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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Interest in how adult learners use web-based instruction and what approaches and strategies are effective in helping them construct knowledge has grown along with the explosion of online learning opportunities. Shirley Ann Freed, in her article **Metaphors and Reflective Dialogue Online** has presented the results of a study, along with a thoughtful discussion of the how student dialogue, reflection, and self-direction can be part of effective online courses. The use of metaphors as a valuable means for reflection confirms the importance of such examples and stories in the learning process. Effective use of bulletin boards, or similar tools, to foster positive interaction among the online learners is clearly demonstrated.

Beginning or returning to graduate school can be challenging for many mid-career adults considering this endeavor. Nancy Bishop Dessommes describes the experience of several women who began an intensive doctoral program in English in her article **Echoes of an Institute: Veterans of the National Writing Project Reflect upon Returning to Graduate School**. These women all had participated in a previous intensive program, the National Writing Project, which had prepared them not only for the subject area, but had helped them deal with the nature of such an immersion learning experience. The article describes the differences between working primarily from home in a graduate program and spending an intensive period away from home with colleagues who are participating in the same experience. The value of the collaboration and camaraderie that can develop in such learning experiences is relevant to many kinds of organized learning programs for adults.

Readers are invited to make these articles “interactive” by responding on AEDNET (the Adult Education NETwork) and sharing their comments. (Directions to guide this discussion are given in this issue on page 31). Readers also are encouraged to submit an article for consideration by the editorial board of New Horizons on a related topic or other topic relevant to adult education philosophy, research, and practice. (See Call for Manuscripts on page 31 for details.)

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METAPHORS AND REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE ONLINE

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to examine how adult learners used a WebCT bulletin board space to construct knowledge. Cognitive psychologists are clear that active involvement with other people is necessary for learning. Yet, what stimulates the discussion online? How does simple “posting” or “argument” develop into “deep reflection?” How does this online learning environment provide for significant and sustained interactions? What is it about a WebCT bulletin board space that facilitates adult learning? In this analysis, metaphors and questions of possibilities were the “tools” that connected reflection, dialogue and self-direction to create new understandings. The space itself provided unique opportunities for self-directed learning and reflective dialogue.

Introduction

“How do I know that I know what I need to know to know what I am expected to know in order to know what I am supposed to know from having participated in this learning environment. . . .” Dan

Dan, like many adults in an online bulletin board, is challenged to make sense of the space and the way it shapes thinking. Socialized in academic environments where discussion and dialogue are often devalued, where debate and combativeness are often encouraged, the online bulletin board provides a new way to function.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine how adult learners used a WebCT bulletin board space to construct knowledge. Cognitive psychologists (Bruner, Pepert, Vygotsky, Dewey and Resnick) are clear that active involvement with other people is necessary for learning. Yet, what stimulates the discussion online? How does simple “posting” or “argument” develop into “deep reflection?” How does this online learning environment provide for significant and sustained interactions? What is it about a WebCT bulletin board space that facilitates adult learning?

In this analysis, metaphors and questions of possibilities were the “tools” that connected reflection, dialogue and self-direction to create new understandings. The space itself provided unique opportunities for self-directed learning and reflective dialogue.

Definitions of Reflection

What is reflection and why is it important in the learning process? Dewey (1933) stated that reflective thought is “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends” (p. 9). Kolb (1984) suggested that reflection is one of four critical steps in the experiential learning cycle. Schon (1983, 1987) demonstrated that reflection is an essential component of professional knowledge and practice. He emphasized reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action, differentiating between reflection on past and present actions. Boyd and Fales (1983) defined reflection as “the *process* of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience (present or past) in terms of self (self in relation to the self and self in relation to the world). The outcome of the process is changed conceptual perspective. . . the shift from one perceptual perspective to another, which . . . has always been the focus of those who seek to understand human growth” (p. 101). Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) developed a model for reflection that had three key factors: a return to the experience, attending to the feelings that arose out of the experience and re-evaluation of the experience. Brody (1994) stated that reflection is “an attempt to impose order and coherence on a stream of experience and to work out the meaning of incidents and events” (p. 33). Saban, Killion, and Green (1994) identify three types of reflection: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. They suggest that the latter type “comes usually as a result of the other two types of reflections” and “forecasts how we will use what we have learned from reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. We adjust our behavior based on our increased knowledge base and a more informed perspective” (p. 17). Mezirow (1994) defines reflection as “attending to the grounds (justification) for one’s beliefs” and “involves a critique of assumptions to determine whether the belief, often acquired through cultural assimilation in childhood remains functional for us as adults” (p. 223).

While there may be nuances of difference in the previous definitions, all authors would agree that reflection involves a rethinking of experiences so that perspectives change and practice (action) is improved. Their emphasis is on the cognitive aspects of reflection, however, the next section elaborates on the social aspects of reflection.

Reflective Dialogue

As constructivism and the social construction of knowledge have become more widely accepted notions about how people learn, it is not surprising that educators have begun to think about reflection as it may be facilitated in conversations among people. Hatton and Smith (1994) use the term “dialogic reflection” to define a kind of reflecting that “involves stepping back from, mulling over, or tentatively exploring reasons” (p. 42). In their research, conversation that was “personal, tentative, exploratory, and at times indecisive” was considered “dialogic” (p. 42). Spitzer, Wedding, and DiMauro (1994) contrast reflective dialogue with information seeking dialogue and assert that “reflective dialogue tends to begin with a triggering message

that offers a “window” into one’s professional practice, exploring personal beliefs, and philosophies” (p. 1).

Isaacs (1999) uses the term “reflective dialogue” to refer to a process/place “where you become willing to think about the rules underlying what you do – the reasons for your thoughts and actions. You see more clearly what you have taken for granted” (p. 38). He suggests that “reflective dialogue can then give rise to generative dialogue, in which we begin to create entirely new possibilities and create new levels of interaction” (p. 38). He believes that this level of dialogue does not occur often and that in order for it to take place, we need to develop and nurture capacity for four behaviors: suspending, voicing, listening, and respecting.

Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) use the terms “monologue,” “dialogue,” “conversation” and “reflective conversation” to analyze their online interactions. They define “monologue” as messages that do not refer to other messages and do not require or invite a reply. “Conversation” types of messages are exchanges of a social nature whereas “dialogue” messages are information processing exchanges – often controlled by the teacher or tutor. Those interactions that were both information processing and social they named “reflective conversations” (p. 48). Mezirow (2000) used the term “reflective discourse” to refer to

that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief. This involves assessing reasons advanced by weighing the supporting evidence and arguments and by examining alternative perspectives. Reflective discourse involves a critical assessment of assumptions. It leads toward a clearer understanding by tapping collective experience to arrive at a tentative best judgment.” (p. 10 & 11)

In summary, dialogue is associated with the reflective process (Mezirow, 1994, Koppi, Lublin & Chaloupka, 1997) and online dialogue may stimulate reflective activity, whereby previous experiences are examined. Marsick and Mezirow (2002) suggest that transformative learning differentiates between instrumental and communicative learning. This study looks at the communicative aspect and shows how adult learners used an online bulletin board to reflect on and expand their experience in higher education.

The Context of the Study

The students in this online discussion were enrolled in a graduate program in Leadership. This program is a nontraditional, competency based program that is job-embedded. The class assignments were primarily to read articles on 6 topics and discuss them in a WebCT forum. The objective was to use the articles on learning organizations, life-long learning, problem-based learning, professionalism and interdisciplinary studies to help the students make connections with their Leadership program. It was my first experience facilitating an online class and I was intrigued by the level of thinking in the conversations. I immediately began analyzing the posts.

Initially, I used Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson’s (1997) interaction analysis model for examining social construction of knowledge in computer conferencing. Using their model that was developed and applied to an online debate, 350+ interactions between 5 men and 5

women were analyzed. Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson's (1997) model has five phases: (a) sharing/comparing of information, (b) the discovery and exploration of dissonance or inconsistency among ideas, concepts or statements, (c) negotiation of meaning/co-construction of knowledge, (d) testing and modification of proposed synthesis or co-construction, and (e) agreement statement(s)/applications of newly constructed meaning. They portray their model as a patchwork quilt with precise patterns suggesting rather predictable patterns of interactions. I soon discovered that like their study the majority of my student's statements were at phase one. However, I felt the model was not really getting at the subtle changes I was noticing in my student's thinking. I also noticed that some statements engendered timely and thoughtful reactions from others and, since I was also interested in how interactions are maintained, I decided to analyze all the statements that elicited three or more comments. This study reports the findings around one topic: learning organizations in one forum.

Using this more focused approach to understand the interactions I found 10 "posts" that resulted in what I called "hot spots." They seemed to represent bursts of interactions and learning. Seven of the posts suggested and expanded metaphors, six endeavored to make connections with experience, and seven of the posts asked questions. Some of the posts did all three: used metaphors, connected to experiences, and raised questions. However, the questions did not seem to fit into Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson's (1997) model: questions to clarify details or to clarify the source and extent of disagreement. These were questions to raise a possibility. For example, Dan said, "Why does learning always have to be measured in credit? Learners are all around you in the work place. Ask them to be your cohort. Your regional group is not your only resource when it comes to dialogue and learning. Collaboration has no boundaries." And Leslie wondered, "As leaders, how can we provide a climate that makes change something to look forward to and not something to dread? Maybe part of the answer is my own reaction to change. Do I model for others that change can be creative and stimulating? Or do others see me resisting and dreading change?"

These questions of possibilities open the mind to thinking about different ways to live – no credit and embracing change rather than fearing it. They provide an opportunity whereby participants can "suspend judgment" until they have had a chance to decide how they will integrate the new ideas into their schema. It is not surprising that these kinds of questions engendered multiple responses. They provided an opportunity to wrestle with new ways to function without having to take sides - which is what happens often in a debate environment. They seemed to align well with Spitzer, Wedding and DiMauro's (1994) ideas of reflective dialogue and Lamy and Goodfellow's (1999) idea of reflective conversation.

The metaphors were also an unexpected result of the online conversations. Four metaphors, embedded in the 10 "hot spots" engaged the learners in dialogue: the compost heap as a metaphor for change in organizations (the new grows out of the old), the sacred cow as a symbol of processes limiting change, the "fast-food university" as a metaphor for online instruction and a baby with a wet diaper as a metaphor for those resistant to change. Each metaphor was the source of rich interactions and conceptual understanding of issues around learning, organizations, and change. The metaphors seemed to provide a way to nudge people toward insights about new ways to be. They were invitations into an imaginary world. For example, Mickey said,

Peter Senge . . . likens effective organizations to organic systems of nature. . . He says that new grows out of the old (**check your local compost heap**) and learning that growth requires “paying attention to the interplay between reinforcing processes and limiting process.” The limiting processes are key because they are our **sacred cows**. . . . What are the limiting processes in the Leadership Program? How is the staff doing at letting go of the old to make way for the new? How are we doing this in our work? In our quest for our PhD’s? At home?

This is a rich post with two metaphors, the compost heap and sacred cows, as well as multiple questions, and an invitation to make connections with the Leadership program experience. Dan, one of five who replied, said, “I particularly like the metaphor of the compost pile. When everything is in a mess, it can be the first signs of new growth. Hmmmm . . . kind of describes what this past year has felt like.” The idea of a compost pile gave Dan a way to think about the Leadership program. And gave him hope that new growth often emerges from a mess! I replied to Mickey’s post by saying,

Is it helpful to name the **sacred cows**? There is so much in higher ed that has been sacred/untouchable for so long!! For example, the Carnegie unit – the idea that we give credit based on seat-time – if not that – then what??

This post also resulted in multiple responses. It may also have legitimized a critical look at higher education. For the next two weeks, the bulletin board space buzzed with questions and comments. Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) suggest that “self-sustaining threads arise in response to questions deemed worth asking by the learning community, but these may not necessarily coincide with those deemed worth asking by the teacher” (p. 57). This question happened to be worthwhile for this particular community. It was the only “hot spot” generated by me, the teacher. All of the other “hot spots” were created by students. How should a teacher respond when their questions are ignored? In a face to face classroom, students will rarely ignore their teacher, but in an online space it happens all the time! I had to learn to deal with this phenomenon and in time realized that the space was a place where learners could exercise significant choice and control. And choosing to respond to some posts and ignore others - even my own was one of the strengths of an online conversation.

The next post that resulted in multiple responses continued the discussion about sacred cows and developed the **fast food university** metaphor that had been introduced by Joe.

Terry O’Banion . . . says that our problem in higher ed. is that we’re so bound: semester-bound, credit-bound, campus-bound, grade-bound, etc., that we’ve lost sight of what affects real learning. The fact that the K-12 system still holds to a school schedule that’s based on the agricultural model is the biggest example of “boundedness” and **sacred cows** (this one elevated to god-hood!) The fact that we are talking about dropping out of the discussion, then picking it back up when we have a critical mass to begin again is a beautiful example of loosening those bindings! Of course, we have to be cautious about quality as Joe suggests, but if we are quality minded, we can make these changes. Joe, the **fast food industry** makes millions of dollars and is a conduit for folks to have heart

attacks, but remember, people choose to eat those burgers – they could also choose to eat the salads! I think we can have education on demand, AND quality.

One of the multiple responders was Joe who said, “You write ‘education on demand, AND quality.’ Sounds like a great slogan to me. I think the quality will come in as we implement what we are learning from this great experiment.” And Gary said, “Education on demand AND quality. That one is a winner! . . . I am making progress on my Leadership program. There are times when we struggle to keep our nostrils above water level (another metaphor!) and parts of our learning (like this internet course) take a back seat. I think that will always be true as long as our program is tied into our job descriptions.”

Another response that brought multiple reactions was from Ginna. It raised a very sensitive issue – that of regional groups. In the Leadership program, because it is job-embedded and students are away from the university for the majority of the program they are expected to develop their competencies with other students in their geographical region. Ginna clearly is not happy with what is happening in her group and the multiple metaphors give her an opportunity to share her frustrations.

We’re just too busy to concern ourselves with very many things that don’t meet our own immediate needs or wants. Where in all this effort and experimentation to improve education do we fit in the idea of seeing others as important as ourselves, of doing onto others what we would have them do to us, of loving our neighbor (or group member) instead of using them for our personal gain. Is there a way to leave our human “me first” attitude on the **compost pile** or will that always have to be something that every class and every group must struggle with? If we are not accountable to be there for one another, can our educational experience really be high-quality? Or don’t the relationships matter that much? And if they do, how do we get us all to the place where when we come to **Fast Food University**, we make the healthy choices: we order the relationship salad instead of the fatty burger of selfishness?

Again we see a rich post with experiences, metaphors and questions of possibility. Joe responded by saying, “WOW, Way to put it!” and Alison said, “Go Girl!” Mickey was more thoughtful. “Ginna, I’m not sure I agree with how you characterize what we’ve been doing in this program—at least you’re certainly not characterizing me correctly. . . . My regional group members know they can count on me for lots of things. Tracie dropped off some materials for me at my house this morning to deliver for her. Sharon called me last week because she was having some conflict at work she wanted to talk about. No, there is nothing selfish about what I am doing in this program – far from it.”

These two interactions, Ginna’s post and Mickey’s response, can best be characterized as the “voicing” ability Isaacs (1999) suggests needs to be present for reflection to take place. Mezirow (2000) states that “discourse is the forum in which ‘finding one’s voice’ becomes a prerequisite for free full participation” (p. 11). The regional group experience is being examined from multiple perspectives and Ginna and Mickey are modeling for the others their use of authentic voices. In another widely responded-to post, Gary introduced the **diaper** metaphor,

“There is a saying that, ‘the only one who likes change is a baby with a wet diaper.’ So, how do we make the transition from a mind that just adjusts, to one that actively looks forward to and seeks change?”

Leslie responded with “Gary, your comment is great! My youngest is just finishing up potty training so I can relate.” Then she goes on to question whether she herself models resistance to change. And Sudds said, “I can only speak for my experience, but the only time I can remember actively looking forward to change is on those occasions when I am dissatisfied with the present and desiring something better.” He goes on to describe how he balances his work life by not chasing every new idea – even waiting to buy software until the bugs have been worked out. Sudds’ comment, “I can only speak for my experience” is provocative. Is experience the only place we speak from? The definitions of reflection would suggest that personal experiences are central to the reflective process. And in this bulletin board space, experiences emerged as a strong theme.

The students were clearly using the WebCT space to reflect on their experience by using metaphors. Other metaphors emerged, but did not create such large bursts of activity. For example, Gary said,

Your comments made me think of the flow of life long learning. Excuse the metaphor of a river (I am a naturalist), but it seems like the Leadership Program can potentially provide learning experiences that flow more naturally. We too often view learning as short intense periods (classes), after which we vegetate. . . .The obstacles associated with our work setting at times provide the greatest learning experiences. But it is the interaction between the water flow and the river bed that creates the dynamic of the fresh mountain stream. Well that is my metaphor for this class!

His final statement suggests that while others were expanding the four major metaphors for this particular section, they did not quite work for him. Yet, it may have been the discussion with multiple metaphors that urged him to develop his own and share it. Leslie responded to Gary by posting, “Now, you’re sounding like Peter Senge in the recent Fast Company article. His premise is that in order to change we must move from thinking like mechanics and acting like gardeners. Right down your alley!”

With this comment Leslie was leading Gary back to the compost heap/organic metaphor. Why did metaphors have such a prominent place in this online space? In what ways were personal experiences connected to metaphors? Why did these “hot spots” engender further interactions?

Vygotsky (1978) has helped us understand the importance of social interaction for the internalization of new knowledge. These “hot” spots seemed to represent the “zone of proximal development” for the learners. In children the “zone of proximal development” is the mental/physical space where new ideas are “tried on,” almost like wearing mother’s high heeled shoes. In adults the playful engagement with metaphors and questions of possibility provide the cognitive space whereby new ideas are formulated. Provenzo et al. (1989) indicate that “an individual’s creation of metaphor is part of a fundamental human impulse to find meaning in life” (p. 551).

What is a metaphor? Webster's definition is "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them." According to Webster, the roots "meta" and "pherein" mean to change, transfer or bear. Is it possible that one concept bears/carries an idea until the learner can reshape the other one and make a new connection? Bowers (1980) agrees that "this drive to name, to give meaning, to categorize involves the use of metaphor, that is, the establishment of an identity between dissimilar things" (p. 271). A partially known concept or phenomenon is explored in terms of the known. Kottkamp (1990) stated that "metaphor is a powerful and flexible means for reflection" (p. 191).

The multiple metaphors in this bulletin board indicate the examination of personal experiences. They were "tools" to think with. Others have noted the generative nature of metaphors -- the way they facilitate understanding of a complex phenomenon. Marshall (1990) uses metaphor "not as a literary device but as a heuristic tool to uncover unproductive patterns and create possibilities for new modes of interacting" (p. 129). The students in this online discussion didn't need instruction in the use of metaphoric language. The WebCT space seemed to open a door to a place where they could do what they naturally do. Metaphors are another way humans think and are pervasive in our language systems (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Provenzo et al.(1989) state that "through its capacity to clarify meaning in complex settings, metaphor is able to go beyond the limitations of scientific language and description" (p. 551).

Bruner (1996) articulated the important role of narrative in contrast with the science paradigm.

We devote an enormous amount of pedagogical effort to teaching the methods of science and rational thought: what is involved in verification, what constitutes contradiction, how to convert mere utterances into testable propositions, and on down the list. For these are the "methods" for creating a "reality according to science." Yet we live most of our lives in a world constructed according to the rules and devices of narrative. (p. 149)

The paradigmatic mode of knowing (Bruner, 1985) has been dominant in education and in our culture but that seems to be changing as the value of stories/narratives are emerging and folks are becoming disillusioned with the debate culture and the inevitable arguments based on logic. Tannen (1998) asserts,

The argument culture, with its tendency to approach issues as a polarized debate, and the culture of critique, with its inclination to regard criticism and attack as the best if not the only type of rigorous thinking, are deeply rooted in Western tradition, going back to the ancient Greeks. . . . The tendency to value formal, objective knowledge over relational, intuitive knowledge grows out of our notion of education as training for debate. It is a legacy of the agonistic heritage. . . .Throughout our educational system, the most pervasive inheritance is the conviction that issues have two sides, that knowledge is best gained through debate, that ideas should be presented orally to an audience that does its best to poke holes and find weaknesses, and that to get recognition, one has to "stake out a position" in opposition to another. (p. 257, 261)

My initial analysis used Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson's (1997) model. It was developed using data from an online debate. My students were not debating - they were dialoguing using multiple metaphors. And metaphoric conversation is unpredictable and more like a crazy quilt than the predicted patterns of Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson's (1997) model. My students were teaching me that dialogue and questions of possibility were ways to encourage the construction of powerful metaphors. I was learning there was something unique about this online environment.

Discussion

How does a WebCT Bulletin Board space enable adult learners to be reflective? Does the WebCT space itself influence the ability for reflective dialogue to take place? The purpose of this section of the paper is to discuss the space that is provided by a WebCT bulletin board and the ways that it facilitates or limits reflective dialogue. Isaacs (1999) states,

What is often missed when people try to create dialogue is that our conversations take place in an envelope or atmosphere that greatly influences how we think and act. The space from which people come greatly influences their quality of insight, clarity of thought, and depth of feeling. This space is composed of the habits of thought and quality of attention that people bring to any interaction. By becoming more conscious of the *architecture of the invisible* atmosphere in our conversations, we may have profound effect on our words." (p. 30)

What is the *architecture* of a WebCT bulletin board? Is it a space where the "habits of thought and quality of attention" are conducive to reflection and higher order thinking? Initially students and teachers often use the space to "post" assignments. They are bringing to the bulletin board space, the invisible *architecture* of previous learning experiences. They see no real need for dialogue, nor do they see the value of an online discussion. The teachers first concern is often, "How many posts should I require?" and "How will I evaluate the discussion?" When first using a bulletin board, I required two postings and two responses to other posts. But the conversations were stilted and the focus of everyone seemed more on the numbers of posts rather than the quality of posts. Over time, I learned that the *architecture* of the space itself provided an atmosphere where my adult learners could function in ways that were comfortable for them. In this section I make connections between four features of an online bulletin board space and adult learning theories.

Independence and Collaboration

Knowles (1970) will be remembered as the Father of Andragogy. In his differentiation between adult learners and children, he identified experiential learning and self-direction as critical components of an adult's learning activities. Garrison (1992) stated that "to have any meaning, self-direction, like critical thinking, must include being responsible for relating new ideas and experience to previous knowledge, as well as actively sharing that new understanding in order to justify and validate it" (p. 146). Tam (2000) states that "distance learning provides a unique context in which to infuse constructivist principles where learners are expected to

function as self-motivated, self-directed, interactive, collaborative participants in their learning experiences by virtue of their physical location” (p. 1).

The WebCT bulletin board seems to be an ideal place for learners to be responsible for their own learning. They have to be independent in terms of figuring out what the “experience” (in this case, the Leadership program) means to them. The bulletin board format doesn’t allow them to “hide” behind other verbal learners as sometimes happens in the f-to-f classroom. They have to think and verbalize their own ideas in the bulletin board space. The WebCT bulletin board gives them a “space” where they can share their thinking and adapt and change it. Yet, they do not remain in isolation in their efforts to make sense of the “experience.” As Mezirow (1985) observes, there “is probably no such thing as a self-directed learner, except in the sense that there is a learner who can participate fully and freely in the dialogue through which we test interests and perspectives against those of others and accordingly modify them and our learning goals” (p. 27). Harasim (1990) states that “educational research identifies peer interaction among students as a critical variable in learning and cognitive development at all educational levels” (p. 43). Her references come mostly from cooperative learning researchers -- Johnson and Johnson, Slavin and Sharan.

It is assumed, however, that the posts would appeal to “social-interactional senses” (Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999) and respond to others, as well as invite others to respond. Statements such as “I agree, Mickey,” “True enough,” “Exactly, Joe!”, “Your comment is great!”, “Alison, very much agree with you!”, “Really, that frustrates you?”, “Love this conversation!”, “Gary, how true are your points of modeling change,” “Leslie, the process will become what we all make it so thanks for your input,” “Right on, Mickey, Your point is well taken,” and “Gary, your comment on the ‘political issues involved’ in making change struck a responsive chord with me” help encourage everyone to stay involved. They are indicators that someone is “listening” and “respects” their comments (Isaacs, 1999). The use of names and quoting parts or all of previous posts seemed to help keep everyone coming back to the online space. The space itself appeared to meet the needs of adult learners: independence and collaboration through social interaction. Koppi, Lublin, and Chaloupka (1997) state that “a requirement for the acquisition of active knowledge by the learner is communication” (p. 246). However, there appears to be a need for learners to have certain communication skills and expectations in order to utilize the space for optimal learning. We might expect that not all learners are ready for this level of interaction. Teachers may have to be more intentional about teaching the behaviors that are needed and the expectation to “see” the behaviors exhibited in the bulletin board space. The Staged Self-Directed Learning Model developed by Grow (1991) shows how a teacher can facilitate the process of moving learners from being dependent towards increasing self-direction.

Individualized Integrative Learning

Koppi, Lublin, and Chaloupka (1997) define several outcomes of “effective teaching and learning in a high-tech environment.” They suggest the term ‘active knowledge’ is “concerned with the integration of information, knowledge, skills and values leading to understanding and the ability to take appropriate action on the basis of integration” (p. 246). The WebCT bulletin board seems to be ideally suited for this kind of integration. The threaded nature of the bulletin

board allows a student to read many different “posts” and respond only to those that “call forth” a response from them. Students choose where to begin their interaction, the level of their interactions, and with whom to interact. If students want to start a new thread, they can easily do this using the “compose” button. In Canning’s (1991) study one of the teachers, Nancy George said, “The more I think about it, the more I feel the reflection assignment *should* be without structure, even though I was adamant about wanting one in the beginning. When you try to fit into someone else’s framework, you lose the flow of your ideas. You have to create the structure that fits your own reflection as you go” (p. 19). For students who are active constructors of their own knowledge a WebCT bulletin board provides a “space” for them to structure, investigate and construct their own understanding.

Reflection and making connections with past, present and future experiences is personal and unpredictable. Insights may come at 2am, 10am, or at 11pm. Bulletin boards allow students to individualize their learning to suit their time-frames. In this study students posted communication at hours almost around the clock. This kind of opportunity may increase levels of reflection and integration, because it does not require everyone to respond at a particular time. They can respond when they are ready – when they have had opportunity to think and prepare a response. This kind of flexibility honors the individuality of the learner. Collis (1998) describes five areas of flexibility that allow “the learner some critical choices in the learning situation so that it better meets his or her needs and individual situation”: flexibility in location, flexibility in program, flexibility in types of interactions, flexibility in forms of communication, and flexibility in study materials (p. 377). This study demonstrated that such types of flexibility gave the learners opportunity to integrate their knowledge with prior experiences.

The Written Component

The WebCT bulletin board space requires a written response. Hatton and Smith (1994) found that reflection was facilitated by a “high degree of verbal interaction with trusted others” and that incorporating “a written record which could be used later as a stimulus to further reflection” also was beneficial (p. 41). Holt et al. (1998) state the “data suggest that participative reflection may be greater in a Web conference because of the ability to reread an entire sequence of postings while composing a response” (p. 47). VanHorn (1999) found that levels of reflection were higher when nursing students were paired for their reflective journal writing than those who journaled independently.

An online environment may provide a space where the benefits of written responses and verbal interactions are optimized. As an individual journals in an online bulletin board, they can “see” their ideas/perspectives in a new way. Ginna said, “On rereading my post I can see why you might have thought I was being critical of individuals or even the program.” This very public space then becomes a place where a learners’ “meaning-perspective” can be examined by themselves and trusted friends for coherence. Mezirow (2000) states that “a frame of reference is a ‘meaning perspective,’ the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions. . . . It provides the context for making meaning” (p. 16). How can a meaning-perspective change? Does a WebCT bulletin board provide opportunities to reorganize ones’ meaning-perspective? Dan seemed to think so! He said,

Wow! What a thread! It seems more like a rope. I'm not sure what to post. First - "what needs to rot." Imaginary boundaries that define learning environments. Self defeatism that states "I have nothing to offer the group." Self serving which asks, "What can I get from the group?" Second - Relationships. . .they are the cornerstone of learning. Check out the lessons you hold dear and you will find a dear one who holds the lesson. Third - Read the threads of each others lives . . . together they form a tapestry.

Dan's last statement is an invitation to take the perspective of others – read the threads of their lives! Mezirow (2000) states the "more reflective and open we are to the perspective of others, the richer our imagination of alternative contexts for understanding will be" (p. 20). He continues, "We change our point of view by trying on another's point of view" (p. 21). The WebCT space seems to be a place where that is possible.

Schwandt (1999) suggests that "to be in a dialogue requires that we listen to the Other and simultaneously risk confusion and uncertainty both about ourselves and about the other person we seek to understand. It is only in an engagement of this kind, in a genuine conversation, that understanding is possible" (p. 5). McHenry (1997) explores the "gift of being together" and the "shared invention" of an idea through Buber's notion of dialogue and "I-You." Does the architecture of a bulletin board provide a space where each becomes aware of the other in their uniqueness? Does the perspective of another become more obvious, more reverent when written? Does the frame of reference change in the presence of others? This study supports such possibilities. Mezirow (1994) sums up the transformation process, "In my view, the developmental process in adulthood centrally involves the process of transforming meaning structures" (p. 228). What I was observing were subtle changes in "meaning perspectives."

The "compile" option in WebCT bulletin board spaces allows students to compile and print out all the messages in one thread so that those who want to engage themselves more deeply in the dialogue or those who wish to underline and reread posts can do this. Gary said, "By downloading the threads I was able to place them in a binder and refer to them as needed." This post seems to suggest that "frames of reference" need time to change and that the bulletin board space may have only been a part of an ongoing transformation.

Development of 'Voice'

One of the capacities Isaacs (1999) identified as needed for real dialogue to take place is "voicing" which he defines as "speaking the truth of one's own authority, what one really is and thinks" p. 419. Canning (1991) found that the teachers in their study "had lost touch with their voices or assumed their voices were not important in professional reflection – they had developed internal patterns of focusing on what they were *supposed* to say. Their early reflections were characterized by references to an unidentified "they" rather than "I." The taking on of an "I" voice was one of the achievements of the reflection process" (p. 19). In this study most of the learners had some comfort level using "I," however, one participant consistently left off references to himself with such statements as "(I) do not know if this will help or not but (I) was checking out the net and found a web site. . .so (I) thought it would be good to pass it on." This way of responding may simply be a function of the web where more cryptic responses can take place among people who know each other well.

The WebCT bulletin board gave everyone many more opportunities to “practice” using their voice than they might have had in a regular classroom discussion. As I analyzed the posts I found equal numbers of posts by men and women. This was an environment/architecture different than the “chilly classroom climate” reported by Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall (1996), Constantinople et al. (1988), and Sadker and Sadker (1990). Women contributed equally to the dialogue and, in fact, seemed to lead to deeper connections. Eighty percent of the “hot spots” were generated by women (in a forum of 5 men and 5 women). Everyone had an equal opportunity to express his or her beliefs and values and could benefit from the modeling of those who had developed more skill in articulating their beliefs. In traditional educational settings, students often suppress their ideas and only say what they think is expected of them.

Summary

In summary, a bulletin board permits adult learners to function in harmony with adult learning theory - connecting with prior experiences, allowing time for reflection and opportunities to construct their own knowledge through interactions with others. However, the very public environment of an online bulletin board may compound barriers to reflection.

Boud and Walker (1993) suggest several barriers to reflection in face to face settings: threats to the self, one’s world view, or to ways of behaving; lack of skills; established patterns of thought and behavior; obstructive feelings like lack of confidence or self-esteem, fear of failure etc; external pressures and demands; lack of self-awareness of one’s place in the world; inadequate preparation and hostile or impoverished environments. These are only a few of the barriers that may be compounded by a public forum like WebCT. So while the bulletin boards of WebCT appear to provide a space for reflective dialogue, there are many other factors that may in fact hinder active learning.

As our understanding of reflective dialogue in online environments emerges, I expect that further examination of interactions will continue to reveal communication styles that are conducive to knowledge construction. Professors will become clearer about how the bulletin board space could be used – giving students suggestions to develop metaphors and make connections with prior experiences. Professors will articulate how interactions will be “graded” or “not graded” and why. And educators will begin to envision different forms of assessment, such as the development of metaphors, as reasonable evidence of knowledge gained.

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**ECHOES OF AN INSTITUTE: VETERANS OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT
REFLECT UPON RETURNING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL**

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(Author acknowledges the contributions of five colleagues interviewed in this study:
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Abstract

College teachers essentially became students again in June 2001, as they concentrated on academic reading and writing under the tight deadlines of a summer immersion program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Six of these mid-career students, including myself, were women who had been through the National Writing Project within the previous five years. I conducted personal interviews with the other five of them to study the impact of the Writing Project experience on their academic and emotional attitudes as they again returned to the role of student in the doctoral program in rhetoric and linguistics. Their observations were close to my own: the experience of the National Writing Project had prepared them not only for the immersion quality of the summer program itself, but for conversation within the discipline of writing instruction, a field that in recent years has been developing its own voice in the academy.

Introduction

Returning to graduate school as an adult student is a daunting prospect for any mid-career professional. But especially for female teachers, who are typically interrupting family responsibilities and work routines, pursuing an advanced degree produces a great deal of academic and emotional anxiety. Since many women feel they cannot take extended leaves of absence to pursue their education, even if their current positions are pressuring them to get a terminal degree, colleges and universities with summer options programs are attractive. The problem is that women have to enroll in immersion classes that are physically and intellectually demanding. This task is particularly disconcerting to women who have been out of school for a number of years and are not certain that they can succeed in the academic world, especially under such serious time constraints. The English Department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania offers such a summer program, whereby returning students can earn a Ph.D. with two summers of residency: that is, two summers of two immersion sessions each, for a total of 24 hours of residency, 12 per summer. This study examines the attitudes and anxieties of five women who, upon returning to graduate school, have only the recent experience of participating in the National Writing Project as preparation for graduate work. This study examines the extent to which participation in National Writing Project prepared these women for summer graduate work. All five women entered the degree program in summer 2001.

Review of the literature

As the number of college students over age 25 continues to climb, so does the percentage of female to male students. In the Population Profile of the United States 1995, the Bureau of the Census reported a rise in the percentage of these non-traditional women from 12% of the college population in 1973 to 24% in 1993, while the percentage of male non-traditional students declined from 17% in 1973 to 16% in 1993 (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1995). In recent years, many studies have concerned themselves with the obstacles both men and women face as part-time and full-time returning students, obstacles ranging from increased levels of stress (due to demands of multiple job/family/school roles) to difficulty gaining access to campus parking (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992; Flannery & Apps, 1987). According to an ERIC Digest report, one study in 1987 by K. E. Muench found that Aboth sexes experienced fears of failure and self-doubt. Men, however, suffered more from lack of self-confidence, while women experienced more guilt@ (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). Although both men and women “talk about the guilt of not being able to give enough time to the family, the guilt of using family resources to pursue their own interests,” for women, the guilt of neglecting family and the stress of multiple roles are the greatest “barriers to learning” (Schmidt, 1983, p. 5). Studies on the problems of reentry women often focus on the conflicting roles of mothers living at home with dependent children, sometimes even holding down part-time jobs while pursuing degrees. Home examines role complications with working mothers as they confront role strain of different types: “(a) role conflict from simultaneous, incompatible demands, (b) role overload (insufficient time to meet all demands), and (c) role contagion, or preoccupation with one role while performing another” (1998, p. 86). In four case studies of doctoral students, Padula and Miller describe the frustrations and difficulties of changing family relationships among full-time reentry women living at home (1999).

Background of Study

While women returning to school as day students after several years of absence clearly have special problems juggling jobs and family responsibilities with the demands of school, those who actually leave their families to become temporary campus residents far from home have a different set of concerns. They do not taxi children to the soccer field, nor do they grade papers late into the night, as is their habit when they are at home. Instead, these women teachers become students again, in ways reminiscent of their years as traditional students living away from home: perhaps living in the dorm, using a meal ticket, walking to classes (without having seen their own cars for weeks), and occasionally phoning home to see whether they are missed. The difference between the typical freshman experience and this one is that these women (the five women of this study) were in a summers-only immersion program, one that demands rigorous attention to academics. And their concerns were different from their role-stretched, home-job-and-school-bound counterparts. They were only five of the eighteen- member class entering the program for a Ph.D. in English at IUP. And they were the only five, besides the researcher, who had participated in the National Writing Project. The research questions were as follows:

1. Does participation in the National Writing Project help prepare returning non-traditional graduate students for the rigors of graduate work?
2. Does participation in the Project affect the level of emotional stress of graduate school?
3. Does participation in the Project prepare women for temporary removal from the family?
- 4.

What is the National Writing Project?

To define the National Writing Project as simply a federally funded in-service teacher training program would be reductive of its significance to about two million teachers nation wide. These teachers have been through a four or five week intensive summer program with a class of fellow teachers from all disciplines and all grade levels with the purpose of doing and studying their own writing, sharing ideas and practices of their own teaching of writing, and becoming effective teacher researchers themselves, as they explore and put into practice reading, writing, and learning theory. Since its beginning in 1974 at the University of California at Berkeley, the National Writing Project has established 167 sites in 49 states. Over 100,000 teachers K through college participate in summer institutes every year (*National Writing Project Annual Report, 2000*).

At each institute, an outstanding teacher serves as director of the group of fellows, and then during the following academic year(s), the fellows of the Project take what they have learned into local area schools. The idea is to spread the word about the best practices of teaching writing and to promote writing as a way to learn, as a tool for thinking, problem solving, and understanding concepts. Through the Project, teachers learn to perceive of themselves as writers; they write more often with their students, and they share their own personal and academic writing with students and each other. During an interview with Richard Sterling, executive director of the National Writing Project, education consultant Mark Goldberg writes, “The summer institute is the heart of the National Writing Project, the setting that allows teachers to shape their ideas and think through the puzzles in their own practice with the help from other expert teachersThese teachers have tremendous credibility” (1998).

Such benefits of participating in the National Writing Project come at a price. Teachers must give up their summer vacation and research time to spend all day in the classroom and much of the night in the books. Families, too, move into the background as the parent/spouse figure becomes less available. In a significant way, the fellows of the Project become a family for one another since participants spend so much time together, writing and sharing pieces that are often personal, even intimate in nature. Sometimes the emotional expenditure of the experience can be significant. Sessions have been known to become tearful as teachers explore personal and professional issues that they have perhaps not discovered until they wrote about them.

Methodology

The Participants

For this study, I used a purposive sampling of subjects from the first-term class of the doctoral program. I surveyed the twenty-member group to find out how many had participated in the National Writing Project within the previous five years. Five students identified themselves as former fellows of the National Writing Project and agreed to be interviewed about the experience. All five were women between the ages of 40 and 55. They held master's degrees in literature, and with one exception, had earned those degrees quite a few years earlier: two from 1984, two from 1990. All of these women had left immediate families at home. Two lived together off campus, one lived alone off campus, and two lived in the same dormitory but in separate rooms. In their Writing Project groups, they had been one of only a few college instructors, having been outnumbered by elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers. Two of the participants continued to be active in the National Writing Project after their first summer institute. One is a current director of a site she helped establish and the other is a State Director of the National Writing Project. Although I was not technically a subject of the research, I did identify strongly with these participants since I, too, was a member of the class, a recent veteran of the National Writing Project, and have a literature MA from 1978.

The Interviews

"Many think of interviews as one person (i.e. the researcher) asking questions and another (i.e. the subject) answering. However, in naturalistic research, interviews take more of the form of a dialogue or an interaction" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 85). In these interviews, I thought of myself as a participant observer, since my experience was so closely linked to that of the participants. Therefore, the one-on-one interviews were like conversations between people who knew the subject well. The interviews were semi-structured, the questions open ended (See Appendix). The setting was either my dormitory room, or the participant's dormitory room or apartment. Sessions were about 30 minutes each and were tape-recorded. Word processed transcriptions were not always verbatim, but faithfully summarized the interviews. Participants reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and gave permission to use their comments in the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was concurrent with data collection. During and after the interviews, themes emerged. As I produced and reviewed the transcripts, I color coded passages according to recurrent themes that surfaced at different times during the research process. I revised the themes appropriately, according to which seemed most inclusive and applicable to the study. I will develop the discussion section of this report around those themes.

Discussion

Introducing the participants (Names are pseudonyms)

Kate has been involved in the National Writing Project since 1996. She is a director and site founder of the National Writing Project. She has been teaching English since 1990. Joan participated in a summer institute in 1996. She is the State Director for National Writing Project in her home state. Her background is in journalism and sociology. Alice participated in National Writing Project in 1999. She has been teaching English for 17 years. Andrea was a fellow in National Writing Project in 1997. She has been teaching English for approximately 20 years, first in high school and then in college. Lois participated in National Writing Project in 1997. She has been teaching English since 1990.

Themes

The data revealed that the participants shared common experiences as returning graduate students. Originally, they had some doubts about beginning a degree program in an area of study in which they had field experience but little formal training. They had been teaching composition with literature degrees for a number of years. They were not sure how they would make the transition into the field of rhetoric and linguistics. They were uncertain, too, of how well they would endure the stress of immersion. Assignments would be demanding: reading would be dense and lengthy; writing deadlines would be rushed. And in the absence of their families, they would have to depend on class members for emotional support. The themes that emerged from the interviews, however, indicated that their experience so far had been positive.

Anxiety about Immersion

The participants indicated a much lower level of anxiety about the immersion aspect of the program than I expected. Having been the most recent National Writing Project fellow of the group, I was perhaps projecting my own insecurities about returning to the rigors of graduate work. Apparently, their more distant past experience with the rigors of a fast-paced writing program helped allay their fears of not being able to handle the work load. Alice gave credit to the Project for her healthy perspective on being able to handle immersion: "I think having been through a four-week intensive reading and writing and reading and writing experience at the college level, post-graduate, has make this work seem doable." Kate noted that she learned in the Project that routines are established easily, that working quickly becomes a habit: "At first, my group of teachers complained, 'I need more time. I need more time.' But as it went through it got a lot easier. I think it's a whole mind-set." Joan, too, felt prepared by the summer institute: "I think the immersion part of this is like Writing Project in that we as individuals could not possibly absorb all this information and digest it and synthesize it. But working in collaborative settings, like in Writing Project, we have learned to rely on each other."

In three of the cases the work load of the Writing Project actually seemed more intense than that of graduate school because at the time of their fellowships they were teaching classes and/or commuting to school and work. In contrast to that experience, graduate school away from job and family seemed a luxury despite the intensive pace. Several times, the participants

attributed their smooth adjustment to IUP to their being away from the pressures of home life, pressures that threatened to interfere with their work during the Writing Project. Alice remembers having to sacrifice family relationships for working under deadlines: “It [Writing Project] was all consuming. When I came here, all I had to go by was my experience with the Project, and I thought that being so far from home would make this experience a hundred times worse. But in some ways it’s easier because I don’t have all the push-pull. Here we have a single focus: learn something. I’m not responsible now for all those other people’s happiness.” Clearly, these women’s experience with the summer institutes reassured them that they had the stamina for intensive graduate work, especially in the absence of other responsibilities.

Confidence in professionalism and classroom ability

Frequently, returning adult students, especially those returning after a long absence, worry that they will have trouble measuring up to younger students’ abilities (Padula & Miller, 1999). The five veterans of the Writing Project seemed to have no such concerns. Through the Project, they gained confidence in themselves as writers and teachers of writing. Smith observes the dual roles of Writing Project teachers in action: “They read and discuss their writing on the spot, wearing two hats as they go. One hat identifies them as writers doing what writers do: drafting, sharing their drafts, gathering responses, revising. The other is the teacher hat. In this role, they analyze [the current teacher presenter’s] approach, not only for its effect on their own writing but for its potential with their student writers” (1996, p.688). Such is the constant practice of the National Writing Project fellow; every class meeting calls for some kind of student performance.

The institute also requires each teacher to present a workshop on a strategy for teaching writing. Two participants in this study commented on the workshop presentation as invaluable preparation for a comparable assignment in a linguistics class at IUP. Kate had never done an activity workshop until her summer with the National Writing Project. Remembering how she felt when her current professor made the workshop assignment, Kate said, “I was so excited about being able to feel I knew what I was doing.” In fact, Kate plans to use a linguistic focus on a part of another Writing Project workshop for a paper due at the end of the term. Likewise, Andrea had experienced workshop anxiety as a National Writing Project fellow, but she overcame her fear when she made her teacher presentation on writing the argument paper. Because of that experience, she was not overly anxious about performing an activity workshop in graduate school. Apparently, the Writing Project gave these women confidence in their abilities as writers and students.

Familiarity with Theory

Although these women held masters degrees in literature, their exposure to composition theory in the National Writing Project made them reasonably comfortable with some of the terminology and well-recognized names in the field. All of the women commented on how helpful they found the professional readings. Lois said, “The Writing Project prepared me in the sense that I know a little bit about the theory and some of the theorists. So that going into the course [linguistics] I’m reading names of theorists whose names I’ve heard before.” Andrea concurred: “The Project prepared me by exposing me to some of the most important literature in

the field. I felt that at least I was getting grounded in the basics before I came here [to IUP] . . . So when people mention certain names, I know what they're talking about . . . and I feel like the Writing Project got me interested in finding out more." Kate was more specific: "I could skim [a linguistics article] and say, 'Yeah, OK. I know this stuff.' With Vygotsky, I can say, 'Oh, Yeah, zone of proximal development.'" Alice summed it up: "The territory is not unfamiliar. If I'd never read any comp. theory, I wouldn't feel confident now, but having studied it a lot on my own, and during the Writing Project, I have become more interested in going to certain panels at CCCC's. I feel like Writing Project gave me enough of a taste of comp. theory to take the mystery out of it . . . it gave me a base to build on."

In the summer institutes, teachers have the opportunity to learn about the theorists and also to discover their own connections between theory and practice. Kate found that the teacher research she had practiced in the National Writing Project actually familiarized her with naturalistic research: "And all of this naturalistic inquiry? It reminded me of the teacher research class I took as an extension of the Writing Project." Therefore, these women came into a graduate program already introduced to a field in which they will eventually find their specialty. Little wonder they, once again, credited their experience with the Project for taking some of the fear out of venturing into a field so unlike their backgrounds.

Appreciation for classroom community

One major feature of the National Writing Project model is the focus on collaborative work. Although the women of this study had been practicing collaboration in their composition classrooms for some time, they didn't expect their graduate classes to contain so much group work. They were delighted to find that graduate classes had apparently reformed as much as the freshman classes since their original graduate degree work. Joan reported, "I was introduced to collaborative work in the Writing Project. Doing collaborative work there was very similar to what we are doing here." Veterans of the Writing Project remember that their institute "instructors, often a college professor and a teacher, model a kind of behavior that includes careful listening, reflecting back to teachers what they say, and mediating a democratic, nonhierarchical community" (Goldberg, 1998, p.394).

The women of the study were pleased to find their graduate classrooms, especially the attitudes of the professors, reminiscent of the community spirit of the National Writing Project. Joan thought the professors respected the students' contributions to the class: "I look at this thing from the point of view of a Writing Project administrator, so one of the things I see here [at IUP] that I know we look for in the National Writing Project model is that directors look for and bring out the knowledge of the student teachers and then validate that and incorporate it into the learning process. . . . These professors kind of step back and allow the participants to express their knowledge and then lead discussion." Andrea added, "Both of the professors seem to have the spirit of wanting to accommodate themselves to the students' natural inclinations. And even our research professor is not distant; he seems to have our best interests in mind." Apparently, the women's previous graduate school experience was characterized by authoritarianism and intimidation, and they welcomed the change.

Expectations of camaraderie

An issue paper of 1988 recounts the experience of a returning student in a similar situation to these women's: "Joyce was anxious about returning to university work in her eighteenth year of teaching." Citing her experience the year before as a National Writing Project fellow, Joyce "talked of the potency of the group experience" as she compared one of her doctoral courses to the institute. (Gomez, 1988, p. 7). The author notes, "The National Writing Project appears to respond to the loneliness, uncertainty, and need for affiliation" (Gomez, 1988, p. 6). From their own experience with the National Writing Project, the women of the study understood the value of camaraderie, and they anticipated developing enduring friendships and becoming dependent on many members of the IUP class. Most of the women made statements similar to Andrea's: "Our Writing Project group really bonded. We became concerned about each other; we were interested in each other's writing by hearing about the issues we wrote about in class. And now I'm beginning to re-experience that bonding here." Lois said her connection with her new classmates has already gone beyond her earlier group experience: "I feel that I am developing more camaraderie with this group than I did with Writing Project. First of all, I had only one other college teacher to relate to. Here we are all teaching college and having a common experience. . . . I have a feeling that when I leave here, I will have email pals. I am going to collaborate on projects with some of these people This has actually been a more positive experience for me, all the way around."

The comments of these participants indicate that camaraderie among classmates is an important issue for returning adult graduate students. These women developed strong personal connections with their former fellows of the institutes and anticipated a repetition of that experience during graduate work.

Conclusions

This study supports the common notion that anxiety is decreased by familiarity. In this case, returning graduate students had previous experience with a seemingly similar situation, one that gave them confidence in returning to the academic world. Participating in the National Writing Project has long been known for revolutionizing the practices of teachers of all disciplines, especially writing teachers. But the effects of participating in the program have not been applied to returning doctoral students pursuing degrees in composition. These women clearly found their fellowships in the Writing Project useful beyond their own classrooms. Although at the time of their involvement with the Project they had no formal plans for returning to graduate work, when that time came, they felt equipped to deal with the rigors of an immersion graduate program. This study, however, considers the comments of students just beginning the doctoral program. To determine whether the positive attitudes that these women attribute to the National Writing Project will have lasting effects, further study is needed. And given the increasing numbers of reentry graduate students, other studies are sure to be conducted.

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Appendix
***Survey Questions for Doctoral Students who had
Participated in the National Writing Project***

The first two questions were designed to help the participant relax. These were “easy answer” questions, not open ended ones.

Personal interview questions:

1. When and where did you participate in the NWP?
2. Can you describe the work load of the WP experience? That is, how long did you meet for class? What kinds of long-term and short-term assignments did you have?
3. How has WP helped you deal with the rigors of graduate school work? (E.g. pacing yourself to get assignments done.)
4. What do your current summer classes and the summer institute of WP have in common?
5. Do you see similarities between the experiences in terms of sharing and camaraderie among the students?
6. Did WP help you build confidence in yourself as a teacher/scholar?
7. Did the WP experience help you anticipate the difficulties of being temporarily removed from your family and the related day to day responsibilities?
8. Specifically, what experiences in these summer classes have reminded you of WP?

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