



## **Navigating New Experiences**

Kara L. Vander Linden, Ed.D.

### **Abstract**

This grounded theory study was initiated to discover the process adult learners go through when engaging in new learning experiences. Data came from 12 open-ended intensive interviews with adult learners involved in various educational endeavors. Theoretical sampling led to several additional interviews with individuals not engaged in post-secondary education but more generally in new learning experiences. The basic social process of navigating explains three cyclical stages of behaviors used to successfully traverse new experiences. The stages are *Mapping*, *Embarking*, and *Reflecting*. Mapping consists of three behaviors: locating, assessing one's location in relation to the goal; surveying, gathering information; and plotting, creating a plan. Embarking involves engaging in normalizing and strategizing behaviors to guide one's self through the experience while encountering unexpected factors that influence one's course and progress. Reflecting techniques and approaches are discussed in the third stage. Although providing an understanding of the process and behaviors used by adult learners, the theory is also applicable in other settings.

### **Introduction**

One cannot go through life without encountering new experiences. While at times people find themselves in experiences of no choice of their own, many new experiences are entered voluntarily. One such experience is adults returning to college classrooms to continue their education.

Today, more than at any other time in history, adults are returning to the college classroom to continue their education. These adult learners are referred to as “nontraditional” and are characterized by “one or more of the following characteristics: not a high school graduate; did not enroll in an institution of higher education directly after high school; are attending part-time; are working full-time; or are financially independent, married, or have dependents” (Wolanin, 2003, p 7). While adult learners have prior experience in education, many factors and conditions of adult life make the experience very different than their earlier experiences. These factors and conditions also contribute to lower retention rates. As Bosworth et al. (2007) reported, “Financially independent, working full time, with dependents and family responsibilities to juggle, and back in school after an extended time out—adult learners are at great risk of not achieving their postsecondary education goals” (p. 8) .

There is substantial research and numerous theories and models on adult education and learning. Research repeatedly categorizes the challenges faced by adult learners into four general categories: accessibility, affordability, lack of time and other responsibilities, such as family and/or job responsibilities (Merriam, S. & Caffarella, R., 1999; Bosworth et al., 2007). Research has also suggested and studied strategies to increase learner retention and degree achievement. These strategies primarily address the issues of accessibility and affordability. While education institutions are making strides in these areas, there is a dearth of research on strategies for addressing the categories of lack of time and other responsibilities faced by adult learners. Although outside the control of educational institutions, these issues still affect adult learners' success in reaching their goals.

As an instructor and mentor of adult learners, I have little control over the four categories of factors that affect the retention and degree achievement of adult learners. Despite this lack of control over, part of my job is to help adult learners be successful. Often this means helping them succeed in spite of these factors. A desire to understand the learning experiences of adults and the challenges they face from their perspective provided the original area of interest and starting point for this study which was conducted for my dissertation.

Classic grounded theory (GT) was selected as the methodology for this study because it provided the opportunity to explore this area in a new way and with an open mind. The purpose of using this method was to develop a theory about “the pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved” (Glaser, 1978, p. 93) and was “sufficiently general to be applicable to a multitude of diverse daily situations” and allowed “the user partial control over the structure and process of daily situations as they change through time” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 237). Such a theory could provide a framework for working with learners based in their needs.

## Method

Grounded theory is “a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area” (Glaser, 1992, p. 16). Fundamental to the method is the emergent process that occurs as the researcher engages in an integrated, cyclical process of collecting, coding and analyzing data using constant comparative analysis with memoing interwoven throughout.

Levy (2000) states, “social systems are subject to intervention by cognizant agents, whose behavior is essentially unpredictable at the individual level” (p. 76). While true on an individual level, the grounded theory methodology allows a researcher to discover a common “pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved” (Glaser, 1978, p. 93) and develop a theory about the core variable that “accounts for most of the variation in a pattern of behavior” (Glaser, p. 93).

A GT study begins with data collection from the substantive area of interest and preconceptions suspended so that the researcher remains open to the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1992, 1998). Although any type of data can be used, following the GT dictum “all is data” (Glaser, 2003, p. 15), a common source of data is open-ended interviews as used in this study.

Initial data collection began using a grand tour question in an interview with an adult attending an institution of higher education. The grand tour question was “describe a recent learning experience.” Four interviews were with adults earning graduate degrees and one with an adult who was unable to complete her graduate degree. Three interviews were with individuals enrolled in bachelor programs and four interviews with adults who had earned bachelor degrees. Theoretical sampling led to two additional interviews with adults who had never attended college. One had no plans to ever attend college and one was considering it.

Concurrent with the first interview, data analysis begins using constant comparative analysis to substantively and theoretically code the data allowing latent conceptual patterns and concepts to become apparent by conceptualizing empirical evidence and raising it to a higher level of theoretical abstraction (Glaser, 1978, 1992). Throughout coding, memoing is used to record theoretical ideas grounded in data. “Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about substantive codes and their theoretically coded relationships as they emerge during coding, collecting and analyzing data and during memoing” (Glaser, 1998, p. 177). The data collection, analysis, and memoing continue until all the categories and properties are saturated. As saturation occurs, memos are sorted conceptually to form the theoretical outline, relevant literature is integrated by analyzing it like any other data, and the theory is written up.

### **Navigating: A Basic Social Process**

While a desire to understand the learning experiences of adults and the challenges they face provided the original area of interest and starting point for this study, the use of the grounded theory methodology resulted in the emergence a theory about a basic social process that transcends the substantive area. The basic social process, navigating, explains three integrated, cyclical stages of behavior that individuals engage in when they voluntarily enter new experiences and factors and conditions which affect their decisions and behaviors as they successfully traverse through the experience. The three stages of navigating are mapping, embarking, and reflecting; these consist of purposeful behaviors that are utilized to assess one’s location within a new experience, to develop a plan or chart a course through the experience, and successfully traverse the experience while encountering factors and conditions that affect the course and progress. Although each stage will be explained sequentially, in a linear fashion, each stage and behavior may be repeatedly engaged in as new factors and conditions are encountered and can occur almost simultaneously in an integrated cyclical process.

### **Stages in Navigating a New Experience**

#### **Mapping**

The first stage of navigating, mapping, encompasses three behaviors people commonly use when deciding whether or not to voluntarily enter a new experience. These three behaviors are: locating, surveying, and plotting.

**Locating** involves identifying the reason or purpose for entering a new experience and assessing the person’s present location in relation to this goal. The reason or purpose for entering the new experience becomes the goal toward which the person strives. As one participant explained,

“there has to be a reason to get into it (the new experience).” Ford (1992) similarly explains that the goal “provides direction for that episode and triggers an organized pattern of cognitive, emotional, biological, and perceptual-motor activity that, in coordination with the opportunities and constraints in the environment, is designed to attain the goal” (pp. 23-24). The data illustrated that this goal may relate to career aspirations, personal interests, personal improvement, social relationships or any number of other areas.

The goal also acts as a motivating factor. As one participant summarized, “your goals are the motivation that gets you started and keeps you going.” Motivation affects both the level of commitment and the effort put into navigating a new experience and is as reflected in a person’s choices, actions, behaviors, thoughts and emotions.

Locating also involves evaluating the person’s current location in relation to the goal. At the beginning of an experience, this location is the starting point. More than a physical location, it is a perspective on the individual’s current location based on various personal factors, such as level of competence and personal obligations, which have an impact on the person’s preparedness and ability to successfully reach the goal. Areas of weakness, natural abilities and level of experience shape a person’s level of competence and ability to successful reach a goal. Bigby (2003) explains that competency results from

...factors working together, which include innate characteristics (natural ability, personality) and learned characteristics (knowledge, experience and skills)... People who have the right competencies or who have a good potential for developing these competencies will be able to do the right things (behaviors) to produce the desired results (effective outcomes). (p. 3)

With a higher level of competence, a person is likely to evaluate the starting point as closer to the goal than someone with areas of weakness or less experience. As exemplified in one participant explaining that when deciding to get a Masters in Social Work she had to consider that she did not have any previous experience or courses in the area so she had a lot more to learn and more courses to take than classmates who had undergraduate degrees in the same field.

Personal obligations, such as time commitments, financial obligations and relationships, can also affect a person’s ability to reach his goal and his perspective on his current location in relation to the goal. Most of the participants spoke of the effect of family commitments on new experiences. Carver and Scheier (1998) expound on influence of personal obligations saying,

...dealing with a problem [personal obligation] in one domain tends to interfere with other aspects of life...If too much has to go into one domain (because it’s demanding or because it intrudes at unpredictable and inopportune times)...progress in those [other] domains begins to suffer... (p. 153)

While locating occurs at the beginning of a new experience, it can also occur at various times throughout the experience as unexpected, or previously unthought-of, factors affect a person’s progress and cause the reassessment of one’s location in relation to the goal. Some participants described how they considered these factors prior to entering the experience while other explained that they had to reassess their ability to reach their goal when these factors, that they

had not previously considered, became apparent. When one's location is reassessed, a person typically tries to identify three things (1) one's current location; (2) if one's current location is where one needs to be in order to reach the goal; and if not, (3) how to get back on course.

In navigating a new experience, a person uses *surveying* to gather and interpret information on how to proceed towards a goal. When surveying occurs prior to entering the experience, it is a way of gathering specific information regarding the person's goal, current location and possible paths to the goal. However, surveying also occurs at various times throughout the experience, especially when a person confronts unexpected factors and conditions or when verifying that one is on course to reach the goal.

In surveying, information is gathered from a variety of sources using a variety of methods, including conversations, observations, and reading. Some of the sources of information exemplified in this study include written resources, media, interpersonal communication, formal education/training, and even previous experiences. This information can be gathered proactively, being specifically sought out, or acquired passively, by chance. One participant explained proactively gathering information from a number of different sources to "build that set of data needed to form opinions" and aid him in making decisions on how to proceed. Another participant explained passively encountering information, hearing about a university from a person she was sitting next to in an airplane, that she later used when she decided to go back to school.

Surveying is dependent on a person's level of competency in gathering and interpreting information. Availability and accessibility of information varies depending on the type of information being gathered and the source. The person's level of competency also has an impact on the interpretation of the information. This is especially true when the person comes across material that he/she doesn't understand. For example, one person interviewed explained that while he was able to gather information he needed from some sources, his progress stalled when he encountered information he did not understand. Gathering and interpreting information aids in making decisions and plans as the person transitions from surveying to plotting a course of action.

*Plotting* is planning a course of action to reach one's goal and is based on the analysis and evaluation of information gathered while surveying. It often involves alternates between locating, surveying and plotting because "planning is a multistage process that produces a plan to be implemented in action" (Berger, 1997, p. 26). Plotting involves making decisions about the type of experience need to reach a goal. Choosing an appropriate experience involves considering how other factors, including the structure of the experience, level of competence, and personal obligations, could affect reaching the goal.

The structure of an experience is one factor that has an influence on the type of experience chosen when plotting a course of action. In more structured experiences, there are preestablished ways of navigating the experience and a person must fit into the existing structure. The individual may need to possess, account for and/or demonstrate a certain level of competency in order to fit into this existing structure. As such, structured experiences are less flexible and adaptable to individual needs and desires. Such an experience may not work depending on

personal obligations, especially in regards to time commitments. In more structured experiences, time commitments are often at specific times and/or for specific lengths of time. Other commitments must fit around those of the structured experience. If this is not possible, it can preclude a person from the experience. Formal educational experiences of participants in this study provide an example of more structured experiences that often have a predetermined course of action. One explained that all the classes within her masters program were pre-set and she wished for more flexibility.

When plotting a course of action for a less structured experience, the individual is often responsible for designing and implementing any structure required based on personal needs and desires and the factors and conditions of the experience. Thus, the course of action is more individualized and flexible to the individual's needs and desires. As one participant explained, "I was able to guide my own experience to achieve the goal in whichever way I felt was best. So, I had the independence." This flexibility often allows more flexibility in balancing personal obligations with obligations and responsibilities within the experience. Finding this balance is often easier said than done. The participant went on to say "It would not have worked had I not been motivated. It would have been too much freedom but since I was motivated, the independence helped a lot."

Regardless of the experience's structure, a person's competence at using the information gathered through surveying and previous knowledge, skills, and strategies influences the design and implementation of the course of action when moving from the mapping to the embarking stage. When moving forward a person often discovers, as one participant put it, "planning it, you know, from a distance and doing it, were really two very different things."

### **Embarking**

The second stage, embarking, is the process of using the information gathered and the course of action developed during the mapping stage to guide one through the experience while encountering unexpected factors and conditions that influence a person's course and progress. While embarking, a person engages in two cyclical behaviors: **normalizing** and **strategizing**. Normalizing is the process of establishing priorities and a schedule and routine while implementing the course of action. However, as the course of action is implemented unexpected factors and conditions are encountered that increases a sense of disequilibrium and must be addressed in order to reach the goal. At this point, strategizing is used to identify and develop approaches to deal with these factors and conditions and minimize their affect on the person's progress. Once these strategies are developed, the person returns to normalizing as the new strategies are incorporated into navigating the experience.

While normalizing, a person prioritizes and creates a schedule and routine to identify where and when to focus time, energy and attention in order to reach the goal. **Prioritizing** is deciding which aspects of an experience are important in order to determine how to distribute resources, including time, energy and attention, so that priorities and the goal are supported. As one participant explained, "If I have a goal and I know good things will come if I make that goal, then I will do the tasks that need to happen for that goal to take place. It helps me to prioritize." These priorities affect the person's commitment and the effort exerted to reach the goal. The

participant went on to say, “My goals either happen or don’t happen based on the effort I put forth and that’s the main key.”

Prioritizing enables *creating a schedule and routine* that reflects and supports individual priorities and goals. Scheduling is the process of deciding what to spend time on, how much time to spend, and when it will be spent. The structure of the experience affects how much control a person has over scheduling various aspects of the experience. The more structured an experience, the less control a person has over the schedule because such experiences often have specific time elements that are part of the established structure.

Creating a routine involves the implementation of a schedule and a course of action to reach the goal. It often means modifying actions and behaviors to support the priorities and goal. Establishing a routine helps a person stay focused on progressing through the experience and working on priorities so that the goal can be reached. Initial schedules and routines may need to be modified as their effectiveness is determined and as new factors and conditions are encountered.

**Strategizing.** Within any new experience, unexpected factors and conditions are encountered which can affect a person’s progress towards a goal. When encountered, the person suspends normalizing to engage in strategizing in order to deal with and limit the effect of these factors and conditions. One of the first factors encountered is newness. A person often encounters unfamiliar issues, factors, and/or conditions in unfamiliar settings or environments. This newness also results from the difference between the person’s preconceptions and/or expectations and the reality of the experience. This can contribute to a state of disequilibrium. A number of the participants discussed the disequilibrium created by the unexpected issues, factors and/or conditions they encountered. One person expressed her disequilibrium by saying, “the concept or idea that we have of how something may be is really changed or challenged by the experience of doing it, of going through it.” According to Mezirow (1991), an experience that creates a state of disequilibrium is “disorienting dilemma” that is “an emotionally charged situation, that fails to fit our expectations...or we encounter an anomaly that cannot be given coherence...within existing schemes” (p. 94). Therefore strategies must be developed to deal with them.

Avoidance and/or “giving up” are common strategies for dealing with newness and other unexpected factors and conditions. However, they do not help in successfully reaching a goal. More productive strategies include being open, sampling, relationships, training, practice, evaluation, and feedback. There are also strategies used to deal with emotions experienced while navigating a new experience.

**Being open** is being receptive to ideas and input from others and a willingness to consider and try new strategies. One participant demonstrated her openness when she let her internship supervisor know that she did not have any experience, but that she was really open to learning what she needed to do. **Sampling** is a trial and error process of trying out new strategies to investigate which ones are useful. When sampling, a provisional commitment is made to try a strategy within certain parameters, such as for a specific amount of time, in order to evaluate its usefulness before fully committing to using it. This can be seen in one person’s statement

regarding a new strategy she was using. She said, “I am going to just give it a try and, you know, I can always pull the plug if it gets really out of line.”

There is a relationship component to every new experience and these relationships can be used to help a person develop strategies. Some strategies include finding a mentor and creating a support system. A mentoring relationship provides a less experienced or knowledgeable person with support and guidance from someone more knowledgeable and/or experienced. One participant described how a mentoring relationship helped her through a new experience by saying, “I think that she is my biggest support because I feel comfortable asking her questions. I meet with her an hour a week...I can ask her any questions that I have.”

Creating a support system of peers can also be very beneficial. As one participant explained, “It was important for me to establish a support system. To identify people that I trusted...To have support people that I could confide in or that I could work with or that I could use as a sounding board.” BURGSTALLER and CRONHEIM (2001) provide a good summary of the benefits of forming a support group with peers.

Peers can coach and counsel, offer information and advice, provide encouragement, act as sounding boards, function as positive role models, and promote a sense of belonging (KRAM & ISABELLA; SHAPIRO, HASELTINE, & ROWE, 1978)...[Peers] offer unique opportunities for sharing, are easier to locate and approach than mentors, and typically develop relationships that are longer lasting than mentor relationships...Peer relationships offer a higher degree of mutual assistance, where both individuals give and receive support (KRAM & ISABELLA; SHAPIRO et al.). Peers facing similar challenges...can share strategies to overcome ...barriers (Byers-Lang & McCall, 1993). (pp. 60-61)

Friends and family can also form a support system. While these relationships may be external to the experience, they can provide an individual with emotional, financial or other types of support and help.

Another strategy involves taking advantage of opportunities for further training and additional practice. These opportunities increase the person’s levels of competency by acquiring and mastering new skills and knowledge. One participant described how she did not feel like she was acquiring the knowledge and skills she needed through her coursework so she decided to take advantage of an internship. She found an internship more useful in helping her gain the knowledge and skills needed, because it also provided her with an opportunity for practice. Another participant emphasized the importance of having opportunities to practice new skills by saying, “if you don’t feel comfortable with it, then you won’t put it into practice.” Training and practice is especially helpful when paired with objective evaluation and constructive feedback because it helps a person discover and work on areas which can use improvement. As one participant explained,

It’s really helpful to get someone to objectively evaluate you...You are so busy just trying to do everything you are supposed to do that it is hard to be as objective as you need to be. Plus, they give you tips... So it’s really helpful.

However, evaluation and feedback can also hinder a person's progress if it is not constructive or if the person is not open to it.

## Emotions and Strategies

While many factors and conditions encountered while navigating a new experience are external to the individual, emotions can be a powerful influence on decisions and behaviors. Emotions vary throughout the experience and also from person to person. While some emotional reactions are mild and pass quickly without much influence, others are intense and greatly affect a person's decisions and behaviors. Yet, despite these variations, emotions are a powerful factor that can impact the entire process and, as such, must be dealt with so as not to prevent individuals from reaching a goal. Ford (1992) says, "emotions help people deal with varying circumstances by providing evaluative information about the person's interactions with the environment...and by supporting and facilitating action designed to produce desired consequences...Emotions provide a very potent mechanism for regulating behavior" (p. 51).

One common emotion is a fear of failure, which may prevent entering or continuing with a new experience. This is using avoidance as a strategy and, as said earlier, it does not help in reaching a goal. Fear may also motivate working harder so as not to fail. More productive strategies used to deal with fear and other emotions experienced include positive self-talk, increasing competency and forming support systems.

Self-talk is the process of repeatedly telling one's self that a goal can or cannot be accomplished. The repeated message often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the messages used are positive and designed to encourage the person, self-talk can be useful. One participant exemplified this when she explained, "So I kind of bolstered myself, my psyche, with the concept that I am working on it so it won't be as hard. So, I kept telling myself that I can do it."

Another way of dealing with emotions is increasing levels of competency so that the person is well prepared with the tools and skills needed to navigate the experience. One way this can be accomplished is by taking advantage of opportunities for further training and additional practice. As skill sets increase, fear, anxiety and nervousness decrease and confidence is restored.

Support systems are another strategy for dealing with the emotional aspect of navigating a new experience. As strategies are discovered that help deal with the unexpected factors and conditions, a person returns to normalizing to establish a new schedule and routine incorporating the newest strategies. The process of cycling back and forth between normalizing and strategizing continues throughout navigating the new experience.

## Reflecting

Reflecting is the cognitive examination of various aspects of an experience and/or the experience as a whole. Reflecting enables a person to return to the experience, examine the feelings and emotions that were felt during the experience and reevaluate them. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) explain that reflection is a process through which people "recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it" (p. 19). Although presented as the third stage of

navigating a new experience, reflecting also occurs throughout the experience, as part of the preparation, engagement and processing of an experience. As Boud and Walker (1992) state, “we experience as we reflect and we reflect as we experience” (p. 168).

The inherent complexity of an experience generally limits the comprehensive examination of the experience through reflection. Instead, individuals often identify specific incidents, properties, factors or conditions that seem significant to the process of navigating a new experience. While at times a person will reflect on a series of events, at other times a person reflects on a defining moment which is “a critical incident that gets the person’s attention in a way that nothing [else] could...” (Kollter, 2001 p.32).

### **Reflecting Techniques**

Although reflecting is a cognitive process, individuals use several techniques to facilitate the process, including reflecting through conversation and through writing. Both provide some insight into the working of mind during reflecting. **Reflecting through conversation** provides an opportunity to “talk through” the experience and its significance to the individual. Asking and answering questions can help a person reflect by clarifying the experience and help them recognize things not previously identified or understood. Conversation also enables a person to hear others’ perspectives and opinions and allows them to compare the experience with that of others.

**Writing or journaling** can also facilitate the reflection process by providing a means of recording actions, behaviors, choices, thoughts and feelings. It creates a written record of the experience that can be re-read and reflected on at a later time to gain additional insights into the experience. Griffiths (2004) states, “There is evidence that although reflective writing is challenging, the scope of development is more valuable and longer lasting when the activity is structured through a written account” (p. 20). One participant expressed this by saying, “It was pretty darn hard to try to write anything about it...Emotionally speaking, I felt like I wasn’t up to it but I was able to make a reaction to it in writing and make it meaningful.”

### **Approaches to Reflecting**

People use various approaches to reflecting that not only affect the reflecting process but also the results experienced. Approaches to reflecting can be viewed as existing along a continuum from reactive to proactive. A reactive approach is characterized by the use of one of three different types of behavior: deflecting, self-rumination or avoidance. Deflecting involves blaming external factors and conditions and failing to recognize and/or acknowledge the influence of personal choices, actions, behaviors, thoughts and emotions on the navigating process. This is exemplified in one person’s reflections on why he was failing his classes. He said, “Right now, as a learner, my problems consist of 20 things a day that I have no control over, including, for example, having teachers who forget the assignments they have assigned and grade you down for their mistakes.”

In contrast, self-rumination involves blaming one’s self, including personal choices, actions, behaviors, thoughts and emotions, and failing to recognize and/or acknowledge the influence of

factors and conditions outside individuals' control on the process of navigating a new experience. Research by Joireman, Parrott and Hammersla (2002) explains that excessive self-focus in self-rumination limits a person's ability to focus outward and think about others. Repeated use of such phrases as "my fault" can indicate that an individual is claiming responsibility for aspects of an experience regardless of whether they were within their control or not. In both deflecting and self-rumination, a person perceives that specific factors or conditions have an exaggerated influence on navigating the experience and limits reflection to these factors or conditions.

The final reactive approach to reflecting is avoidance. Some people try to avoid reflecting on an experience if they feel exposed and vulnerable when reflecting. In this case, a person is often afraid of what may be discovered through the reflecting process and is often unable to identify or explain the choices, actions, behaviors, thoughts and/or emotions experienced while navigating the experience. Sometimes, a person will avoid reflecting because re-living the experience is too painful.

In proactively reflecting, a person may consciously identify various aspects of an experience that affected their progress through the experience including, but not limited to, individual actions, choices, behaviors and feelings. Ford (1992) refers to as cognitive regulation which he states

involves several different kinds of evaluative thoughts designed to help people make wise and effective choices among alternative goals, plans, and actions...it is an evaluative decision-making function that is responsible for determining whether a pattern of activity should be initiated, altered, or terminated given a variety of relevant factors: the person's goals, values, capabilities, emotions, and bodily states; and the facilitating and constraining conditions currently operating in the environment. (pp. 44-45)

The person analyses and evaluates these aspects to gain a deeper understanding of their significance and influence on navigating the experience or on the self. Reflection facilitates gaining a deeper understanding of the experience through "adults connecting what they have learned from current experiences to those in the past as well to possible future situations" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 246). This understanding can help the person navigate the current experience or future ones. Mezirow (1996) defines this as learning when he states, "Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (p. 162).

When proactively reflecting, a person is more likely to recognize the transformative nature of the experience; to discover both expected and unexpected benefits, including the acquisition of new knowledge and skills; and/or to recognize personal growth and gain a greater self-awareness. Brems (2001) identifies individual, interpersonal, cultural, physical, and professional self-awareness as different types of self-awareness that can be developed through reflecting. Participants discussed how going through the new experience and reflecting on it enabled them to develop greater self-awareness in many of the areas identified by Brems. A proactive approach to reflecting helps individuals recognize the value and benefits of navigating the experience, going beyond simply deciding what to do next in reaching one's goal. Proactively

reflecting on navigating a new experience can shape, affect and/or transform a person's perspective, beliefs, emotions, thoughts, actions and/or behaviors.

The results of reflecting vary depending on the experience and the approach taken. Deflecting, self-rumination or avoidance can result in a person failing to discover the benefits of navigating a new experience or, even worse, can inhibit their willing to navigate new experiences in the future. A proactive approach can facilitate the discovery of expected and unexpected benefits of navigating a new experience.

### **Implications for Practice**

One cannot go through life without encountering new experiences, many of which are entered voluntarily. As stated earlier, one such experience that many adults enter voluntarily is returning to school to continue their education. Although this provided the original area of interest and starting point for this study, the use of the grounded theory methodology resulted in the emergence of a theory from the data which depicts the broader social process of navigating a new experience. The resulting theory transcends the substantive area and explains a basic social process that occurs when people voluntarily enter and successfully navigate new experiences. As Glaser (1992) explains,

Grounded theory often starts off with a study located within a structural unit, such as in a particular business, hospital or school. The conceptualization going on in grounded theory automatically leaves the time and place of this unit. The theory is no longer generalized to a unit, but to a process which goes on in many other similar units. (p. 137)

### **Mentoring Adult Learners**

The theory of navigating can be used by mentors as a framework for mentoring adult learners throughout a new learning experience. It can help them identify and foster patterns of behavior that enable adult learners to successfully traverse new learning experiences. These behaviors help adult learners deal with the challenges they face as they continue their education, included but not limited to personal obligations. Each of the three stages, Mapping, Embarking and Reflecting, and their related behaviors, is discussed in relation to mentoring adult learners. In each stage, it is about working with the learner on developing these behaviors, not about telling the learner what to do.

**Mapping.** When deciding whether or not to continue with education, adults engage in three mapping behaviors: locating, assessing one's location in relation to a goal; surveying, gathering information; and plotting, creating a plan. While some or all of these behaviors often occur prior to entering a new educational experience, mentors can investigate how these were used to help the learner select the institution/program to enroll in. When this is done early in the learner's new educational experience, it can help identify potential problems, such as a mismatch between personal and institution goals, the individual's level of competence and what is needed to successfully complete the program and personal obligations which may conflict with program requirements. This mismatch is likely to occur when learners are uncertain about their goals and/or when surveying has been limited to such an extent that learners have not gathered enough

information on the institution/program to see if it fits their needs. Thus, a mentor can help insure that the new learning experience will work for learners and fits their needs.

Mentors are often involved in plotting as they advise the learner on the best path through the new learning experience. While mentors may have knowledge of the best sequencing and pacing through the program, it is important that they know the learner's goal, level of competence and personal obligation so that the plan fits the individual's needs. This may mean altering the sequencing and pacing. A "one-path fits all" approach to plotting is unlikely to meet individual learner needs.

As the theory suggests, an individual may periodically reengage in certain mapping behaviors as they navigate a new experience. For example, locating can occur at various times throughout the experience to reassess current location, consider whether the current location is where one needs to be to reach the goal and if not, how to get back on course. Surveying also occurs at various times throughout the experience, especially when a person confronts unexpected factors and conditions or when verifying that the individual is on course to reach the goal. Mentors can help learners with locating and surveying behaviors as they go through their program. This is especially important if a learner is "off course" or if the learner's goals have changed. When learners discover that they are off course, they are at greater risk of giving up on their goals. A mentor can provide guidance and support on how to get back on course. If the learner's goal has changed, the mentor can help advice on plotting a new path to the new goal.

**Embarking.** While some learners may be able to independently engage in normalizing to establish priorities, a schedule, and a routine assisting them to identify where and when to focus their time, energy and attention in order to reach their goals, others may need the help of mentors, especially if they fail to recognize the need to engage in this behavior. It is important that a mentor remembers that this is about the learner's priorities, not the mentor's. It can, at times, mean focusing on personal obligations, rather than academics, in order to manage personal obligations in such a way that they do not derail learning. As a course of action is implemented, unexpected factors and conditions are encountered that must be dealt with in order to reach the goal. Often these relate to personal obligations. When learners fail to successfully navigate new learning experiences, it is often because they do not know how to deal with these unexpected factors and conditions. Those who are successful, engage in strategizing.

As learners encounter unexpected factors and conditions, they often consider giving up and need the help of mentors to develop other strategies that are more productive. Yet, this is often when they avoid mentors because they do not want anyone to know that they are struggling. Emotions, such as fear of failure, are very influential at this point. While specific strategies are dependent upon individual factors within the situation, being open to the advice of others and to sampling different strategies are key to dealing with unexpected factors and conditions and minimizing their impact a learner's progress.

Unexpected factors and conditions often change the dynamics of a new learning experience. Learners may need help returning to normalizing as new strategies are incorporated into navigating the experience. A mentor can be very instrumental in helping the adult learner cycle back and forth between normalizing and strategizing while navigating.

**Reflecting.** As explained earlier, reflecting occurs throughout the experience, as part of the preparation, engagement and processing of an experience. Mentors can encourage learners to proactively reflect by providing an opportunity for conversation regarding past and present experiences. Facilitating proactive reflection can help learners identify various aspects of the present or past experiences that impacted their progress including, but not limited to, individual actions, choices, behaviors and feelings. This type of reflection can help learners gain a deeper understanding of the experience and apply this to current or future experiences. Encouraging and facilitating proactive reflection can also help learners recognize the value and benefits of navigating the experience that go beyond deciding what to do next. It can shape, impact and/or transform perspectives, beliefs, emotions, thoughts, actions and/or behaviors, resulting in a more significant impact on learners' lives.

The application of the theory of navigating to mentoring is not meant to imply that this is all mentors can or should do in relation to adult learners. Rather the theory can be used as a framework or tool to help identify and foster behaviors that support successful traversing of new learning experiences and can be used in conjunction with other best practices.

### **Mentoring and Coaching**

While the theory of navigating can be used to mentor adult learners, mentoring is not limited to educational settings. Mentoring is also common in organizations and businesses. It involves an informal or formal relationship between a mentor and protégée designed to enhance performance, development and career potential. The three integrated, cyclical stages of behaviors identified in the theory of navigating can likewise be used as a tool or framework for mentoring a protégée.

Many of the ways that an academic mentor can utilize the stages of navigating as discussed above apply to career mentoring and coaching. Personal and professional coaching involves a working partnership between a coach and client to help the client maximize personal or professional potential (International Coaching Federation, 2008). Each relationship is individualized to the specific needs and goals of the client. According to the International Coaching Federation (2008), "Professional coaches provide an ongoing partnership designed to help clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and professional lives....and to customize their approach to individual client needs" (pp.2-3). The theory of navigating can be used as a framework for helping individuals through new experiences, identifying and fostering patterns of behavior that help in successfully traversing the experience.

A key difference, however, in using the theory as a career mentor or coach occurs during the mapping stage. Unlike an academic mentor who is not present during the initial mapping, a career mentor and coach would likely be very involved at this stage as they help the individual (1) identify and clarify the goal, (2) recognize personal factors, such as level of competence and personal obligations, which have an impact on individuals' preparedness and ability to successfully reach the goal and (3) gather and interpret information on how to proceed towards the goal.

Career mentoring and coaching are just two examples beyond the substantive area where the theory of Navigating can be applied. Undoubtedly, the theory of navigating has broader implications to the many different types of helping professions that assist people as they go through new experiences.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

The theory of navigating a new experience would benefit from future research in two directions. First, to maximize its applicability in various settings, the theory would benefit from further data collection and analysis in order to discover variations that may emerge from navigating new experiences within other substantive settings. Second, the specific applicability of the theory to adult learners could be further explored and developed. Of particular interest would be exploring further strategies that can be used during the embarking stage to help adult learners deal with unexpected factors and conditions encountered in new educational experiences as well as exploring further the role of reflecting in adult learning and how mentors can facilitate the reflection stage. Two other discovered behaviors that people use when encountering new experiences – drifting and docking – merit further research. Both behaviors prevent an individual from successfully navigating a new experience. Finally, the use of grounded action (Simmons and Gregory, 2003) would also be a logical and practical method for conducting further research on the applicability of this theory. As the authors explain, “grounded action is the application and extension of grounded theory for the purpose of designing and implementing practical actions such as interventions, program designs, action models, social and organizational policies, and change initiatives”.

### **Author**

Kara L. Vander Linden, Ed.D. Fielding Graduate University San Diego, California Email: [dr.k.vanderlinden@gmail.com](mailto:dr.k.vanderlinden@gmail.com)

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