Tricia had a much more stable childhood than Rachel in that she spent her entire life in the same town and same school system, but she still wishes she had more support and stability in terms of educational guidance.

Like Rachel, Rick did not feel stable during his early years because his parents “divorced” and he bounced around to several school systems, which he says was “tough,” both socially and academically. He felt more stability when he got to the vocational school because he finally felt settled and like he was somewhere that fit with his learning style. As he explains, he always had trouble “sitting still” in school and found it to be “incredibly boring.”

Like Tricia, Nicole lived in the “same town” her entire young life, which she says made for a stable upbringing, as did the fact that she only had “70 kids” in her graduating class, most of whom she had known since kindergarten. Bill had stability in that he felt supported by his mom when he was homeschooled and by many of the teachers at the small private school he ultimately attended. But he did not experience stability as he “transitioned” from one learning environment to the next, saying it was “hard” to move from public to homeschool to private school.
Although Jessica did not feel stable when she first moved to another school system in middle school, she eventually experienced stability when she finally settled into her new surroundings. Like Nicole and Tricia, she says the town she moved to was a “close knit community” where teachers and students “knew each other.”

**Theme 3: Role models and mentors.** The third theme is Role Models and Mentors and, in each case, participants’ perceptions of their early education were shaped and influenced by those individuals who they viewed in these capacities. Rachel did not have many role models when she was growing up and also had very few mentors both at home and in her schooling. No one in her family attended college and neither of her parents ever discussed the possibility of pursuing higher education. She says one of her high school math teachers as well as the vice principal were mentors to her and the only ones “who cared” and that most of the educators she encountered in her early life did not support her in ways she had hoped.

Even though Tricia felt supported by her community, she did not feel like there were many role models for furthering her education, especially for girls since most of the mothers in her neighborhood were “stay-at-home moms” who did not have college degrees. However, she does recall having several mentors during her schooling who not only made learning “fun,” but also “supported” her on a personal level.

Like Rachel’s parents, Rick’s mother and father did not go to college although Rick does take pride in the fact that his mother got “her own degree as an adult” when she graduated with an associate’s degree at 42. One of his older sisters provided a role model for higher education in that she went to college although his other sister “quit high school in tenth grade” and his stepbrother went right from vocational school into becoming a mechanic. Rick does not remember having any mentors in school and says that if anything his teachers mostly got
frustrated with him because he did not always pay attention in class because he did not feel “challenged.” When he got to vocational school, he says he was “just cruisin’” without much direction because his teachers “didn’t really pay attention” to him.

Nicole’s parents were role models in that they were stable and supportive of her as a person, but they were not very “involved” in guiding her in her education. For the most part, she feels as though she had to be self-reliant when it came to doing her schoolwork or deciding what she wanted to do when she graduated from high school. She does recall having a few teachers who acted as mentors in that they “cared” about the students and took the time to help them become better learners.

As the person homeschooling him, Bill’s mother was definitely both a role model and mentor, but the strongest role models he had came from his experience in private school where he had a few teachers who really supported and “encouraged” him in his learning. There were only 20 students in his grade so he says his instructors could pay “special attention” to each student and help them grow as a learner, which was a “bonus.”

Although Jessica felt supported by both her parents and her teachers growing up, she did not experience many role models or mentors for higher education. She was raised in a rural area of Georgia where she describes the academics as being “not very challenging” and many kids did not go onto college. She did have several teachers who were mentors in that they “pushed” her to work hard and learn and “forced” her “to grow a lot” as a person and student, but overall she did not have much guidance for pursuing her education after high school.

Theme 4: Motivation. The fourth theme is Motivation, which directly relates to the theme of Role Models and Mentors. Rachel was not motivated to go to school or do well in it partly because she did not have role models who encouraged her or could show her the benefits
of getting an education. No one in her immediate family had graduated from high school and she says she “didn’t care” about school back then, which ultimately led to her dropping out “completely.”

Tricia says she was an “average” student who “liked” school, but was not particularly motivated by it because she “really didn’t know what she wanted to do” when she graduated and “didn’t see the need” to get a degree, especially since both her older brother and sister had gotten jobs right after high school. Rick had trouble “sitting still” in class and needed constant stimulation so he says he “absolutely hated” school and found it “incredibly boring” and “not challenging.” He did the academic work, but like many kids at the vocational school, his motivation and focus was on the trade he was learning and this was also where his role models and mentors came from including his father and grandfather who were electricians.

Nicole says she “did fairly well” in school but was not always motivated to “work hard” because she had some teachers who gave everyone good grades even if they did not put much effort into what they were doing. She says she was “discouraged” because she did not learn much in those classes and often asked herself, “Why am I even bothering?”

In attending a small, private school, Bill probably had the strongest support from mentors than any other participant in this study, but he says he “didn’t like school particularly” and similar to Rick, had trouble “sitting down for hours on end” and was probably more motivated by his afterschool sports than what he was learning in his courses. As he explains, he was “very into sports” and dreamed of becoming an “athletic trainer” for the New England Patriots.

Jessica describes herself as a “pretty average student” who was motivated to learn, but that learning was “always a challenge” for her even though she “enjoyed” it. Although she saw
her teachers as good role models and mentors, there was not a lot of emphasis put on pursuing college since they lived in a rural area with not many local opportunities for higher education.

**Theme 5: Successes and advantages.** The fifth theme is Successes and the Advantages participants experienced that allowed them to be successful in their early education. All of those interviewed were able to recall certain moments in their young life where their learning came easy to them and were also able to reflect on the advantages that allowed them to have these early successes as well as reflect on how those experiences helped them as learners.

Rachel had a high school English class that she felt successful in because of the teacher who she says “made it fun” and taught in a way that was interactive and hands on, which worked with the way she learned. Another advantage she had was she always “loved to read” so any courses involving literature and writing tended to be easier for her than other subjects. Tricia’s early success was in creative writing where she says she “could put her thoughts down on paper rather quickly.” The advantage she had was that she was a “very organized” person who was good at developing “outlines” and arranging her thoughts in a succinct and structured way.

Like Rachel, Rick was a “voracious reader” so he tended to be more successful in courses involving books although in general, he found the most success in his shop classes, the advantage being that he was “interested” in them and they fit his learning style. Nicole found success in her English classes because she thought they were “interesting” and also had the advantage of loving books like Rachel and Rick. Another advantage she had was “confidence” that she says she gained from doing well in certain courses, which then allowed her to push herself even further in these classes because of the positive results she was experiencing.

Bill also found success in English and in his case the advantage was his teacher who he says was “hard” but “instructive” because he pushed him to really understand how to write a
paper by “tearing it apart” and giving lots of feedback. Science was harder for him, but he also found some level of success in this subject as well because of the teacher who “would explain things in different” ways and would “show you visually,” which Bill says worked for “his learning style.”

Jessica is a “visual” learner too so she was most successful in those classes where the teacher gave her the advantage of explaining things in a way that she could conceptualize them in her head. She recalls doing well in English and social studies not only because of how her teachers taught these classes but also because of how they took the time to help her understand what she was learning and “pushed” her to work and “grow” as a student.

Theme 6: Struggles and barriers. The final theme that came out of participants’ early experiences with education is Struggles and the Barriers that made those learning moments challenging. Rachel’s early struggles came mostly in math, which she says was “awful” and the barriers were part her teachers and part her. She felt like her instructors did not take the time to “help” her, but that she also did not have the patience to learn things that she did not “understand” because she was “lazy with everything” and “probably had ADHD.”

Tricia “struggled” with math as well and like Rachel, one of her biggest barriers was that she did not “understand” the concepts she was being taught. She says her teachers were supportive, but that she “just didn’t get it” and started to feel left behind as they started building on the more basic concepts they were teaching. As she explains, “It gets to the point where you just barely getting by to get out of it.”

Rick’s greatest struggle was with the writing part of his English classes because his barrier was “poor penmanship” and he recalls many of his teachers going through his papers “with a red pen, ruining what you wrote.” Nicole struggled somewhat with math, but her biggest
early challenge came in typing, which she says was the “only class” she “ever flunked” in her life because of the teacher, which she felt was a major obstacle. She describes the teacher as being “very stern,” “very disapproving” and not willing to help her learn as a student. Instead of teaching her, Nicole says she would look at her work and just say, “you made all of these mistakes” like she did not think Nicole was “trying hard” enough.

Bill was another person who struggled with math and his barriers were his “teachers” and “time.” He says he has always “liked” math, but needs “time in order to understand it” and many of the teachers he had would “move on no matter where” he was in comprehending it so he would have to “go back and try to figure it out” on his own.

Like most of the participants, Jessica’s greatest struggle was with math, which she says she “didn’t really understand” and was a “challenge” for her. Similar to Bill’s experience, she felt that her teachers were a barrier to her learning in that they taught her “only one way to do” math and that she probably would have “benefited” from being shown “different ways” of understanding it.

**Current Education Themes**

The second set of themes was developed based on the answers participants gave when asked about their more current experiences with education and more specifically, their online learning. The themes that emerged were somewhat similar to those found in their early education, with the main differences being that Feedback and Communication as well as Positive Experiences became recurring topics when listening to their narratives about their more recent learning.

**Theme 1: Motivation.** As was the case in reflecting on their earlier learning, Motivation was a theme that resonated in the way participants spoke about their more recent experiences
with education, but this time around, it took on a somewhat different meaning. Whereas they were not particularly motivated by school when they were younger, participants were more so when they went back as adults because it “meant more” to them because they were “paying for” it and it was their “choice” to attend.

Rachel says she “loves” school now and is more motivated to learn because it is “more important” to her because she is “paying for” it. For this reason, she also wants to have a certain level of “control” over her learning and finds it frustrating when an instructor tries to do her work for her or does not allow her to give input on her assignments. Tricia was motivated to return to school to get a “promotion” at work and like Rachel was further motivated to do well because she was “paying for this.” As she explains, “I’m doing this cause I want to do this. And, I’m going to achieve it and excel in it.”

Like Tricia, Rick was motivated to get his degree so he could move up to a leadership position at work. He was also motivated to finish because he was paying for his education and said to himself, “If you want to get better, this is how you’re gonna get better.” Nicole was motivated to enroll in school to excel at work as well and also saw it as an opportunity to ensure job security as more hospitals were starting to require nurses to have “degrees” in order to stay in their current positions. Paying her way was also a motivating factor for Nicole who said to herself, “If I’m gonna start it, I’m gonna finish it. I wouldn’t have let myself not do it.”

Bill’s motivation to go back to school is similar to Nicole’s in that he too is a nurse who is concerned about security and advancement at work and like all of the other participants in this study he is also motivated to do well because he is now “paying” for his schooling. Jessica was a stay-at-home mom when she began pursuing her bachelor’s degree so she was not motivated by a specific job situation but says she was definitely motivated to do well because she was
“paying” for her education. As she says, “I was more willing to work harder at it. I was just older and more mature. I was excited to have something in hand at the end of it that I had worked really hard for.”

**Theme 2: Support.** A second theme that came out of participants’ stories about their current educational experiences and in particular their online learning was Support. This was also a theme in discussing their earlier education and was clearly something that was important to them now as well.

Overall, Rachel has felt much more supported in her adult learning than she ever did when she was younger and calls the school environment she is currently in her “community.” However, her husband and other family members have not supported her in the way she would like, and yet despite this, she is determined to “finish” her associate’s degree.

Tricia’s family was supportive of her and her instructors were as well, but she says she would have liked even more support when she started her online courses because “going into it, she didn’t know what to expect.” Rick says he got more support from his instructors when he attended his program’s residencies, which were held on weekends, and that during the online portion of his classes, there was “very little interaction” with his professors. He could always contact them, but often when he needed advice on something he would consult his wife who was a big support to him.

Nicole had support from her family as well, but like Tricia, had young children when she started her program, which was challenging. She says she had a lot of support from advisors in her program that would “check in on you and make sure you were doing OK and you weren’t having any issues.” Like other participants, Bill’s family provided him with support, and so did
several of his instructors who he says were “very available” when it came to any issues or questions he had about a course or an assignment.

Jessica specifically mentioned her husband as a great support to her and says he was the one who brought a flier home from the school she enrolled in, saying, “you should look into this.” She also felt very supported by both her instructors and advisors who she says were “very helpful” and easy to contact and always got back to her in a timely fashion.

**Theme 3: Feedback and communication.** Support ties into the third theme of Feedback and Communication, which appeared to be an extremely important aspect of every participant’s adult learning experience, especially those courses they took online.

Rachel says she “needed the feedback” from her instructors and needed to know what she was “doing wrong” and that their communication was crucial to her success. Tricia says she “liked getting feedback” too, especially when her professors had “suggestions for improvement” because it made her “challenge” herself “to do better.”

Rick wished his instructors had communicated more with him and he had gotten more “feedback” because as he explains, “Sometimes, you would have two or three days before that person would get back to you.” Nicole says her online courses were “pretty well mapped out” and that overall, her instructors and advisors were good at communicating with students. However, she says she wished there had been universal guidelines for each of her writing assignments because every professor had a different way that they liked them done.

Bill says he “appreciated” those instructors who gave “constant communication” and wanted to get feedback from them so that he could “improve his skills” and learn something in each of his classes. Feedback was also important to him so that he could “improve” and build on his skills and be better prepared for the more difficult courses he took.
Jessica says most of her advisors and instructors were good at “communicating” with students and giving them “feedback” and interestingly, like several other participants in this study, she says even though the communication was happening online, it was easy to tell who was “engaged” and who was not.

**Theme 4: Successes and advantages.** Like in their earlier education, the fourth theme revolved around the Successes participants have had in their online learning and the Advantages that have led to these successes.

Rachel says she has had a lot more successes in her learning now because she has more “confidence” in herself and is better at “balancing” things in her life. In particular, she mentioned an anthropology course that came “easy” to her and she did well in because the instructor did not “take over the process” and allowed her to be part of her learning. For example, he gave her “control” over what topic she choose for her final paper, which she says made the course more “fun” and as a result, she learned more.

Tricia felt successful in most of her online courses because they played to her advantage of being a “well organized” and “self-motivated” person. Overall, she did well in most of her classes, especially those involving writing because her organizational skills allowed her to “write a paper in no time flat.”

Rick says being a “self-starter” helped him find success in many of his online courses and at times, also helped him to keep going when he was feeling “overwhelmed.” He described it this way: “You gotta prop the eyeballs with toothpicks and just go on there and just do what you need to do. Because otherwise you’re not going to succeed and you’re gonna get frustrated and you’re gonna drop out. There were so many instances where I went, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore.’”
Nicole was successful in most of her online courses with the advantage being that many of them “connected” and were related to what she was doing in her professional life as a nurse. She recalled one class in particular that was “hard for a lot people” but came easy to her because it involved using a computer system to physically assess patients.

Bill has been most successful in his English courses and he credits a “really hard” English teacher he had in high school for giving him the advantage of doing well in these classes because he taught him “how to write papers correctly.” Jessica felt successful in the discussion boards in each of her courses because she says they kept her “engaged” and “dealt with things that were happening in the field at that time,” which was advantageous to her because it made her learning more “enjoyable” and “relevant” to her.

**Theme 5: Struggles and barriers.** The fifth theme speaks to the Struggles participants have had online and the Barriers that have caused these difficulties. Like earlier in her life, Rachel still struggles with math, but her biggest challenge online has been her human development course and she says it was the “instructor” who was the “barrier” to her success. She says she was not “very engaging” and did not respond to emails for what “felt like a week.” When Rachel reached out to her professors, she appreciated when they got back to her because it made her feel like she was “actually being read and heard.”

Tricia’s biggest struggle was with online math, which she says was “excruciating” and a “nightmare” and “the only thing she didn’t think she was going to pass.” She felt as though her instructor, who she calls “not helpful,” was a big barrier to her doing well in the course and that she “barely got through it.”

Rick did not struggle with a specific course or subject but had a tough time with the discussion boards and keeping up with them because of the barriers created by his work and
family responsibilities, which he says “pulled him in all kinds of directions.” Another barrier was other students who sometimes would not post their responses “until the last minute,” which left Rick “scrambling” to respond in time based on his busy schedule at the fire station. As he explains, “Some of the students were not as dedicated and that ended up being a problem. There were a couple of times I was like, I can’t do this.”

Nicole struggled with the discussion boards for the same reasons that Rick did, saying that she is a “little bit of a control freak.” She found that other students were also a barrier when doing group projects, which she did not find to be difficult but struggled with because some of her classmates “were not as thorough” or did not participate at the level that she did. She says the thought of “giving up part” of her “grade to somebody else just drove” her “crazy.”

Like Tricia, Bill struggled with math and more specifically, statistics, and felt that the instructor was a barrier because he was “not available” to explain things. Another barrier was time as Bill says he has always been “slower at” math and “could have done so much better” if “he had more time.”

Jessica also struggled in statistics but unlike Bill, she did not see the professor as being a barrier but more the fact that she was taking the course online as opposed to face-to-face. She says she wished she could have “stopped in the middle of whatever” she was learning and said, ‘Wait a minute. Can you explain it again?’ “You couldn’t really do that. It was me reading, and rereading, and rereading to get all of the steps down in how to do whatever we were doing.”

Theme 6: Positive experiences. The sixth and last theme involving participants’ online learning is all of the Positive Experiences they have had taking courses from a distance as opposed to the more negative experiences they tended to have in their early education.
Rachel says she is “loving” college and the online experience mostly because she feels like she is in a better place in her life to learn and she is doing it on her terms. As someone who sees her greatest strength as being an organizer, Tricia says she really liked the “structure” of online learning and the fact that she clearly knew what “the expectations” were.

Rick “loved” his online college experience too and described it as being “fun” and “rewarding.” He liked that it gave him the flexibility to set his own schedule and also allowed him to be somewhat involved in his learning because he says he is “used to running his own show.”

Nicole found the time commitment involved in distance learning to be demanding, but felt like she had a “very good” experience and that she “probably wouldn’t have done it” if it had not provided her with the opportunity to continue working full-time and taking care of her “two kids at home.”

Bill has been pleased with his online experience and sees it as a “benefit” because he is “working full-time” and needs the “flexibility” to organize his courses around his schedule. He also likes that he can focus on each class for whatever amount of time he wants, which he says “promotes learning a lot more than having somebody speak to you for an hour or two.” Jessica says she “loved” taking online courses because she “was able to work when” she “wanted to work” and “was able to make” her “own schedule.”

**Future Learning Themes: Choice, Interaction, and Feedback**

The last set of themes came from asking participants what they would like their future learning to look like. The most prominent ideas that resulted from this question were that they would like to see More Choice in the types of courses they could take, who taught them, and when they were offered. They would also like their online courses to be more Interactive with
“some Webinars” and more communication and collaboration with both their instructors and other students.

Some participants were only able to talk to other people in the class through email and say they would have liked to have other means of technology to “interact with one another.” They also felt like doing this would make them feel more “connected” to their classmates and make the online experience seem more like a traditional classroom.

Lastly, they would like to continue getting Feedback in their courses as they say this was an important element of their online education and something that helped them “grow” and gain “confidence” as learners.

**Conclusion**

The data analyzed in Chapter 4 resulted in several themes that help to better understand the lived experiences of adult students who have taken online courses in pursuit of their associate’s or bachelor’s degree after time away from formal education. Using a first level of In Vivo coding followed by axial Pattern coding also proved to be beneficial in creating a more nuanced picture of how adult learners approach their education now as opposed to in their earlier years. The third and final level of coding conducted was Provisional coding, with the purpose being to categorize the codes and themes collected and examine them in relation to both the literature on adult learners and andragogy, the theoretical framework chosen for this study.

The results of this coding will be presented in Chapter 5, which will also include a summary of the study’s major findings and themes as they relate to the questions posed in this research. Chapter 5 will also consider the implications of this study to both current and future examinations of this very timely topic. The following chapter will also recognize the limitations of this study and provide recommendations for future research.
Chapter V: Discussion

Although more adults are turning to online education to earn their undergraduate degree, many are not succeeding in this environment, raising the question of how effective these programs actually are for this particular student population (Hart, 2012). The purpose of this study was to listen to these nontraditional learners’ stories about their past experiences with education as well as their more current experiences so as to better understand how this has impacted their distance learning. This narrative research was examined through the lens of andragogy, the adult learning theory that suggests older students learn differently than children and led to the central research question: What are the lived experiences of working adults who have taken online courses in pursuit of their associate’s or bachelor’s degree after time away from formal education?

The following sub-questions were also posed:

1. What were adult students’ experiences with education prior to taking online courses?
2. How did these experiences influence the way adult students approached their online courses?
3. How did adult students’ past educational experiences affect how they perceived their learning in their distance classes?
4. What aspects of distance learning work best for adult students?
5. What areas of online learning are challenging for adult students?
6. Based on their past educational experiences, what would adult students like their future learning to be like?

Summary of Participants
Six participants were included in this study, which meets the criteria required of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Four were women and two were men, ranging in age from their late 20s to their late 40s. All were Caucasian. All attended school part-time while either working or handling family responsibilities or both. All were going back to school for either career advancement or to improve their job prospects. Some were seeking their associate’s degree while others were seeking their bachelor’s degree. Some had taken online courses at community colleges while others had attended four-year institutions.

**Discussion of Findings**

All six participants had a much more positive experience with their distance education than they had with their earlier education. Several participants used words like “fun,” “rewarding,” and “loved it” to describe their online learning. This was in contrast to how they recounted their K-12 education, with one participant saying she “never really cared about school” while another recalled “getting in trouble” and yet another said he “absolutely hated it” and found it to be “incredibly boring.” All six participants also liked the flexibility their distance courses afforded them because they could plan their classes around their work and family schedule. They said they would not have been able to go back to school and get their degree if they did not have the option to take online courses. The fact that they were paying for their education also motivated them to do well in their classes.

All of the participants said feedback from instructors was an important aspect of their distance experience because it made them feel supported in their learning and less isolated and more secure in the online environment. One of the participants really liked the discussion boards because they helped her feel more connected to both her classmates and the instructor. She said
the forums were also helpful to her because many of the topics that were discussed were “relevant” to real world issues that could then be applied professionally.

Some participants liked that their distance courses allowed them to have a good amount of control over their learning and could work on assignments at their own pace. However, one participant said this was sometimes challenging because you had to be the “teacher in a way” and remind yourself to do the work unlike in a classroom setting where there is more guidance. Another participant liked how “structured” and “mapped out” the online experience was for her not only because it allowed her to plan out her life each week but also because it worked to her strengths as a learner. She described herself as being a highly “organized” person who works best when given clear guidelines of what is expected of her.

Overall, participants have enjoyed their more recent experiences with education and online learning because they are doing it on their terms. Many are glad they pursued their undergraduate degree now as opposed to when they were younger because they are more serious about their education and also more confident in their ability to learn.

**Experiences with education prior to taking online courses.** Participants’ earlier experiences with education were not as positive as their more current experiences with many saying they were “average” students who did not love school but did what they had to do to get by. Their reasons for not liking school ranged from being bored, to not caring, to not feeling well supported by some teachers and/or family members. One participant said she enjoyed school, but that learning has always been “challenging” for her. Several participants said they had trouble sitting still or focusing in class, which made learning more difficult. Four participants changed school systems during their early education, which added another obstacle to their learning, as they had to adjust to a new environment.
Most of the participants did recall having at least a couple of teachers or administrators in their early education who supported them in their learning and made an effort to help them be successful. However, most of the participants said they did not have many role models for higher education so they were not exposed to the potential benefits of attending college. One participant attended a private high school so he did have some support for furthering his education, but he also struggled with some learning issues.

All six participants had some positive memories of their K-12 education, but overall, they were glad when it was done and were ready to move on to the next phase of their lives.

**How these experiences influenced the way adult students approached their online courses.** Participants had clearly learned from their past educational experiences and went into their more recent learning environment with more confidence in their abilities and a determination to succeed. Most said they were motivated to do well in their online courses because they were now “paying” for their education and were choosing to go to class as opposed to being told they had to go.

They were also taking courses that they were interested in because they were going back to obtain a degree that would help them professionally. However, some of the same insecurities they had when they were younger remain with them today. Several participants mentioned having a difficult time with math in their early education and still struggled with it in the distance environment, but the difference this time was they were more determined to succeed in it because of their past troubles with it. Some said they would spend all day working on their online math assignments and one participant even got herself a tutor to ensure she would pass the course.
Participants’ past experiences with education also made them realize the value of getting feedback and support in their learning so they were more proactive about reaching out to instructors in their distance courses. Several participants said they wanted detailed feedback on their assignments because it was important to them to know how they were doing in their classes and they wanted to get the most out of their experiences. All six participants seemed determined to be successful in their online learning and appear to have genuinely enjoyed the experiences they have had as adult learners.

**How students’ past educational experiences affected how they perceived their learning in their distance classes.** Participants’ past experiences with education made them a little wary of their online classes at first because they were not sure what to expect and only had their prior experiences as a basis for their current learning situation. Some participants, especially those in their 40s, went into their distance courses wondering how it would all work since their past experiences were only in traditional classroom settings where they did not have to navigate technology and had an instructor who gave lectures and guided them through assignments. Although participants early experiences with education were not always good, they viewed their online learning in a much more positive way because they had chosen to go back to school and wanted to do well in their classes for professional or personal reasons. They also said they took their learning more seriously now because they were more mature and did not have the time to waste on something unless they were fully committed to finishing it. Some participants did not have a lot of confidence as learners when they were younger but said that their life and work experiences have helped them to better understand themselves and what they need to do to succeed.
All six participants were more pro-active learners than they were in their earlier education. They were more engaged in their classes and more apt to reach out to their teachers when they needed help or feedback.

**Aspects of distance learning that work best for adult students.** Flexibility was definitely the aspect of distance learning that worked best for all six participants in this study. All of them had outside responsibilities whether it was a full- or part-time job in addition to family obligations. They needed a learning environment that would allow them to work their courses around their busy schedules and participants said they would not have been able to go back to school and get their degree if they did not have the online option. They also liked that they were an active participant in their learning and had some level of control over when and where they completed their assignments.

Participants liked the structure of their online classes and that everything was mapped out from day one so they could prioritize things and balance out their coursework with their job and family commitments. Some participants said the discussion boards worked well for them because it kept them connected to their classmates and instructors and also kept their minds “engaged” with what they were learning in the course. They also liked that many of their classes involved assignments that were relevant and directly applied to their professional interests.

**Areas of online learning that are challenging for adult students.** Participants said online learning could be isolating at times and this is why instructor feedback was so important to them. They also said that some courses should probably not be taught from a distance because of how involved and difficult they are. Two participants mentioned taking statistics online and wished they had taken it face-to-face so they could have gotten more support from their professors. They said that the software program used to teach the class was counterintuitive and
made learning the concepts much more “difficult” since most of their time was spent trying to understand and navigate the program as opposed to focusing on the course objectives.

Some participants found the discussion boards challenging because it made them too reliant on their classmates who they had to wait for to respond to posts, which did not always work within participants’ busy schedules. One participant said he would post his initial response at the beginning of the week and then would have to wait several days for others to respond and by that time, he had to go back to working 24 hour shifts so he did not have the time to get back to them. He said there was no deadline for students to post their initial response, which might have helped.

Another participant found group projects to be challenging because of the reliance on others. She said it was difficult to coordinate with members of the group especially if people were in different time zones and that technology issues often caused problems. She also said relying on others to do their part was also tough although she admitted that she is a “little bit of a control freak.” This same participant felt that some of the PowerPoint presentations in her courses were “useless” and “boring” and did not help her to better understand what she was trying to learn in the class. Like most of the other participants, she said there were times when it would have been nice to have in person access to an instructor when she had a question or was having trouble learning something.

**What adult students would like their future learning to be like.** Participants would like their future learning to be similar to their more recent educational experiences with opportunities that allow them to have flexibility as well as course offerings that match up with their professional needs. They would like to see more choice in terms of class times and instructors and also the types of classes available to them. Participants would also like to see
even more technology integrated into their courses because they think it will make them more “interactive” and engaging. They also want their instructors to provide additional guidance and feedback because they like to know how they are doing in their learning and the ways in which they can improve. They would also like to get more communication from their professors from the very start of each semester so they get to know them better and feel comfortable in their classes.

One participant said she would like to see more instructors who are well trained in technology since she had a couple of online courses that became “frustrating” because the instructors were not very familiar with Blackboard. Another participant said he would like to take more hybrid courses in the future because he wants to see and interact more with his instructors and peers and because he thinks some classes would be easier to take with some face-to-face support. Several participants also said they would like to have some synchronous elements in their future learning such as Google Hangout or Blackboard Collaborate so they could connect with their classmates and professors in real time as well as feel more invested in the course as a whole.

**Discussion of Themes**

Participants’ stories about their educational experiences resulted in several themes being developed to describe both their early education and their more current experiences with learning. Some of the themes such as Motivation and Support carried through their entire narratives about their educational journey while others like Stability and Role Models were important in their early education as opposed to Feedback and Communication and Positive Experiences that have played a larger role in their adult learning. Both their early and more recent education have also had Successes and Barriers, which participants were not only able to
reflect on, but also view in relation to how these experiences have helped them as learners. In reflecting on their educational experiences as a whole, participants would like to see more Choice, more Interaction, and more Feedback in their future learning.

**Early education themes.** Several themes emerged when participants talked about their early learning experiences. The first theme was Support and each participant had varying levels of it from both family and teachers in their K-12 education. Although a few participants felt supported by their community in their daily life, all of the participants said they would have liked more support in their educational pursuits. They did not have a lot of exposure to higher education or role models for seeking a college degree. The youngest participant, who was in his late 20s, had the most support because he attended a private school where most students pursued post-secondary education, but he also had some learning challenges and transitional adjustments that affected his early schooling success. He needed extra time to take tests and struggled to sit still in class, which was exacerbated by going from homeschooling in his younger years to attending a private school starting in seventh grade.

The second theme in their early education was Stability, which was often connected to support. The more supported participants were in their formative years the more stable they felt in their early life and learning. Several of the participants said they did not have a sense of stability when they were growing up whether it was because of divorce or moving around a lot or both. They said it was difficult to adjust to their new environment or their new family situation and this impacted their educational experiences. Two of the six participants felt like their childhood was stable because they grew up in a small town where they stayed for their entire K-12 education.
The third theme coming out of participants’ younger years was Role Models and Mentors. Most of the participants said they did not have many role models and mentors when it came to education and the possibility of furthering their learning after high school. Some viewed their parents as role models in that they said they supported them and raised them well, but in several cases, the parents themselves did not go to college so they did not know how to help their children in this area. The participant who had the strongest educational role models and mentors was the one who went to private school and was also homeschooled by his mother until seventh grade.

The fourth theme was Motivation and for several participants this was closely linked to the lack of role models and mentors in their early life. They did not have many role models around to motivate them to do well in school or pursue the idea of continuing on to college. Some participants were raised in communities where most people did not go on to higher education so there was no motivation to pursue this goal either. Instead of getting a degree, they said their focus was on getting a job when they finished high school.

The fifth theme is Success and Advantages and although participants mostly described themselves as “average” students, all of them did have some successes in their early education that helped them as learners. Most of their successes came in courses that catered to their interests and/or learning styles and often involved a teacher who they felt was engaging and “instructive.” They said some of the advantages that came from these early successes were that they gained confidence as learners and were also able to better understand their learning styles and what worked for them.

The six and final theme in their early education was Struggles and Barriers. All of the participants had no trouble recalling the times when they struggled in their K-12 schooling. Math
was a struggle for all but one of the participants and in each case they said the teacher was the barrier to their success in this particular subject. The instructor was also the barrier for the one participant who struggled in English as well as for another participant who had a tough time in math but said her greatest challenge was in typing. Participants said they had a difficult time in these courses because their teachers only taught one way and if you did not understand it, they were not very helpful in guiding and supporting you.

**Current education themes.** The first theme that came out of participants’ stories about their more current education, and more specifically their online courses, had to do with Motivation. Motivation was also a theme in their early learning, but instead of having a lack of motivation, participants were highly motivated to do well in their more recent education because they were “paying for” it and had made the choice themselves to go back to school. Several participants were also motivated to work hard and complete their degree for professional reasons, whether for a job promotion or a career change.

The second theme is Support and overall, participants felt much more supported in their current education than they did in their early learning. Several participants said their spouses supported them, as did their instructors and advisors, which helped them be successful in both their classroom and online coursework. They said their instructors were “very available” whenever they had questions or needed help and one participant even called her school her “community” because of how supportive they were to her.

The third theme was Feedback and Communication and this proved to be an important aspect of participants’ current learning and something that they believed was crucial to their success, especially in their online courses. All of the participants needed and wanted both feedback and communication from their instructors not only so they knew how they were doing
in their courses but also so they could know what they needed to do to improve. They said getting feedback was crucial to helping them grow as learners.

The fourth theme was Successes and Advantages and all of the participants felt much more successful in their later learning than they did in their early years. Part of the reason was they were more mature and had made the choice themselves to go back to school so they were determined to be successful in their learning. They said doing well in their current education also helped them build their confidence as well as continue to better understand how they best functioned as learners.

The fifth theme was Struggles and Barriers and each participant has had struggles in their more recent education but not as many as when they were younger. Several participants still struggled with math in their current learning but unlike their early years, they were determined to be successful this time around with one getting a tutor and a couple of others spending entire days trying to complete assignments. Some participants said the instructor was again the barrier to their success while other felt like the software programs and online platform created the biggest obstacles. Several participants felt like they might have done better in certain courses if they had taken them face-to-face as opposed to online so they could have gotten added help from the instructor and not had to deal with the software programs.

The sixth and final theme of participants’ current learning was Positive Experiences. All of the participants have had much more positive experiences in their education now than they had when they were in K-12. Several participants said they “loved” college and the online experience and that they would not have been able to go back to school if it was not for distance learning. They said they enjoyed school much more because they were doing it on their terms
and that they liked the online courses because it allowed them to work their classes around their busy schedules.

**Future learning themes.** In their future learning, participants would like to see more Choice, more Interaction, and more Feedback. They said they would like to see more choice in courses, instructors and class times and more interaction with their instructors and classmates so they feel more engaged in their learning. They would also like to get more feedback from their professors so they know how well they are doing in their courses and can improve as learners. Overall, they said they want to continue having educational experiences that are similar to the ones they have had as adults with them being active participants in their learning as well as increasingly being involved in assignments and activities that connect them more with their classes.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature**

A review of the literature on adult learners taking online courses in pursuit of their undergraduate degree shows that many have chosen distance education because of its accessibility and flexibility although a good number are not succeeding in this medium and the reasons for their high attrition rates are multifaceted and have not been fully explored (Angelino et al., 2007; Park & Choi, 2009). The purpose of this study was to listen to adult students’ stories about their educational journey as a whole to get a better understanding of the ways in which these experience have influenced their distance learning.

The findings of this research clearly support much of the literature on the reasons adult students choose online education (Boston et al., 2011; Hoffman & Reindl, 2011) as well as validates some of the past studies (Hart, 2012; Kemp, 2010; Nash, 2005) that have focused on both the external and internal forces that can create challenges for these particular learners. But it
also broadens out the discussion of how these nontraditional students actually perceive and approach their distance learning and how this fits into their overall educational experiences. Before this study was conducted, very little research was done from the perspective of the adult students themselves and how they as individuals viewed their online experiences. Most studies done on distance education have focused more on the overall student population without taking a closer look at the unique needs and challenges older learners face (Boston et al., 2011; Hart, 2012). Much of the research has also been quantitative in nature as opposed to qualitative, relying more on survey data and past studies to try and better understand the experiences adult learners are having online (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2011; 2013).

The data collected in this study did confirm past research that showed adult students often choose online education because it is accessible and flexible (Boston et al., 2011). All of the participants said they would not have been able to go back to school and get their degree if it had not been for distance learning. Many were working full-time in addition to taking courses and also had family responsibilities. They pursued online education because they could work their courses around their busy schedules and complete assignments at their own pace as well as save time because they did not have to drive to a campus each week.

Some of the past literature on the external and internal forces that can make online learning difficult for adults was also confirmed in this research although most of the participants had been successful in meeting these challenges. The external forces of job and family commitments (Kemp, 2010; Parker, 1999) made completing their distance courses tough at times, but all of the participants said they were determined to succeed because they had chosen to go back to school and were paying for it.
They also faced some of the internal obstacles mentioned in past studies such as lack of proficiency in technology and struggles with creating learning strategies and self-regulation skills (Harrell II & Bower, 2011; Wang et al., 2008). But again, they worked through these issues often developing various support mechanisms to help them achieve their goals. Some hired tutors to help them work through difficult courses and assignments while others reached out to instructors for guidance. Despite some research that suggests adults may have trouble being self-directed online (Tyler-Smith, 2006), most of the participants in this study did not seem to have this issue and were extremely motivated to do their work and do it well in their courses. The one participant who did have some trouble with self-regulation was aware she needed help and was able to reach out to others for support.

This study also affirms past findings that show adult students who are satisfied with their online courses are more likely to complete them (Hart 2012; Morris, 2011). All of the participants had positive experiences with their distance learning and had been mostly successful in their classes. They said they would take online courses again because of the good experiences they have had in them.

A few anecdotal studies (Hart, 2012; Morris, 2011; Rhode, 2009) have also suggested that the quality of the instructor and ease and interactivity of the courses impact adult students’ engagement and this was true with participants in this research as well. Most participants said the online class they liked the most and got the most out of were the ones that involved instructors who communicated with them and gave them thoughtful and constructive feedback on their work. This supports the notion that the instructor could potentially play a pivotal role in adult students’ success online.
Several studies (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Nash, 2005; Rhode, 2009) have also shown that interaction with both peers and instructors resulted in adult students being more engaged in their distance courses and more likely to persist in them, which was confirmed by participants in this research who spoke at length about the importance of communication and connection with others in their classes. Most of the participants in this research liked the discussion boards as a way to interact with their classmates, but some also saw these forums as an obstacle because they had to rely too much on other students to respond to posts in a timely fashion. They felt like there needed to be more stringent guidelines for when students had to post their responses and that instructors needed to monitor the boards more closely.

Participants’ most positive experiences online were in courses that had clear expectations and were well mapped out for them and easy to navigate, which aligns with past research that shows adult learners are most successful in distance classes that are designed this way (Morris, 2011; Pelletier, 2010). Adults have busy lives so they want learning experiences that are seamless and logical so they can maximize their time. Studies have also shown that they want to take courses that connect with their professional lives and will help them with career advancement (Park & Choi, 2009; Pelletier, 2010) and this was the case with participants in this study as well. Most were going back to school for job security or for a promotion at work.

Although some research suggests that more should be done to connect adults with the institution they are enrolled in since online learning can be isolating (Workman & Stenard, 1996), participants in this study seemed to be satisfied with their involvement in their school. Some were taking both online and face-to-face courses while others had attended residencies and said they would not have had the time to go to a campus for activities and workshops. All of the
participants again emphasized the importance of the instructor and why their communication and feedback was crucial to making them feel connected and engaged in their courses.

Listening to participants’ stories also validated the importance of talking to adults themselves to better understand what they see as the advantages and disadvantage of distance learning. A review of the literature showed a gap in this area as very few studies (Zembylas, 2008) have provided anecdotal evidence of older students’ experiences with online education and this was one of the reasons narrative inquiry was chosen for this study. This research also proved that adult students can offer new insights into what the distance experience is like for them and that their rich and detailed narratives including their thoughts on their future learning may be beneficial to creating online courses that better suit their needs and learning styles. It also shows that their learning experiences are unique and should be viewed and addressed in a way that recognizes this.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Andragogy

Based on the themes developed in this research, it is clear participants in this study learn and approach their education differently than they did when they were younger, which is a key principle of andragogy (Blondy, 2007; Clawson, 2006). The study’s key findings will be now examined in relation to adult learning theory to see if participants’ recent experiences with education fit within Knowles’s six assumptions of how older students learn and whether their current learning environment is meeting their needs and learning styles.

Active learners. Under the theme of Motivation, participants reflected on their current education by talking about their desire to be in “control” of their learning and play an active part in it. They described themselves using words like “self-motivated” and “self-starter.” This is in contrast to their early years of schooling in which they were not as motivated because they were
not “paying for” their education and were not doing it for “career” advancement. Overall, they feel like their online experiences have been “positive” because distance learning works with their need to be independent and therefore is a good fit for them as adult learners. This also supports the first principle of andragogy, which is that adult students tend to be autonomous and need to be actively involved in their education (Cercone, 2008; Merriam, 2001).

**Relevant learning.** In both the themes of Feedback and Communication and Successes, participants talked about the need for learning that is relevant to them, which is another important aspect of adult learning theory. Several participants mentioned the discussion boards as being a place they felt successful and “engaged” in because many of the topics they talked about were “relevant” to real world issues or “connected” directly to what they were doing at work. This fits with the belief that adult learners are more like to learn and be satisfied with their classes when the information being presented to them “relates” to their own experiences (Cercone, 2008). They also felt like they learned the most in discussion boards where instructors gave them specific “feedback” and other students participated and shared their own stories.

**Clear expectations.** Another principle of andragogy that could be found in the themes of Feedback and Communication and Positive Experiences was the realization that adult students want their course objectives and assignments clearly outlined because they are goal-oriented and want to know that their particular learning needs are being met (Tyler-Smith, 2006). One reason their online experiences were “positive” was because they “knew what the expectations were” and it was “pretty well mapped out.” This fits into the notion that adult learners want instructors to communicate with them not only about how they are doing in the course but also about what they expect of students (Clawson, 2006).
**Problem-Oriented learners.** According to andragogy, adult students are also more problem-oriented as opposed to subject-oriented, meaning they want to know how their learning can be applied to their current experiences and how they will benefit from it (Clawson, 2006). In every case, as was shown under the theme Motivation, participants went back to school to further their career or begin a new one so they wanted to ensure that their education was beneficial to them. As one participant said, I “wanna get something out of” it. Another talked about how she would like to see even more “real life experiences” incorporated into her future learning.

**Internal motivation.** Adult learning theory also suggests that older learners are motivated to learn based on internal factors as opposed to external ones such as pressure from their parents or teachers and thus are driven by the desire to excel at work or improve their career opportunities (Cercone, 2008). The theme of Motivation proved this when participants talked about the reason why they went back to school, saying they wanted to “challenge themselves” and “do better” or get a “promotion” at work.

**Active participant.** The last aspect of andragogy suggests that as people mature, they need to see relevance in what they are learning and therefore want to be involved in the planning and implementation of their education (Taylor & Kroth, 2009). In listening to participants, this became clear when they spoke about their Future Learning and the common themes that could be seen in their answers of More Choice, Interaction, and Feedback.

They want “more choice” in the types of courses they can take as well as more options for class times and instructors and they also want “more interaction” and collaboration with both their peers and professors. For various reasons including the fact they are “paying for” it and have career or other goals in mind, they want to be actively involved in the direction their
learning takes in contrast to their early education, which was driven and influenced more by parents and educators.

**Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to listen adult students’ stories about their educational experiences both past and present so as to get a better understanding of how these experiences have influenced the ways in which they have approached their distance learning. In choosing narrative for this research, adult learners were given a voice to fully and authentically share their thoughts not only about their overall educational journey but also about what the online learning experience has been like for them. This is in contrast to most past studies on these nontraditional learners, which have focused more on collecting mostly quantitative data about their experiences with distance education with little to no discussion about the role their early learning might be playing in how they approach and perceive their online courses.

This study sought to broaden the discussion on this very timely topic as well as contribute much needed anecdotal evidence about adult online learners by allowing them to share their unique perspectives of what it was like to take distance courses after time away from formal education while also juggling multiple responsibilities both at work and home. One important implication of this research is that through the narrative, each participant was able to provide a rich and detailed account of their experiences and as a result, the data collected could prove valuable to colleges and universities serving these students since it offers a clearer and more personal picture of how adult students learn online. The findings could be especially beneficial to distance institutions as most of those enrolled in undergraduate online programs are adults. The stories recounted in this study may also be helpful to instructors and course developers who are working to make distance classes more effective for this particular population.
Another implication of this research is that there is clearly a link between adult students’ satisfaction with their online courses and how engaged and connected they felt their instructors were in these classes. All of the participants in this study had mostly positive experiences in their distance courses and much of this had to do with the communication and feedback they received from both instructors and administrators at the institution they were enrolled at. Many participants did not feel well supported in their early education so it was important for them to have a more solid foundation in their current learning, particularly in the online environment, which can be isolating. As part of their distance experience, they wanted to know what the expectations were, how they were doing in their courses, and have frequent interactions with both their instructors and classmates.

These findings suggest that communication that is clear and constant is essential for adult learners’ success online and that the instructor can play an integral part in facilitating this as can the institution itself through consistent contact with students about their educational goals and how they can achieve them. The more easily degree requirements and course expectations are mapped out for students the more likely they will be to be satisfied with their online experience and engaged in their coursework.

Participants also seemed to like the discussion boards that are currently used in online courses as a means to interact with others although most felt like these forums could be even better utilized through more guidance and feedback from instructors. Those who got the most out of the discussion boards were participants whose professors engaged in the conversations and regulated them when students were not contributing to the debate. Participants also found it helpful when instructors included topics that related to real world problems and connected to their professional goals. This research shows that the discussion boards can be a useful tool for
engaging adult students, but that the instructor needs to play a critical role in monitoring them and providing feedback in order to make them effective.

Another important implication of this study is the recognition of the valuable role andragogy can play in developing and designing courses for adult learners. Participants in this research were motivated to do well in college because they were paying for it and were mostly going back to school for job security or career advancement as opposed to the reasons younger learners often enroll in higher education. This is in line with the principles of adult learning theory that suggest older students not only view their education differently but approach it from a unique perspective as well (Blondy, 2007; Clawson, 2006).

As andragogy theorizes, study participants wanted to be more actively involved in their learning than they were in their early education and they also wanted to ensure they were taking courses that incorporated their experiences and had relevance to them (Cercone, 2008; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Participants in this research also confirmed another assumption of andragogy, which is that adult students tend to be independent learners who want some level of control over their learning and this is why the online environment works for them as long as they are getting some direction and guidance in their education (Cercone, 2008). Adult learners also demand more from their learning than they did when they were younger so they have strong opinions about what is working and what is not in their current educational experiences and participants in this study confirmed this as well (Clawson, 2006).

Adult learning theory also surmises that older learners are motivated to learn by internal factors as opposed to external ones (Cercone, 2008). Participants in this research were going back to school for themselves and therefore wanted to ensure that their educational experiences were beneficial to them and that their classroom contributions were being valued by others.
These findings show that colleges and universities should acknowledge the unique traits of adult students and do more to include them in the learning process. Since they have a personal stake in their education, adults should be involved in guiding their learning with direction from instructors as this helps them to be engaged and in turn satisfied with their experiences.

This study also showed that adults have some insightful ideas for how to make online learning even better for them. They are the ones having these experiences so their perspective is important and could provide valuable information for making distance classes more effective for older students. Hearing from participants in depth and allowing them to share their stories freely through open-ended questioning resulted in research that has many practical applications that online educators should consider when creating programs for these learners. Many of the reflections and suggestions made by participants are worth taking note of since more adults are turning to distance education for their educational needs and it is important to develop courses that they will be successful in.

**Areas for Future Research**

This research could provide a basis for future studies that seek to better understand the experiences adult students are having in their online undergraduate courses. More needs to be done to recognize the distinct characteristics of older learners and consider the ways in which they could get more out of their distance education. Using the narrative to learn more about their educational experiences proved to be a worthwhile exercise that future researchers should consider replicating or expanding on since there is a wealth of information out there that has yet to be explored on this topic. Based on the responses given by participants in this study, adult students clearly have a lot to share about what it was like to take online courses as well as many valuable suggestions for how to make these classes even more effective for them.
The valuable role instructors can play in adult learners’ success should also be examined further as this research validated and strengthened past studies on this issue. The connection between engagement and course and program satisfaction should be addressed more thoroughly as well. Participants in this study had mostly positive experiences in their online courses in part because of how interactive these classes were and the feedback and communication they received from their instructors. Future research should focus on instructor involvement and consider ways in which their role could be strengthened so as to make sure adults get the most out of their distance programs. Areas that should be explored in more detail include what kind of training instructors should receive before teaching online courses and whether institutions should consider having certain requirements for how often professors communicate with their students since class engagement appears to have an impact on student satisfaction.

This study also confirmed that undergraduate adults learn differently than their younger counterparts and that many of the principles of andragogy held true for participants in this research so this is an area that requires more attention. Many of the participants learned in ways that closely align with adult learning theory and therefore future studies should examine how andragogy might be used to develop online courses that better suit the needs of older students. Some of the topics that should be explored are how to get adults more involved in their learning and how to incorporate their life and work experiences more into their distance education. Research should also be conducted on how online courses could be more clearly mapped out so adult learners see the connection and relevance of their learning to their professional goals.

Although a good amount of research has been done on online undergraduate programs and ways to improve them, more studies should address the unique experiences older learners are having in these courses. More attention should be paid to both adults who are doing well in their
distance classes and those who are struggling, as their experiences are most likely very different and worthy of further exploration. As this study has shown, adult students have specific needs and approach their learning in ways that are distinct from their younger counterparts and this is why more research needs to be devoted to this very important topic.

Limitations

This study was also not without its limitations, meaning the results do not necessarily reflect the experiences all undergraduate adults have had with online learning. Since this was a narrative study, the sample size was small, with only six participants whose stories might not be indicative of this particular student population as a whole. Study participants attended various institutions while seeking their college degree from community colleges to four-year universities, but most of the schools were in the Northeast and a few were in New Hampshire, which limited the scope of this research as other students in other programs and other parts of the county may have had completely different experiences in their distance programs.

Most of those interviewed were also quite successful in their online classes so their experiences might be in sharp contrast to those who have struggled or not completed their distance courses. Although this study included two men and four women ranging in age from late 20s to late 40s, all of the participants were Caucasian and English was their first language so the group that was interviewed was not very diverse and may not be representative of what some adult students have experienced in the online environment. The results of this research may have been drastically different if language had been a barrier. Not including participants of various races also limited the scope of this study. All but one of the participants appeared to have a fairly stable job and economic situation and this impacted the findings as well since the majority of those interviewed did not seem to be struggling with the financial aspects of completing their
degree. Most had good solid paying jobs and had gone back to school for career advancement as opposed to needing to find work.

This research was also limited by the time participants could devote to being interviewed. Some of the interviews had to be condensed into one or two longer sessions as opposed to three separate interviews. The researcher worked to ensure each participant had as much time as they needed to share their stories, but their narratives may have been even more thorough if they had a longer time to reflect between each interview.

Participants were also in varying stages of completing their degrees with some already having finished their bachelor’s or associate’s while others were still taking distance courses. The results of this study might have turned out differently if all of the participants had been at the same stage in their education. Despite these limitations, participants were able to share narratives that were well thought out and offered lots of rich, detailed information about their learning. Their stories will hopefully help provide a clearer more nuanced picture of their educational experiences so that online educators and administrators alike can work to develop more effective programs for them.

**Personal Reflection**

The choice to pursue narrative as a means to more fully understand adult students’ experiences with distance learning proved to be a beneficial endeavor as participants in this study were eager to open up and share their thoughts about their educational journey. As a former journalist who has always been curious about human nature, it seemed only fitting to choose this type of qualitative research and doing so resulted in findings that created a fuller and more detailed portrait of what it is like for older learners to take distance courses after time away from formal education.
By opening up adult students’ narratives to include stories about their past educational experiences, this study was able to offer new and valuable insight into how their early learning has informed their more recent education and in particular their online classes. Viewing their narratives through the lens of andragogy was also helpful as it brought new meaning not only to how adult students perceive their education but also to what they want to get out of their learning experiences.

This study has also shown how important it is include adults in the conversation about their online experiences as they can offer a unique first hand account of how they approach their courses and whether their classes fit their needs and learning styles. Most of the research that has been conducted in this area has centered more on what educators and administrators think should be done to make distance classes more effective without including adult students themselves in this discussion. This researcher wanted to change this and in reflecting on the problem of practice presented in this study, the results show that adults’ stories do indeed provide a needed piece in the ongoing debate about how this specific population can benefit more from online education.

Adult learners seeking their college degree need to be successful in their learning as our nation currently has a significant gap between the jobs available in this country and the percentage of our population that has the required education to fill these positions. Many adults are going back to school to keep up with the changing economic times and if the U.S. does want to compete globally our educators need to figure out ways to better support these nontraditional learners. Most of them are going online for their degree so it is imperative that instructors and administrators do what they can to make distance courses and programs as effective as possible
for this student population. Attrition rates are currently high in many online courses and educators need to figure out solutions to help students complete these classes.

The hope is that with more degree holders, more people will have better paying jobs, which might help to lessen the inequity gap in this country. Higher education leaders should be working to help open doors for these older learners so they can be succeed in their learning and provide better lives for themselves and their families because in the end, their success is our success. Having a more educated workforce is imperative to our nation’s future as it will not only strengthen our economy, but our entire country and therefore it is a goal we should all aspire to.
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Appendix A

Date:

Dear [Vice President of Academic Affairs],

I’m writing to you because I’m interested in doing my doctoral research at your college. I’m currently working on my thesis at Northeastern University and believe [insert school here] would be the perfect place to conduct my study not only because I’ve done past research there (thanks to [insert name] and [insert name]!) but also because your student population is ideal for the problem of practice I’m examining.

The purpose of my qualitative study is to learn more about how adult students approach their online courses by listening to their stories about their educational experiences both past and present and how these experiences may now be influencing their current learning. I know [insert school name] serves many of these nontraditional learners and I also know that the school offers an extensive distance education program through the state’s seven community colleges. In reading the school’s 2013-2017 strategic plan, I also discovered that [insert school name] recognizes that the adult student population is growing, as is the demand for online learning options. I’m hoping my research might be helpful to the college in providing data not only on adult learners at the school but also on the experiences they’re having online and what aspects of this type of learning are most effective for them.

In terms of research specifics, I’m conducting a narrative study so I’m hoping to do in-depth interviews with four to six adult students and I plan to interview each of them three times for about an hour. I hope to recruit participants by posting fliers on campus and contacting the school’s distance instructors to see if they would put up an announcement in their courses.

All of the interviews will be done at a time and location that is convenient for students. I’m willing to meet them on campus or in their homes or wherever works for them. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used and the college will not be identified by name. There are also no risks associated with this research and the potential benefits are that the results could help adult students make more informed decisions about whether online learning is right for them. Also, I’ve included a copy of the consent form I will be distributing to participants so they are well informed about the study and their rights and privacy are protected.

I’m hoping to begin my research this spring. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at lyng.k@husky.neu.edu or (603) 957-1969.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kimberley Small Lyng
333 New Castle Ave.
Portsmouth, NH 03801
Appendix B

WANT TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY?

Northeastern University doctoral student is looking to interview adult students interested in sharing their experiences with online learning. The purpose of this study is to better understand how adults approach their distance courses by listening to their stories about their educational experiences as a whole with the hope this information can then be used to create online classes that are more beneficial to them.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

• Participants must be between the ages of 25 and 45.
• Participants must be seeking either their associate’s or bachelor’s degree.
• Participants must have completed at least one course that is completely online and asynchronous.

WHAT WILL PARTICIPANTS BE ASKED TO DO?

• Participants will take part in three interviews.
• Each interview will last about an hour.
• Interviews will take place at a location convenient to participants.
• Pseudonyms will be used to protect participants’ privacy.

If you have questions or are interested in participating, contact Kim Small Lyng at lyng.k@husky.neu.edu or call or text her at (603) 957-1969.
Appendix C

Consent Form

Northeastern University
Department: College of Professional Studies (CPS), Higher Education Administration concentration
Name of Investigators: Dr. Kelly Conn (Principal Investigator), Kimberley Small Lyng (Student Researcher)
Title of Project: Going the Distance: Why Students’ Stories May Hold the Key to Creating More Effective Online Courses for Adult Learners

Why am I being asked to participate in this research?
You have been recruited for this study because you are 25 years of age or older and have completed at least one online course in pursuit of either your associate’s or bachelor’s degree. As part of this research, you will be involved in three interviews lasting about an hour each and done at a time and location that is convenient to you. Each of the interviews will be taped with a voice recorder and later transcribed. To protect your privacy and ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used during the interviews and the name of your college will also be obscured. In addition, I will take all precautions to ensure that all electronic and written data I collect is password protected on my computer and secured in a lock box during the course of my research.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to better understand how adult students approach their distance courses by listening to their stories about their educational experiences both past and present and considering ways in which these experiences may now be influencing their online learning. The hope is that by allowing adults to share their experiences, to tell their narratives, distance educators can begin creating more effective online classes for these students.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to participate in three hour-long interviews that will take place at a time and location that works for you. The first session will include a brief overview of the study followed by a discussion and signing of this informed consent form, at which time the interview will begin.

The first interview will focus on your past experiences with learning. The second session will include questions about your present experiences with education giving specific attention to your online experience. This will be followed by questions about what you would like your future learning to be like. The final interview will be devoted to any follow-up questions I feel are necessary to clarify and complete your story. Time will also be spent going over your interviews to ensure your narratives are told in a way that you feel are as authentic and accurate as possible.

During the interviews, I may take some brief notes based on my observations of your responses or to help me with follow-up questions, but most of the session will focus on you and your stories. It would also be helpful if you could bring any online class syllabi or assignments you
have so I can get a good visual of what is happening when you talk about your online experiences and the specific assignments and course objectives involved.

**Where will this take place and how much time will it take?**
I’m open to conducting the interviews in a place that is convenient and comfortable for you. We can do them at the college either before or after one of your classes, or at your home, or at another location of your choosing. Each interview will last roughly an hour and I will try to respect the time limit.

**Will there be any risk to me?**
No. There are no significant risks involved with participating in this research.

**Will I benefit from participating in this research?**
There are no direct benefits to being involved in this research. However, the hope is that this research could be used to develop distance courses that are more beneficial to adult students so they are more successful in them.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your participation in this study will be completely confidential. As mentioned earlier, pseudonyms will be used for all study participants and the college you attend will not be identified by name. The only people who will have access to the data collected are myself and the principal investigator. Once the interviews are transcribed, the audiotapes will be destroyed and the data will password protected on my computer. Any written materials will be kept in a lock box in my home and later destroyed when the study is complete.

**What if I decide to drop out of this study?**
Participation in this study is voluntary and you can opt out at any time even if you signed this consent form.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns?**
You can contact me, Kim Lyng, the researcher, at lyng.k@husky.neu.edu or call or text me at (603) 957-1969. You can also contact the principal investigator Dr. Kelly Conn at k.conn@northeastern.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
You can contact Nan C. Regina, director of Human Subject Research Protection at 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Her phone number is: (617) 373-4588 and her email is: nregina@neu.edu. You are welcome to call anonymously.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
There is no compensation for participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
There is no cost to participate in this study.
I have read and understand the information provided in this consent form. I have also been given the opportunity to ask questions about this research and am fully aware of the nature of my involvement as a participant. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I can withdraw from this research at any point.

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<th>Research Participant (Signature)</th>
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Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. I know your time is valuable. One of my main reasons for doing this research is to help adult students like yourselves be more successful in the online environment by listening to your stories about your experiences not only with your distance courses but with education as a whole both now and when you were younger. My hope is that in sharing your stories, I, along with other educators, can get a better sense of what aspects of online learning are working for you and which are not.

As part of this process, I want these interviews to be as fluid and open-ended as possible so you feel comfortable telling your stories. I will be asking you some overarching questions to get us started, but I want you to control the direction of our conversations because these are your experiences, meaning only you can tell them in a way that is meaningful and authentic.

There will be a total of three interviews lasting about an hour each. The first interview will focus on your past experiences with education. The second interview will focus on your current experiences with education and in particular your online experiences and I will also ask you to look ahead and reflect on what you would like your future learning to be like. The third interview will be reserved for follow-up questions and any clarifications that both you and I feel are needed to make your story as complete and accurate as possible. All of the interviews will be recorded and will remain confidential.

Below are the questions that will be asked during each interview, but remember this is simply a guideline and I am willing to go in whatever direction we need to in order for your stories to be told.

Also, before we get started, I want to make sure you have read and signed the Consent Form that explains what this study is about and is there to remind you that your participation in this research is voluntary, you can opt out at any time, and all of the information that is collected will remain confidential. Finally, do you have any questions before we begin the first interview?

**Interview One Questions**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself and your background.

2. Tell me about your past experiences with education.

3. What were your experiences like in grade school, in middle school, in high school?
4. Can you share a story of a time when learning came easy to you?
5. What was it about that experience that you think helped you as a learner?
6. Can you share a story of a time when you struggled as a learner?
7. What do you think was a barrier to your learning?
8. Is there anything you would like to add about your past experiences with education?

**Interview Two Questions**

1. Tell me about your current experiences with education.
2. What have your experiences with online learning been like?
3. Can you share a story from your experiences taking distance courses in which your learning came easy to you?
4. What was it about that experience that you think helped you as a learner?
5. Can you share a story from your online experience in which you struggled as a learner?
6. What do you think was a barrier to your learning?
7. Based on your past and current experiences with education, what would you like your future learning to be like?
8. Is there anything you would like to add about your current and future experiences with education?

**Interview Three Questions**

1. This interview will be used for follow-up questions and clarifications of your answers in Interview One and Two.
Appendix E

Member Check Form

Date of Interview:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

I, the interviewee, have reviewed the researcher’s finding and I agree with the following statements (check all that apply):

___ I have verified the accuracy of the report.
___ I agree the information gathered is complete and accurate.
___ I agree the interpretation of my stories is fair and representative of my experiences.
___ I do not agree with the report and interpretations made about my experiences. Below are my suggestions for making this report more accurate.

Suggestions/Comments:

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<th>Interviewee</th>
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