Older Adults and a Writing Workshop: A Phenomenological Study

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OLDER ADULTS AND A WRITING WORKSHOP:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Jennifer Lynn Alex

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2010
ABSTRACT

OLDER ADULTS AND A WRITING WORKSHOP:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by Jennifer Lynn Alex

December 2010

This study examines how older adults experience the phenomenon of participating in a writing workshop and how older adults interpret their experiences, understandings, and realities of writing. Ten older adults, ranging in age from 62 to 83 with varying degrees of experiences in writing, participated in this study. Through a semi-structured interview, each participant related his or her experience first as a writer and then as a member of a writing workshop offered through a Community Literacy Center in a mid-sized Appalachian city.

A phenomenological analysis method was used to identify and analyze themes of meaning that emerged in the interview data. Those themes of meaning were then analyzed within a framework of writing workshop, self-directed learning, transformational learning, lifespan development, and successful aging theories.

The analysis identified eight essential themes of meaning. Three essential themes of meaning specifically applied to writing: Writing as a Vehicle for Thought, Writing as a Means of Challenge, Writing as a Record. Four essential themes of meaning were related to the experience of being in a writing workshop: The Writing Workshop as a Commitment, The Writing Workshop as an Affirmation, The Writing Workshop as Awareness, and The Writing Workshop as Community. The final theme applied equally
to the experience of writing and being in a writing workshop, and it is Writing and The Writing Workshop as Enjoyment.
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2010
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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer would like to thank the dissertation director, Dr. John Rachal, and the other committee members, Dr. Willie Pierce, Dr. Kyna Shelley, and Dr. Gary Peters for their advice and support throughout the process of this project. In particular, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Rachal for his advocacy on my behalf and for being committed to my success. There were many times when I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to complete this process, and his belief in my ability to create a worthwhile piece of research carried me through.

I would also like to thank the members of the Friday Morning Writing Group for their willingness to meet with me on relatively short notice. Their candor and openness brought everything together for me, and without their participation, this project would not have been possible.

Finally I would like to thank the friends, family, and co-workers who provided support during the process of writing my dissertation. They provided the time and space to write, edited drafts, and believed in my ability to see this through. When I wasn’t sure I could finish, they provided invaluable encouragement, and without them, I could not have completed this task.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2000 United States Census (Gist & Hetzel, 2004), there were 35 million people in the United States aged 65 and older. By 2050, approximately 20% of the population will be 65 and older, accounting for some 88.5 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Further, the U. S. Census Bureau reports that in the 2004-2005 academic year, some 7.3 million people in this age group were engaged in some form of adult education course. Hudson (1991) identifies this aging of America as our most significant demographic trend.

The changing demographic trends mirror a society that is changing as well. Rather than retirement being a period of time in which older adults live a life of leisure in retirement communities, many senior citizens are continuing to work or they may find themselves raising grandchildren and great-grandchildren (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009). Even if older adults enjoy a more traditional retirement, they face issues of determining how to maintain their social identities and how to best spend their available free time. “Whether working was a primary source of identity, retirement eventually results in unstructured time, time that must be filled one way or another to maintain a social identity” (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1986, p. 289). How the older adult chooses to spend his or her time is dependent upon the meaning the activity has for the older adult (Hendricks & Hendricks; Hudson, 1991).

Life span development literature posits that one of the main tasks of late adulthood is to create “a new balance of involvement with society and with the self . . . a new form of self-in-world” (Levinson, 1978, p. 36). Erikson's (1963) final ego stage of
Integrity vs. Despair, beginning around the age of 60, correlates to Levinson's “new form of self-in-world,” and Erikson (1978) believes that in order to age successfully, older adults needs to find meaning in the experiences of their lives and to make peace with those experiences. Hudson's (1991) cyclical model also assumes that this search for meaning takes place in the later stages of life. Writing can provide older adults with that opportunity to create understanding and meaning.

While not quite a model of aging, Cruikshank (2003) proposes “comfortable aging” rather than successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997) or productive aging (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherraden, 2001), which focuses on the potential for social and economic contributions to society by the older adult. Cruikshank argues for a more personal approach to aging that looks at aging and the state of old age as a time for leisure and personal growth, where the aged pay attention and live in the present moment with an emphasis on pleasure. This emphasis on pleasure can be linked to the fulfillment of creative urges by engaging in lifelong learning, a concept Lindeman (1926) advanced when he defined adult education as presuming “that the creative spark will be kept alive throughout life” (p. 55). Simonton (1996) describes the following aspects of creativity: divergent thinking, tolerance for ambiguity, and openness to experience. These elements can also leave people more open to continued learning. An awareness of their own creativity can help older adults recover “their identity as culture bearers and culture creators” (Moody, 1988, p. 259), which brings things back around to the need to maintain a social identity (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1986).

If adults do not need to continue to work—and the U. S. Census Bureau (2009) indicates that only 15% of adults aged 65 and older were employed full-time in 2007, so
many will not be employed—old age can be characterized by an abundance of leisure time. Winnifrith and Barrett (1989) define leisure as “the goal of human life—life lived to its fullest” (p. 11). Murphy (1974) outlines differing conditions of leisure, which all have at their heart freedom: freedom from producing income and the freedom to use one's time as one sees fit. One way that older adults see fit to use their time is in learning activities. According to Lamdin and Fugate (1997), “the influence of factors like age, health, income, and previous education predispose someone towards further learning” (p. ix). Life expectancy has increased, with Americans adding 28 years to their longevity (Deets, 1999), providing greater opportunities for “continued intellectual growth and development over a longer time span than ever before envisioned” (Lamdin & Fugate, p. 2). Lamdin and Fugate further argue that

the linear life plan, in which education is clustered in the first two decades of life, no longer makes sense; education is needed through the lifespan to help us accommodate changes in the nature of our work, navigate passages from one stage of development to another, accommodate new personal and professional situations and respond to the challenge of successful aging. (p. 60)

The results of the Elderlearning Survey created by Lamdin and Fugate point to two main reasons that older adults seek out learning activities: the joy of learning and meeting new people. Their findings support Houle's (1961) learning orientations, although omitting the goal orientation he describes.

While lifelong learning is a key assumption of adult education and development across the span of life is an important concept in gerontology, the idea of what it means to continue to grow and develop may need further examination. Merriam and Cafferella
According to Williams and Nussbaum (2001), late life development is “multidirectional . . . with both gains and losses, dependent on contextual factors with a great deal of individual variability” (p. 68). This means that as older adults participate in educational activities, the facilitators and participants must understand that due to the cognitive changes associated with aging, learning may not be a straight path from point A to point B. There may be starts and stops and frustration along the way, with lots of repetition thrown in for good measure.

Writing workshop as proposed by Elbow (1998) and Murray (1985) can accommodate the individualization that many older adults may require given the changes and differences in their cognitive abilities, and writing workshop is a natural fit with Knowles’ (1980) andragogical assumptions. In a writing workshop atmosphere, students are in charge of their learning, making the writing workshop construct a very self-directed process. In the K-12 arena, writing workshop is often more of a mixture of teacher-centered and learner-centered activities with the teacher deciding the form or genre of the writing and deciding on the topic (Rief, 1992). With adults the tendency appears to be to suggest possible topics to get the writing started, and there is very little other direction (Coare & Jones, 1996; Juska, 1999; Kazemek, 1999).

In the researcher's experience, many participants in a writing workshop choose to begin their work with some form of personal narrative or memoir. Personal narrative has been used by gerontologists to study the aging process by focusing on reminiscence and life review (Gubrium & Sankar, 1994; Reinharz & Rowles, 1988), although much of that
work has been done through a process of oral reporting. Reminiscence is an important part of old age. Butler (1963) states, “The life review is a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts” (p. 66). Preserving the memories of older people allows those older people to continue to contribute to society. According to McMahon and Rhudick (1964), opportunities for and ways to encourage older adults to share their knowledge of the past need to be found. Life history with a focus on significant people, places, and experiences in life has gained prominence in gerontological literature as well as in the wider society with an increasing number of guides available to those wishing to write their own life stories (e. g., Abercrombie, 2007; Metzger, 1992; Roobach, 1998; Thomas, 2008; Zinsser, 2005) and the rising popularity of memoir (Minzesheimer, 2008).

Internal motivation appears to be a central factor for older adults who participate in a writing workshop. Many older adults are interested in not only recording their lives in order to leave some kind of legacy for their families (Brady & Sky, 2003), but they are also interested in making meaning out of their lives (Birren & Duetchman, 1991; Kazemek, 2003). Their writing is not merely a recording of what happened in their lives; it is an attempt to figure out what the events of their lives meant. Related to the motivation of older adults who attend writing workshops is the effect that autobiographical writing has on the self esteem of older adults. Richeson and Thorson (2002) have found that older adults who participated in an autobiographical writing class were more satisfied with their lives than those who participated in a general learning class.
For other older adults, though, writing appears to be an attempt to reclaim their voices and articulate their experience as an older adult (Farrell, Kamler, & Threadgold, 2000). Through writing older adults are able to name and describe what it means to grow older, making the process less fearful for themselves and for younger generations. This reclamation, or establishment of voice, is a primary goal of writing workshop (Murray, 1985; Rief, 1992) and touches on Freire’s (2000/1970) theory of liberation and problem-posing education. The power in a writing workshop does not belong to the facilitator but rather the participants in a process of co-creation of knowledge.

According to Juska (1999) and Kazemek (2003), much of the writing adults produce in a writing workshop is autobiographical. When asked to write, most participants will write about the things they know or the things that are important to them. This fits with the experiential assumption of andragogy (Knowles, 1980). In a writing workshop, experience is the basis for the growth that happens as a consequence of the process of writing, receiving response, and making revisions.

Interestingly, experience can also work against the writing workshop model, and this mainly has to do with past experiences adults may have had with writing. Elbow (1998) and Brady and Sky (2003) discuss the barriers that writers face and the root causes of those barriers. The negative experiences many adults have had with schooling and writing, especially as related to issues of correctness, are often the basis of a belief that one is not a writer and what they write is not worthy of being labeled as writing. According to Freire (2000/1970), this stems from believing that knowledge rests outside of them and must be given to them by another, more capable person.
Theorists such as Vygotsky (1962/1939) and Bakhtin (1981/1975) posit that writing and language are inherently social activities. In order to fully appreciate what has been written, a dialogue needs to be created between the writer and the reader. This dialogic aspect of writing and meaning-making is the foundation of the response aspect of writing workshop. A key component of the writing workshop is the response that an author receives from the other participants in the workshop. Ideally the response is not about what is wrong with the writing but rather about how the writing is received by the reader: what reactions they had to the writing, what feelings the writing evoked, what questions the writing prompted, what thoughts the writing elicited (Elbow, 1998). The dialogue about the responses creates a potential avenue for the writer’s revision of that piece. However, the author has total control over the piece of writing. He or she is free to accept or reject any suggestion that is given (Atwell, 1998; Rief, 1992).

Purpose of the Study

It is clear that adult educators need to be prepared to meet the needs of an aging population that may turn to educational settings to help make sense of and reconcile the experiences of their lives in addition to providing opportunities to continue learning. In order to help make these educational opportunities as meaningful as possible, adult educators need to have some understanding of how older adults experience the writing process and in this particular case, how they experience a writing workshop. Along with the understanding of how older adults experience the writing process, adult educators need to understand what it means for older adults to consider themselves writers. The purpose of this study will be to determine how older adults experience a writing workshop and what that process means to them.
Research Questions

1. How do older adults experience the phenomenon of participating in a writing workshop and what does the writing workshop experience mean to and for them?

2. How do older adults view, construct, and interpret their experiences, understandings, and realities of writing?

Definitions of Terms

The terms used in this study are defined as follows:

1. Adult education: “process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, or life skills” (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, p. 9).

2. Andragogy: an ideal of adult learning that respects and accommodates the learner's past experiences and present needs as the adult is encouraged and empowered to become an autonomous learner.

3. Facilitator: a person who guides the writing workshop, providing support to the participants without taking ownership of the participant's writing process (Murray, 1972).

4. Older Adult: a person who is at least 62 years old, the minimum age at which Social Security retirement benefits can be received under normal circumstances (Social Security Administration, 2010). This term is synonymous with the term senior citizen.
5. Participant: a person who attends a writing workshop, contributing their writing and response to other participants' writing.

6. Writing Workshop: an approach to writing instruction that emphasizes the writing process and student involvement, typified by students choosing their own topics and reasons for writing (Calkins, 1986).

Delimitations

Delimitations for the study include the following:

Only participants from a writing workshop for older adults in a mid-sized Appalachian city will be interviewed.

Limitations

Limitations for the study include the following:

1. Participating in a writing workshop may have effects that participants have not yet realized at the time of the interview.

2. The researcher's experience as a participant in and facilitator of writing workshops may affect her perspective and interpretations.

Assumptions

The following assumptions will be made in the formulation of the study:

1. Participants can articulate what it means to them to participate in a writing workshop.

2. Participants will respond openly and honestly about their experience as a member of a writing workshop.
Justification

As Laslett (1989) states, what it means to be old and retired in this country is changing. Retirement, also referred to as the “third” age, may last as long as thirty years and will be “a time of fulfillment through activities that give men and women both pleasure and a sense of their own worth” (Laslett, p. 32). As the Baby Boomers retire, they will insist on a more active, productive old age, one that is as enriched with technology and things to do as their current lives. While the concept of retirement is in flux, many older adults will find themselves with time to fill and the need to adjust to a new social identity. Birren (1987) predicts, “Older people will be freely mixing work, leisure, education, and personal growth, without regard for age, in ways we can scarcely imagine today” (p. 26). Some older adults may choose to fill part of their time with writing. Cruikshank (2003) envisions that a “social role for the old might be found in storytelling, reminiscence and life review” (p. 47). Both of these ideas fit nicely with McClusky's (1990) “community of generations” which is “based on the assumption that, although separated by time and experience, each generation nevertheless has a common stake with other generations in relating the wholeness of the life-span of which it is a part” (p. 72).

The growing population of older adults and their participation in adult education activities combined with the increased popularity of writing life story and memoir makes understanding how older adults experience participation in a writing workshop an important task for adult educators and educational gerontologists. Further, what it means to them to be a writer can provide better understanding of how older adults learn and make meaning. In examining the literature related to older adults and writing (Birren &
Duetchman, 1991; Brady & Sky, 2003; Juska, 1999; Kazemak, 1999, 2003), nothing pertaining to what it means to be a writer or experiencing the writing process was found. All available research discusses the benefits of writing and what older adults choose to write about but not what the process of creating the writing means to and for the older adult. As Moody (1990) emphasizes, adult educators need to

find ways to use the students' own life experiences to enhance the learning process...We will need to pay the closest attention to how older people use their life experience in the learning process in order to build on the strengths of experience in old age. (p. 29)

If, as the literature supports, the major developmental tasks in older adulthood are showing greater introspection, reviewing past experiences, and finding meaning, this study allows researchers to see in the participants' own words what it means to go through this process as it pertains to a writing workshop structure. The study may also offer new insight into and understanding of the aging process as well as issues surrounding the older adult learner. The study may also help adult educators understand the issues surrounding implementation of a writing workshop and what it means to be a writer, particularly for older adults.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The preliminary literature review of a qualitative study differs from the literature review utilized in quantitative research. Particularly with phenomenological research, which demands that the researcher come to the experience as free of presuppositions as possible (Creswell, 1998), the literature review is not meant to be what Schram (2003) likens to a “parade of everything you can find on your topic” (p. 120). As Glaser and Strauss (as cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 135) state, “qualitative researchers begin their studies with minimal commitment to a priori assumptions and theory.” In contrast with the traditional literature review in quantitative studies, the purpose of a preliminary literature review within the context of a qualitative research study is to “justify the need for the study, develop sensitising concepts, and provide a background for the study” (McCann & Clark, 2003, p. 15). With that in mind, the literature review that follows intends to explore the nature of writing workshop coupled with adult education and life span development in order to build on the justification and background that have been offered in Chapter I.

The literature review is divided into three sections. The first section explores writing workshop theory and the relevant literature as it relates to adolescents and adults. The second section presents a discussion of adult education theory and how writing workshop relates to adult education. The final section presents a discussion of life span development theory in order to provide a context for the participants in this study.
Writing workshop is an approach to writing instruction that emphasizes the writing process and student involvement in that process, typified by choice in topic and purpose for writing (Calkins, 1986). Within the K-12 education environment, a history of writing pedagogy shows that within the last 40 years, educators have moved towards a process-based approach and away from one that is more skills-oriented (Gill, 1993; Nystrand, 1989). Calkins (1986) argues that schools create barriers that prevent students from exploring and utilizing the organic purposes of writing. Writing Workshop theory helps remove those barriers for students (Atwell, 1998; Britton, 1972; Calkins, 1986; Daniels & Zemelman, 1988; Emig, 1971; Graves, 1983; Moffett & Wagner, 1992; Rief, 1992).

Writing Workshop and process-based writing instruction have their roots in the work of literary authors. Emig (1964) argued that the composing processes of authors such as Kipling and Hemingway could provide insight and models for the composing process of student writers. In what has been called “the single most influential piece of Researcher inquiry—and maybe any kind of inquiry—in Composition's short history” (North, 1987, p. 197), Emig (1971) expanded her study of literary authors' composing processes and applied the resulting model of how writing is created to a case study of eight twelfth graders and described a recursive process that includes seven stages: pre-writing, encompassing awareness of a need to write to putting words on paper; planning, which involves a setting of parameters for the writing; starting of the writing; composing; reformulation, including revising, correcting, and rewriting; stopping, contemplating the
product. Writers move back and forth through these seven stages in order to create a finished product.

Murray (1972) simplified Emig's seven stages to just three: prewriting, writing, and rewriting. For Murray, while the length of time it takes each writer to move through the stages depends largely on the writer, prewriting takes approximately 85% of a writer's time and includes “research and daydreaming, notemaking and outlining, title-writing and lead-writing” (Murray, 1972, p. 12). The writing stage is the production of a first draft and takes the least amount of time, perhaps as little as one percent. The rewriting stage involves “researching, rethinking, redesigning, rewriting—and finally, line-by-line editing” (Murray, 1972, p. 12). Simplifying writing to three stages and placing issues of correctness last results in ten implications for teaching, according to Murray (1972, pp. 13-14):

1. Student writing forms the text for a writing course;
2. Students discover and create their own topics with support from the teacher;
3. Students use their own voice rather than an artificial academic language;
4. Students write as many drafts as they need in order to get to the core of what they want to say;
5. Students write in the form or genre that is most appropriate to their subject and audience;
6. Students consider editing and correctness as the last step of their writing process;
7. Students are free to take as much time as they need to complete a piece of writing;
8. Students are graded on their finished product and not the drafts that lead to that finished product;
9. Students are individuals and move through the writing process at their own pace;

10. Students and teachers need to be willing to explore alternatives.

As with Emig (1971), Murray based his assertions about the writing process on the work that writers actually do.

At the same time Emig and Murray were advocating a process-based approach to writing, Elbow (1973) was also investigating the writing process, popularizing the idea of freewriting: writing continuously and without editorializing or worrying about correctness for a period of at least 10-20 minutes on a daily basis. When freewriting, one does not really think about the words that are making their way on to the paper but rather just allows whatever is inside the writer to take shape on the page in whatever way is most appropriate at that time (Elbow, 1973). Within the “chaos” of thought and “garbage” of material created in the process of freewriting, much is thrown away, but writers will also find thoughts and pieces that are integral to exactly what the writer wants to say (Elbow, 1973, p. 34). Beyond freewriting, though, Elbow’s 1973 Writing Without Teachers provides an outline of a workshop process for those wishing to improve their own writing. For Elbow, writing improves when the writer can begin to believe in the effect that his writing has on readers and that can only happen when the writing has been shared with a multitude of readers. Writing with the same group of people over an extended period of time is critical in his conception of writing groups. In order to create a teacherless writing group that allows those exposures, according to Elbow (1973), the following elements need to be in place (p. 195):

1. A group of 7-12 people who are committed to coming together once a week for a period of at least 10 weeks;
2. Each member of the group must commit to write something every week;

3. Each member of the group reads his or her writing out loud to the other members of the group each week;

4. Members of the group provide “pointing” (pointing out words or phrases that were particularly effective or ineffective) and “summarizing” (a single sentence summary of the work) responses to the author, doing their best to not offer advice on how to improve the writing;

5. Without editorializing the author records the responses as completely as possible and chooses at a later time how to change (if at all) his or her writing based on how it impacted the listeners.

In a teacherless writing group, the instructor or facilitator is a participant and retains no more authority than any other member of the group. The facilitator's main role is to provide a model of both writing and response, and in the early stages to provide the writing exercises that may help people begin to get into the habit of writing.

*Writing Workshop in the K-12 Environment*

At the same time that the writing as process movement was gaining steam, the whole language movement was also on the rise within the K-12 environment. *The Essentials of English*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1982, advocated an emphasis on functionality, communicative nature, and lifelong utility of the language arts. Whole language, as described by Bergeron (1990), uses literature and writing opportunities to immerse students in a world of print in order to provide students with authentic interactions with text and other learners, creating intrinsic motivation for learning. Whole language advocates that students become literate through purposeful and
meaning based writing, reading, listening, and speaking, and Writing Workshop is consistent with that position (Fielding, 1992).

Atwell (1991, 1998), Calkins (1983, 1986, 1991), Daniels and Zemelman (1988), Fletcher and Portalupi (1992, 2001), Graves (1983, 1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1991, 1992), Moffett and Wagner (1992), and Rief (1992), build on work of Elbow, Emig, and Murray to create a guide for incorporating writing process theory into the K-12 classroom. While there are minor differences in implementation, all advocate a similar structure for a writing workshop in a classroom. The structure of a writing workshop revolves around student-selected topics rather than teacher-assigned topics, conferences between the teacher and student with regard to their writing, and student ownership of writing. All proponents agree upon the importance of student choice in assignments, although Rief acknowledges the need to bow to the constraints of the education system and creates parameters for assignments. For example, if a curriculum says that students must learn how to write business letters the assignment will be to write business letters. While there is no choice in terms of the form of writing, students are free to choose the topic of their writing, selecting which company to write about a product or service that is meaningful to them.

All of the major theorists also agree on the need for specific instruction in writing skills and strategies. In traditional, teacher-centered classrooms, skills are taught in a predetermined sequence and in isolation. Within Writing Workshop theory, skills are taught in the context of student writing and reading and are based on the errors that teachers are noticing in student writing (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Rief, 1992; Shaughnessy, 1979). Instruction generally happens during a whole-class “mini-
lesson” that introduces the skill within the context of student writing and provides students the opportunity to practice with the skill. Teachers then conference with individual students as needed to reinforce the skill. Teaching the skills within the context of student writing allows students to see the skills they are learning as useful and necessary to improving their writing.

Conferencing both with the teacher and with peers is a key ingredient in the writing workshop classroom (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986; Fletcher & Portalupi, 1992, 2001; Graves, 1983; Moffett & Wagner, 1992; Rief, 1992). There is a highly social aspect to the writing workshop classroom (Graves, 1985). In the writing workshop classroom, the audience for student writing is often the other members of the writing community and writing for this real audience can empower young writers (Dyson, 1989). At the other end of the spectrum, though, both teachers and peers must be careful in the types of response that they provide in conferences because students are writing as “members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say” (Harris, 1989, p. 12). Writers can be stifled by responses by peers and teachers that are seen as teasing or conflicting (Lensmire, 1992). As Calkins (1986) states, both teachers and students must consider the types of input that will be most helpful to young writers. Without an atmosphere of mutual respect, the response process can be torturous and damaging to the novice writer.

Another area of agreement is that teachers in Writing Workshop should write and share their writing with students. This is seen as important because it provides students with a model for literate behaviors and because it allows students to see that all writers struggle with the writing process (Daniels & Zemelman, 1988; Fletcher & Portalupi,
Graves (1990) is particularly strident on this point, going so far as to say that teachers should not ask students to complete an assignment that they themselves have not written.

An essential for creating a writing workshop is a dedicated block of time for students to write and confer both with the teacher and each other. Children need extended periods of time in order to become proficient writers, according to Calkins (1986). This is perhaps the greatest barrier to the implementation of Writing Workshop in the K-12 environment and teachers are always struggling to find enough time to provide students with the freedom to take the time that Elbow (1998) said is essential to student writing (Sudol & Sudol, 1991).

*Writing Workshop and Adults*

The search for literature that related specifically to adults and writing workshop theory or writing groups made it apparent that while there may be many different kinds of writing classes or groups available to adults, there is a dearth of scholarly work examining the experience or process of adults within a writing workshop/group. Of the studies found that relate directly to adults and writing workshops, several researchers mentioned the paucity of available material on which to ground their own work as justification for their studies (Kazemek, 1997, 1999, 2003; Saunders, 2005; Schuster, 1998; Webb, 2003). The search for relevant and related research turned up three main subgroups: writing workshop and older adults, writing workshop and women, and writing workshop for adults in formal and informal settings. Across the different subgroups there are several commonalities in terms of how the workshops are structured. All researchers discussed the need to create a supportive and welcoming environment in which
participants would feel free to share their writing and to respond to the writing of others. Several researchers mentioned the use of catalyst or mentor texts that might help participants decide upon a topic or that illustrated a specific aspect of the writer's craft. In participating in a writing workshop, many participants found the space to deal with traumatic or painful incidents and had the opportunity to develop or discover a voice or sense of personal power. While related and at times overlapping, each subgroup will be discussed separately.

*Writing workshop and senior citizens.* In searching for research specifically related to senior citizens and writing, the author most frequently found was Kazemek (1997, 1999, 2003). Kazemek's research centers on The Senior Class, a group of seniors that he facilitated in a writing workshop for a number of years. His work branched out to include members of The Senior Class writing with elementary school-aged children and the impact of the experience both on the seniors and children (Kazemek & Logas, 2000). Drawing on Kaminski (1984), Kazemek (1997) outlines several reasons why seniors write: as a means of communication, as a vehicle for remembrance, as a way to continue learning, to convey their life experience to future generations, as an opportunity to make sense of their experience, as a means of connection to others, and as a way to become more observant.

The Senior Class consisted of on average 14 participants, predominantly women, of various backgrounds. The group met on a weekly basis for approximately 90 minutes. The workshops followed the same general structure (Kazemek, 1997, 1999):

1. Workshops begin with a brief time to share personal news and engage in discussion related to issues or subjects that the participants mention. This time
typically lasts 10-15 minutes and serves as trust/community-building activity within the workshop structure, and this sharing/discussion often turns into guiding points for the writing that participants may create.

2. In order to spark discussion or writing, the facilitator may bring a short “catalyst” piece to the group which is read and then discussed with an emphasis on how the piece helps them think about a particular topic. With the catalyst text, Kazemek often presents a “craft lesson,” which can focus on a range of topics such as developing a strong opening sentence or incorporating descriptive or figurative language.

3. After initial discussions, participants are invited to share the piece they have been working on in the previous week in order to have an opportunity to receive feedback on their work. Kazemek (1997) stresses that no one has to share what they have written and no one feels pressure to share. While participant response to their peers' work is often positive, Kazemek tries to provide at least one comment that is specific to issues surrounding writing craft.

4. After sharing and response, participants come back together to discuss an interesting topic (often surrounding the catalyst text the facilitator has prepared and brought to the group). Through discussion, the group begins to figure out various ways to approach writing about that particular topic.

5. At the close of the workshop, the participants have 10-15 minutes to begin the process of drafting a new piece or revising a previous piece. If there is time and desire, the seniors have the opportunity to share their beginnings or revisions.
According to Kazemek (1997), the use of catalyst texts is extremely important. Many people (not just seniors) have had negative experiences with the writing process and are overwhelmed by needing to choose something to write about. Catalyst texts can provide participants with not only a topic but a model for imitation. For the struggling or novice writer, this can be key in experiencing a level of success. Catalyst texts can be taken from any variety of sources, including but not limited to poetry, music (Kazemek discusses the use of participants' music, i.e., music that was popular when participants were younger), articles, and fiction.

Importantly for the participants in The Senior Class, the writing workshop was a place to find a supportive community (Kazemek, 1997). The Senior Class gave the participants a place to go one day a week and something to do in the intervening times (Kazemek, 1999). For some of the participants, membership in The Senior Class warded off depression and decreased loneliness. Within The Senior Class, participants had the opportunity to connect to others who were exploring the same types of experiences they were. Those connections allowed the participants to explore weighty topics including death, racism, and aging in general and made it easier to undertake a process of life review (Butler, 1963).

While Kazemek (1997, 1999, 2003) briefly touches on how participating in a writing workshop helps seniors find their identity, Schuster makes it a much more central finding in her work with seniors living in a nursing home, stating, that as participants began to identify as writers, it essentially changed the nature of their relationships with themselves, their families, and the rest of the community around them. The writing workshop that Schuster (1998) studied has parallels to the ones that Kazemek led,
although confinement to a nursing home brought particular challenges and important differences. The format of the workshop was similar in that Schuster's group met weekly for approximately an hour and participants shared their writing. However, due to specific disabilities, the facilitator had the responsibility of transcribing and making copies of participant writing each week in order for everyone to have legible copies of the writing at their disposal. Not all of the writers in this group were able to physically write so their writing had to be dictated to a scribe (either the facilitator or other volunteers who were designated for that purpose).

Notably in Schuster's research, there is no mention of the use of catalyst or mentor texts. All of the writing seems to have sprung from discussion about topics that may have been of interest to the participants. There is also no mention of craft lessons or instruction to participants that were related to improving the quality of participant writing. However, like Kazemek (1997, 1999, 2003), the importance of developing a supportive community is discussed at length. The participants in the nursing home writing workshop were often tackling difficult topics, coping with and adjusting to the changed circumstances of their lives by relying on the memory of past lessons and experience in order to draw on the strength that resulted from the life they had lived (Schuster, 1998).

The writers in Schuster's (1998) group created new identities for themselves as writers, and that identity changed many of their significant relationships. Writing was often used as a way to create a connection with others both inside and outside of the facility in which they lived. Writers used their work as an opportunity to not only pass on their life histories and important remembrances to their family members but to also assure their families that they were adjusting to and coping with their new lives as
residents in a nursing home. The writing produced by the participants often allowed family members to see their relatives as not just someone who lived in a nursing home and was on the decline but rather as a fully-drawn, still contributing member of a larger community, creating a connection between the family and the participant that often was not present before engagement in the writing workshop.

As participants were recognized as writers, their success in acquiring a new skill and identity that had value not only to themselves but to others both in their immediate sphere of influence and in wider contexts created a sense of empowerment, and being a writer allowed participants who may have had little control over their lives to regain some small sense of control (Schuster, 1998). Identification as a writer often only came after someone else had recognized and praised a participant's work. Pride, new-found confidence and a sense of value marked the transformation to writer. Within the nursing home community, being a writer earned the participants a certain amount of prestige, although interestingly that idea applied generally just to those who could write independently and without the assistance of a scribe, and those who wrote with a help of a scribe did not tend to consider themselves writers (Schuster, 1998).

Saunders' (2005) dissertation on the work of older poets is different from both Kazemek's work and Schuster's in that his work was an analysis of the themes that developed in the work of amateur elderly poets as compared to the themes present in the work of published, “professional” poets. Although the methodology was different, many of Saunders' findings were similar to both Kazemek's and Schuster's.

Saunders' first analyzed selected work of poets known to have been publishing or writing in the later stages of their lives. These poets were some of the ones that he
emphasized in the course of teaching a poetry workshop, although Saunders (2005) maintains that he drew from the work of a plentitude of poets in order to be able to discover common themes. This could be considered providing the catalyst or mentor text of which Kazemek (1997, 1999) speaks. The only other mention of how the poetry writing workshop was facilitated comes through the delineation of the rules for the workshop (Saunders). The rules give the reader a hint to the process engaged in by the participants and facilitator. Like Kazemek and Schuster, there is an expectation of writing and sharing of the writing. There is also mention of a writing exercise. Beyond that, there is no discussion of how the poets created their work.

Saunders' (2005) analysis of the work of 17 participants reveals the emergence of six themes: healing, resiliency; silencing and emerging from silence; the quest for immortality; social interaction; and gerotranscendence. Many of Saunders' participants came to writing in order to deal with some sort of trauma. It may have been fresh (the loss of a spouse) or it may have been long-standing (failure in childhood academic situations), but through their poetry, the participants were able to place those painful episodes in perspective without it consuming them. Closely related to the theme of healing is resiliency. Many of the poets in Saunders' workshop chose to write about the trials or set-backs in their lives and their own perseverance. Some of the female participants wrote about surviving divorce; others wrote about chronic illness and dealing with the day-to-day limitations that imposes on their lives. Both of these are related to findings from Kazemek (1997, 1999, 2003) and Schuster (1998). Both researchers made mention of dealing with difficult topics and making sense of the place in life where participants find themselves. Also found in participants' poetry is the idea of silencing or
emerging from silence. Many poets described instances of being silenced when younger, whether within their family or in their roles in the wider society. For the poets, the act of writing offered an opportunity to reclaim their voices and create a new identity was powerful in its ability to shape a new perspective. The recognition of their new identity as poets capable of expressing thoughts and emotions that they were not permitted to express during early periods of their life is also closely linked to the theme of healing and resiliency.

Saunders (2005) also identified the quest for immortality as a theme emerging from the work of the poets in his study. Roughly half of Saunders' participants expressed a desire to leave something behind, a record of themselves and their lives, for their loved ones. This echoes Kazemek's (1997, 1999, 2003) and Schuster's (1998) assertion that older people often write to leave a record and pass on family stories to future generations. Another theme that emerged from both the poetry of Saunders' participants and interviews with them was one of a desire for social interaction. Adjusting to a new phase of life and accepting a change in their social status (no longer working, a widow or widower, living in a different place), left many participants desiring a connection with others. As seen in the work of Kazemek (1997, 1999, 2003) and Schuster (1998), participating in a writing workshop provides that element of interaction that may have been missing. The final theme uncovered in Saunders' (2005) analysis is the idea of gerotranscendence, “a shift from materialistic and rational vision to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally followed by an increase in life satisfaction” (Erikson & Erikson, 1998, p. 123). According to Saunders, all participants expressed elements of
gerotranscendence, crafting their own interpretations of experience and acknowledging the ability to do so free of expectation and stricture.

*Writing workshop and women.* Investigation into adults and writing workshop turned up two pieces of research that were particularly related to women and the experience of writing workshop. Farrell et al.'s (2000) exploration of women and literacy includes an examination of the writing process of 40 women, all between the ages of 70 and 85. The women wrote about their relationships, their experiences, and the ways in which they dealt with the changes, both emotional and physical, that come with aging. While the workshop procedures were not clearly outlined, the authors state that those who participated engaged in the writing process of drafting and revising stories as a part of the group in addition to engaging in lessons designed to address issues related to writing craft. According to the authors, the workshop and experience of writing their stories allowed the women the space to create identities for themselves that were outside of the stereotypical roles society assigns to older women, and in order to specifically facilitate the construction of a new identity, participants were asked to write about times when they felt both powerful and powerless at the same time.

For the women who participated in the workshop, writing came to be seen as a means of representation and power. The writers were able to present versions of their reality that allowed them to claim power they had been denied. The researchers point out that initially many women were reluctant to talk about themselves and their experiences in much detail because as the women themselves reported, they were part of a generation that was “actively discouraged from talking about themselves” (Farrell et al., 2000, p. 87). To overcome that reticence, the women were encouraged to examine every day
habits and the details associated with those habits. The attention to detail allowed the women to create a counter-narrative that grounded the habits in the experience of the women themselves rather than in the perceptions of others.

Unlike in the studies previously discussed, there was a definitive trajectory the researchers were interested in examining. While the participants were free to choose an everyday habit, the re-imaging of that habit was an expectation. Similar themes of the emergence of voice and creation of a new identity through the process of writing are consistent with studies previously mentioned, however.

An additional piece of research related to women and writing is Webb's (2003) thesis on women writing in a Zona Rosa writer's workshop. This Zona Rosa writing workshop was started in Savannah, Georgia in 1981. It has been meeting continuously since that time, and it is an all-women group with 13-20 participants. All participants are members by invitation-only, and they pay membership dues to remain as a part of the group. The group meets once a month for 5-6 hours. The participants meet at the facilitator's home, sharing food and drink before starting. Each meeting begins with an introduction and update as well as a review of the previous session's “exorcise,” with the facilitator reading the “exorcises” aloud to the participants. The “exorcises” are brief writing exercises that are designed to highlight an element of craft that might be particularly interesting or helpful to the participants. Not everyone does them, nor is there an expectation that every one will do the exercises. The facilitator views them as an “ice breaker” for the more serious work of manuscript review, and they are not reviewed for technical merit.
After a break for more food and drink and possible appearances by special guests (other writers, artists, comedians) the facilitator begins to read manuscripts aloud which she has already edited once. After a manuscript has been read, it is discussed, and the workshop proceeds in that fashion until people begin leaving. This contrasts with the descriptions of previously discussed workshops in that the facilitator takes control of the reading. Participants are free to experience their writing as someone else reads it rather than concentrating on reading it, which gives them another perspective on their writing and how it comes across to others (Webb, 2003). Interestingly, it is the facilitator who determines whether a piece is ready to be brought before the full group. If the facilitator doesn't think a manuscript is ready for a public reading, it is returned to the author with only the facilitator's comments on it. The expectation is that the author will make revisions if they are inclined and resubmit for possible consideration for reading before the entire group. While the facilitator is the gatekeeper for peer review, unanimously, the participants feel like the facilitator makes the women feel as if they are free to choose to accept or decline the suggestions that the facilitator makes.

Participants describe the workshop as being a “place of safety” (Webb, 2003, p. 61) where they can try new things with their writing and receive honest criticism of their efforts. Zona Rosa is also described as “supportive” (Webb, p. 62) and that support gives participants permission to experiment with their writing. The group also satisfies the need to socialize and connect with people that other researchers (Kazemek, 1997, 1999, 2003; Saunders, 2005) have discussed. For many of the women, knowing that they will receive honest and constructive feedback, even if it is painful to hear, is the major draw in attending the workshop. “While the members in the group do not seek to tear each other
apart, they are satisfied that the members critique each other with expertise and some rigor” (Webb, p. 65). Not all prospective members are ready for the honesty provided, though, and choose to leave the group.

The major difference in the experience of this writing workshop and others that have been examined is the role of the facilitator. Rather than being a co-creator of knowledge, in this instance the facilitator is clearly in charge of the group and the direction that it takes. For instance, while many members of the group feel that the sharing that happens at the beginning of the session should be shorter so the participants can get to the response that they find to be the heart of the process, the facilitator feels that this “priming of the pump” is very important, and thus it continues to occupy more time than the participants would like (Webb, 2003). Several of the members feel if the facilitator were to decide to no longer lead the group, the group would cease to exist.

Despite this difference, the Zona Rosa workshop retains common elements with the other adult writing workshops that have been discussed in this section, including the supportive community, the freedom to choose the topic and form of writing, and process of sharing and responding to participant writing.

*Writing workshop for adults in formal and informal settings.* In examining research related to adults and writing workshop, there were a couple of additional studies that do not fit neatly within the previously defined categories. Those include a writing group designed to help elementary school teachers understand the writing workshop process in which they would be asking their students to participate (Keffer, Carr, Lanier, Mattison, Wood, & Stanulis, 1995), an examination of writing groups facilitated by the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers in the United Kingdom.
In their research into what it means to be a member of a writing group, Keffer et al. (1995) describe what it is like to be a member of a writing workshop, with particular insight into what it means to give and receive response along with the issues of trust that arise in a response situation. As elementary school teachers implementing writing workshop, they believed that being writers would make them better teachers of writing, but they had never had an experience in a writing workshop and did not consider themselves writers. The teacher-researchers originally met at school every two weeks and shared their writing while offering response, but with the pressure of work creating other demands on their time, they elected to meet every other month for a full day, with part of the day dedicated to a writing workshop model.

One of their biggest initial challenges was trying to come up with something to write about. “It was soon apparent that one of our first tasks would be to try to overcome the feeling that we had nothing worthwhile to say, that nothing we thought of writing could be worthy of print (or even scribbling on notebook paper)” (Keffer et al., 1995, p. 7). This echoes concerns Kazemek (1997, 1999) addressed by providing catalyst texts and Farrell et al. (2000) overcame by directing women to write about their every day habits. While the teacher-researchers attempted various methods for deciding on a topic, including keeping a writer's notebook to record observations throughout the day and freewriting, no one strategy worked for all the participants. The participants found no easy answer to the problem of deciding on what to write and at times, what worked once
for someone, did not work the next time. This inability to quickly decide on something to write was frustrating for the participants.

Once they got ideas down on paper, the teacher-researchers found difficulty in giving and receiving response, which is not an uncommon situation as related by Atwell (1998), Graves (1991), and Rief (1992). In the early establishment phase of a writing workshop, issues of trust often come into play, but the teacher-researchers found that even after a sense of community had been established, some writing remained out-of-bounds for the group. Response models were only specifically mentioned by Kazemek (1997, 1999, 2003) who stated that response generally consisted of positive comments from the group and specific response related to craft from him; and Webb (2003) who emphasized the women's appreciation of the honest critiques. The teacher-researchers learned that they had to specifically ask for the kind of assistance they particularly wanted, which is an appropriate way to frame response, according to Elbow (1973, 1998).

Woodin's (2005) piece on worker writing groups also discusses the problem of receiving adequate response. “However, as writers improved and developed, the workshop could become limiting. Alan Gilbey lost interest in writers’ groups because he felt they ‘blanded out’ into reading circles, with members afraid to make critical comment” (Woodin, 2005, p. 571). In order to address this problem, the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (the Fed) allowed members to create and organize groups that more aptly fit the needs of the more experienced writers who were looking for support beyond encouragement.
The writing workshop process that Woodin (2005) outlines follows the same format as the other workshops previously discussed in that participants bring their writing to the group and the group provides response. Most interesting about Woodin's work is the idea of who is and is not a writer. This was briefly addressed in Schuster's (1998) study of writers in a nursing home, with those who dictated their writing to a volunteer scribe not being seen as a writer in the same way that those who write without assistance, but Woodin describes the tension between considering oneself a writer and “real” writers. Many of the participants in the Fed's writing workshops had negative experiences in school. The Fed's use of non-educational settings helped to create an atmosphere that was conducive to education. The Arts Council viewed the Fed's work with working class writers as having “no literary merit” (Woodin, 2005, p. 563). If writers in the Fed's writing workshops can get past the prejudice of more practiced writers, they often face judgment from their communities or themselves. Woodin relates the story of Jack Davitt, who wanted to write as a child but who threw his poetry away because it was not acceptable to write poetry. The Fed’s workshops provided experiences which allowed participants to construct new acceptance for engaging in the process of writing and becoming writers. In order to do so, the workshops had to be places of support and friendship, creating a culture of equity where people of all literary abilities and physical ability or disability were free to participate.

In examining what led the workers to the Fed’s programs, Woodin (2005) discovered that many people came to writing in order to deal with a trauma. Significant events created an impetus and often the space, whether that be time or resources, to engage in the reflection that is often inherent in the writing process. This notion of using
writing to have something to do or to heal has previously been outlined by Kazemek (1997, 1999, 2003) and Saunders (2005). Deciding to attend one of the Fed’s writing workshops has been remembered as a “turning point” (Woodin, 2005, p. 567) by participants who used the workshops as a springboard for further learning and experimentation. In looking for ways to improve their writing, many participants altered their reading habits. They began to search out models, or those catalyst texts that Kazemek (1997, 1999, 2003) discussed, in order to imitate and create text that was more challenging to them as writers.

Bryan’s (1996) examination of writing groups in the community college arena brings a final dimension to the discussion of adults and writing workshop. Significantly, Bryan discusses the need to take time for the community- and trust-building aspects of creating and facilitating writing groups. In Bryan’s community college classroom, the first four weeks of a writing class revolved around community building and allowing students the opportunity to come to know each other. While building community, Bryan also scaffolds the peer response process as well as teaching students facilitation skills. This was accomplished by giving students response and facilitation stems to build capacity to engage in those skills. Peer response stems such as “I like the way you said” and “I have a different view of” (Bryan, p. 190) turned out to be most helpful to students in giving meaningful, relevant feedback, with students relying on the stems throughout the course of the class. Atwell (1991) and Rief (1992) both discuss the use of stems to help students provide appropriate response but caution that they can be a double-edged sword with students only providing response in the forms of the stems, not confident of their ability to provide meaningful assistance to their peers.
Writing Workshop and Adult Education

While adult learning is concerned with the learner’s internal cognitive role in the learning process (Merriam & Brockett, 1997, pp. 5-6), what adult learning actually consists of is often open to interpretation. With continuing exploration into learning in adulthood, new understanding of what it means to be an adult learner is added to the body of knowledge that is adult education (Lawler, 2003). Adult education can be considered a “mosaic of many ideas” (Zepke & Leach, 2002, p. 205), and this section presents an overview of those ideas which are most applicable to the experience of a writing workshop.

A writing workshop provides senior citizens with the opportunity to engage in a process of lifelong learning. An examination of Lindeman's *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926) delineates four attributes of adult education:

1. Education continues throughout the process of life and is not the sole province of youth. Learning is not confined to institutions of learning, and adults have the capacity to learn long after they leave the secondary and post-secondary education environments.

2. Adult education is not concerned about vocational training or related to the work that one does in the process of his or her career. Adult education is primarily concerned with creating meaning within the context of the whole of a participant’s life.

3. Adult education is related to situations, not subjects. Adults seek out learning and knowledge when they encounter a “situations which call for adjustment.” Specific
subject matter serves the need of the situation; instructors and texts are secondary
to the learner’s need.

4. The learner's experience should be at the heart of the adult education experience.

(pp. 4-7)

While unfamiliar with writing workshop as it has been defined since the 1970s,
Lindeman could be describing a writing workshop when he discusses the setting for adult
education:

Small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and
vigorous; who begin to learn by confronting pertinent situations; who dig down
into the reservoirs of their experience before resorting to texts and secondary
facts; who are led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after
wisdom and not oracles: this constitutes the setting for adult education. (p. 7)

A writing workshop is an excellent example of adult education as defined by Lindeman.

Lindeman is often identified as the father of adult education, and within the adult
education world, Malcolm Knowles can be considered the father of andragogy. As
previously noted, much of the research that relates to writing workshop is based in the K-
12 education world, even though the model for writing workshops originated in the world
of adult writers. As such, a discussion of andragogy, the art and science of helping adults
learn (Knowles, 1980) is appropriate.

As defined by Knowles (as cited in Merriam & Brockett, 1997), andragogy
involves a set of six assumptions that are foundational to adult education:

1. Adults want to see the importance of what they are learning.

2. Adults have the ability to be self-directed learners.
3. Adults bring a lifetime of experiences to the learning situation.
4. Adult learning is based on a need related to a task, problem, or life skill.
5. Adult learning is based on real-life situations.
6. Adults are motivated by internal desire rather than external rewards. (p. 136)

In examining the tasks of a writing workshop and what happens within a workshop experience, most of Knowles’ andragogical assumptions are fulfilled. The last assumptions, which Knowles added to the theory of andragogy at a later date, might be questionable. Participants in a writing workshop may want to improve their writing skills just for the sake of their personal improvement, but within a writing workshop, the motivation might be driven by external factors such as the desire to create a publishable, or correct, piece of writing that might provide a source of income.

**Self-Directed Learning**

Within the definition of andragogy, Knowles discusses the concept of self-directed learning. Knowles (1975) defines self-directed learning as learning in which the learner is in charge of the process, perhaps with assistance from others, of first determining their learning needs and their goals for learning, identifying resources and learning strategies that will allow for meeting those goals, and then evaluating whether the goals have been met. By various estimates, 70% of adult learning is self-directed (Cross, 1981) and approximately 90% of all adults are engaged in at least one self-directed learning (SDL) project each year (Tough, 1978).

Because individual writers in a writing workshop are determining what they are writing, how they are writing it, and what assistance they would like from the other
members of the workshop, participation would generally be considered a self-directed learning activity. Within the writing workshop, the facilitator takes on some of the roles generally accepted for adult educators who assist self-directed learners (Ash, 1985; Bauer, 1985; Brockett & Hiemstra, 1985; Brookfield, 1985; Cross, 1978; Hiemstra, 1982, 1985; Reisser, 1973), including: create an atmosphere of openness and trust, help learners develop positive attitudes and feelings of independence relative to learning, teach self-evaluation of work, and help learners find resources.

Autocratic instruction does not fit within the parameters of an adult education setting (Knowles, 1980), nor does it work within the writing workshop context. A hallmark of writing workshop is a dialogue among participants and between the participants and the facilitator. Within the course of a writing workshop, the facilitator often takes on the role of collaborator, in agreement with Mezirow’s (1996) assertion that the educator should try to “work his or herself out of the job of facilitator to become a collaborative learner, contributing her experience to arriving at a best consensual judgment” (p. 171). Through the response process described earlier, the facilitator’s voice carries no more weight than the participant’s. The facilitator does retain authority as a content specialist and can bring issues of writer’s craft or technical correctness to the table that more novice writers may be unaware of. Often the facilitator “poses problems,” listening to the participant’s writing and focusing on those things with which the participant has requested assistance but at the same time asking questions that cause the writers to examine their work from different perspectives. The problems the facilitator poses should be related to the participant’s overall goal for her writing and honor the participant's experiences (Freire, 2000/1970; Vella, 1995).
The facilitator is not merely a “service manager” but is rather a full contributing member of the workshop; her experience, insights, and knowledge challenge and contribute to the participant’s learning (Brookfield, 1986). Brookfield (1985) highlights Tough’s assertion that adults often say that they would like more assistance, rather than less, in their self-directed learning process. Brookfield (1985) goes on to make note of the fact that SLD projects are often engaged in with the support of “community groups, hobbyist’s societies, and other learning networks” (p. 7). Particularly with regard to writing workshop, as evidenced in a previous section, the workshops often originate within the very groups that Brookfield delineates.

Brookfield (1985) also debunks the notion that self-directed learning happens in isolation. In fact, self-directed learning can be a very social endeavor where adults are seeking out and accepting the expertise and advice of others. Within the context of a writing workshop, several researchers indicated the social nature of workshop process and how important that is to the participants. Additionally, in a writing workshop, the participants are actively seeking the expertise of other more skilled writers within the group. The facilitator who brings mentor texts in to the workshop to illustrate issues of craft that participants may be struggling with or interested in imitating and then incorporating—or not—provides participants with a model to enhance their own writing, moving them closer to the personal goals they may have set for themselves at the outset of the workshop.

Related to the discussion of setting goals and controlling the direction the learning is to take, the participants may not necessarily have clearly defined goals for themselves, other than to improve their writing or have something to do with their time, when they
enter a writing workshop. According to Brookfield (1985), this is acceptable. “Although some degree of direction and purpose is a necessary condition for any kind of education, it is possible for adults to embark on an intellectual quest with no closely specified, fixed, or terminal point in mind. Indeed, many adults engaged in purposeful learning do not specify the skills or knowledge that they are attempting to acquire” (Brookfield, 1985, p. 9). As participants engage in the process of developing writing, they may begin to construct new goals or to refine goals previously set. This falls into place with Brookfield’s (1993) assertion that self-directed learning needs a measure of time and space in order to make well-informed decisions. Sometimes before writers are able to set goals for themselves, they have to have a sense of what is possible in terms of their writing. That often only happens as they write and encounter the writing of others.

Brookfield (1993) also argues that the decisions self-directed learners make are bound by their culture. The culture in which a learner is situated has an enormous impact on the decisions the learner makes. Culture, with its inherent values and belief systems, shapes what a learner views as possible and acceptable. This has been illustrated in a previous section when the women in Farrell et al.’s (2000) study had difficulty making a decision related to writing about their lives and experiences because they had been “actively discouraged from talking about themselves” (p. 87). It was only through engaging in the process of writing that the female participants were able to discover the possibilities that were open to them.

Transformational Learning

As will be discussed in the next section, learning and development do not stop as adults reach old age. As people age, according to Mezirow (1991), they ascend to more
nuanced awareness of context and premises and a greater integration of logic and feeling. This shift in orientation has been called transformative learning or meaning making (Buhler & Massarick, 1968; Bulter, 1963; Coleman, 1986; Cumming & Henry, 1961; Hendricks & Hendricks, 1986; Hudson, 1991; Kaminski, 1984; Mezirow, 1991). Rather than being consumed with the outside world, older adults have a tendency to be concerned with their inner world, searching for deeper meaning and understanding of themselves and how they fit into the world. Often the learning that is sought is both personal and universal, revolving around who they are and how they are connected to others.

Transformational learning can happen at any stage of life, and regardless of when it happens, it has similar elements. In transformational learning, rather than integrating a new experience with an old meaning, an old experience is reinterpreted with a new expectation which lends it new meaning. Key components of transformation learning are critical thinking and reflection. For Mezirow (1991), reflection is defined as “the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience” (p. 104). As defined by Mezirow (1991), content is what a person perceives, thinks, feels, or acts upon; process is how she perceives, thinks, feels, or acts; and premise is why she thinks, feels, or acts as she does. As a person engages in reflection, the ways in which experiences have been interpreted can either be confirmed or transformed. Reflective learning becomes transformational learning when that person discovers that her assumptions about an experience are wrong or no longer useful, creating a transformed perspective. When engaging in content and process reflection, beliefs or meaning schemes are created, confirmed, negated, elaborated, or reinforced.
Reflecting on premises can transform belief or meaning perspectives and lead to transformation of perspectives.

Mezirow (1991) delineates a difference between the transformation of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. Beliefs, attitudes, and reactions can be, and often are, transformed through reflection on a daily basis; however, transformation of meaning perspectives is a rarer event and often involves the sense of self. According to Mezirow (1991), a perspective transformation involves

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

Mezirow (1991) goes on to describe the following 10 phases of perspective transformation:

1. A disorienting dilemma;
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame;
3. Critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions;
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change;
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
6. Planning of a course of action;
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans;
8. Provisional trying of new roles;
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and

10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (pp. 168-169)

Perspective transformation can be painful or empowering; it can become a spiritual experience. For some people it happens gradually and for others, it is more immediate. Transformational learning may not even involve a profound redefinition of the self (Mezirow, 1991). Participation in a writing workshop, regardless of the topics that a participant chooses to write about, can be a transformational experience. As discussed previously, many participants come to view themselves as writers or to see writing as something that they can do. While many older adults are interested in not only recording their lives in order to leave some kind of legacy for their families (Brady & Sky, 2003), they are also interested in making meaning out of their lives (Birren & Duetchman, 1991; Kazemek, 2003). Their writing is not merely a recording of what happened in their lives; it is an attempt to figure out what the events of their lives meant. When participation in the writing workshop is viewed as an attempt to make sense of traumatic or painful events, as several researchers indicated that it can be (Farrell et al., 2000; Kazemek, 1997, 1999, 2003; Saunders, 2005; Schuster, 1998), the meaning-making process can be transformative. As experiences are deconstructed and re-imaged in ways that allow a new conception or understanding of the self in relation to the experience, a perspective transformation can occur. This is particularly true of Farrell et al. (2000) and Schuster (1998) who described writers who were able to see themselves in different, more powerful roles than they had previously imagined.
Human development happens at all ages and throughout the course of a life, according to adult development theory. The learning and growth process is not the sole property of childhood or adolescence, and adults continue to make meaning and change throughout their life. The journey through life is a learning process and learning is a lifelong process (Jarvis, 1992). As life changes, adults are growing. Every day in a life is not necessarily one that brings earth-shattering revelation about the human condition, but every day in a life is building towards subsequent experiences, helping prepare for what is coming in the future (Dewey, 1938).

Several models of human development have been offered in order to explore and explain the developmental changes that occur during a person’s life. There are two major paradigms within adult development theory and those are the stage theory and the transitions theory. Within stage theory, a key proponent is Erikson (1963).

With *Childhood and Society*, first published in 1950, Erikson (1963) established the idea of age related stages of ego development that are not dependent upon the context of an individual’s life. In order to move successfully from one stage of development to the next, a crisis must be resolved successfully. According to Erikson, there are eight stages of development, and the last stage begins around the age of 60. During this last stage of ego development, the crisis that must be resolved is one of achieving Integrity vs. Despair. This crisis involves an examination of the life that has gone before in its entirety and gaining a sense of what that life means taken together rather than seen as just a series of achievements. Erikson (1963) describes integrity as culmination of the preceding stages of life and it involves acceptance of both the triumphs and tragedies of a
life lived. This search for integrity is a searching for overall meaning in life and if a person is unable to see her life as having integrity, the result may be despair or bitterness during the later years of life. Introspection is required to resolve the conflict of the eighth stage and when the conflict is resolved, wisdom is acquired.

Erikson, Erikson, and Kivinick (1986) note that as older adults move through the last stage of life, they may take on the roles of mentors and advisers. Healthy older adults have the time to create a narrative that can be passed on to younger members of their families and communities in order to provide context and guidance. These new roles help contribute to a positive sense of self by having their life experiences seen as valuable and interesting. A positive sense of self is necessary for development of integrity.

According to Peck (1968), in order to resolve the conflict of ego integrity vs. despair, there are three tasks which must be processed. Those three tasks include separating the sense of self from a career-related identity; valuing mental and social capacities above the physical limitations of the body; and finding ways to make life more meaningful for those that they will leave behind after their death. In order to progress through these tasks, senior citizens must engage in a form of life review (Erikson et al., 1986). Life review allows seniors to come to terms with issues from the past which may be unresolved. As the physical body fails, intellectual abilities can take on more prominent roles in social settings. As the three tasks of reconciling integrity vs. despair are accomplished, gerotranscendence is achieved (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). According to Erikson and Erikson, gerotranscendence is “a regaining of lost skills, including...joy and song...an opening forward into the unknown with a trusting leap” (p. 127). As
discussed in a previous section, gerotranscendence involves a perspective shift, valuing mediation and contemplation over materialism.

Stage theory is not without its critics. It has been questioned for ignoring the differences between genders with regard to development as well as a simplification of personality and an aspiration to a middle-class orientation (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1986). An alternative to stage theory is construct of successful aging. While successful aging has been a frequent topic of research since at least the 1960s (Havighurst, 1961), there has been difficulty in creating a common concept for what it means to age successfully. Rowe and Kahn (1997) delineate three conditions for successful aging: a lack of disease or disease-induced incapacity, high levels of cognitive and physical ability, and active engagement with life. Guse and Masesar (1999) disagree with Rowe and Kahn (1997) as it relates to the idea of physical disability. Under the Rowe and Kahn model, frail older adults may not be able to achieve successful aging. In addition to Rowe and Kahn, Guse and Masesar (1999), Baltes and Baltes (1990) offer the idea of selective optimization with compensation. According to Baltes and Baltes (1990), as people age, they become more selective in terms of the activities in which they participate and interests they pursue. As abilities and faculties diminish, older adults may compensate by using other psychological, technological or physical adaptations in order to optimize their experience. Activity level has been positively related to life satisfaction and to functional and cognitive status (Beck & Page, 1988; Garfien & Herzog, 1995; Herzog, Franks, Markus, & Holmberg, 1998; Lawton, Winter, Kleban, & Ruckdeschel, 1999).

Subsequent researchers include elements of health, activity, mental acuity, positive attitude, acceptance, and adaptation in their definitions of successful aging.
(Knight & Ricciardelli, 2003; Tate, Lah, & Cuddy, 2003; Von Faber et al., 2001). In their qualitative study of what successful aging means to older adults, Duay and Bryan (2006) found that for their participants, a key to aging successfully was maintaining or creating significant relationships. Participants in Duay and Bryan’s study specifically identify unsuccessful aging in crafting definitions of successful aging, and for those participants, unsuccessfully aging is characterized by a lack of connection and isolation—essentially those who are not aging successfully are those who not only retired from work but from the world in general.

Rossen, Knafl, and Flood (2008) and Wick (2006) specifically examined what it means for older women to age successfully. Rossen et al. found many of the same themes as other researchers: acceptance of their physical, mental, and environmental changes; engagement with in the world around them and in particular “self-care” which was defined as exercise, both physical and mental; and comportment, which included both physical appearance and a positive attitude toward others and life in general. Wick’s phenomenological case studies of two Australian women conceptualizes successful aging through the lens of occupational strategies and how they eventually impact how one ages. The occupational strategies the women adopted and carried into their older age included a willingness to put self first, a refusal to indulge in regrets, and a willingness to try. For both of these women, those occupational strategies carried over into their retirement, creating a sense of well-being and satisfaction with their choices and their lives.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to present the theoretical foundation and provide the background necessary for an examination of writing workshop with older
adults. The majority of research on writing workshop methodology has been conducted in the K-12 environment (Atwell, 1998; Britton, 1972; Calkins, 1986; Daniels & Zemelman, 1988; Emig, 1971; Graves, 1983; Moffett & Wagner, 1992; Rief, 1992), and that research outlines a process that relies heavily on student choice, respect, and self-direction. The scant research related to adults and writing workshop (Bryan, 1996; Farrell et al., 2000; Kazemek, 1997, 1999, 2003; Keffer et al., 1995; Saunders, 2005; Schuster, 1998; Webb, 2003; Woodin, 2005), outlines a similar process and adds motivation for participation to the equation as well as some examination of the kinds of writing that adults produce. Writing workshop fits well with the parameters of adult education, which are acknowledged to include self-directedness, respect, opportunity for experimentation, active involvement, and intellectual stimulation, as well as consideration of the learner’s age, experiences, and developmental stage (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1975, 1980). While there has been little research with older adults and writing workshop, life span development allows that adults can continue to learn as they age (Bridges, 1980; Erikson, 1963; Havighurst, 1961; Hudson, 1991; Levinson, 1978; Rowe & Kahn, 1997). The second half of life can be a time of immense growth and development, a time for increased introspection, reevaluation, and a search for meaning (Erikson, 1963; Hudson; Jung, 1933). Participation in a writing workshop can provide support for older adults as they go through those processes.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how older adults experience a writing workshop and what their participation in that experience means to them. Because there are no studies that directly address this issue, a qualitative approach will be utilized. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate where little prior research exists.
(Hessler, 1992; Van Maanen, 1983). The following chapter explores the methodology used to investigate the study's questions.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine how older adults experience the phenomenon of participating in a writing workshop and what that experience means to them. The research was conducted using a qualitative phenomenological approach in order to create knowledge that is based on the experience of participating in a writing workshop. The study focused on a group of older adults participating in a writing workshop that is offered through a Community Literacy Center (CLC) in a mid-sized Appalachian city. The group, with varying membership, has been meeting since the mid-1990s. One of the current participants is an original member of the group. After receiving the dissertation committee's approval of the research proposal, the researcher secured approval by the USM Institutional Review Board (see Appendix C) and formal permission from the community literacy center which facilitates the group (see Appendix D).

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first outlines the research paradigm and methodology guiding the study. The second section delineates data collection procedures and features a description of the interview process, research participants, and setting while discussing the ethical considerations surrounding the study; the final section details the data analysis process.

Research Paradigm and Methodology

The nature of this study requires qualitative methodology. Qualitative methods are most commonly used by psychologists, educators, sociologists, and anthropologists...
who are chiefly concerned with the meaning that actions and events have to the participants of a study (Hessler, 1992; Van Maanen, 1983). Coming to an understanding of the meaning of a phenomenon is the aim of qualitative methodology (Van Maanen) rather than the frequency of the phenomenon's occurrence. Meaning and understanding are the primary concern of the qualitative approach (Thomas, 1989).

In qualitative approaches, the researcher was the primary data collection and analysis instrument, methodically probing for an understanding of how the world is experienced. Using “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), qualitative methods endeavor to uncover the intrinsic meaning of people's experience with the world (Jax, 1984; Merriam, 1991). Additionally, as part of the research process, the researcher interprets his experience of being engaged in the research (Merriam, 1991). Huberman and Miles, (1994, p. 429) assert that, “to know how researchers construe the shape of the social world and how they mean to give us a credible account of it is to know just who we have on the other side of the table.” There are multiple realities and the researcher’s must be included in the mix.

In relation to quantitative methodology, qualitative methods are ideal for small sample sizes. Qualitative methods give a detailed description of a phenomenon, looking for patterns of relationships among different categories. “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in their world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 2). Because the focus is on the meaning of a phenomenon to the people experiencing it, being able to generalize the results is not the aim of the qualitative researcher (Patton,
Qualitative research hopes to provide a precise snapshot of a narrow field of inquiry, which is in contrast to the much broader view that quantitative research creates. Understanding an intricate phenomenon holistically by examining it within the context in which it occurs is the goal of qualitative methods. Because of the interplay between participant and researcher, the analysis of data can often be subjective. The researcher combs through the data, in search of over-arching themes and patterns that fit within the total context of the phenomenon under study. As Eisner (1991) relates, “These unique ways of experiencing [the world] make possible new forms of knowledge that keep culture viable. These new forms then become candidates for shaping the experience of others” (p. 48). The subjectivity that is inherent within the framework of qualitative methods is seen as a virtue rather than a hindrance.

The subjectivity of qualitative research creates issues of validity and reliability that can be problematic when attempting to make a comparison to quantitative research. Merriam (1991) cautions that in qualitative research, no system exists for determining the value of one subjective evaluation as compared to another. Both researchers and readers of qualitative research must struggle with what it means to have validity and reliability as it relates to qualitative research. Because qualitative research aims to uncover different understandings than quantitative research, it is helpful to remember that alternative understandings of the definitions of valid and reliable may be required (Merriam, 1998; Mishler, 1986).

Within qualitative research, there are several ways to help moderate issues of validity and reliability. The primary way of achieving accurate representations of participants’ experience is to use multiple sources of evidence to allow for triangulation.
Another method of promoting validity and reliability is to engage in member checks (Creswell, 1998). As Jax (1984) states, “Validity is established when the researcher and the subject are able to construct and share common meaning” (p. 10). Giving participants an opportunity to review transcripts and asking them to affirm the accuracy of transcriptions and interpretations helps promote accuracy in developing the essential elements of the experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

The issue of generalizability also needs to be clarified with regard to qualitative research. In a qualitative study the goal is not to generalize to the wider population but rather to understand a particular issue with greater depth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1991). Qualitative research tends to leave issues of generalization to the reader of the research, but within the presentation of findings, the researcher can make it possible for readers to make connections to and among the experiences of the participants (Lincoln & Guba; Seidman). Additionally, in the presentation of the data and the findings, the reader can identify consistency and dependability. Given the purpose of the study, do the interview questions make sense? Are the results actually what the researcher claims them to be? In determining the answers to these questions, an audit trail is helpful (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The audit trail is a collection of evidence that can include the data, the researcher’s thoughts, documentation of sources, descriptions of interview settings, and the audio tapes of interviews. This trail of information allows the researcher to demonstrate to the reader that the interpretations made and conclusions drawn make sense (Piantanada, Tananis, & Grubs, 2002).
There are several different research traditions that fall under the umbrella of qualitative methodology, including grounded theory, case study, ethnography, phenomenology, and biography (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenological study is centrally concerned with how people create understanding of their experience to devise a connected worldview. As Creswell states, “a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 51). The examination of how older adults experience a writing workshop and what that experience means to them is logically suited to the phenomenological tradition. Exploring how older adults constitute understanding of their experience, finding the essence of that experience, is, as Creswell asserts, the focus of phenomenology.

**Phenomenology as Philosophy**

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research methodology. The philosophical roots of phenomenology in fact form the basis for all qualitative research traditions (Merriam, 1998). In order to more fully understand the process of conducting phenomenological research, it is essential to have an understanding of the philosophical tradition that informs the methodology (Creswell, 1998). According to Patton (1990), the defining characteristic of phenomenology as a philosophy is that the primary goal of inquiry is to describe the essence of experience. The assumption inherent within the phenomenological movement is that shared experience has an essence and phenomenology seeks to describe the “internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p.10). Additionally, perhaps one of the few things that can be agreed
upon when trying to establish defining characteristics of the phenomenology philosophical framework is that it is a non-empirical stance (Schmitt, 1967).

While it can be argued that the roots of phenomenology as a philosophy go as far back as Plato, phenomenology did not emerge as a school of thought until the late 1880s. The nineteenth century German mathematician and philosopher Edmund Husserl (1980/1911, 1962/1913, 1965/1936) is often credited with being the father of phenomenology. As the editor of a series of phenomenological studies titled *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* (*Yearbook for Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*), Husserl began shaping the idea of a phenomenological philosophy and felt that philosophy should occupy a more distinct role, separate from science but as a foundation for science. His work was aimed at providing philosophy that place within the scientific community. Husserl concluded that phenomenology was the “science of science’ since it alone investigates that which all other sciences simply take for granted (or ignore), the very essence of their own objects” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 23).

For Husserl, the person is the primary vehicle for explaining experience and distilling knowledge. Without experience (phenomenology) at the center, all other disciplines have no basis on which to stand.

Many divergent views are encompassed within the phenomenological movement. Asking each of the prominent scholars within the phenomenological tradition what phenomenology is yields a different interpretation in every case (Gadamer, 1976). Despite the varying answers to the question, one key assumption of the phenomenological movement is that consciousness is central to human experience. For Husserl, consciousness is intentional, which refers to the idea that the mind is directed
towards some entity, whether real or imagined (Moustakas, 1994). Within phenomenology, there is no measurable distinction between the subjective and objective worlds. Husserl describes the noema, the actual phenomenon as it exists in reality and the noesis, how the phenomenon is experienced (Miller, 1984). For every experience, there is both a noema and a noesis, and it is through the integration of the two that understanding of a phenomenon is achieved (Moustakas).

In addition to this key assumption, there is one primary unifying characteristic of phenomenology espoused by the different practitioners, and that is a lack of presupposition:

Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgment, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41)

Rather than approaching the situation with hypotheses, the phenomenologist suspends judgment about the nature of the phenomenon under scrutiny, letting the experience guide the ultimate understanding of it rather than shaping the experience through our own filters. For example, in the case of this study, the researcher must attempt to set aside her own experience as both a participant in and facilitator of writing workshops. Without doing so, the researcher risks imposing her experience on the data, creating an inaccurate understanding of what the experience means to the older adults who participate in a writing workshop.
According to Husserl, this laying aside of preconceived notions is known as the *Epoché*, which means to “become aware of personal bias and to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material” (Patton, 1990, p. 407). This process of *epoché* may be repeated numerous times in order to more ably approach the phenomenon without prejudice. “Only what enters freshly into consciousness, only what appears as appearance, has validity at all in contacting truth and reality. Nothing is determined in advance” (Husserl, 1977/1929, p. 30). This process allows one to receive what is offered exactly as it is, coming to know it as it appears, independent of others' experience of the same phenomenon.

Often synonymously with *epoché*, Husserl uses the terms “reduction” and “bracketing.” Essentially, these three terms mean examining and describing, repeatedly, teasing out those things which are indispensable to the description and leaving behind those which do not constitute essential understandings. According to Husserl (1962/1913), “The process itself is like a visual ray that changes with every experience of perceiving or thinking, shooting forth fresh perceptions with each new moment of seeing as it appears and disappears” (p. 172). It is this reflection and attention to detail which leads to a true understanding of experience of the phenomenon as it actually is. This reflection can only happen after an experience has occurred, making the phenomenological reflection retrospective (Van Manen, 1990). It is important to note that Husserl maintains that while it is not possible to completely eliminate personal bias, it is important to come as close to a state of neutrality as possible (McPhail, 1995; Moustakas, 1994).
Phenomenology as Research Method

Phenomenology as defined by Husserl asserts that the researcher’s approach to the study must begin by setting aside any preconceived ideas about the subject in order to purely examine one’s own thought process (Phillips, 1987). For the researcher to fully understand the participants’ experiences, prior beliefs or knowledge about the experience should be set aside through the process of *epochè* or bracketing in order to allow discovery of the essential elements of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher is immersed in the contextual situation in an attempt to understand the participants’ experiences and reality. Participants, and thus the researcher, come to understand the meaning of an experience through the description of it. Phenomenology’s goal is not to explain a phenomenon but rather to describe it and what it means to those who have experienced it.

Like most research, phenomenological investigation begins with a personal interest in the subject to be studied. There is some commitment to the subject that leads the researcher forward (Van Manen, 1990). This personal interest creates an immediate need to engage in *epochè*, and in many cases, to engage in it repeatedly (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen), as, according to Patton (1990), *epochè* is recursive and not something the researcher checks off her list before moving on to the next step. Engaging in this bracketing process allows the research to “enter freshly, encounter the situation, issue, or person directly, and receive whatever is offered and come to know it as such” (Moustakas, p. 89).

After beginning the *epochè* process, the researcher conducts interviews with participants. According to McCracken (1988), interviewing “can take us into the mental
world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world. It can also take us into the lifeworld of the individual, to see the content and pattern of daily experience” (p. 9). This language-rich process allows the researcher to understand a phenomenon in ways that quantitative methods cannot access. In the simplest of terms, language is thought and interviewing allows the researcher to begin to uncover thought and meaning within the context of the participant’s life. The purpose of interviewing is to understand the experience of those who are interviewed (Seidman, 1991). Interviewing can create a wealth of in-depth data, but it can also lead to variable and complex data (Kaufman, 1994). It is the job of the researcher to present the experiences that are uncovered through the process of interview so that those who read the resulting analysis are able to understand the experience while understanding the nuances of the phenomenon. In phenomenology, this is accomplished by reflecting on the essential themes that emerge from the data (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Data Collection

Interview Process

Interviews were utilized to collect data for this study. As noted by Merriam (1998), interviews are the most common source of data in qualitative research and in a majority of instances, interviews are often the only source of data. In the case of this study, in addition to interviews, participants were asked to complete a short survey in order to collect demographic information. There are several options available to qualitative researchers, including interviews, observations, and documents (Merriam & Simpson, 1995), but in the case of phenomenological research, where the aim is to uncover what an experience means to the participants, an interview is well suited to the
purpose of the research study. The discussion and interaction between participant and researcher provides an opportunity to gain an understanding of how people interpret the experiences of their lives and construct meaning in their worlds. Interviews allow the researcher to uncover information that cannot be readily seen, such as feelings and thoughts, coming to understand the participants’ “subjective understanding” of a phenomenon such as engaging in a writing workshop (Patton, 1990; Schutz, 1967).

Within the confines of an interview, it is important to keep in mind that while every effort at minimizing the impact of the interviewer, the interviewer is intimately engaged in the entire process of conducting the interview. The researcher decides which questions to ask and then asks them. She responds to questions, disseminates information, and then interprets, analyzes, and describes additional information (Mishler, 1986; Seidman, 1991). While this can be problematic, qualitative research, and phenomenological research in particular, recognizes the value of the human instrument (Mishler; Sankar & Gubrium, 1994; Seidman). Interviews allow both the researcher and the respondent to travel the paths that are most applicable to experiences being investigated.

For this research study, a semistructured interview schedule was utilized. In semistructured interviews, “either all of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more or less structured questions” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). While there are suggested questions and themes to be addressed as in a structured interview schedule, the semistructured interview schedule allows the researcher the flexibility to change the questions and topics in order to pursue information that participants may suggest or that arise from the flow of conversation (Kvale, 1996) while retaining a core
set of ideas to be covered. Often, phenomenological interviews resemble unstructured interviews and appear to be more informal and spontaneous than other types of interviews (Patton, 1990). The unstructured interview can be problematic for novice researchers as it can lead to a collection of data that is disparate and divergent with little sense of cohesion or relevance (Merriam, 1998). Due to the researcher’s inexperience with interviewing in general and phenomenological research in particular, a set of questions were prepared to use as a reference in conducting the interviews, although the researcher was prepared to alter, vary, add, or drop questions should responses from the participants indicate a need to do so. As suggested by Creswell (1998), the questions are brief and open-ended, designed to elicit an understanding of the respondents’ experience of participating in a writing workshop as well as their background/history with writing in general.

Research Participants

As discussed in Chapter I, there is little research on older adults and writing workshop. While there may be many groups meeting across the country, their work is not publicized, and it is difficult to find them. Quite by accident, at a national writing convention, the researcher was introduced to the director of a Community Literacy Center (CLC) located in a mid-size Appalachian city. The director mentioned that the center had been running a writing workshop for senior citizens for at least a decade and would be interested in discussing both the workshop and the researcher's proposed project further.

The writing workshop has been offered free of charge through the CLC since the mid-1990s. During that time, attendance has fluctuated from a high of 17 participants to a
One of the current participants has attended every session since the initial offering. The workshop has always had what the director calls a “good” mix of male and female participants, as well as a mix of educational experience. The director of the CLC has been the facilitator of the workshop the entire time, and the workshop is offered three times a year: in the spring, fall, and winter. The workshop meets once a week on Friday mornings.

While the CLC has a physical space located in the downtown core where such diverse classes as Financial Literacy, Adult Basic Education, Grant Writing, Fiction Writing, Research Writing, and various book clubs are offered, the writing workshop for senior citizens is offered off-site. The director feels this is a big reason the group has been successful. The CLC’s downtown location offers extremely limited parking at the site, although there is parking available in a lot approximately three blocks from the CLC’s building. For many of the participants in the senior citizen’s writing group, parking was mentioned as a barrier to attending functions and workshops at the downtown location. The site where the senior citizen’s writing workshop is held is centrally located, off a main thoroughfare, with a large parking lot that includes many handicap parking spaces. According to the director, for some participants who may have mobility issues and who don't like driving in the traffic that is often associated with downtowns, this can be a deciding factor in whether to attend or not. Additionally, the director has tried to offer the writing workshop at senior living centers, both senior housing that is not associated with a need for some sort of medical or supervisory care, and assisted living facilities, and the workshops have not been successful. According to the director, the need to commit to
actually going somewhere, knowing that others have made the effort to get out and will be waiting on you, makes a difference in participation. The director has also found that those who have participated in the writing workshop are those who are committed to the idea of writing and putting their thoughts on paper.

The workshop is very loosely organized. Many participants are working on very divergent types of writing. Some participants are working on memoirs or what the director of the CLC describes as “family stories,” which often relate to family history or lore. The workshop is actually advertised as a family stories class, and the director encourages participants to leave a “paper trail.” Others participants are writing poetry, fiction, essays, and letters to the editors. The workshop generally follows a pattern sharing and responding to writing in progress, followed by a brief writing exercise if there is time left at the end of the class.

During the course of the 2009 offerings, the workshop suffered the loss of several long-time members due to death, and the director was unsure if the workshop would be able to continue. A few new members have been recruited, and the director feels certain that there will be enough participants to make the workshop worthwhile to all participants. At the remaining fall 2009 sessions and the Christmas 2009 gathering, the director mentioned this research study to the participants and all expressed interest in participating. The spring 2010 session had a regular attendance of 12 members, with an even number of males and females.

The only criteria for participation in the study were (a) that the person be a senior citizen, as defined by an age of at least 62 years or older and (b) that they be a participant in a writing workshop. It is assumed that by participating in the writing workshop, all
potential respondents have the time and inclination to write and that they are both physically and mentally able to participate in the writing workshop. Once approval for the study was granted by the dissertation committee, the USM Institutional Review Board, and the CLC, the researcher made contact with all members of the group in order to ascertain their willingness to participate. Of the 12 group participants, eight were initially contacted via email, and four were first contacted through the postal service with follow-up phone calls. Because of time constraints, two group participants elected not to participate in the study.

_Ethical Considerations of the Study_

In dealing with human subjects, questions of ethics come into focus immediately: When is the researcher gathering information that is too personal? When should the researcher probe for further information and how should the researcher handle information that might be painful to the participant? What do participants risk by answering questions about their experience? What do participants receive in return for their participation in the research study?

While the consent form informed participants that interview sessions would be recorded, at the beginning of each interview, participants were asked for their permission to make an audio recording of the interview session. During the interview sessions, if a particular topic appeared to be painful for the participant, he or she had the ability to determine whether to continue with that topic or move on to something else.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all participants. Confidentiality was promised and maintained throughout the study. Because interviews took place on a face-to-face basis, the interviewer was aware of the identities of the participants, which
made anonymity impossible. Additionally, because of the nature of the group, individuals within the group would be able to identify each other. Transcription is verbatim, and all transcription was done by the researcher. All noises and interruptions were transcribed with an attempt to note voice inflection by bolding or capitalizing words, phrases, or sentences given particular emphasis by the participants. Lowered voices and displays of emotion were also noted in the transcriptions. Participants were given an opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews in order to allow for clarification or correction. In the analysis and presentation of data, any identifying details were changed to protect identities.

The Interview Setting

Each participant was contacted individually to arrange the logistics of his or her interview. Because the researcher lived in close proximity to the research site (within an hour’s drive) and had a flexible work schedule, it was not inconvenient to meet the participants at locations and times of their choosing. One interview took place at the CLC, another happened at a Panera Bread location, two occurred at the writing workshop site, five were conducted at participants’ homes, and one was an exchange of emails between the participant and the researcher because while the participant wanted to be involved, he was out of town and would not be back within the time frame for completing the study.

At each of the face-to-face interviews, the participants were extremely hospitable and gracious, asking how they could make the researcher comfortable, often offering something to eat or drink and one insisting on lunch after the interview. Often the researcher was introduced to spouses, and in some cases, grandchildren. All but three of
the participants allowed the researcher to review their writing, and, in several cases, gave
the researcher copies of their writing. The interviews lasted from between 45 minutes to
over two hours. The stories were rich, personal, and detailed, with many participants
providing incredible accounts of their lives. There were several very emotional, although
not painful, moments as the participants recalled what it meant to them to be a member of
this particular writing group. The researcher and two participants made close connections
primarily based on places they had been or occupational experiences and have kept in
contact after the interviews.

As previously stated, all interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Once
transcription was completed, copies of the interview transcripts were sent to
individual participants. Most transcripts were emailed to participants for their review,
although two transcripts were sent through the postal service. In one instance, a
correction was made because the participant was describing his use of a play on words.
The research transcribed the exchange literally, missing the pun, and the participant
noticed the error. In another case, the researcher misunderstood an acronym and knew
when transcribing it that it was incorrect but could not figure out what it might be. The
participant made the correction, and as soon as the researcher saw it, had a moment of
disbelief because of how obvious it was.

Data Analysis

The phenomenological semistructured interviews produced a large quantity of
data that had to be sorted through. Because the respondents were older adults and they
were potentially more diverse than other age groups, interpretation of the qualitative data
was also problematic (Rowles & Reinharz, 1988). To further complicate the matter, while
phenomenological research design makes use of specific steps in the data analysis process (Crewswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990; Van Manen, 1990), parts of it, particularly how to proceed with the identification of the essential themes of what is being studied, is not definitively explained in the literature (Kaufman, 1994; Seidman, 1991; Van Manen). There is agreement, though, on the following three ideas (Luborsky, 1994; McCracken, 1988; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Seidman, 1991; Strauss, 1988; Van Manen):

1. The researcher must come to the process with an open mind, all presuppositions put aside as discussed previously. The researcher hopes to come to understand the essential elements of the participants’ experience, and this cannot be accomplished without going through the *epochè* process.

2. The text must be reduced to the essential structure and elements of the experience, discarding all of those things which are extraneous.

3. The process of reduction is inductive rather than deductive.

As previously discussed, the *epochè* process is a key, ongoing process within the phenomenological study. The researcher must begin this process before undertaking the study and has to repeatedly engage in reflection to ensure, as much as possible, that the participants' experience is viewed through unbiased eyes, allowing the participants’ perspectives to remain primary throughout the research. This cannot be assumed to be an easy task. The researcher must honestly engage in reflection that allows her to suspend any personal experience or ideas about the topic of research. As Moustakas (1994) states, it is “a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing
things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (p. 85). As articulated in Chapter I, the researcher has extensive experience with writing workshops, both as a participant and as a facilitator for both adolescents and adults. Since first conceiving of this study and through the literature review in Chapter II, the researcher has had an opportunity to bracket assumptions about the process. In examining the literature as it relates to writing workshop, many of the researcher's personal experiences were confirmed; however, the researcher’s experience had not been with older adults and throughout this process, the researcher carefully examined the data for the participants' experience, not the researcher’s. To that end, it was important to remember that the research questions for this project were conceived in such a way as to ascertain what the writing workshop experience means to older adults and how they view participating in a writing workshop. According to Jaffe and Miller (1994), in asking participants what an experience means, the researcher is asking about the social and personal significance of that experience for the participant. Coming back to the significance of the experience for the research participants is part of the *epochè* process for the researcher.

After engaging in *epochè*, while remaining mindful of the need to repeat that process should the occasion present itself, the researcher collected data from the participants. In the case of this study, there were 12 participants in the writing workshop offered by the CLC. Ten chose to be a part of the study, and all participants yielded rich data. As Creswell (1998) warns, “The less articulate, shy interviewee may present the researcher with a challenge and less than adequate data” (p. 124). In order to address that challenge, probes were used to encourage participants to provide elaboration or
explanation as needed. While the researcher was prepared to have participants choose to
decline a particular line of questioning because it could be uncomfortable or painful, that
was not a situation that occurred.

After the collection of data, there is agreement on the general process by which
that data are analyzed (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990;
Van Manen, 1990). The researcher identified units of meaning, engaged in
horizontalization, practiced reduction, grouped the meaning units into themes, wrote a
textual analysis, and proceeded through imaginative variation. As Van Manen (1990)
states, the researcher must reflect upon, clarify, and make explicit “the structure of
meaning of the lived experience” (p.77) to understand the essential structure of a
phenomenon.

In order to determine what constituted a “unit of meaning,” the researcher focused
on the data that were most related and relevant to the research study. As Seidman (1991)
emphasizes, the research must constantly be questioning the data. In the case of this
study, it involved the researcher asking the data repeatedly, “What statements or phrases
seem particularly essential to this respondent's experience of being in a writing
workshop?” Once units of meaning or significant statements were identified, the
researcher engaged in the process of horizontalization. During horizontalization, all units
of meaning were given the same initial weight, leaving what Husserl called the
“Horizons” (Moustakas, 1994). These “Horizons” are a list of nonrepetitive,
nonoverlapping statements, and according to Moustakas, this list can be quite long as
experience and meaning can be extensive. In order to make this list of horizons more
manageable, the researcher then practiced reduction, which led to all irrelevant or
repetitive information being excluded. Determining what is not essential to understanding
the essence of a phenomenon was accomplished by placing the focus of the research in
brackets, “so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question”
(Moustakas, p. 97). The researcher continually engaged in reflection about the
phenomenon under investigation, asking again and again how each horizon was essential
to understanding the experience.

Once the reduction was accomplished, themes were then determined.

Approaching the phenomenon in terms of themes that present themselves (Berman, 1994;
Van Manen, 1990) gave the researcher the tools to understand meaning. Theme,
according to Van Manen, “is the means to get at the notion, gives shape to the shapeless,
describes the content of the notion, and is always a reduction of the notion” (p. 88).
Theme analysis allowed the researcher the ability to understand the phenomenon by
understanding the essential components of the phenomenon. As these themes were
discovered and clustered into groups that address the research questions, they were then
used to create a textural description of the phenomenon that was experienced (Creswell,
1998).

After a textural description was constructed, the researcher engaged in what is
known as imaginative variation (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994;
Patton, 1990; Van Manen, 1990). “The task of Imaginative Variation is to seek possible
meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference,
employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent
perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (Moustakas, pp. 97-98). Through
imaginative variation, the researcher hoped to discover the structural elements of the
experience, seeking those things that were universal in the different meanings and perspectives that were generated. From the philosophical perspective, this involved looking at each element and determining whether it was truly essential to the experience. If it were not present, would the experience remain the same? Would it be considerably different? If something else were added, would the experience be the same? Can other elements be added without changing the essence of the phenomenon (Schmitt, 1967)? This reflective process leads to the creation of a structural description of the phenomenon (Creswell).

The final step in phenomenological analysis was the synthesis of the meanings and essences that had been derived through the creation of textural and structural descriptions into “a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). This structural synthesis is a description of the true meaning of the phenomenon for the individual participants (Patton, 1990).
CHAPTER IV
ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

This study explored two slightly different but closely related questions: How do older adults experience the phenomenon of participating in a writing workshop and what does the writing workshop experience mean for them? How do older adults view, construct, and interpret their experiences, understandings, and realities of writing? In seeking to understand the meaning that each participant makes of his or her experience, the researcher asked participants to respond to questions designed to elicit information about what writing and being a member of this particular writing workshop meant to them.

The analysis that follows was guided by the research questions. Throughout the process of collecting the data and then sifting through it in order to determine the essential elements of the experience, the research questions were foremost. It was incredibly difficult to reduce the variety of experiences to a few essential themes, but phenomenological research strives to “construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 41). What follows is an attempt to capture the essence of what it means to a group of older adults to participate in a writing workshop and how they interpret their understandings of writing. This chapter is organized into the following sections: an introduction of the participants, a description of the writing workshop, and an analysis of the themes of meaning. Getting to know the participants and describing the workshop setting is essential to understanding the fuller
picture of what this experience means to those who engage in it and helps provide a context for the themes that emerged from the data.

Introducing the Participants

Ten very engaging, articulate older adults participated in this research study. They opened up about themselves and their history, providing the researcher with glimpses into their lives and their motivations to write. Basic demographic information was collected from all of the participants, and of the ten who chose to participate, ages ranged from 62 to 83, with a mean age of 73.5 years of age. The sample consisted of an even number of men and women, with five each. Additionally, the sample was uniform in racial or ethnic make-up, with 9 participants identifying as Non-Hispanic White. The remaining participant refused to identify a race, stating that he was, “American. Just American,” although based on appearance and life history, the researcher believes him to be Non-Hispanic White as well. In accordance with the participant’s wishes, though, for the purpose of this study, the designation of “American” was added to the demographic information. Slightly more than half of the participants were married, with two participants identifying as widowed, one divorced, and one never having married. Only two of the participants reported that they were still working, with one participant still running her own business. The remaining eight participants were retired. All but two of the participants were college graduates. Of the college graduates, three held Master’s degrees, and two had obtained doctorates. One participant did not complete high school but later went back to school to earn a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) certificate. The remaining participant completed high school and entered the military, receiving training as an electrician.
What follows is a brief introduction of each member of the writing workshop who agreed to participate in this study. Participants are presented in no particular order.

Frank

Frank is a 71-year-old retired police officer. He is married with several adult children and completed his college education while working full-time, taking classes when he had the chance and when they fit into his schedule. “Sometimes they’d offer an extension class or a summer intersession class. Wherever you could squeeze the hours in.” It took eight years of “squeezing in” classes in order to graduate. “The only thing I missed out, I thought I missed . . . . you appreciate it more because it was something you choose to do. Someone else wasn’t paying my way.”

Frank has always identified himself as a writer, at one time having an email address that combined his occupation with writing. He said that for him the interest in writing is linked to an interest in reading. “I guess I got into it, I would read and occasionally I would read a bad book. I would say, I can write better than this.” Frank is working towards having a book of short reminiscences about his life published, and his family has been supportive of his efforts. “When I retired, I got a thesaurus and dictionaries and how-to, writing for dummies. I’ve got a little library section downstairs. So the family has been supportive. I’ve just been dragging my feet getting published.”

Frank has been participating in this writing workshop for five or six years. He remembers seeing an advertisement for a Family Stories class offered by the Community Literacy Center (CLC), designed to help older adults create a record of their lives. “[A]nd I’m thinking well, any writing is better than no writing. I’ll go and write the family histories and that will get the creative juices flowing. I’ll start writing again.” Two years
before coming to the writing workshop offered by the CLC, he had participated in a one-day writing workshop offered at a one of the local universities, looking specifically for some comments on a detective novel he was working on. “[P]art of it was they would review a chapter. That was one of the reasons I went.” One of the reasons that Frank was interested in writing was that he felt he could write better than some of the authors he was reading, but he felt that with the detective novel, maybe he wasn’t as good as he thought he was.

I think I wrote three chapters and it was like, I would re-read it and I’m saying it’s no better than the book that…I claim I could write better than that. I wasn’t writing better than that. I hadn’t lived up to the standard I set for myself I guess. So I made a couple of attempts at trying to rewrite it or start all over again. I just put it up on the desk and I guess for over two years, I never touched it again. It’s like I tried and I couldn’t do it.

Frank primarily writes stories told through the perspective of Little Frankie. They are all true stories except he has taken some liberties with names and actual details. “Everything I put down happened, but to make it flow better or read better, I might put a curve in the road. But there’s no curve there.” He is in the process of putting together enough stories about Little Frankie to create a book, although not all of the stories are about his childhood. The arc of the book will take the reader through Little Frankie’s life. When I have my book, it’ll be pre-first grade all the way up through adulthood.

And I’ve got stories. Well, I guess the word is, I wasn’t a bad boy but I was a mischievous boy. Most of them [the stories he has already completed] concentrate in the third, fourth, fifth grade. That’s the mischievous era.
All of the Little Frankie stories involve a moral at the end or some lesson that Little Frankie—even when he’s an adult—learns as a result of his actions.

Frank is a pen-and-paper, first draft writer. When he worked as a policeman, he often typed his own reports even though there were secretaries within the department whose job was to translate the officer’s long-hand into typed reports, but there is something about the computer that he finds difficult.

I love to type but when I type on a computer, for some reason I go back to abbreviated three finger hunt and peck. I just can’t, I can’t touch-type on a computer, but I can on a type on a typewriter. So I write my stories long-hand, pen—usually a pen, not a pencil—yellow legal pad, spiral notebook, whatever.

There is very little editing of his work once it’s done. If a piece is for the workshop’s annual anthology *Silver Threads* or a writing contest, he may spend some time going over it. “I’ll edit those pretty good. I’ll go over them, give it to two or three close friends.” For most of his work, though, he makes few changes. “Pretty much if I write a story, 95% of it doesn’t get touched.”

*Amelia*

Amelia is an 82-year-old woman who has led quite the life of adventure. After completing a doctorate in nursing, she decided she wanted to go somewhere. She was teaching at a Northeastern University and during her summers off, she traveled. “I’ve been around the world alone. Uh, started back in 1973. Uh, no tour, no nothing.” Her first trip was as a part of a World Health Organization exchange and took her to Norway. “I had gone with the attitude if I wanted to talk to Americans, I would have stayed home.” That attitude led her to visit with relative strangers in Sweden and Poland and took her to
“a tiny fishing island, a mile off the coast, north of the Artic Circle. I didn’t even know where I was going!”

That first summer led to a lifetime of traveling, often with students. When she moved to her current location, she became involved in an outreach program in Ecuador, traveling there seven times, “working with grassroots groups on empowerment of women.” After her retirement, she became involved with Elderhostel.

I went to Alaska to Katmai National Park, which is away from everything except the bears and that, ummmm . . . I can’t even keep it straight in my head. I went to Mexico teaching English as a second language. I went to another Elderhostel. I went to, um, South America. Went to Paraguay. Argentina. Bolivia. And Brazil.

In 2002, Amelia’s travel was curtailed when she developed shingles and she has not traveled since. “I don’t really miss it. I’ve been to 29 countries, a lot of the time living with families. I’m really quite satisfied not traveling.”

In addition to her travels throughout the world, her work as a professor in nursing has taken Amelia to several different locations in the United States, including the researcher’s home university. According to Amelia, she worked at The University of Southern Mississippi in the very early 1980s for several years before needing to find somewhere that wasn’t quite as hot and humid, having grown-up in the Northeast and being unused to the brutality of Southern summers. She and the researcher spent quite a bit of time discussing USM and the surrounding areas.

Despite having retired from formal wage-earning, Amelia volunteers as an English as a second language tutor. “I’ve done that for uh, 22, I mean 19 years. And I have met people from all over the world.” Her professional, leisure, and volunteer life
have given her connections and contacts all over the world. Many of those people are the people with whom she shares her writing.

Amelia primarily writes stories through the voice of her dogs, calling them her “little stories.” She feels that she has no real voice of her own, but when she writes from the perspective of her dogs, things just seem to flow for her. “It just pours out. And the other thing I’ll have…when I write for myself, it’s a real drag. I can’t come up with stuff. But I’ll put the dog in it, it comes right out.” Amelia shared several of her stories with the researcher, giving her copies of a few of the “Little Volumes” that she distributes to friends every year. Before coming to the writing group sponsored by the CLC, she engaged in some technical or professional writing but did not do much beyond that. She is one of the few participants who has been with the group for an extended period of time. By her estimates it has been 13 years, and according to her only Griffin has been participating in the CLC’s writing workshop for longer.

Amelia, in contrast to Frank, does most of her composing on the computer. “Uh, but um, I write just about everything by computer. Handwriting I can’t go fast enough.” Her writing is usually centered around a title. “I always have a title. My titles are…I take them very easily. I come up with the title and then I fill them out.”

Griffin

Griffin, like Amelia, is one of the remaining long-time members. Griffin has been participating in the CLC’s writing workshop for older adults since it began in 1993. He is 83 and married with children and grandchildren. He says that his grandchildren have little interest in his writing. Before he retired, he was an engineer and engaged in many kinds of technical writing. “Well I wrote a couple of articles which were typical, I call it
engineering articles: boring, uh long-winded, of use to nobody and of interest to nobody except possibly to me.” Before coming to the CLC’s writing workshop, he had never engaged in a writing workshop or writing activities other than those connected to his work.

While Griffin is one of the oldest members of the group, both in terms of age and his participation within the group, he was also one of the most brief when speaking with the researcher. He answered questions very directly and succinctly, although there was a great deal of humor in his responses. When asked about what kinds of writing he typically does, his response was,

Fictional short stories. I tried my hand at mystery and novel. My attention span is that of a wet dish rag so I stick to short stories. If you ask [the director of the CLC] about me and poetry, she’ll say that I consider poetry to be prose with wide margins.

While the workshop sponsored by the CLC was originally slated to be a family stories group, Griffin says, “I guess that lasted about two sessions and she [the CLC director] saw that she had a bunch of mavericks on her hands. And uh, kinda took off in all directions.” Through his work in the writing workshop, he has amassed a collection of approximately 160 stories, and almost all of them feature a troll character named Gtznvlk. Most of his stories “will end with a pun of some sort. Not all but most of them will.”

Griffin, like Amelia, is a computer-composer. Almost all of his writing happens on the computer. When asked about his composing process, he says he isn’t quite sure where his characters or stories originate.
Sometimes a character will pop up and I want to do something with the character.
Sometimes I may hear something and get a punchline for the end. And these, I say, are always short stories. So I’m not looking for a plot or anything like that.
I’m looking for a quick and dirty something.

It doesn’t appear that Griffin does much revising of his work unless it’s for the anthology or the occasional writing contest that he enters, saying, “I just kinda get an idea and then just put it out and try to eliminate the mistakes, the spelling, and the grammar.”

Peggy

Peggy is another long-time member of the writing workshop, coming for 13 or 14 years. She says that as far as she can remember, Griffin is the only other person who has been in the group longer than she has. Peggy is 77 and a retired LPN. She grew up in Appalachia, and her father was a minister. She was married at the age of 14 and had four children by the time she was 19. The early marriage and motherhood required her to leave school after completing the ninth grade. According to her, it was not an easy life. Her husband only worked eight of the 16 years they were married. “I can look back now and I can see he was having panic attacks. He just said, ‘I feel like I’m gonna die all the time.’” Through a state agency, she was given the chance to attend LPN school, which allowed her to support herself and her four children, although it was still a struggle.

Peggy’s lack of education as compared to the other people within the workshop reveals a touch of insecurity. She says that she has learned that her writing is fine, but she also explains that in many instances she doesn’t feel like she can comment on the writing that other people create. “Well then when I got in the group, I found out I didn’t really know much about writing at all.” She says, “I don’t feel competent to critique them [the
other writers in the group]. Sometimes, well, I don’t know. They’re all such good writers.” She goes on to say, “Oh, I guess I just felt, I just felt inferior. My writing really wasn’t good enough.” She states several times, though, that she has gotten to the point of being able to judge her writing as good or not and doesn’t particularly care what other people think about it.

Before coming to the writing workshop at the CLC, the only real writing that she can remember engaging in is some writing exercises related to her Sunday school classes. Several times the Sunday School Quarterly asked her to write about the subject of the Sunday school lesson. She does remember attending a journaling workshop offered through the CLC although she says that the writing workshop for seniors is the only writing workshop she’s attended. She reports that she has always enjoyed reading. Her writing has helped her appreciate her reading more.

I find that I like reading more because I can identify with the author more no matter if they’re male or female. Try to figure out, maybe not figure out, maybe appreciate more how they’ve, uh, expressed themselves. And maybe their imagination and so on.

Within the group, her writing tends to be “just things that I know about or have experienced myself. That’s all I can write about. Things I’ve experienced myself. I don’t have an imagination like a space ship story.”

When Peggy writes, she is a pen-and-paper composer. “I can’t type and I don’t know how to use the computer, although I do have one sitting there not being used. I feel connected to the paper, you know.” She says that she writes because “every once in awhile I’ll have an idea and I’ve got to sit down right then and get it on paper or it’s
gone.” There are bits of paper stashed all over her house, she reports, with little things she’s written down so they don’t escape her. Peggy brought several pieces of her writing to give to the researcher, numbered chronologically in order to depict her growth as a writer.

Carol

Unlike approximately half of the members of the writing workshop, Carol came to it with an extensive history in writing, including having participated in other writing groups and even starting one of her own in the condo complex where she lived. She is also one of the newest members of the group, having been a member for a little less than a year.

Carol is 77 and divorced with a master’s degree in music. She was raised on a tobacco farm in western Kentucky and was the last of seven children, born after her siblings were already out of the house. She commented several times that she didn’t want to seem “Pollyanne-ish” because she really did enjoy her childhood and the life her parents provided for her.

That part of my life, I just have, I just have very warm memories of my mom and dad. It was a good life. My dad had a third grade education and my mom had a sixth grade education but they were two of the brightest people I ever wanted to know. I don’t mean to sound so Pollyanne-ish but it was a good life. They were…I forgot all the work in the tobacco patch and pulling off the tobacco worms and you know, just all the things that go along with that.

Her early childhood provided the impetus for the rest of her life. When she was in fourth grade, her siblings got together and purchased a piano for her. It cost $35 and set her
course. She briefly taught music in an elementary school, but has spent most of her time
working in her own piano studio or as a consultant with major piano companies, teaching
others how to use music technology. Her work has taken her all over the world and
throughout the country. Within the course of her work, she has published several books
related to teaching piano and using technology such as synthesizers.

Carol brought a piece to her interview entitled “Writer’s Journey.” It catalogued
at least 12 pieces, dating back to the time she was nine years old. Carol also talked
extensively about an annual work entitled *Family Connections and Creative Dimensions*
that she compiles and contributes to. The impetus for the anthology was the September
11, 2001 tragedy in New York City. At the time, two of her sons were living in New
York and she was unsure of their safety.

And that was in September, and I kept trying to write my kids and reinforce how
important they were to me, how important family is, and how much I love them.
And you know, it would sound sentimental or trite or insincere. I just couldn’t do
it. So just out of the blue one day, I thought, I thought about having them write
something, and I would put together a book….and the idea was that they were
supposed to send me something they wrote. It didn’t matter. It could be serious; it
could be funny; it could be a drawing; it could be a poem; it could be whatever
they wanted. And I would put it together in a notebook, and that was my
Christmas present to me. They wouldn’t need to get me a Christmas present—just
that—and I would give them the book for Christmas.

The following year she expanded the contributors to include her 14 nieces and nephews,
and the project has continued every year since 2001. She does not edit the pieces that are
sent to her. She just compiles them and sends everything back out to the rest of the family. She says that for her children in particular, who never had a chance to know their grandparents or some of their aunts and uncles because of the age difference, the gift is priceless. “They still talk about the stories that were told about my nieces’ and nephews’ grandparents, my mom and dead, my kids’ grandparents.”

Carol is currently working on her autobiography at the request of her children but that is not all that she writes. She says she often just writes down random thoughts she has. For example, she related a recent experience of driving between two cities and stopping to write about the bug that splattered on her windshield. She also has written a multi-media production about her parents’ lives.

I don’t know actually how the idea came to me, but, but uh, I started writing about them [my parents] to put in, to put in our Family Connections book. And my nieces and nephews loved it. I was telling stories about them they didn’t, they’d never heard. My kids never knew them. So they…and it got so every year I’d write more about them, more about them, and somehow the idea came to me, why not make a production out of this?

The final stage production included dancers, a choir, musicians, and visual projections.

Carol’s composing process involves a mix of pen and paper and the computer. She often records initial thoughts on paper and then does the real work of writing on a computer. While she may not edit the contributions her family makes to their annual book, she does heavily edit and rewrite her own materials.
Dale

Dale is another newer member of the group. He has been participating for two or three years as best he can remember. He is 69 and married. He retired after a career in television production. During his last years at a local television station he was in charge of community relations. As a side-interest, he’s always been involved in photography and in his retirement, identifies as a professional photographer. Photography has been a lifelong interest. He routinely takes photos for local ballet and theatre companies as well as capturing autoracing on film.

Before coming to the writing workshop at the CLC, Dale had not engaged in any writing projects or workshops. His prime motivation for coming to the writing workshop is to create captions for his photographs. When Dale and the researcher met for the interview, he had several books of photographs available to look at. They were not his photographs but were rather inspirational books that had pictures with some sort of caption with them.

Like the books that I showed you. I’ll go through and pick out something. Well…I wouldn’t necessarily have to pick out. There’s one in there about a guy sitting in a wheelchair. I’d looked at it, and it, it tells a little bit about it there but I didn’t want to pay any attention to it. I tried to come up with my own thoughts. OK. What is this guy doing in a wheelchair? Who comes to see him? What had he been doing? Who comes to see him? What had he been doing? Something like that. So again, trying to push myself to think of something. I guess I’m letting the pictures help me think as well as creating pictures to do something.
Dale wants to create both photographs and short captions or stories that go along with them that creates an opportunity for others to engage in the same kind of wondering that he does.

Dale is also heavily engaged in an organization that provides support to soldiers who are engaged in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The organization creates care packages and letters to send to the troops, but Dale eventually wants to take his background in television, photography, and now writing to create a more complete story of those who are engaged in the fight against terrorism.

Because we get letters from the troops when we send packages. They will send emails or letters thanking us, and they’ll say a few things. And my thought again is, with the writing, all these guys have a story to tell. And their parents have a story to tell.

He is currently in the planning stage of this new project because there are many things to take into consideration for the safety of the troops.

Like Carol, Dale’s composing process is a mix of pen-and-paper and the computer. “I write on scratch paper and then, then uh cross them off and rewrite. And write it over, around. Then maybe I’ll rewrite it. Then uh, write it in, type in the computer.” Dale reveals himself to be an extensive reviser. He engages in revision before he moves to the computer, and once he has something in the computer, he often goes through it again before giving it to his wife who may suggest even more revisions. This is in contrast with many of his fellow writers who comment that they are mainly first draft writers.
Theresa

Theresa is a six year veteran of the CLC’s writing workshop, and like Carol, is one of the four participants who had experience with writing workshop before coming to the workshop offered by the CLC.

Like my first experience was 13 years ago. I became a breast cancer survivor and I started with poetry. And uh, uh, writing about that experience, the mammogram, the first mammogram. And uh, just going down to Florida where I told you about Barnes and Noble and polishing that up, you know, that piece, which was the first. And I had friends who were English teachers who wrote. So I let them review my work and see if I was going on the right track.

Those English teacher friends stemmed from her career as both an elementary school teacher and as a school guidance counselor. When asked about her past experiences with writing, she mentions that when she was a sophomore in high school, she “got picked to write an essay at the end of the final exam and I won honorable mention in a whole area of Brooklyn, New York.” Theresa has also engaged in some independent exploration of writing, mentioning Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*.

Theresa mentioned several times the importance of creativity and how since her retirement, she’s been exploring her creative side. She mentioned that she is not a painter or an artist but that she could write. Theresa is mainly writing family stories. “I was the one in the family that any time anything happened, Theresa knew the story.” She is purposefully trying to “leave a paper trail.” She says that sometimes she writes her “thoughts and feelings on a subject. Or personal experiences.”
When Theresa writes, she is a pen and paper composer. She carries a notebook in her purse so she can capture her thoughts and mentioned wanting to invent something “that I could carry with me when I get ideas while I’m driving in the car. You know, and read it into the something as I’m driving.” Like several other members of the group, Theresa is essentially a one-draft writer. “It depends on the piece. If I had a hard time putting it down on paper, then I might do a lot of revision, but if I have this whole in my head, then when I go to put it down, I don’t have to do much revision.” She talked about how she used to walk to work and by the time she got there, she’d have crafted an entire story in her head and would want to get it down on paper. Theresa expresses a distrust of computers, although she will use one if she is submitting a piece to the group’s anthology or to a writing contest. “My husband’s computer crashed, and I lost a lot of my stories. And I was so glad that I had the paper [copies] with me because I hadn’t backed them up [on the computer].” She is making more of an effort to try to create electronic copies of her writing.

Judson

Judson also had experience with writing workshops before coming to the workshop presented by the CLC. After his retirement from a major children’s research hospital, he engaged in two different writing workshops near his home. Both of those groups had “dwindling membership.” While he wasn’t sure why membership decreased in both groups, he offered a couple of possibilities including, “they [the other writers] didn’t have the courage to write or they weren’t prepared to just start trying to express their ideas . . . . [or] the loss of interest. I don’t think, I don’t know if it’s the discouragement of not having adequate audience.” Several times Judson mentioned the
idea of audience and discouragement, hinting that perhaps he wasn’t getting the appreciation he might like, saying that “the product [the writing] is never accepted by the reader.” Additionally, like Carol, Judson has an extensive professional writing history, including some 60 publications in the scientific realm.

At age 83, Judson has been participating in the CLC’s writing workshop for approximately six years. He says that most of his writing is short stories. I got the idea to try for a novel and I abbreviated. It takes, it takes more material than I realized so I call them novellas….I’ve been toying with, I call it abbreviated writing. It isn’t poetry. It doesn’t have a meter and doesn’t have a rhyme. But it gives me an excuse for omitting a lot of prepositional phrases and adjectives. Interestingly, this is different than what the director of the CLC had relayed to the researcher. In discussing with the participants in the group, she provided a brief description of the people and their writing, specifying that Judson mainly writes political commentary with most of it aligning closely to a Tea Party, limited government ideology. She stated that she wasn’t sure how much he took away from the group because most people disagreed with his political views. He mentioned several times that his audience was captive and they had to listen to him even if they didn’t like his writing. The pieces he presented to the researcher for review were not political in nature but instead were his “abbreviated writing.” From an initial review, the researcher could find nothing objectionable about the writing, which created a disconnect between his perception of how his writing was received by the larger group and what his writing actually was. It was only when discussing participants further with the director that a connection was
made between Judson and his more political writing. At that point, the comments about how his writing was received made more sense.

Because of decreased vision and hearing, Judson is reliant upon his wife to get him from place to place. He indicates that he would like to perhaps engage in more activities but does not feel as if he can impose further upon her. When he writes, he writes on the computer. “I don’t like to even try to write with a paper anymore. Before I had the computer, I didn’t think I would enjoy using it but I really like it.” He likes the ability that the computer gives him to create quick changes. For him the computer also eliminates “reams of paper of intermediates,” implying that he does engage in revision, unlike many members of the workshop. Judson also commented that he likes to add a last line to most of his work, like the “sugar on the gingerbread.” Even though he includes that last statement, he says he feels that it “detracts from what I, the idea I want to get across.” Despite that, he feels the need to include that “sugar,” and the researcher noted it in the pieces of writing he shared with her. While unsure if the “sugar” detracted from what he wanted to get across, the researcher felt that it definitely led the reader in a particular direction.

Vanessa

Vanessa is another member of the workshop who had extensive experience in writing before she came to this particular writing workshop, and in fact, at 62, she maintains membership in two other writing workshops in addition to the one sponsored through the CLC. Vanessa has actually been coming to this particular workshop for approximately 10 years even though she just recently turned 62, officially making her a “senior citizen.” She first came to the workshop with her own mother, which was an
Vanessa has a master’s degree in English and has taught composition courses at a local university.

Vanessa writes many different things but for the last several years, her main focus has been on a novel. She has just recently completed it and is in the process of trying to sell it to a publishing house. The novel’s main character is a teacher of writing at a community college but her mother is in a retirement home. The plot point is that she’s going to begin a writing class in the retirement home. So what I’ve learned from members of the group has helped me shape the characters and the interaction in my book.

In addition to working on her novel, Vanessa is often creating a “literacy autobiography,” cataloguing her experiences as both a reader and a writer. Vanessa also mentioned, as did a few other participants, the desire to create a “paper trail” and is gradually beginning the process of creating that for her children. The death of her own mother made her realize that she had “very little of her [her mother] on paper.” While Vanessa tried to get her mother to write down family stories, it never happened. Vanessa feels “really sad that I don’t have it” and doesn’t want her own children to have that kind of regret. With her novel out of the way, she feels that perhaps now she’ll have some time to concentrate on a paper trail.

Vanessa’s composing process is, like a few others in the class, a mix of both pen-and-paper writing and composing on the computer. She carries a notebook with her wherever she goes, and in fact, has several going at once. Things like her novel, though, are kept on the computer because that format is what she needs for publication. As Judson also indicated, she appreciates the ease of revising when using a computer. Things
can quickly be deleted or moved, and she particularly mentioned appreciating being able to save different versions of her writing. That allows her the chance for reflection and to decide which version she likes better.

*Isaac*

Because of Isaac’s travel schedule, this interview was conducted via email. Consent documents were forwarded to him and were explained over the phone. When his consent was given, the interview questions were emailed to him. There were several rounds of back-and-forth communication, seeking clarification to the responses provided.

Isaac is another relative new-comer to the writing workshop, having just begun attending in the spring of 2010. He is new to both the workshop and to writing in general. At 62, Isaac is a recently retired electrician. At 17 he entered the Army and was trained as an electrician. After 20 years in the military, he retired and eventually started his own business. At the end of 2009, he made the decision to turn the business over to his son-in-law and now says his time consists of, “wondering and wandering,” spending time with his children and their families since the death of his wife four years ago.

Mostly Isaac says that he is “trying to write about what it means to be human,” and while he occasionally writes about events in his life, he stresses that really he is writing “essays about the human condition.” While Isaac did not offer any writing samples to the researcher, it appears that of all the writers who agreed to participate in this study, his writing is the most esoteric. Even his responses to the questions posed were rather inaccessible, although he did clarify when asked.

I know there is a distinct divide between my choices of occupations and how I choose to spend my time since my retirement. Because of my family circumstance
[the youngest of six children], I made the most expedient choice available to me. I knew that in order to escape the poverty inherent in my family, I would be faced with difficult choices. College was out of the question with five older siblings, so I made the decision to enter the military. Being in the Army presented me with exposure in addition to an occupation. While the military might not have been an exact fit, it allowed me the chance to travel extensively and connect with different people. I may have only been an electrician, but my aspirations were always greater. My previous life has afforded me the opportunity to move closer to whom I might have been if I’d been born somewhere else, to other people, with different expectations.

According to Isaac, he has always been a great reader and has always “collected little bits of paper.” Throughout his life he’s kept little memo books and as he’s read or as he’s moved about his life, he’s made an effort to record his thoughts, waiting “for the opportunity, the chance to make something more of them.”

When Isaac writes, he, like several other members of the workshop, uses a combination of handwriting in his little memo books and the computer. He describes himself as a “geek” and an early adopter of most technological advances. He captures his “wonderings” in his memo books, keeping one in his truck, one on his person, and various ones scattered throughout his home. When he writes beyond those “random scribbles,” he uses a computer. He says that he has toyed with the idea of creating a blog, but as of yet hasn’t made the leap, although he follows many different blogs, including one by his 17-year-old granddaughter. At this point, he is not sure which parts of his writing he wants to open up to public scrutiny or he’s ready for that yet.
The Writing Workshop

All participants were asked about the actual format of the writing workshop—what happens when they come together as writers—in order to establish some consistency in responses. While all participants generally agreed on a similar outline of what happens during the workshop time, there were some notable differences in how participants reviewed the response process that is a hallmark of a writing workshop. Those differences will be addressed in this section and again in the following section, the analysis of themes.

In the responses to the question about what happens during the writing workshop, what procedures do they follow, most participants described the same routines and procedures. While several people commented that they come in and sit in the same places every week, Dale described it as “being like church” with every one sitting in the same place every week, and Frank expanded on that idea.

We sit in the same place every week. You know, it’s like, who’s in my seat?

There’s not reserved seating but you know how it is. Sometimes I’ll shift just to mix things up but uh, I feel like, Little Frankie has to do things like that. So occasionally I’ll sit on a side of the room I don’t normally. But usually we sit with the same two or three people. Little subgroups, we kind of pair off.

Once everyone stakes out their territory, there is a general consensus that the first 10-15 minutes of the workshop are dedicated to socializing or as Griffin puts it, “BSing,” although Judson presents a different take on this. “We meet and talk. Very little discussion of anything that’s happened in previous meetings. And really little discussion of personal lives away from there.”
Once the CLC director arrives, people settle into the routine of reading the work they have brought with them. Peggy says, “[She] will ask if anyone has written anything in the last week and if you have, would you like to read it and so on. So we go around the table and everybody reads what they’ve written if they’ve written anything.” Interestingly very few people mentioned that other participants provide response to others in the group unless prompted by the researcher. When asked if people could respond to her writing, Amelia stated, “They question. Ask questions or make comments. They can say, have you considered this or considered that? Or this was particularly good or that was particularly good.” Theresa had a slightly different take on the response process. “If uh they want a critique, we’ll critique it but sometimes uh, generally I’ll say, ‘I didn’t get that’ or ‘You didn’t do.’”

Several participants mentioned that the greatest difficulty in responding to their fellow writers’ work stems from not having a copy of the work in front of them in order to facilitate their understanding. Both Judson and Griffin mentioned their hearing difficulties as related to responding to others. Theresa mentioned that she is not an auditory learner and that makes it difficult for her to follow the pieces as they are read aloud. Vanessa spoke of how the participants might get a better quality of response if they were able to make notations on the writing as they heard and read it. When the researcher broached this particular topic with the director of the CLC, she said that it was a very difficult position for the class. Because not everyone uses email, they cannot necessarily send their writing to her so she can make copies for the class. The senior center where the workshop is held is not receptive to having the class use their resources to make copies. Participants could make their own copies, but with many people citing
the fact that the workshop is free as a deciding factor in their participation, she is not sure if expecting them to do so would be practical. When you combine that with not knowing how many people are going to be in attendance each week, she would hate for people to waste money on copies that aren’t needed.

If everyone has had an opportunity to share their writing and there is time left over, according to Griffin, “she gives us something to do.” That often takes the form of a writing exercise. Amelia described the exercises:

She has her little box of cards. It would be like uh an index card and it might have a phrase on it. And then there’s usually a second card that comes around. You pick one and then try to merge the two.

There are varying opinions on the boxes of cards. Dale enjoys the cards; Griffin isn’t so much a fan. Isaac says that, “I like to think I’ll have my own ideas to write about until I die, and the writing exercises take me away from those ideas.” Theresa feels that maybe some resistance might be that “you have to think on the fly,” although she states that she enjoys that part of the workshop. Carol actually wishes that the class did more of those types of activities because of the challenge it presents to writers.

I thought it was really interesting that one guy picked up a piece of paper and he no idea what it was, what the word was, so he put it back and got something more comfortable with. And I thought, well that was the whole point!

Amelia echoes both Theresa and Carol, stating that while the exercises are fun, “if you don’t like them, you don’t do them.”

While not a regular feature of the workshop experience, several members commented on how much they enjoyed it when the facilitator did some work with them
on issues of craft or grammar. Vanessa talks about the time they worked on using “fresh”
language, creating a “running list of clichés to just make people aware of them because it
seemed like every time we turned around, there was another one.” Frank states that he
wishes there was more “chalk teaching. And here again, the class is not designed for that.
It’s like a little bonus but I can’t get enough of it because I feel like I’m lacking the
formal writing instruction.” Several other participants expressed similar sentiments
whether directly or indirectly. While Dale didn’t directly say that he’d like more
instruction in grammar, both he and Peggy said that their lack of formal writing
instruction made those types of concerns hard for them to address as they didn’t know
what they didn’t know. Because participants do not bring in copies of their work for the
facilitator, it would be difficult for her to know exactly what specific grammar issues
needed to be addressed.

Analysis of the Themes of Meaning

The research questions for this project guided the analysis of the data.
Understanding what the phenomenon of participating in a writing workshop means to
older adults as well as how older adults interpret their experiences as writers produced an
required sifting through volumes of what Geertz (1973) refers to as “thick description.”
Because there are two slightly different, although related research questions, themes
related to each emerged during the process of analysis. The question most related to how
older adults view or interpret their experiences of writing revealed three distinct themes,
while the question revolving around how older adults experience participating in a
writing workshop yielded four separate themes. Because the two questions were so
closely related, one theme was found to apply to both the experience of participating in a
writing workshop and the phenomenon of writing. The experience taken in its entirety revealed a total of eight themes. Each theme will be discussed separately, beginning with those related to those that pertain specifically to how older adults experience writing and moving to the experience of participating in a writing workshop before finishing up with the themes that relate to both phenomena. The themes that emerged were Writing as a Vehicle for Thought, Writing as a Means of Challenge, Writing as a Record, The Writing Workshop as a Commitment, The Writing Workshop as an Affirmation, The Writing Workshop as Awareness, The Writing Workshop as Community, and Writing and The Writing Workshop as Enjoyment.

How Older Adults View Their Experiences of Writing

As stated previously, essentially two different although related questions were examined through this study. This section deals specifically with, “How do older adults view/construct/interpret their experiences, understandings, and realities of writing?” The data analysis revealed three themes which will be discussed separately: Writing as a Vehicle for Thought, Writing as a Means of Challenge, and Writing as a Record.

Writing as a vehicle for thought. Almost every participant expressed some form of this theme, although Dale put it most succinctly. When asked about his beliefs about what it means to be a writer, his response was, “Uh, it’s someone who thinks.” When asked if he considered himself a writer, he said no, “because I have a hard time, uh thinking up things. And I think that’s one reason why I took the class. To make me think.”

Other participants expressed the idea of writing as thought in more subtle terms. Carol talks about using writing as a means of capturing ideas. “Like when I have a
thought that sort of captivates my thinking, I like to write about it.” Related to the idea of capturing ideas is inspiration. Carol says that she wanted to be “with people my age and to be inspired by what they write about.” Vanessa echoed that idea when she discussed how often hearing what other people are writing will spark a thought for her or give her an idea for something she could write about.

For Peggy writing and its ability to promote thought have a much more personal meaning. After her parents retired, neither of them did much to stimulate themselves mentally. “Well, both of them died of Alzheimer’s. I just made up my mind I wasn’t going to do that.” Peggy sees writing as a defense against Alzheimer’s disease, and she is determined to not suffer the same fate that her parents did. In addition to writing, she engages in other activities, such as book clubs through the CLC as means to stay mentally active. Peggy says that, “People who are in the group do a lot of thinking about a lot of things. And I love the diversity of the group and it’s caused me to think about more subjects than I had you know.”

Vanessa also fears the loss of the ability to control her thinking. “I’ve seen family members who have developed Alzheimer’s and so I’m doing whatever I can to keep that faculty. That life of the mind, that thinking life is really important to me and I’m hanging on to it.” Vanessa feels that writing, with the inherent planning and revision, is a way for her to retain and perhaps even enhance her current mental state.

*Writing as a means of challenge.* The theme of challenge takes on several different forms for the participants. For some of them, the challenge is just coming up with something to write. Others find challenge in trying to complete the exercises that are
a part of the class. Some participants describe their own challenges as coming to terms with their own writing abilities after having been convinced that they were not writers.

Dale discusses how he uses his participation in the writing workshop as a means to “push myself to think of something.” In particular when discussing the exercises that are often a part of the workshop, he says, “And again, if you don’t finish it, it’s OK but you’ve got to start writing something because you don’t want to sit there twiddling your thumbs. So it does make me, and I guess maybe that’s why, it pushes you again.”

Amelia echoes Dale when she spoke in particular about a writing exercise that was done for class. The group had created a list of different forms or genres for writing, and then those genres were placed on cards, and Amelia drew out the card that said “a play.” She says, “Well, I came home and I was climbing the walls on that one.” Eventually she was able to create something, but she was stumped for a moment. This is also true for Frank.

I enjoy writing outside of…my niche is the Little Frankie stories. I’ve got a knack for dialogue and a little humor and it works for me. But I’ve also written a short story kind of like a Rod Sterling Twilight Zone. I asked my wife to read it and she said, “You don’t write this way.” It was way out from what I normally write but I wanted to try. You know, expand boundaries and all.

Frank also talks about writing a one-act play and how that was difficult, yet fun for him.

For Judson the challenge isn’t in the exercises, although he does mention that because he is a slow, exacting first draft writer, it is difficult for him to complete the in-class writing exercises. For him the challenge is a much deeper issue.
No one ever said, “You’re fine” [as a writer]. Again, they always said, I can help you. I will help you. I’m the boss; I will help you in some instances. I wanted to see if I could overcome that deficiency, which I did not recognize as being related to the subject of the work but of the words that were used, the sentence structure, etc.

He had been made to believe that because of issues of correctness he was not a writer. For him the challenge was to change that perception of himself. This is also true for Peggy who is keenly aware of her lack of formal education.

I didn’t have much background in writing at all. In West Virginia, the schools start you out writing when you’re in second or third grade. They don’t wait ‘til you get to high school like they do in Kentucky. So that kinda gave me a little idea. Well then when I got in the group, I found out that I didn’t really know much about writing at all. But it was interesting because I could hear the banter back and forth. And I listen to everything anybody says. And I kept trying. I kept trying.

Peggy says that she has gotten to the point that she thinks she’s an OK writer but she is always looking for ways to improve what she has done. She says she is not a “prolific writer” but she is always listening and learning, trying to incorporate what she hears into her writing.

Related to this idea of listening, Vanessa discusses how hearing other participants’ writing challenges her.
When I hear something that’s really good, it’s a challenge. A good kind of challenge. It’s that, “Oh! I can do this! I can give this a try!” It can result in some frustration if my writing doesn’t, if I try and my writing doesn’t achieve it. While she speaks of potential frustration, Vanessa also notes that should she fall short, the group is very supportive. She feels safe to take on that challenge.

*Writing as a record.* While the writing workshop was originally offered as a family stories class, not many people were actually writing family stories. Most clearly Carol and Theresa were engaged in writing to record their family histories. In addition to her *Family Connections and Creative Dimensions* books and the multi-media production about her parents’ lives, Carol has brought “vignettes of my six brothers and sisters” to the group in order to get their reactions. Beyond creating a record of her family history, Carol talks about “recording” her thoughts. The thoughts that she captures in her notebooks aren’t necessarily things that she will go back to and expand on, but she feels it is important to at the very least write them down.

When asked what it means to be a writer, Theresa says clearly, “Writers put the story down in uh, in written form. It’s a redundant answer but it’s, it’s the stuff beyond oral history. They’re [writers] the ones who keep it for posterity by putting it down on the paper.” She has been designated the member of the family who records the family history, and for her it’s important to get things down. “It’s written. If it’s not written down on pen and paper, it’s gone.” Theresa related a story about her mother and her mother’s best friend that illustrates why for her it’s important to ask questions and write the answers down.
We [she and her mother’s best friend’s daughter] were talking, and we were trying
to figure out how our mothers met. We couldn’t figure it out, and the sad thing
was that we would never be able to find out. Her mother had passed away a few
years earlier, and my mother was suffering from dementia. I wish I’d known to
ask because now that information is gone.

Theresa is determined to create as complete of a record of her history as she can not just
for herself but her children and grandchildren.

Peggy is also creating a record of her life. As outlined earlier, she only writes
about her experiences. “That’s all I can write about.” While she did not specifically say
that she is creating a paper trail for her children or grandchildren, her family will have her
recollections of her life and experiences.

Frank’s Little Frankie stories are also a version of a family history. Frank
discusses how he originally thought that he would “go and write the family histories and
that will get the creative juices flowing. I’ll start writing again. After I got into this class,
I started writing these Little Frankie stories and it kinda stuck.” Frank talks about in
particular finding out information about his family that he never knew and needing to
write it down. While most of his Little Frankie stories currently are centered on his
childhood, he has one that is much more recent.

I’ve got one where we went to Hawaii. My younger sister is retired on the big
island. We were there about 2-3 years ago. I found out then for the first time that I
had a younger sister I never knew about. She was born when I was, we figured
out, one or two. She lived a day. I mean she wasn’t stillborn. She lived a day and
died and I never knew it.
Since discovering that he had a younger sister, Frank has written about that incident, and several members of the group talk about feeling the power of that story the first time he read it to the class. Frank also says that he realizes “once I pass on, all the stories and knowledge I have up here, the kids will never be able to get.” While he has not yet begun writing about his family in general, he knows exactly how he wants to do it and plans to start on it soon.

Isaac spoke about the need to be a part of the history or story. “I write because I want to fulfill my desire to be a part of the story. Not just the story that I write but also the stories that go unwritten.” Related to the idea of story for Isaac is the notion of history and that through writing he is extending both his own personal history but in a larger sense he is contributing to a greater cultural history. “I am part of the history I have lived, and I feel responsible for keeping it alive in some fashion.” For him, keeping that history alive is about writing it down, making it tangible, and leaving something behind.

*How Older Adults View Their Experience in a Writing Workshop*

This section, while related to how participants experience writing, is more about how the participants experience being a member of a writing workshop. The question that guides this section is, “How do older adults experience the phenomenon of participating in a writing workshop and what does the writing workshop experience mean to and for them?” The analysis revealed the following four themes which will be discussed separately: The Writing Workshop as a Commitment, The Writing Workshop as an Affirmation, The Writing Workshop as Awareness, and The Writing Workshop as Community.
The writing workshop as a commitment. Several participants said that they really enjoyed writing and that it was important to them. That was generally followed by a pause. When they resumed speaking, what usually was said indicated that they just didn’t have the time to actually write. Carol states that for her it was difficult to “find (or take) the time to write.” This is a prime motivation for Theresa as well. She saw an advertisement in a brochure and felt like it might be a good thing for her to be “disciplined” and a part of a formalized group.

Structure because then I’d be forced to do it. If I left the house on Friday morning and I went to write, then that hour and a half, I would have to write. And then as I became a part of the group, you had to have something prepared the next Friday you went. So you wrote in between time. It was my time and nobody else’s. That was it. I could sit down and write.

As with Carol and Theresa, Frank felt like he needed the structure of a group in order to get himself back into the practice of writing.

Other participants discussed searching for something, anything, to do and deciding to take part in the writing workshop offered by the CLC. The participants didn’t want to stay home and watch soap operas, in Vanessa’s words, and they weren’t interested in picking up hubcaps to paraphrase Griffin. Griffin simply states, “When I retired, I was looking for something to do.” Vanessa said, “There’s the wish to go, to have a destination one day a week, a thing that you do that uh, distinguishes that day from other days.” For both groups (who often over-lapped), writing is a commitment that they make both to themselves and to the group, providing them with an opportunity to engage with others.
Several participants spoke of the need to have something to bring to the group. For some people, like Carol, that may mean just having something written even if it’s a piece that was not written specifically for this group. Being a member of the group gives her “that need to have something done.” For others, it was about the need to have something of quality. Isaac spoke of wanting “to make sure that what I bring to the group has enough merit to stand up.” While Dale doesn’t speak specifically to the quality of the writing he produces, he does talk about the need to have something for the group each time he goes.

I always feel if I’m gonna be there, I ought to have something. You know, whether it’s I wait until 10:30 at night and do it, I ought to have something but I don’t know what…I’ll go look through my photo files and start to work, even if it’s 11:00 Thursday night.

Dale takes his commitment to the group very seriously, often pulling his wife into his writing process in order to ensure he has something ready for the group.

The idea of the writing workshop as commitment takes on a slightly different hue for Griffin. Not only has he been a member of this particular group for 17 years, he has been committed to the same stories for equally as long. “I wrote a story about a troll who got lost down in the well and consequently he had an adventure or two there. Well, it became 160 adventures I guess.” Griffin goes “when the class in session. When there’s no class, I stay home.” He intends to continue participating until he is unable.

For other members of the group, commitment takes on yet another hue. While the workshop might not exactly meet their needs, the members of the group are committed to
each other. They recognize that if they stop coming to the group, the group may not continue to exist.

I’ve made a commitment to this group. I come here on Friday mornings and if we’re not here, this group might not exist. I don’t share my writing often and there are some other people who don’t share their writing. But if we don’t come, this group can’t continue. So I keep coming.

Other members of the group echoed Peggy’s concerns that if they stop coming to the group, the group stops.

*The writing workshop as an affirmation.* The theme of writing workshop as an affirmation is most related to the response model. When discussing the response model, many participants noted that they most often received positive comments or that they are looking for affirmation that they were on the right track. While several writers expressed a desire to know when people didn’t understand what they were writing or if something wasn’t working, they only wanted to know if it was done in a positive manner. Isaac states that “feedback is mostly positive and if there is a need for criticism, it’s done politely.”

Several participants noted that they had never considered themselves writers and in fact had been led to believe that they were not writers. Amelia is a perfect example of this.

All through grammar school and high school, almost through college, I was told I had no writing ability. So. I just assumed I had none. And it was [the CLC director] who brought it out with her patient way. I’ll never forget one time, when I first went to the class, uh she…I don’t remember what. Oh! I had just written
something about the around the world thing. I’d put it together a little better than it had been. And I asked her if she would just read it and give me some ideas. Well the next week she came back and she said, Amelia, now I plan to give this half an hour. Well, an hour and a half later, I was still reading. She said, you have the ability to put people right in that place…and comments like that keep you going.

Amelia sends “little volumes” of her writing out every Christmas to friends and the positive responses to that writing are important to her. “One of my friends…expects me to send her one every year and she writes these glowing letters back. You know, makes you feel kinda good.” Theresa echoes Amelia’s thoughts about how positive response makes you feel good by saying that the “pat on the back says that you’re doing a good job.”

Peggy’s experience is similar to Amelia’s and Theresa’s. Peggy was very self-conscious about her writing ability due to her lack of education.

Oh, I guess I just felt, I just felt inferior. My writing really wasn’t good enough and what was I doing in that group and you know, so on like that. But uh, after listening and listening and reading and reading and reading and writing and writing and writing, I think I’m better than I was, you know? I’m comfortable, more comfortable with it [writing]. And I’ve gotten to the place where I know I’m as good as the next person if nothing else, you know? And I’m not the smartest person in the world but then after observing the human condition for a long time, I’m not the dumbest person either.
Engaging in this writing workshop has really given Peggy a sense of self-confidence. It has taken many years to be comfortable in the group, and she still does not share much, but she does feel as if her writing measures up to most of the others in the group.

In some cases, participants pointed to negative experiences with response as a non-example of what they need in the workshop. Carol gave an example of a writing workshop that she had attended in another city:

You know, I got burned really bad. I attended one class, maybe somewhere in [a neighboring city]. I think they were professional writers. I don’t know if they were professional writers but they were very much involved in writing, more so than this group. And it was a critiquing class and it was ugly. One woman wrote the neatest, neatest, neatest book about the Disciples, Peter I think. It was kinda funny and, and serious combined. And they really tore it apart. And I think in the process, they totally missed what her point was. I, I was just a guest, and I didn’t say anything, but I couldn’t…I would have a hard time dealing with that.

While Carol expressed a need for more objective criticism, she was very clear that it needed to be done gently, with the intent of affirming her progress thus far and pointing out areas where she could improve.

Amelia also related a negative experience with a writing workshop. She was considering branching out from the writing workshop offered by the CLC but decided that perhaps she was in the right spot after all.

I went [there] one time. This was several years ago. They didn’t critique, they trashed. And I, I saw them do it to others, and when they got to me, I said, Oh! I didn’t bring anything to read. I wasn’t about to put myself in that situation. They
weren’t even kind to each other. But they continued to go week after week or month after month. However it was. I didn’t want that.

Despite professional successes and accolades, many of the participants in the writing workshop expressed the need for support or affirmation. Amelia, in particular, was very interested in receiving only positive comments. When speaking about that experience in the other group, even though it wasn’t her or her writing that was “trashed” it was almost as if she shrank inward, trying to protect herself even from the memory. She might have traveled around the world by herself and she may have been working at writing for more than a decade, but she was still incredibly fragile when it came to her writing.

The writing workshop as awareness. The theme of awareness was perhaps the most difficult to ascertain because it encompasses so many different types of awareness. Essentially, though, it is about the idea that the writing workshop allows the participants to become aware of different things: types or forms of writing, life experiences, similarities, differences, and audiences.

Many of the participants spoke about how their participation gave them the opportunity to discover other types of writing and to be more aware of the possibilities for their writing. Dale makes note of how being a member of the group has helped him realize that everyone is working on something different and while he doesn’t think he could write the way others do, he’s been exposed to something different or outside of his comfort zone.

Beyond the idea of becoming aware of different ways to say or write things, there is the growing awareness of the differences in people’s lives. While the group is relatively homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status, their experiences in life have
been vastly different. Dale says, “But again the class is, you’ve got so many different, various variations in there. You’ve got some foreign lady that came in recently and she was very quiet. But what she wrote was really good about her experiences with her church.” People have lived lives that were different from his and through being in this particular group, he has an opportunity to learn about them.

This is particularly true for Peggy. She came to the writing workshop in order to keep herself mentally stimulated and found a wealth of experiences that she didn’t know was lurking in her community.

It’s just been quite an experience. You know there was one girl who was an English bride that came over from Australia after the second World War. She met her husband in Australia. We’ll talk about different writers or books and I’ll go to the library and get them so I know what people are talking about.

She also says that due to her experiences in the writing workshop, she thinks “in broader terms for one thing.” She realizes there are many possibilities out there that she may not have considered before, and she’s had the opportunity to “learn about subjects that I wouldn’t normally know about.” For her, this awareness of the greater world is linked to not succumbing to the same fate that her parents suffered. This is also true for Vanessa, saying that the group has “introduced a lot of different subjects to me.”

Additionally there is the awareness of how the reader receives a piece of writing. Many participants spoke of making changes to their writing based on the reactions of their fellow participants. Judson recalls, “one incident when uh one of the others laughed at something that was intended to be serious. So I went home and rewrote it to get the idea across in a more expressive form.” Theresa talks about this as well by saying,
“When I have an audience there’s a different kind of a feedback that I get. Um, so that’s good because it tells me whether I’m on point with that piece or not.” Theresa goes on to say that she has to make sure her writing is clear because participants only hear the writing and don’t see it.

*The writing workshop as community.* Discussing the writing workshop with the participants inevitably led to a discussion of how everyone interacts and how they relate to each other. In some cases the participants form connections outside of the workshop. But even without those outside connections, it is clear to see that the group forms a community. Very few of them come to the group just to share their writing and then leave. The very act of sharing something as personal as their writing leads to the creation of a community.

Isaac very clearly stated that he believed that being a writer meant being a part of a “writing community, either online or in person.” In looking for a place to write, Isaac spoke of wanting to find like-minded people.

I was searching for an opportunity to collaborate with others who feel the need to express themselves through the written word. I wanted my later years to be fruitful in terms of contributing to the world of stories, and I was looking for people who would support me in that goal.

For Isaac, the idea of collaboration—a group of people to support him and who were working towards the same goal—was key. The purpose of working towards a common goal, even though other participants were creating different kinds of writing, creates a community of learners and writers.
Frank touches on this aspect of community when discussing the need to share his writing.

I know there’s a lot of writers who write just for themselves and no one else reads what they write but I guess I’m the opposite of that. I’m always one to share it with someone. Here, read this, read that. But uh, I guess it’s just a written form of storytelling.

Frank also believes that in order to be a writer, one needs to have the “desire to share a story or an experience with someone else.” His conception of what it means to both write and be a part of a writing community is bound by the idea of sharing.

Beyond that, though, bonds are formed within the group. Amelia was very quiet as she talked about those the group has lost.

We’re missing a lot of people. There are several now who are in nursing homes, several who have died. When people die…you know, I’m immune being a nurse and all that for the most part, but people in the class have a hard time. Because we all become so close.

Several participants mentioned how difficult it could be for a new member to join the group. Amelia stated, “It must be hard for a new person because so many of us know each other. We kinda laugh and kid and that kind of thing. Uh, but we tend to bring the others along with us.” Judson, who is newer to the group than Amelia, disagrees with her. “How could it be [difficult for new people to integrate into the group]? Because you just come and are there.” Dale contradicts Judson’s assessment when he says that part of the appeal of participating in the group is “not only the writing. It’s camaraderie among everybody because we’re all ages.” As one of the newest members of the group, Carol
did feel “a little bit awkward. Especially when I found out that they almost knew everybody. But there have been a couple of new people who have come in and you feel very welcome.”

Frank takes the notion of community a step farther when he talks about the relationships that were initially formed within the writing workshop and have become friendships outside of the workshop.

Yeah, we trade books back and forth. Here’s a book you need to read. If I read a book, I can kinda like, I can almost pick out the ones in the class I think would like it or wouldn’t care for it as to how they’ve been writing. So we do a lot of book trading back and forth. There’s two or three in the class, we’ve—it wasn’t coordinated—we just all agreed we’re taking one of those OLLI (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute) history classes at [a local university]. I think there’s four of us in the class. We just love the instructor there and it’s kind of a support group in that class.

Without the writing workshop, that connection could not have been created.

How Older Adults Experience Both Writing and a Writing Workshop

During the course of the analysis of the data and focusing on the two separate questions that guided this entire project, there were overlapping themes. One theme in particular appeared when looking at both how older adults experience writing and how they experience the writing workshop. During the analysis, there were times when the theme was very clearly referring to writing or to the writing workshop. However, there were other times when it was impossible to determine whether participants were referring to writing or to the experience of being in the writing workshop. The one theme that did
not neatly fit into one category or another was that of Writing and a Writing Workshop as Enjoyment.

A majority of the participants noted that writing is fun. In response to why she writes, Amelia very concisely stated that she writes because, “It’s fun.” Perhaps, though, Griffin conveys the theme most clearly when he says, “I do this as a hobby. I am not even trying to publish any of my stuff. Uh, if I have to publish it, then it becomes a job, and I don’t want a job. So it’s fun.” For Judson, the enjoyment comes in being able to play with different forms of writing, in particular with what he calls “abbreviated writing.” He says, “I’ve had fun with that. I don’t know if anyone else has, but I have had fun with it.”

Peggy really enjoys the writing exercises that are a part of the writing workshop. “We get to pick one card out of each box and just write about that there. And that’s fun for me.” She says that she’s not interested in being published. She writes because she enjoys it.

Dale speaks directly to this theme as it relates to the writing workshop when he says,

Ummm . . . I’m 69 but I don’t know exactly where I, sometimes I think I may be the youngest one in there. And other times I think, I’m quite a bit older than a couple of the others. But there are quite a few of them that are a lot older and they’re funny. I enjoy what they write about because some write about their childhood. Some write about something else. We’ve got one guy in there from Finland so he’s trying, he’s trying to write about his experiences here in this country. He’s about my age. So I think the class uh, it’s just enjoyable to everybody.
Judson also mentions that he enjoys the experiences of being in the group. “I enjoy it. Don’t take these statements as being negative. I’m getting something out of it.” Peggy is another who very much enjoys being a member of the group.

Griffin, again, cuts right to the chase when he says, “I went down [to the CLC] to see what was going on. I’ve enjoyed it, so I stayed there.” He also says that he’s “having a ball” and it’s difficult to determine whether he’s talking about being a member of the group or the writing itself. While Griffin is insistent that his participation is purely about fun and enjoying the process and his companions, he admits that the writing is “more work than I anticipated. Enough more work that I don’t want to do it professionally. I just want to enjoy it.” Numerous times throughout the interview, Griffin mentioned that once the writing or the group was no longer fun, he would cease to participate.

Frank also makes note of the enjoyable aspects of the workshop. While what he is occasionally talking about is also related to the sense of community created within the workshop, it is also related to this theme of enjoyment.

We draw for horses in the Derby. We have our own little Derby raffle. We have a party putting together the anthology. We put the thing together and fold the cover and staple. We bring pot-luck and eat and drink and just have a good time with it. In addition to that sense of merriment, Frank emphasizes that he enjoys spending time with the other writers in the workshop and misses them when the workshop isn’t in session.

Summary

This chapter explored what it means to the 10 participants in this study to both write and be members of a writing workshop. During the analysis of data, eight essential
themes of meaning emerged. Three themes were specifically related to the act of writing, and they are: Writing as a Vehicle for Thought, Writing as a Means of Challenge, and Writing as a Record. Four themes were related to participating in a writing workshop, and they are: The Writing Workshop as a Commitment, The Writing Workshop as an Affirmation, The Writing Workshop as Awareness, and The Writing Workshop as Community. One theme pertained equally to writing and the experience of being in a writing workshop, and it was Writing and The Writing Workshop as Enjoyment. The eight themes were discussed in depth.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter further explores several issues already discussed in the preceding four chapters: writing workshop theory, writing workshop theory and adult education, and life span development. It continues with the limitations of the study, implications for adult education, implications for future research, and concluding comments.

Writing Workshop Theory

The participants in this writing workshop experienced many of the same things that children and adults experience as part of a writing workshop. Within the context of this particular writing workshop, a community was established. The writing workshop offered through the CLC meets some of Elbow’s (1973) criteria for a teacherless writing group. Notably that which is most lacking within this writing workshop is the idea of both pointing and summarizing responses. As noted by the director of the CLC, it would be difficult to provide the support necessary in order to create the space for a more response oriented workshop model.

It is difficult to know whether all of the participants in the writing workshop would want a more response-oriented workshop, although it is clear that some participants, notably Frankie, Dale, Carol, Theresa, Isaac, Vanessa and possibly Judson, are hungry for more than what they are currently receiving. Without an orientation towards more adequate response, the CLC risks losing those participants, which puts the workshop itself in danger. Without a critical mass of participants (at least eight, preferably 10), the CLC might not be able to justify continuing to support the group. Judson’s experience in other writing workshops seems to bear out that membership
dwindles as the level of engagement with each others’ writing decreases. Additionally, Woodin (2005) highlights this danger. In Woodin’s study, some members of the writing workshops were limited by the generic response they were receiving. One solution was to create smaller subgroups of writers, and according to the director of the CLC, that has happened in the past with those more focused writers continuing to come to the original workshop. As those smaller groups fizzle out, writers have somewhere to return to. Long-standing members such as Griffin and Amelia will probably continue to participate in the group but newer members like Carol and even older ones like Theresa might be tempted to find a group that more closely fits their needs. One thought for those who want more direct critiques or feedback might reside in the work of teacher-researchers (Keffer et al., 1995) who came to realize that if they wanted to receive specific, honest feedback, they were going to have to ask for specific, honest feedback. This might be a skill that the CLC’s director would need to facilitate.

The structure of the CLC’s writing workshop closely mirrored that of The Senior Class described in Kazemek’s (1997, 1999) work. Minus the regular use of a catalyst text to prompt thinking or illustrate issues of writing craft, the workshops are incredibly similar. Kazemek describes attempting to provide at least one comment that is specific to issues surrounding writing craft, and this appears to be what the director of the CLC does as well. Carol made particular note of that, saying, “I am always interested in her responses to what we read because she always picks out the core. You know I try to anticipate what she’s going to say. But it’s, she’s really insightful about what is being written.” Importantly The Senior Class identifies as a supportive community (Kazemek,
1997) and most members of the CLC’s writing workshop see their workshop in the same light.

Writing Workshop Theory and Adult Education

Engaging in a writing workshop can certainly be considered a self-directed learning project. While the facilitator often makes a writing exercise available to the participants, as Amelia states, they are free to do it or not, and she often chooses to not do it. Interestingly Brookfield (1985) points out Tough’s assertion that adults often say that they would like more assistance with their self-directed learning projects. It appears that this can be the case within this particular writing workshop. Several members of the group say that they would like the facilitator to do more direct teaching either as it relates to issues of writing craft or to correctness. If there is an opportunity for the facilitator to do so, providing that more direct support would fall into line with the facilitator of self-directed learning projects ability to provide more support.

It is also interesting to note that many of the writers within this group do not have goals for their writing. Brookfield (1985) discusses how it is possible for adults to engage in learning without a clearly defined end. This appears to be true for many of the participants in the CLC’s writing workshop. Many of the men and women don’t have specific goals for themselves, although Frank and Vanessa certainly do. They want to be published and are hoping to make their writing an income-producing endeavor. For other members of the group, they are more interested in the engagement with other people and the learning that happens is an added benefit. This appears to contradict Cummings and Henry’s (1961) disengagement theory which posits in part that as adults age and abilities diminish, they will naturally lose ties to others within their societies.
Also of note with regard to the self-directed learning aspect of the writing workshop is the idea that self-directed learning is not something that happens in isolation (Brookfield, 1985). This is particularly true of this writing workshop. People are coming together to write and to share their writing. Vanessa particularly speaks to the idea of seeking out and accepting the expertise and advice of others when she talks about how she is challenged by what has been read and inspired to attempt something similar when she hears something particularly good that another writer brings to the group.

The idea of transformational learning is often subtle within the CLC’s writing workshop, although it can be argued that for Dale, who learned about the birth and death of a younger sister he never knew he had, the transformation of his conception of his family was in no way subtle. In other instances, though, it is. For example, after thirteen years of identifying as a writer, thirteen years of creating fanciful stories that her friends and family eager anticipate receiving, Amelia came to consider herself not only a writer but a storyteller. “I thought I was just scribbling things down but I’ve come to realize that I’m a storyteller. It’s taken 13 years but I’m a storyteller.” Amelia says that in some ways, that new knowledge gives her the freedom to play even more with her stories told from the point of view of her dogs. “If I can keep people interested while Princess Clarissa is talking about how much she loves eating cantaloupe, I wonder what else I can make people enjoy?”

For others with in the group, notably Peggy, the transformational learning is much more profound. Having come to the group as one of the only members who did not have an advanced education—did not even in fact have a high school education—she felt inferior to the other writers in the group. She was reluctant to share her writing or to offer
commentary on what other people wrote. But over the course of her participation in the group, she’s come to understand that her writing is at least “as good” as the writing of the other participants. While she still is not the first one to share or even the first one to say that a piece of writing is good, she no longer views other participants’ suggestions as commentary on her lack of writing ability. She sees it as simply their reaction to her writing, in the same as they comment on the writing of the more educated members of the group. Her prolonged engagement with the CLC’s writing group has given her self-confidence.

Life Span Development

It would seem that at least a few participants in the CLC’s writing workshop have resolved the ego integrity vs. despair conflict. Many of the participants in the group are engaged in some form of life review. They are collecting the stories of their lives and that of their families and making a record of them. It appears that in Frank’s case, he is using his available time to not only fulfill his goal of becoming a published writer, he is also taking on the role Erikson et al. (1986) defines as providing context and guidance to younger members of not just his family but the larger community through the moral twists at the end of each Little Frankie story. However, Peck (1968) would not say that Frank has resolved the ego integrity vs. despair conflict. If there are three tasks that must be processed in order to progress through the last stage of Erikson’s (1963) ego development, then Frank isn’t quite there yet. He is very focused on becoming a published writer, as is Vanessa who is shopping her novel to publishing houses now. Of all the participants in the group, only Frank and Vanessa expressed interest in publication
and the possibility of earning income from their writing. Frank in particular mentioned not wanting to
go the self-publication route because then I’m not making money with this thing. I have to pay for self-publication and while there are some quality products associated with self-publication these days—not like the vanity presses of my day—I want the exposure and potential that a major publishing house brings. This may mean neither one of them has separated a sense of self from a career-related identity. However, in looking at some of the other members of the group, it appears that many of them have processed the three tasks related to the ego integrity vs. despair conflict and in fact have achieved gerotranscendence (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Certainly Amelia who is content to now sit in her corner and write her little stories; Carol who has had a professional career that took her around the world and back again but now is happy to collect her family stories and share her love of piano; Griffin who writes for the joy of it and doesn’t particularly care who likes it or not; Peggy who is satisfied in her abilities and the choices she has made and accepts her skills for what they are now. Where the other members of the workshop appear to be in relation to resolving the ego integrity vs. despair conflict was not readily apparent. It would also appear that by any of the various definitions of successful aging, all of the participants of the CLC’s writing are aging successfully. While several of the participants have deteriorating eyesight and hearing, their impairment does not rise to the level of “disease-induced incapacity” delineated by Rowe and Kahn (1997). Several participants stated that if a function doesn’t have plenty of close parking they will not go because of arthritis or issues like Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), but
rather than using those as excuses to not participate in activities, they make the choice to search out things that cater to their specific needs, such as the CLC’s writing workshop which meets at a facility with plenty of close, flat, handicapped parking. Those sorts of adaptations would meet Baltes and Baltes’ (1990) model of optimization with compensation. Similarly, the participants were as a whole indulging in a willingness to put self first, a refusal to indulge in regrets, and a willingness to try, which fit the occupational strategies outlined by Wick (2006).

Limitations of the Study

This study could have greatly benefited from asking the study participants to validate the researcher’s interpretation of their experiences as writers and in writing workshops. While participants were offered the chance to review the interview transcripts, they have not yet been presented with the findings. The results will be shared with the writing workshop as a whole, potentially during their first meeting in the spring, but any misinterpretations will not be corrected in this document.

While qualitative research does not require large sample sizes, the relatively small number of participants both in this particular writing workshop and in terms of those who agreed to participate is a limitation. Of course, viewed through the lens of qualitative research, one is not looking to be able to generalize the results of this study to the entire population of older adults who may be interested in participating in a writing workshop. With that in mind, though, given the paucity of research related to the subject, it would be nice to be able to move from the idea of what the phenomenon of writing and participating in a writing workshop means to older adults into collecting other forms of
data that would help give a more complete picture of what writing is and can do for older adults.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of diversity in the sample. To a great extent, this was a homogeneous sample. For example, while one participant refused to identify himself in terms of race, all other participants selected “non-Hispanic White” as their race. It would have been interesting to see if a different racial make-up led to different experiences with writing and the writing workshop. Also, as a whole, the group is highly educated with all but two members at least having a college degree. The two who did not have college degrees had engaged in some type of technical education and identified themselves as being “great” readers. Clearly all of the participants valued the written word, and the researcher wonders how the results would have been different if that had not been the case. Peggy commented that several of her friends came to the workshop for “the interaction that it, uh, provided” and while they did not write, they continued to come for several years before ceasing to participate. Speaking with them about their experience may have provided interesting data. Also, while economic status was not a part of the basic demographic information collected, and some participants identified as having grown up in poverty, it appears that most participants enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle. If there were a greater range of economic statuses present in the sample, the results might have been different.

Yet another limitation includes having only interviewed participants from one writing workshop. During the years preceding this study, the researcher was only able to find this group as a possible research sample. Once the researcher began talking with the participants, many of them indicated that they had explored or been members of other
groups. Even with the names of the groups provided by those participants, it was difficult to locate information regarding them. By the time the researcher discovered these other groups, it was too late for many things: too late to amend the research proposal, too late to seek permission from the sponsoring agencies, too late to track down individual participants. The researcher wishes that there would have been more time to explore these different groups, and having discovered these other groups, the researcher cannot help but wonder what kinds of results would have been revealed if the research were conducted in other areas of the country.

Additionally, the researcher would have liked to have had the opportunity to observe several of the workshop sessions. The observation would have been another point of data and would have helped place the whole experience in context. Where there were conflicts between various accounts of the writing workshop experience, the researcher would have had some reference on which to base additional clarifying questions.

Implications for Adult Education

As discussed in Chapter II, there is little research related to adults and writing and even less research that applies to older adults and writing. The increasing popular interest in memoir and personal reminiscence combined with what many see as a need for life review makes the need for quality writing instruction paramount for older learners who are seeking such outlets. While not all of the participants in this study chose to engage in life review or the process of “creating a paper trail” as many of the participants called it, almost all of the participants felt like at some point they should engage in that activity. Because almost all of the participants expressed a desire or a need to eventually engage in
life review, this study at least in part supports life span stage development theory. While it appears to the researcher that many participants appear to be living with integrity, Peggy seems like a shining example of some one who has made peace with her past and has accepted the circumstances that formed the first part of her life. She has dealt with her insecurities and is comfortable with the life she has created for herself. While other participants certainly are at the same place that Peggy is, she stands out to the researcher. Particularly as it concerns writing, adult educators must exercise caution. Many older adults come to writing thinking that they are not writers because of their schooling experiences. This was notably true of Amelia and Judson. In order to allow any writer to develop, the facilitator must exercise patience and care. While the researcher’s experiences have not been with older adults, her experience with adolescents and adults was confirmed through the process of engaging with these ten older adult writers.

All writers want to know that they are being successful. They want to feel like they are accomplishing something, and these older adult writers stated that again and again in their comments about the appreciation of their writing and the reactions to their writing from fellow members of the group or friends and family. At the same time, there will usually come a point when a developing writer feels like he or she needs more than just praise, and a few participants in this group—Carol in particular—felt like they needed a bit more pressure applied to their writing. They may be ready for a more focused kind of response that goes beyond “It’s good.” Finding the balance between who needs the accolades for what they have managed to accomplish and who needs a more critical stance is precarious under the best of circumstances. It is difficult to provide a range of appropriate responses without having first taught participants how to respond.
The engaged teaching may take longer than the participants or the facilitator wants to spend.

Several of the participants in this group mentioned that they would like more focused teaching on aspects of writing. Many of them equated good writing with being grammatically correct, and in the cases of Dale and Peggy, they mentioned that they did not know enough about grammar to be able to know what they did not know. Researchers such as Weaver (1996) have shown that grammar is most effectively taught in context, which essentially means that truly the only way that grammar lessons stick with students is to show students how grammatical concepts work within their own writing. In order to know what mistakes participants are making, the facilitator must first see the participants’ writing. That requires additional preparation on the part of the facilitator, and depending on the volume of writing and number of students, the additional preparation is not to be taken lightly.

Being able to see the writing was another issue several participants mentioned. As adults age, hearing often deteriorates. To base an entire writing workshop around the need to listen can prohibit some people from taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the workshop. In the case of this particular writing workshop, the reliance on an auditory response model has clearly limited the kind and type of response that is available to the participants. If adult educators want to provide more focused response opportunities to participants in writing workshops, then those participants must be able to see the writing. In general that means individual copies. Due to deteriorating eyesight, many participants might not be able to clearly see images projected on a screen using a document camera (if one is available), a projector attached to a computer (if one is
available), or writing transferred to overhead transparencies (if those are available). The deteriorating eyesight is also problematic when it comes to the size of print on hand-outs. If the facilitator plans to provide individual copies of participant writing, he or she will have to be prepared to change font sizes or for those who do not have access to technology—or who like Peggy do not know how to use the technology they have access to—transcribe hand-written documents into word processing applications. This is an important consideration with an ever-aging population. Three members of the writing workshop studied were 83 years old. At one point in time, a 93-year-old was attending the workshop.

Also, many adults may be craving social contact. It is important, particularly in a writing group, to building that time and ability to socialize. It is critical for the participants to get to know each other. If, as Judson implied, there is no sense of camaraderie within the group, it will be extremely difficult for participants to be comfortable sharing their writing. Some participants in this group did not experience that level of comfort and while that may depend on the individual to a certain extent, the researcher suspects that while there is an attempt to integrate new members into the existing group, not all of the community building that occurs when a group is first established happens when new members come into the experience. It is certainly expedient for the established group members to continuing moving on, but if new members come into the group, there has to be some way to integrate them more fully.

Writing and participating in a writing workshop have the power to lead to transformational learning. While the transformations experienced by several of the participants were profound redefinitions of the self (Mezirow, 1991), in the case of this
workshop, the participants were often at various stages of their own personal transformations. Participants like Dale were coming to see themselves as writers. Judson was attempting to create a new identity as someone who was a competent writer without the assistance of an outside authority. Peggy had evolved into seeing herself as just as good as the other writers in the group. With writers at differing stages of transformation, the learners and the facilitator must be prepared to deal with the changes that occur within the context of both the learner and the group as a whole based on those changes.

Finally, this study points to the need to plan activities for older adults that are meaningful. This particular writing workshop meets once a week throughout the year and while for a few members it functions as something that allows them the opportunity to get out of the house, for the majority of members, it is a chance to engage in an activity that has meaning for participants individually, the class as a whole, and people outside of the class. These writers are doing something that is important to them and that engages them on many different levels.

Implications for Future Research

One obvious implication for future research is that still more research needs to be done as it relates to older adults and writing, not just writing workshop. As has been stated several times previously, there continues to be little research regarding older adults and writing. This study offers but one more piece of the puzzle, and it is a very small piece at that. With a growing population of older adults, even more work needs to be done in this area. Research on successful aging points to the need for older adults to engage in mental “exercise” (Rossen et al., 2008) as well as the need to create meaningful
relationships (Duay & Bryan, 2006). This study suggests that perhaps writing and a writing workshop can help create both of those conditions for older adults.

Although this study was designed to investigate the experiences of older adults and writing workshop, given the lack of research about adults and writing workshop, another area that would seem rife for research is present. What does it mean for adults in general to participate in a writing workshop? And what does writing mean to them?

The findings of this research project appear to be in-line with what the research related to writing workshop across the age spectrum states about what it means to participate in writing workshops. It might be interesting to do some larger-scale projects that address those similarities or differences in a more methodical fashion.

Also specifically as related to the idea of writing and writing workshop, an area for further investigation appears to be how to provide more adequate response for the members of the workshop who feel that they may need to move beyond the simple appreciation of the other members of the group. In order to provide that greater level of support, what can facilitators of older adult writing workshops do to create a more challenging level of response?

Along those same lines would be an examination of what older adults really do know when it comes to writing. Several participants in this study expressed that they did not know much about writing but when it came down to it, they were actually more competent than they believed. If a researcher were to examine writing artifacts from older adults, what would they find in terms of technical writing ability? Do older adults, or really just adults, write as poorly as they’ve been led to believe they do?
To move in a completely different direction, another area of possible investigation could be how the practice of engaging in writing and participating in a writing workshop is related to Stebbins’ (1992) concept of serious leisure. Stebbins defines serious leisure as “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for a participant to find a career there in acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge” (p. 3). While investigating successful aging, the researcher came across this concept, and based on the descriptions provided by the participants in this particular writing group, for many members writing may qualify as “serious leisure.” It would be interesting to explore this idea further.

Concluding Comments

This study has been an examination of the experiences of 10 older adults, aged 62-83, who come together on a regular basis to engage in and share writing. An exploration of what it means to them to participate in this writing workshop experience with each other as well as an examination of how they view their experiences and understandings of what it means to write has led to a deeper understanding of those ideas for both those writers and the researcher. Through the interaction and exchange of stories—both theirs and the researcher’s—all participants have been changed.

Information did not flow in just one direction. While the researcher was interested in collecting their thoughts and experiences, through the course of our engagement, they have also collected the researcher’s thoughts, experiences, and stories. Researcher and participants are now bound together.

The participants’ experiences have brought together many different histories: a world traveler, a renowned musician, a teacher, a police officer, an electrician, a doctor,
an engineer, a lab technician, a photographer, a counselor, and a professor. Writers. Their writing and participation have brought about thought; served as a means of challenging themselves, each other, and the researcher; created a record of lives and experiences; created an on-going commitment both to each other and to self; presented affirmations of being and potential; awakened awareness of endless possibilities; established a lasting community; and enlivened the experiences of the whole.
I would like to thank you for participation in this research project. As part of my doctoral dissertation process, I am conducting research on how older adults experience participation in a writing workshop. There is little existing research related to older adults and writing, and I hope this study will contribute to a great body of knowledge and perhaps more effective programming for older adults. Your participation will consist of answering several questions related to your experiences both with writing in general and more specifically the Friday Morning Writing Group. I expect the interview to last between 60 and 90 minutes. Your time and consideration are greatly appreciated.

There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study. The risks include the inconvenience of dedicating time to being interviewed. Additionally, there are a few questions that are related to why you write and what you write about and these questions can potentially be related to painful or traumatic past experiences for you. Answering these questions may be distressing for you. However, I feel that the information and insight that you share will potentially benefit the those who design programs for older adults.

While all risks to confidentiality can not be predicted, you may be assured that your participation and responses will be held in strictest confidence. Furthermore, a pseudonym will be used in place of your actual name throughout the study. Because the interview will be face-to-face with the researcher, your responses are not totally anonymous. Additionally, as the other participants in this study are your fellow writing group members, because of the community that you have built and the sharing inherent within your writing group, when you receive a copy of the study findings, you may be able to identify other participants. All attempts will be made to obscure any and all identifying third party references. The researcher will hold your responses in confidence.

Also, to ensure that what you say is accurately documented, the interview will be recorded. Only the researcher and her faculty sponsors will have access to these recordings; the materials will be securely stored at the researcher’s residence. The recordings and all identifying materials will be destroyed after the study is completed.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.

Participation in this interview indicates your consent to participate in this study. Again, thank you for your cooperation. Questions concerning the research should be directed to Jennifer Alex, at (601) 818-8595. This project and this consent form have
been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research subject should be directed to the chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820. Any questions about the research should be directed to Jennifer Alex at (601)-818-8595.

Jennifer L. Alex  
Graduate Student  
The University of Southern Mississippi

Date
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

AUTHORIZATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT

(Short Form – to be used with Oral Presentation)

Participant's Name: _________________________________

Consent is hereby given to participate in the research project entitled OLDER ADULTS AND WRITING WORKSHOP: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY. All procedures and/or investigations to be followed and their purpose, including any experimental procedures, were explained by Jennifer Alex. Information was given about all benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that might be expected.

The opportunity to ask questions regarding the research and procedures was given. Participation in the project is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. All personal information is strictly confidential, and no names will be disclosed. Any new information that develops during the project will be provided if that information may affect the willingness to continue participation in the project.

Questions concerning the research, at any time during or after the project, should be directed to Jennifer Alex at 601-818-8595. This project and this consent form have been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820.

A copy of this form will be given to the participant.

_________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of Participant                          Date

_________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of person explaining the study          Date
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Schedule – Alex Dissertation Research

Research Questions: How do older adults experience the phenomenon of participating in a writing workshop and what does the writing workshop experience mean to and for them? How do older adults view/construct/interpret their experiences, understandings, and realities of writing?

Background questions:

1. Are there beliefs you have about what it means to be a writer?
2. In light of any beliefs you may have about what it means to be a writer, do you see yourself as a writer?
3. Why do you write?
4. Before participating in the Friday morning writing group, were there various kinds of writing projects you engaged in?
5. What brought you to the Friday morning writing group?
6. How long have you been participating in the Friday morning writing group?
7. Typically, are there certain kinds/types/genres of writing you produce in the Friday morning writing group?
8. Has participation in the Friday morning writing group influenced your understanding of what it means to be a writer? If so, in what ways?
9. Has participation in the Friday morning writing group shaped your view of yourself as a writer? If so, in what ways?
10. Before participating in the Friday morning writing group, what were your experiences with writing workshop?

Experience in a Writing Workshop:
11. Describe for me the process you engage in when you come to the Friday morning writing group.
12. Are there any procedures or parts of the Friday morning writing group you feel have been helpful to your writing?
13. Are there any procedures or parts of the Friday morning writing group you feel have been challenging for you?
14. How has being in the Friday morning writing group impacted your writing?
15. How do you view the response process?
16. What is your level of comfort in providing feedback about the writing of the other members in the group?
17. Are you comfortable receiving feedback about your writing from the other members of the group? Please explain your response.
18. What affect, if any, do you feel the response process has had on your writing?
19. Would you recommend the writing workshop to a friend?
20. Are there any suggestions you have to improve the writing workshop?

**Basic Demographic Information:**

1) Age: ____________

2) Sex: Male / Female

3) Race/Ethnicity:
   a) American Indian/Alaska Native
   b) Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   c) Asian or Asian American
   d) Black or African American
   e) Hispanic or Latino
   f) Non-Hispanic White
   g) Other

4) Marital Status:
   a) Married
   b) Divorced
   c) Widowed
   d) Separated
   e) Never Been Married
   f) A Member of an Unmarried Couple

5) Employment Status:
   a) Employed for Wages
   b) Self-Employed
   c) Retired
   d) Unable to Work

6) Education Completed:
   a) Grades 1 through 8 (Elementary)
   b) Grades 8 through 11 (Some High School)
   c) Grade 12 or GED (High School Graduate)
   d) College – 1 year to 3 years (Some College or Technical School)
   e) College 4 years (College Graduate)
   f) Graduate School
   (Advanced Degree – ___________________________)
APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

Institutional Review Board
118 College Drive #5147
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Tel: 601.266.6820
Fax: 601.266.5509
www.usm.edu/irb

HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION REVIEW COMMITTEE
NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Human Subjects Protection Review Committee in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Effect Report Form”.
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 10072003
PROJECT TITLE: Older Adults and Writing Workshop: A Phenomenological Study
PROPOSED PROJECT DATES: 10/01/2009 to 10/22/2010
PROJECT TYPE: Dissertation
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS: Jennifer Lynn Alex
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education & Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Educational Studies & Research
FUNDING AGENCY: N/A
HSPRC COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 07/20/2010 to 07/19/2011

[Signature]
Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
HSPRC Chair

7-22-2010
Date
June 17, 2010

Jennifer L. Alex
P.O. Box 21472
Louisville, KY 40221

Dear Ms. Alex:

This letter confirms that you have my permission to include the members of my Friday Morning Writing Group in your study investigating the experience of older adults who participate in the class. We just compiled our seventeenth volume of stories, poems, and memoirs; I believe this group will be a rich source of information.

Please let me know how I can help as you begin the interviews.

Best regards,

[signature]

Janet A. Isenhour
Executive Director
jisenhour@carnegieliteracy.org
REFERENCES


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