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## The Unemployed Adult in the Liminal Space of a Job-Training Program: Transformations of Learner Identities

Anthony Craig Adkisson

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The Unemployed Adult in the Liminal Space of a Job-Training Program:  
Transformations of Learner Identities

Anthony Craig Adkisson

Bachelor of Arts, Psychology

The Ohio State University

December 1996

Bachelor of Arts, Black Studies

The Ohio State University

December 1996

Master of Education, Adult Learning

Cleveland State University

June 2010

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN URBAN EDUCATION:

ADULT, CONTINUING, AND HIGHER EDUCATION

at CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2016

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We hereby approve the dissertation  
of

**Anthony Craig Adkisson**

Candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy in Urban Education degree

This Dissertation has been approved for the  
**Office of Doctoral Studies,**  
College of Education and Human Services  
and

**CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY**  
College of Graduate Studies by

---

Dissertation Chairperson: Catherine H. Monaghan, Ph.D.

C.A.S.A.L. \_\_\_\_\_  
Department & Date

---

Methodologist: Catherine A. Hansman, Ed.D.

C.A.S.A.L. \_\_\_\_\_  
Department & Date

---

Brian E. Harper, Ph.D.

Curriculum and Foundations \_\_\_\_\_  
Department & Date

---

Jonathan Messemer, Ed.D.

C.A.S.A.L. \_\_\_\_\_  
Department & Date

---

Helen Liggett, Ph.D.

Urban Studies \_\_\_\_\_  
Department & Date

**May 3, 2016**  
Student's Date of Defense

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this work first and foremost to two key and important women in my life, my mother Leanetta Calderon and my aunt Shirley Adkisson, who raised me and early on instilled in me a love for learning, a desire to pursue knowledge, and always encouraged me to use my voice.

I also dedicate this to the participants, staff, and administration of “Geared up for Work” for their support throughout this process without you none of this would be possible

– Thank you!

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I want to thank everyone at “Geared up for Work.” Your support and constantly pushing me on to get this done was greatly appreciated during those moments when I wanted to throw in the towel.

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I would also like to thank my committee members for your insight, your constructive critiques, and the knowledge you each brought to this project. As I wrote, I was always thinking and asking myself “how might each of you look at this issue.” Thank You each for being a part of this journey with me! Thank you for coming into this “Liminal Space” with me!

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Lastly, my deepest and wholehearted Thank You goes to my committee chair, fellow CofP member, and mentor, Dr. Monaghan. You have been there with me from the very beginning. I can still remember back in 2009, as I was completing my Master degree and sitting in your office pondering if the doctoral program was the right program for me. You have been a bedrock of support, encouragement, and wisdom on this journey. Thank you for your ability to understand what I was thinking even when I didn't know! It's because of you that I feel confident in my identity as a researcher.

**THE UNEMPLOYED ADULT IN THE LIMINAL SPACE OF A JOB-TRAINING  
PROGRAM:**

**TRANSFORMATIONS OF LEARNER IDENTITIES**

**ANTHONY CRAIG ADKISSON**

**ABSTRACT**

This research addresses the impact job-readiness programs have on the identity of unemployed adults. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the transformational learning that happened for a group of seven unemployed adults seeking employment. The research considered: 1) what meaning do unemployed adults make out of their experience going through job-training programs; 2) what are the liminal aspects of job-training programs; 3) how do aspects of the job-training programs influence the development of their identity; 4) what are the ways the programs shapes their views toward learning; and 5) in what ways was this experience transformative? Data were collected through interviews with participants and facilitators, and workshop observations. The findings of this study demonstrate how learners with barriers use learning environments as a space to further work on and develop their identities. The significance of this study demonstrates the need to consider program space and structure when working with unemployed adult learners with barriers to employment.



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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Background**

It is the autumn of 2015 and I sit down to have a conversation with Nicole. Nicole is a 32-year-old African-American single mother to a young daughter in elementary school. Nicole who at the time of our interview was unemployed and had not completed high school. She was a participant in a job-readiness program at the Geared Up for Work (GUW) organization. Nicole enrolled herself into the GUW four-week job-readiness program because she heard from family members that the program offered the opportunity of potentially getting her criminal record expunged once she successfully completed. Nicole, during her interview, stated that she had a misdemeanor charge for possession of an unregistered weapon and the charge made it difficult to gain employment in the medical field. Nicole shared that despite her not completing high school, she did have a certificate as a Medical Assistant, which she earned participating a similar program several years earlier. Nicole was interested in returning to the medical field and thus her reason for wanting to take the steps necessary to clear-up her past record as way of getting back into the field she loves

Nicole story is not a unique one. Everyday unemployed, underemployed, or dislocated adult learners, similar to Nicole, participate in some form of job-readiness or work preparedness training program as a process of either entering or re-entering the American Workforce. Many of these same adults also have criminal backgrounds, which further complicates their aspirations to find employment.

Nationally, many job-readiness programs are funded and or operated by state or local workforce development systems (Hilliard, 2011). These job-readiness programs are typically short-term and teach learners skills ranging from remedial skills, occupational specific skills, soft skills, or a combination of post-employment skill training. (O’Leary, Straits, & Wandner, 2011). Some of the same job-readiness programs, like GUW, are structured and funded to provide programming and training to special populations of individuals with barriers to employment. In Nicole’s situation, her barrier is her misdemeanor.

Federal, state, and local governments have supported, over the years, variations of job-readiness training programs as a method of preparing the American workforce and attempting to broaden their skills while connecting them to work opportunities. Over the years, the purpose of job-training programs has been to strengthen the American workforce and help individuals become self-sufficient by preparing them with the skills that employers need and placing them into employment. In a review of the various U.S. job training programs and regulations, O’Leary, Straits and Wandner (2011) provide some context for understanding the shifts and changes that have taken place within the American workforce job-preparedness programs. The most recent modification of the



workforce system was the re-authorization of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA) in 2014 when it was changed to the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA). With the reauthorization of the federal workforce system, policy makers and practitioners hoped to address some of the limitations of the former policy in regards to training opportunities and service delivery.

Organizations, such as GUW, offering job-readiness programming may require participants to enter programs as a means of gaining access to networks of employers. In order to obtain access to these networks learners are evaluated on the demonstration of learned skills and abilities through the performance of prescribed task such as completing resumes, drafting cover letters, passing mock interviews; tasks considered as desirable to hiring networks of employers. In the field of workforce development, these skills are considered as soft skills (Kaye and Nightingale, 2000). Programs may be as short as one week, while others may be up to four weeks depending on the skills taught and the population served. Upon completion of programming, participants are usually awarded a certificate of completion or achievement. Once complete with the training portion of the program participants may engage in job searching, work experiences or transitional employment putting into practice their newly learned skill sets.

As demonstrated in the story of Nicole, a participant in this study, the unemployed come into job-readiness programs not only prior lived experiences, but barriers, which make it difficult for them to find adequate employment. Alfred & Martin (2007) discuss adult learners within urban communities, similar to the one GUW is situated within, emphasizing how groups of learners struggle to overcome, educational, situational, and personal barriers. These barriers, according to Alfred and Martin (2007)

make it difficult for the unemployed or underemployed adult to achieve a level of self-sufficiency in order to provide for themselves and their families. When job opportunities are unavailable, many unemployed adults rely on the support of public assistance programs and community-based organizations. In Nicole's case and other participants in this study, they are relying on the assistance of GUW, a not-for-profit publically funded workforce development organization to provide them with support and opportunities to either enter or re-enter the workforce, despite their criminal backgrounds.

When it comes to entering or re-entering the workforce, employers look for hires that have high skill sets. In a discussion on of the practice of adult education within urban communities, Martin and Rogers (2004) examine ways we might better understand what opportunities exist within the context of the urban environment for intellectual growth and development despite the social, structural, cultural, and economic barriers marginalizing its residents from more affluent aspects of the urban community. Furthering this discussion, Rocco and Gallagher (2004) make an argument for educators of urban adults, working within institutions of higher education, to deconstruct the ways that discrimination of minority groups is implicit within both instruction and structure the learning environment. They make the point that "the geographic location of urban institutions does not guarantee a welcoming and nurturing environment for all adult learners" (p. 38). Institutions located within the environment serving an already marginalized population are created in an image that reflects white, middle class, male privilege (Rocco & Gallagher, 2004).

As an adult educator who has worked both within an institution of higher education and within community based programs located within urban communities, I

believe there are further implications to Rocco and Gallagher's argument if we take into consideration Martin and Rogers understanding that within urban learning environments opportunities for intellectual growth and development exist. What might we learn by examining an urban learning environment created to serve urban adults that is not necessarily associated with an institution of higher education, but situated to provide learning opportunities in the form of job-readiness for adults wishing to place themselves on a career path?

With the above consideration, if we look at the work of Mike Rose (2004) *The Mind at Work*, he examines how in American culture the intelligence of workers, particularly blue-collar workers, is undervalued. In an examination of the work done by several vocational occupations, he exposes the historical assumptions and judgments held toward certain types of work where individuals work with their hands as opposed to with their minds. At one point, he discusses how his mother, a waitress, "shaped her adult identity in the restaurant business" (p. xiv). Observations such as those pointed out in the work of Rose provide additional reasoning for further examining how programs and places are created for the purpose of educating and/or training unemployed, underemployed adult learners, who may or may not always have the ability or desire to participate in formal types of instruction provided by institutions of higher education.

How might these participants find and connect to non-formal learning opportunities? Furthermore, do the unemployed adults who go through job-readiness programs in hope of finding employment consider themselves to be learners? If so, what does that mean for an adult educator working within urban community-based program? Is there a need to adjust the structure and instruction of these programs to ensure they are

not furthering the assumptions pointed out by Rose. As Rocco and Gallagher (2004) pointed out within higher education, educators may hold certain discriminatory beliefs and assumptions toward students—how might these same assumptions cross into the practice of working with adults in a community based setting, especially if those learners who are ex-offenders.

### **Problem Statement**

The purpose of this study was to explore how the liminality of job-readiness training programs influenced the learner identities of unemployed adults. Going into this study, I was interested in understanding how unemployed adults make meaning out of their experience transitioning through a job-training program and in what ways aspects of the program and their experiences within the program impacts their learning identity.

We know that through research (O’Leary, Straits, & Wandner, 2011) workforce job-training programs are structured to provide opportunities in aiding the unemployed and underemployed adult in finding and connecting to work opportunities. We further know that such programs supported under WIOA connect individuals to work and have a tendency to exist as short-term and low-wage jobs. In a research looked at by the O’Leary, Straits, & Wandner (2011), on the effectiveness of publically funded programs, it was found that programs focusing on labor force attachment were ineffective in linking people to long term consistent work mostly because they focus on a vague set of skills and the needs of the job industry rather than the individual as learner. Immel (1995) points out how earlier attempts at constructing programs for putting people back to work saw the greatest success when combined with not only job search assistance but education and training.

However, for those deciding to participate in job-readiness training programs, what do we know about that span of time in which the unemployed adult transitions through the space of the program? Are there ways the programs affect the adult's development as a learner? Are there experiences within the actual program itself that if we fully understood them might aid us in understanding how adults develop learner identities?

Job-training programs, similar to those funded by the federal, state and local governments, provide opportunities to address a skill gap but do so in a deficit model to learning and education. Sandlin and Cervero (2003) point out that literacy and job-training programs under WIA and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) fail to address the structural reasons for unemployment but instead place primary responsibility on the individual learner. The assumption is that individuals, in these programs, lack work preparation skills and accessing short-term job-training programs will make things better in their lives (Sandlin and Cervero, 2003). As programs currently exist, tensions exist within the structure and planning of programs that limit how the field and practice of adult education sees unemployed and underemployed adults as not learners but as workers, which is worth further consideration in order that we move beyond a deficit approach of what the learner's lack but more about how the adult within the program use the tools within the space to transform as learners.

Kegan (2000) offers a developmental model of transformative learning, in which the learner develops overtime from someone focused on immediate needs and desires to someone who is self-transforming. In this study, I am proposing that through the use of a

liminal space i.e. the job-training program learners develop through the use of certain tools and social interactions according to Kegan's transformative model, despite the larger and dominant curriculum in place, thus transforming and developing as learners versus simply workers, and it is through this transformation that adult educators and the practice of adult education may learn how to best serve unemployed urban adult learners.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Little empirical research exists about the experiences of unemployed and underemployed adults (Bullock-Yowell, Andrews, McConnell, & Campbell, 2012). Through this qualitative study I expected to gain some understanding of the experiences, unemployed adults have within job-training programs. In particular, better understandings of the experiences of underserved adults within the liminal space of a job-training program.

Through a qualitative case study, investigated the experiences of the unemployed adult for the purposes of understanding the transformational learning that happens within the context of a liminal space. By using this opportunity to gain insight into the spatial practices of the job-training program, observing workshops, reviewing curriculum, and interviewing both the participants and facilitators—I gained some insight into the learners experience.

In the instance of this study, the liminal space in question was the job-training program. The experience of unemployment as an unanticipated event (Schlossberg, 1989; Merriam, 2005) for many adults posed moments of flux and instability, particularly when the learner comes from an underserved community of learners (Martin, 2004). Furthermore, underserved populations of learners seeking employment opportunity

transition through government supported job-training programs, which connect them to low-wage jobs only to face future unemployment. It was the assumption of this study that the job-training programs operated as liminal spaces where learners transform and re-shape their identities in a manner different from when they entered. Operating under a cultural understanding of bricolage (de Certeau, 1984), I examined how adults move through the liminal space of job-training program acquiring new tools in order to re-shape and transform their identities into learners as opposed to simply workers.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore how the liminality of job-readiness training programs influenced the learner identities of unemployed adults. I examined the affect job-training programs as liminal spaces had on the development of an unemployed adult's identity as a learner. Guiding my investigation into the spaces, I addressed the following research questions:

1. What meaning do unemployed adults make out of their experience going through job-training programs?
2. What are the liminal aspects of job-training programs?
3. In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training program transform the development of an unemployed adult's identity as a learner?
4. What are the ways the job-training programs shape the views of unemployed adults toward learning and continuing education?
5. What are the ways in which this experience was transformative for them as learners?

## **Methodology**

The plan of this research was to investigate the above through a qualitative investigation. Compared with the use of a quantitative approach, a qualitative approach allowed for an in depth exploration into how individuals make sense of their particular experience or phenomenon (Merriam, 1998), and how the adult learners who participated in this study interacted with both the representational space and the physical space of the program. As a researcher, I wanted to better understand whether the adults transform their views and perceptions of themselves as learners due to their experiences within the program. The data for this case explains how the unemployed adult makes sense of his or her experience within a job-training program and how the program affects their learner identities.

Through the use of a qualitative case study approach I provide a rich, thick description filled with personal experiences of the unemployed that allowed for a better look into the experiences of this group and adding to the existing body of research that examines the experiences of unemployed adults. I selected to use a case study approach, which allowed me to investigate a program where adults are engaged in job-readiness programs. Creswell (2013) defined case study as a research methodology that allows a researcher to explore a bounded system or unique case using multiple data sources. In the instance of this research, GUW is an organization that delivers multiple job training programs, for which participants are screened and assessed prior to their entrance into the program. Each program has a particular curriculum used to train and education participants. For this study I observed a four-week and two-week job-readiness workshop with GUW, conducted interviews with participants of the program following their



successful completion of their workshop as a means of gaining insight into their experiences within the program, interviewed facilitators, and reviewed training curriculum.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study addressed the gap in current research about the experiences of unemployed adult learners participating in job readiness programs. Understanding these experiences helps the field of adult and continuing education learn why it is important to create effective and supportive spaces for adult learners, particularly those learners with barriers to employment, to gain confidence in their ability to move beyond their backgrounds. What we may further learn from these experiences is that job-training programs operate as a liminal space where learners are able to reconnect with their own prior identities as learners. Finally, this study demonstrates the ability of adult learners to re-purpose the tools and skills provided by programs for moving beyond employment to continuing to seek out education opportunities.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore how the liminality of job-readiness training programs influences the identities of unemployed adults. Guiding this research investigation into understanding how these spaces may influence an unemployed adult's identity and why this is important to the field of adult and continuing education I addressed the following research questions:

1. What meaning do unemployed adults make out of their experience going through job-training programs?
2. What are the liminal aspects of job-training programs?
3. In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training, programs influence the development of an unemployed adult's learner identity?
4. What are the ways the job-training programs shape the views of unemployed adults toward learning and continuing education?
5. Are there ways in which this experience was transformative for them as learners

It is the proposal of this research that some unemployed adults enter into these programs with the intent of finding employment, but instead or in addition seek to continue their education and further develop their identities as learners. These experiences may help the field of adult and continuing education learn to create a more effective model at helping adult learners seek out opportunities to become more self-sufficient. What we may further learn from these experiences is that job-training programs operate as liminal spaces that are critical in understanding adult development.

Since the inception of job-training programs, as a system for helping the unemployed find work, the outcomes of participation in programs has favored a market driven argument of matching participants directly to work. The question of this research is whether or not job-training programs, which are traditionally formal learning environments based in communities, have the potential to not only help adult learners become self-sufficient through seeking out and securing employment, but also the potential for motivating unemployed adults to seek out opportunities to continue their education.

To better answer the question, the following literature review will address four major areas of research. The first is the broad area of defining and understanding adult learning and adult education. To better understand whom adult learners are, why adults participate, and the types of learning activities they participate, the review will examine current studies as well as some foundational theoretical discussions and models about adult education and learning with a focus on the unemployed adult learner. Next, the review will focus on adult development and change. In particular, the review of research

will focus on life-transitions for adult learners and the impact transitions, such as the loss of a job, have on identity formation. Following, I will review adult learners and the reasons they participate in workforce development programs. This literature will give insight into the history of job-training programs as a means of developing the U.S. workforce at the same time providing an understanding of whom the programs serve and their programmatic outcomes. Finally, the review will examine what role place, space, and class have on the formation of the unemployed adult learners identity. What impact, if any, do the construction of these spaces, learning environments, and the location of these adults into these spaces have on their identities as learners and their abilities to seek and secure future employment or to continue a path of learning through schooling? The review will conclude with a summary of the relevant literature and a proposal for next steps in this research.

### **Unemployed Adult Learners**

For the purposes of this research adult learners are defined as those individuals who are 18 years or older, experiencing low levels of literacy, unemployed or under-employed, and currently participating in a job-readiness training program as a means of finding and securing employment. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, persons are considered unemployed if they do not currently hold employment, have actively looked for work in the past 4 weeks, and are currently available for work or have recently experienced a lay off (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). The above definition of an unemployed adult gives a very specific description of an adult learner, and one that is situated within the context and purposes of this research proposal. Just as I have defined the adult learner for the purposes put forth here, research in the field of adult learning

(Bjorklund & Bee, 2008; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Hansman & Mott, 2010) is filled with distinct ways of determining exactly who the adult learner is. For educators working with adult learners, the challenge becomes not only defining who adults are, but further answering the question of what constitutes adult development, who participates, and how will the field continue to improve programming for adults learners faced with multiple challenges and barriers (Hansman & Mott, 2010).

**Traditional Understandings of Adult Learners.** Of the multiple ways of defining the adult learner Bjorklund & Bee (2010) discuss traditional and often referenced understandings of adulthood by using stages of life-span development such as early and middle adulthood and older and late adulthood, that examine how adults change over the course of their lifespan based upon chronological age (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Alternatively, other reports use a “nonstandard” or functional definition of adult learners such as if a student is married or has dependents (American Council on Education, 2005). Regardless of how one selects to define the adult learner, the field of adult education needs to consider the diversity of learners that will show up in the classroom, their changing needs as they age, in addition to the barriers that may work against them in the classroom (Hansman & Mott, 2010).

In broad terms, Johnstone & Rivera (1965) conducted what is now considered a landmark study for the field of adult learning to determine who is an adult learner. The study was one of the first within the field to gather quantitative and qualitative data, through a national survey, on the characteristics of the adult learner and the types of learning activities in which they were involved. In addition, the research examined what social and psychological factors might help to explain why adults participated in various

types of learning activities. Data for their study was collected through nationally distributed surveys, personal interviews, and a case study of educational facilities serving adult learners.

Participants within the Johnstone and Rivera (1965) study showed that, at the time, 22% of U.S. adults were engaged in some form of learning that was non-academic (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Upon further analysis of their research, Johnstone and Rivera (1965) concluded that most adults participated in education as a part of non-academic instruction or in “self-organized” forms of learning, mostly tied to vocational pursuits. In 2005 6.5 million adults were engaged in academic learning, which is only 7.2% of the 90 million adults who were at the time engaged in some form of learning activity, leaving the remaining 92.8% participating in other non-credit learning (American Council on Education, 2005).

Johnstone and Rivera’s (1965) study has served as a point of continued reference in the field of adult education for understanding and defining adult learners, and further demonstrates that the overall characteristics of the adult learner, in national studies, is that of an individual who is self-directed, young, employed, with a higher socioeconomic status (SES) that still holds up today (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). But what of those who are older, not employed, and of a lower SES (Cross, 1992)? Cross (1992) argued that statistics, such as those discussed by Johnstone and Rivera (1965) on formal learning give us only a glimpse of who the adult learners are, while actually demonstrating the “socioeconomic elitism of adult education” (p. 53). If this is so, are we to assume that these marginalized learners are not interested in learning activities or that

learning is not an important outcome for the field of adult education to measure and understood for these populations?

Further attempts at understanding the adult learner requires a understanding of adulthood that moves beyond functional characteristics (American Council on Education, 2005), but further examines the various learning activities in which adults participate (Hansman, 2010). Credited with setting the groundwork for understanding what Hansman poses is given to the work of Knowles (1980). In the field of adult education, many researchers credit Knowles in helping to develop a practice for understanding how adults learn and for making an argument that adults learn differently than children, also referred to as andragogy (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Knowles refers to adults as self-directed learners whom are internally motivated to learn, and many of their learning experiences are based within the context of their lived experiences. Knowles was both a protégé and colleague of Houle and Tough respectively, who were also two foundational theorists to the concept of self-directed learning and adult learning (Hiemstra, 2003). Knowles believed that fundamental to the adult learner were the following six assumptions for understanding the learner as one who 1) has an independent self-concept and can direct his or her own learning, 2) has accumulated life experiences, which are used as a resource to learning, 3) has a desire for learning related to changing life circumstances, 4) is focused on resolving problems and needs to know how knowledge is applied, and 5) motivated internally rather than by exterior motives and 6) adults need to know how this new knowledge will solve problems in their life (Merriam, 2001). Knowles' theories and assumptions about adult learners have set the stage for providing researchers in the field of adult education and learning insight into who adult learners are

and how adults learn, whereas the studies of Johnstone and Rivera (1965) promoted for the field more of an understanding of what types of learning activities adults participated in.

As much as the field of Adult Education credits Knowles with generating discussion for the field of adult learning, it has not been without critique (Grace 1996; Merriam, 2001; Sandlin, 2005; Hansman & Mott, 2010). Where the study of andragogy falls short is the under-use of principles and approaches that look at the social and cultural context of the adult learner (Grace, 1996) most notably the actual learning space itself. Similar to Cross's (1992) critique of earlier studies on adult participation, adult learners are viewed as a homogenous group with similar qualities, environments and reasons for learning. Grace (1996) draws attention to Knowles' assumptions as an outgrowth of the time period in which it was developed in the 1960s which valued individual motivations for participation over sociocultural factors (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Further, Knowles conceptualization of the adult learner fails to incorporate how individuals are shaped by the social institutions they are a part of (Merriam, 2001). Understanding the impact social institutions have on learners is to also acknowledge the role adult educators play as facilitators in creating the learning environment, which andragogy stresses (Sandlin, 2005). Sandlin (2005) takes to task Knowles' assumptions of andragogy through the use of a qualitative content analysis of journal articles that critique andragogy through critical, feminist, and Africentric perspective. Through her analysis of articles she found the following five common critiques of andragogy: 1) andragogy assumes that education is value neutral and apolitical, which she argues is incorrect, 2) andragogy fosters the notion of a generic



learner with white middle class values, 3) andragogy ignores other voices and ways of knowing, 4) it ignores the interrelation between self and society, and finally 5) it supports a continuation of the existing state of affairs without question (Sandlin, 2005).

Andragogy remains an important foundational theory for understanding adult learners, but its assumptions fail to challenge the inequalities of education that Cross (1992) pointed out makes adult education appear elitist. Educators concerned with social justice and democracy should consider the use of critical perspectives as they facilitate and develop programs for adult learners (Sandlin, 2005). The use of critical pedagogy, feminism, and Africentric perspectives may help prepare adult educators to better address the growing field of adult education and address the needs of current and future learners. The current landscape of adult education faces multiple changes such as an ever-changing workforce, addressing the barriers to education of minority adult learners, and tackling the question of why some adults do not participate in learning (Hansman & Mott, 2010). In order to move away from this elitist view that Cross (1992) discussed it becomes necessary to not only examine who participates in various types of learning activities, but why they may or may not participate.

**Contextualizing the Unemployed Adult Learner.** Two years before 2005 report by the American Council on Education, the Council released a report on adults titled *Low Income Adults in Profile: Improving Lives Through Higher Education* (2004). At the time of this report 70% of all existing jobs required some form of education beyond a high school diploma (2004). The report acknowledges the need for older students and lower SES students to have access to education beyond secondary education as a means of securing stable employment, but further points out that these same learners are the least

likely to participate. Or perhaps its that the field of adult education has not fully explored the various context and settings these learner exist within. As Cross (1992) points out, this population of learner is understudied and is the least likely to receive any measure of empirical study. As signifiers of barriers for why lower SES students may not participate at the rates of traditional college age students, the report discusses the characteristics of lower income students in comparison to traditional students such as their employment status, family obligations, self-esteem, and financial stability. As true as these factors may be, in that they may operate as obstacles to continued education, should we assume that their personal dispositions alone are the reasons for their lack of participation, or might institutional barriers exist that further prevent the learner from participating (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Merriam, 2001). In addition, the report only gives an account for adult learners who seek to continue their education through institutions of higher education. However, are there other pathways adults can take in developing themselves as learners that do not directly involve colleges or universities, but still may lead them to securing employment and possibly other forms of credentials that aid in their securing self-sufficiency. At the end of January 2013, the U.S. unemployment rate was 7.9% of the population (United States Department of Labor, 2013). This translates to 12.3 million American men (7.3%) and women that are unemployed, which further breaks down demographically into 7.0% of whites, 13.8% of blacks, 9.7% of Hispanic and 6.5% of Asians that are currently experiencing a state of unemployment (2013). At the current rate of 7.9% unemployment, less than 25% are considered as youth ages 16 to 24. The inclusion of this younger demographic into the total ratio of unemployed further complicates having a true understanding of the unemployed adult learner through

quantifiable measures. The Department of Labor (DOL) (2009) defines the unemployed as those who do not have a job, have actively searched for employment in the past 4 weeks, and are currently available for work. The 2009 report further breaks down “actively seeking work” as the following: 1) contacting an employer directly or having a job interview, 2) contacting a public or private employment agency, 3) contacting friends and relatives, and 4) contacting a school or university employment center. In the DOL determination of who is considered as unemployed, those not included are individuals who are considered as “marginally attached to the workforce” (DOL, 2009). In this marginal population of unemployed adults are individuals who are not actively looking for work at the present time, but indicate that they want employment. A further subset of this marginal population are those considered as “discouraged workers” who are not seeking employment as they believe no jobs are available, are unable to locate employment, lack the necessary experience for available jobs, and face stigma and discrimination from employers (DOL, 2009). The current number of unemployed has decreased compared to when unemployment rates approached double digits in 2010. However, despite the gains made in the recovery of the economy, those unemployed adults without a high school diploma, those without a college degree, and those in low wage or minimum wage employment continue to face great losses compared against those with a college degree (Loprest & Nichols, 2011).

To better understand unemployed adults, Bullock-Yowell et al. (2012) did a comparison between college students and unemployed adults comparing their career thinking, negative career thoughts, and career decision-making self-efficacy. Early on in their study they make it a point to say “little empirical knowledge about unemployed

adults exists during a time when this group needs substantial career assistance” (p. 18). The researchers make the point of stating that a great deal more work is required in order to understand unemployed adults and their use of college students as a comparison sets the stage for this to happen. The data for this study consisted of collecting information from 200 college students from a mid-sized state university, 169 unemployed adult participants from a local government funded job-training center, and the demographic information of 2,444 previous clients through job-training centers archival data. Both the college students and job-training center participants were presented with the Career Thoughts Inventory, a 48 item self-report instrument measuring negative career thoughts using a Likert scale, and the Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale-Short Form, which consisted of 25 items assessing individual efficacy in completing career tasks. In addition, both sets of participants were given a 228-item Self-Directed Search inventory measuring their personality types based on Holland’s RIASEC theory of careers. The archival demographic data was collected for the purposes of gaining some historical understanding of the population of adults who used the job-training center.

Results of the study demonstrated that for both the college students and the unemployed adults, career decision-making self-efficacy decreased as negative career thinking increased. In addition, researchers applied the use of a chi-square test to determine the primary areas of career interest between the two groups. The results demonstrated that with great significance the unemployed adults expressed greater career interest in the Realistic category of the Holland’s RIASEC theory of careers at 21.4% compared to the 2.0% of college students. There were not significant differences between the groups in other categories indicating that students and the unemployed have similar

interest in the Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional Categories (Bullock-Yowell, et al., 2012).

Bullock-Yowell, et al. (2012) study is useful for establishing a baseline for understanding the needs of unemployed adult learners and demonstrating that more empirical research is needed for this population. But this study is limited in further assisting the population and practitioners who work with these adults because it compares quantitatively two populations of learners with different needs in terms of education and employment. In their attempt to understand unemployed adult learners the researchers did not state why the use of quantitative measures served their need better than qualitative means. In attempting to establish empirical research on this under researched population, they might have learned more by using qualitative methods. The use of qualitative methods is useful when researchers want to identify and study how individuals make meaning out of the variables affecting their life versus starting with predetermined assumptions of what should be measured (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the study assumed that the unemployed adults had negative career thoughts or low self-efficacy, when really what is at issue is other barriers not examined by their instruments.

Of the studies (Mathers & Schofield 1998; Dooley 2003; Kessler, Turner, & House, 1988) done on unemployed adult learners all focus on either the physical health or the psychological aspects of the unemployed. For researchers to base an understanding of unemployed adults on only psychological or physical aspects, it locates the “problem” or lack of motivation for participation with the actual learner. Ahl (2006) makes an argument that traditional ways of understanding an adult’s motivation for learning are lacking and the problem really lies within those attempting to recruit learners into

participation. In Ahl's study of motivational theories he points out the use of psychological models for understanding motivation avoid any discussion of power and politics, but instead paints a picture of the adult as unwilling or unable with unlimited options and no barriers. Ahl goes on further to point out that the discourse of lifelong educational programs is structured so that it attempts to integrate those who do not want to participate in mainstream learning activities while also labeling them as other. So, how then do we as a field help unemployed adults as learners to situate themselves in a place where they can not only become more self-sufficient, but determine for themselves what forms of educational activity they wish to participate in as a means of finding gainful employment—if they elect to participate at all?

**Understanding Unemployed Adult Participation.** Few empirical studies have had as their focus the unemployed adult (Bullock-Yowell, et al., 2012). In particular, little is said within the field of adult education empirically about the unemployed adult as a learner and their choices to participate or not participate in learning activities. What the field has discussed are the learning opportunities for the employed adult learner and the unmet needs of the unemployed adult learner seeking to become self-sufficient (Alfred, 2010). A literature search in the EBSCO Host for the following subject topics of unemployment and adults turned up 1,567 articles and only 23 related to adults here in the United States. Of the 23 found 17 were not scholarly peer reviewed articles. Of the six remaining articles, four were concerning young adults under the age of 24. None addressed the needs of three-fourths of the unemployed adult population over the age of 24. So is the unemployed adult learner not a concern within the field of adult education? Based upon a 2012 report from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS), which operates

and distributes funding for the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), just over eight million, unemployed adults took part in job-training services sponsored by the federal government (Department of Labor, 2012). Evidently, adults are participating in some form of learning activity, namely job-training programs, but the field has not assessed their particular needs empirically.

Understanding the reasons unemployed adults participate is key toward developing more inclusive and effective job-training programming, understanding who will participate and why thereby setting the stage for creating and developing more appropriate program models. Knowledge of who your participants are and why they are there will promote greater outcomes (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007). Many research discussions (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Cross, 1992; Blair & McPake, 1995) on participation for the field of adult learning and education cite Johnstone and Rivera (1965) as an indicator for our understanding of adult participation. According to Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007) this study was unique in that the researchers defined what was considered to be adult education, who adult learners were, and included as part of the research self-directed learning, formal learning, and community based learning. Both Cross (1992) and Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner (2007) point out, in their respective works, that years after the comprehensive study of Johnstone and Rivera the characteristics and demographics of the adult learner participation appear to remain stable, but who participates in a learning activity seems dependent on issues of class, race, gender, and age. Both arguments further point out that within certain areas of education minority groups are greatly underrepresented.

More contemporary research (Blair & McPake, 1995; Porras-Hernández & Salinas-Amescua, 2012) on adult participation furthers Johnstone and Rivera's work by problematizing some of the current conceptualization of participation (Blair & McPake, 1995), in addition to looking at reasons why adult learners may elect to not participate in learning activities (Porras-Hernández & Salinas-Amescua, 2012).

Researchers Blair and McPake (1995) depart from the traditional research means of understanding adult participation through quantitative methods, and they instead employ the use of in-depth interviews through qualitative methods for understanding the reason why Scottish adults were returning to participate in learning activities. The larger argument behind the study is that quantitative ways of understanding adult participation has not helped the field understand the "complex and diverse...reasons adults give for returning to education"(p.1). Instead what we know from prior studies (Johnstone and Rivera, 1965) on participation is who participates based solely on demographic characteristics. Alternatively, Blair and McPake (1995) hoped to develop a new conceptualization for understanding participation through an in-depth analysis of the learner's personal experiences with learning. Questions asked as a part of the interview focused on understanding the reasons why adults decided to return to school, the factors that influenced their choice in a particular provider for their schooling, the support they may have received in deciding to return, and their plans for the future.

The study consisted of 50 adults of various ages, experiences, and backgrounds, participating in a variety of learning activities. The criteria used to select the sample of participants were learners age 25 and up earning their first degree through higher education, learners participating in further education certified by the Scottish Education



Council ages 21 and up, participants participating in community education courses, and adults attending daytime courses. Before embarking on the creation of a new way of thinking about participation the researchers laid out a summary of past ways of conceptualizing participation and where these concepts fall short.

They first draw attention to the motivational theories of participation (Houle, 1961, & Morstain & Smart, 1974). These typologies as referenced by Blair and McPake (1995) seek to explain an adult's reason for returning to education by slotting them into different categories such as: goal-oriented learners, activity oriented learners, and learning oriented learners. The study acknowledges historical ways for understanding psychological characteristics of learner motivation, but insists that learners, based upon individual needs and circumstances, may not fit into these fixed categories.

Going further Blair and McPake (1995) examine participation studies (Cross, 1992; Aslanian & Bricknell, 1980) which have as their focus of understanding participation life transitions and believe that a learners reason for participation are parallel to their life circumstances. From these conceptualizations of participation, we gain a better understanding of learner involvement in educational activities based on their life context at that time. As an example, they point to a learner who has lost his job or looking for a career change may further seek opportunities for learning to secure employment or advancement. The concern with this understanding of participation is that it makes the assumption that life transitions and the decision to participate are linear and transitions must always precede learning (Blair & McPake, 1995). In the analysis of their data, they found this was not always the case for participants. Someone in transition may decide not to seek out further education, but instead participate in other activities (Blair &

McPake, 1995). What Blair and McPake research does not tell us specifically is what are the activities in which their sample experienced transitions causing them to “not participate” in further education. They point to examples of how a person in life transition may decide to “join a church, move house, or take up jogging instead of engaging in formal learning. It might be worth further consideration to know what the activities were in order to determine if what they did participate in might be labeled as another form of learning i.e. non-formal or informal. Indeed transitions may not always lead in a linear fashion to a formal learning activity, but transitions have the potential to bring individuals into action and personal reflection. Merriam (2005) points out that different types of transitions in an individual’s life may have the potential to bring about learning and development. An individual taking up running may find out they enjoy running and learn “informally” that it makes them feel good.

In a final look at traditional approaches to participation, Blair and McPake (1995) examine the contextual conceptualizations of participation (Carp et al., 1974; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982, Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Cross, 1992; and McGivney, 1990). Together these studies take into consideration the barriers that confront adult learner participation such as cultural barriers, situational barriers, dispositional barriers, institutional barriers, and social disapproval (Blair & McPake, 1995). Each of these above-mentioned barriers operates in different ways to impact an individual’s motivation to participate in a learning activity. Barriers may vary from lack of time and money (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1988), to an individual’s negative conception of their self as learners (Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988), to barriers such as access to educational institutions (Cross, 1992; McGivney, 1990), or sociocultural

barriers (Jarvis, 1985; O'Shea & Corrigan, 1979) as an example of the disapproval a learner might receive from their community for seeking out learning.

In their new conceptualization of participation, Blair and McPake (1995) argue that to think about adult learning programs and motivating participation we must conceive programs that take into consideration each of the above ways of thinking about participation. Their data points out that increased participation may be dependent upon positive experiences with education, an increase in the number of venues offering education, and less of a focus on learning for the sake of employment and entry into the labor market. In fact, they found that learning for the sake of leisure could lead to a desire to learn.

Recent research (Porrás-Hernández & Salinas-Amescua, 2012) into adult participation looks at reasons for non-participation of adult learners. In a mixed method study of 279 Mexican women researchers looked at the self-perceptions and beliefs of participants who chose not to participate in adult education courses even when barriers such as location and cost were eliminated. The hypothesis of the research leading to this study was that they would find women with low self-concepts and images thus explaining their lack of participation in adult learning courses. Instead, they found the opposite, women with high levels of self-efficacy and positive self-images, which did not match their assumptions for why learners do not participate.

Quantitatively the study was implemented with yes/no questions and a Likert-type scale. Due to the low literacy level of the women, instruments were applied orally by a group of female researchers. The researchers looked for the variables of self-concept, perceived self-efficacy for academic learning, perceived self-efficacy for problem

solving, beliefs about their level of intelligence, and reasons for school success or failure. For the qualitative phase of the study, 12 women were selected and interviewed based upon their responses to the earlier phase of the study. Women were selected based upon high, medium, and low scores in the self-concept scale in order to gain an in-depth understanding of women with different levels of self-concept. It was the hope of the researchers that this would explain their disposition to participating in education.

The results from this study demonstrated that the women usually have high and positive images of themselves. Further, that participation in education is not dependent on just individual factors, but a connection and tie to the larger community of the learner. The researchers were not able to confirm the original hypothesis of the study that non-participation of learners should be understood through psychological factors. Porras-Hernández & Salinas-Amescua (2012) argue that Blair and McPake's (1995) new conceptualization of understanding adult participation is correct and traditional models of understanding participation are insubstantial. Porras-Hernández & Salinas-Amescua further point out additional works (Boeren, 2009) that concur with their findings that the context of the learner rather than the individual choice is of greater importance for understanding participation. Nesbit and Wilson (2010) argue that in spatial terms individual identity and context cannot be separated, but are interrelated. The idea of context and place within the field of adult education are often viewed as "functional because they recognize place as a container, not as an enabler or producer of difference and power" (Nesbit & Wilson, 2010). In the case of Porras-Hernández & Salinas-Amescua (2012), the women were greatly influenced by their communities, but in ways counter to those conceived by the researchers or the planners of the programs.

Boeren (2009) argues the need for a sociocultural understanding of participation versus an individual process because traditional and individual models of looking at participation support a rational choice model that places capital above all else. In other words, traditional conceptions of participation see individuals as seeking out learning activities for the purposes of securing economic capital over cultural capital (Ahl, 2006). In the case of the Mexican women in Porras-Hernández & Salinas-Amescua's (2012) study, the women demonstrated that the accessible adult education courses were not in line with their indigenous views and that their personal self-concepts were not tied to participating or not participating, but instead were aligned with their own communities. The decision about what gets taught as a learning activity greatly impacts who will or will not participate. Access, such as the access that the Mexican women had to educational activities, does not always mean individuals will participate. When adult educators facilitate curriculums that are more in line with the dominant culture of the planners and not with those participating, participation levels may be low.

The dominating conversation, which appears to be happening in the literature, is a conversation that focuses individual's motivation for participation in learning activities on market driven reasons. Based on this conversation a number of assumptions present themselves; first, the research assumes that unemployed adults participate for market driven reasons. Second, the assumption can be proposed that due to their state of unemployment the unemployed adult want to get back to work, but do they, and if they do, do they want to gain the types of employment that result from job-training programs? However, there is not enough empirical research to link the market driven model to the participation and motivation of unemployed adults.

## **Change and Development**

**Exploring Adult Development.** Understanding adult development impacts how as educators we develop and facilitate programs for adult learners (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Hansman and Mott (2010) point out that culturally our understanding of adulthood has shifted from an assumed and static stage to a series of stages that unfold over the lifetime of a learner. To make sense of these stages is to also recognize the complexity of deciding what happens at each stage (Clark & Caffarella, 1999), along with the impact that both heredity and environment have on the stages. Clark and Caffarella place the developmental theories into four “orienting assumptions”. The first is the biological assumptions, which look at our physiological bodies and aging over time, along with the changes in learning that correspond. Second are the psychological assumptions that examine how the environment influences our internal sense of self and inner being. Next is the socio-cultural assumption, which argues that the cultural and social aspects of our lives impact our learning. And finally, the integrative approaches, which states that humans are too multifaceted to fit easily into one category and that each of the above approaches is necessary for a full portrayal of the adult learner. Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner (2007) suggest that as educators we move beyond traditional psychological paradigms of understanding adult development and seek out other perspectives.

Rossiter (1999) challenged adult educators to also think outside of the box when it comes to understanding adult learning and development. She maintains that adult educators have relied heavily on the “stage and phase models” to understanding adult development most of which are borrowed from the psychological models of development (Piaget, 1972; & Kohlberg, 1983). Fundamental to the traditional approaches are ways of

knowing and understanding that are based in rational and objective ways of knowing. As an additional way of understanding adult development and the role of adult educators within the lives of learners Rossiter looked at a narrative approach, which is a combination of literary, cognitive, theology, and philosophical disciplines. She explains that the use of a narrative approach to understanding development will allow for the following: 1) a knowing that is based in constructivist, interpretivist epistemology, 2) an understanding that narrative is central to human meaning making allowing identity to be expressed through story, 3) a realization that time and narrative are related, 4) narrative as life story is historical, and 5) there are relationships between individual and cultural narratives. The use of narratives to understanding adult development are not meant to replace the stage theories, but serve as a way to understanding development contextually and situated within the life of the learner (Rossiter, 1999). In situating development in the lives of the learner we gain insight, which otherwise might be left out through traditional frameworks by having the learner interpret their experiences.

Further problematizing our traditional understanding of adult development also questions the traditional frameworks of adult development by examining adult participation in learning activities using a dialectical framework (Gvaramadze, 2007). Gvaramadze (2007) also argues for looking at an adult's motives in relation to their social practices rather than just the traditional frameworks of biological, individual, and personal explanations for motivation. He points out that "society as a system is not simply a combination of external conditions where individuals implements his activity, but it is a society where individuals finds motives for his activity and develop skills and capabilities" (p. 125). A learner's development and change over a life course

conceptualized in this manner is viewed as progressive and not linear, but built upon previously learned abilities that are understood by examining the social context in which they take place (Gvaramadze, 2007).

In a more recent attempt to move our understanding of adult learning and development along Sandlin, Wright, and Clark (2013) review literature such as Luke, (1996) and Giroux (2001) that view adult development from the framework of public pedagogies opposed to the master narratives of modernity. These master narratives hold that 1) the learner is rational and autonomous, 2) supports a foundationalist epistemology, 3) understands reason as universal, and 4) believes social and moral progress is made through rational application of systematic methods (Sandlin et al., 2013). Sandlin et al., (2013) write that public pedagogies are those processes and sites of education that fall outside of formal education i.e. popular culture, informal institutions, public spaces, dominant discourses, and social activism. It is their contention that many sites of adult education happen within popular culture (TV, movies, and internet) as well as informal cultural institutions (zoos and museums), and that within these “spaces of learning” that adult learner identities are developed and shaped. It is through these public pedagogies that individuals learn about the histories of race, class, gender, and sexuality while further learning how to either accept or resist the dominant discourse on these aspects of their lives through critical awareness, thus producing a counter narrative of their own (Sandlin, et al., 2013). The authors further discuss how adult educators play a role in fostering critical adult learning and development in the classroom by allowing for transformational learning experiences by helping learners to construct counter narratives or further promoting modernist views. Sandlin et al., (2013) conclude their review by relating their



hope to create new theories in the field of adult learning that “foster critical learning through opening up spaces of incomplete knowing’s and ideas” (p. 18).

In taking up the challenge of Rossiter (1999), to rethink our traditional approaches to adult development, we look to other researchers (Gvaramadze, 2007, & Sandlin et al., 2013) that have explored other avenues to understanding the changes in adult development. By taking on this challenge we may gain a better assessment on the development of adult identities and that they are simply situated psychological explanations, as we have historically seen, but rest in multiple factors such as social customs of literacy practices of a GED class (Compton-Lily, 2009). The field of adult education plays a formative role in further exploring and understanding identity and how adult learners shape and re-shape their identities as learners (Crowthers, Maclachlan, Tett, 2010). Crowthers et. al (2010) used a qualitative case study design to explore eight Scottish literacy organizations. The research looked at the relationship between adult learner persistence in educational programs and the change in their identities related to learning and the official practices of remedial education programs. Using purposeful sampling, the study gathered data through observations, interviews with four course instructors and forty-seven adult learners. Two class sessions were observed for two hours while the course instructors were interviewed in regards to their teaching strategies immediately following the class sessions. Finally, the adult learners were interviewed at the beginning and at the end of their courses. The use of categorical aggregation was employed as the method for sorting and analyzing the data.

**Critical Learning Practices Shaping Identity.** Compton-Lily (2009) studied the literacy levels and identities of 10 adult learners attending a GED program and those of

their family. The purpose of the study was to understand how adult learners positioned themselves and their identities as readers relative to the often-used cultural models of literacy. In her exploration she found a tensions between what she considered the “unofficial” model of literacy, where adults have positive experiences with reading and writing, as opposed to the “official” models that position adult learners as lacking in reading and writing skills because they are unable to perform in universally accepted ways.

Compton-Lily’s (2009) report is a part of a larger qualitative study that examined adult learners in a GED classroom situated in a low-income urban community. The participants ranged in age from 20s to 50s. A majority of students were African-American and some Puerto Rican. Of the 10 participants, one had a GED; the others had dropped out of school. Data was collected by conducting four interviews with students over one year, conversations with an employee of the education center who functioned as an informant, interviews with the teachers of the families’ children, as well as video of the adults and children participating in literacy practices.

The findings of this study support what other researchers (Sandlin, et al., 2013) have stated that identities are socially constructed as well as bounded by the context for which the individual is based (Compton-Lily, 2009). The participants of this study, low-wage earning urban learners without a GED, are often defined in relation to official discourse and interpretation of literacy that are developed by the larger culture. These official discourses often paint a picture of the learner as illiterate. Further, these interpretations are often in conflict with how learners identify their own levels of literacy and connections to reading and writing. Such interpretations will have an impact on how

a learner views him or herself and their ability to seek out further learning and or how a learner transitions into new roles and occupations and the place and position they will occupy in these new roles (Compton-Lily, 2009).

What the study does not discuss, that may be argued as crucial in understanding learning and development for adult learners, is the learners ability to acquire the skills and capability to critically learn and think about their positions as learners. This includes questioning their positioning within the larger dominant and hegemonic culture of the GED course, while further developing a level of agency that moves beyond the scope of the program. Compton-Lily (2009) discusses in her data results that the learners have a desire to speak in language that is more technical and use larger words. One participant makes the point to say that people do not understand her and she wants to learn words that are more professional. At the same time, a student also reported liking the way she currently speaks, but also admiring the way professionals speak. Compton-Lily (2009) states “[the participant] suspected that using big words would reposition her as a professional” (p. 38). In this instance, the student becomes aware of their position against the larger cultural context of the GED class and a need to negotiate between the two conflicting identities.

With this in mind, perhaps we need to consider sites such as the GED course to be considered spaces of public pedagogy (Sandlin et al., 2013) where students are able to gain a critical awareness of their identity in comparison to the dominate ideology which constructs an identity of them as lacking. Even further, from within these spaces learners are able to construct themselves in ways that are not imagined by the space. Dowdy (2002), in a theoretical piece on language and culture in the classroom, discusses the

importance of learners having the ability to negotiate between the language of the dominant cultural group and their own spoken language. She points out the tendency of marginalized groups to wear “mask” (p.9), as a method of survival and success. Do the learners in job-training programs operate in similar ways and what might we learn from those learners who have found the ability to transcend beyond the traditional outcomes of the job-training program? Are there aspects to GED programs or possibly job-training program, which create the potential for learners to review, renegotiate, and re-enact their identities as learners?

Sandlin and Cervero (2003) conducted a study with a similar group of learners. The focus of their study was to examine the ideological assumptions that are made about work and learning within an adult literacy course for adult women on public assistance. Using a framework based in the critical sociology of education Sandlin and Cervero (2003), through the use of a qualitative case study design, examined the ability of these programs to lead to employment for learners.

Through the use of classroom observations, interviews, reviews of curriculums and official documents, and informal conversations the researchers were able to collect data, which informed the research. The collected data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis and Atlas/ti, which allowed them to search and compile emerging themes from their data. From the data four ideological assumptions emerged, which spoke to the participants thoughts about the intersections between work and education, which are the following: 1) negotiating assumptions about students and the purpose of education; 2) negotiating assumptions about success in the classroom; 3) negotiating

issues of gender in the curriculum-in-use; and 4) negotiating issues of race in the curriculum-in-use.

The research raised a concern over how teachers and learners negotiated the tension between the curriculum-in-use and the structure of programs in creating unequal power and roles between the institution and the learner. In other words, programs such as adult literacy programs support education and learning for unemployed adults while both advertising the ability of participants to gain employment from such programs, and failing to address larger structural systems outside of the control of the learner that create unemployment, and placing the failure to find employment on the individual.

Sandlin and Cervero (2003) point out in their findings that the students and teachers should not be seen as passive internalizers of the hegemonic messages, but instead are able to resist, shape, and accommodate the larger discourses of society. If this is the case, does it not also shape and impact their individual identities both within the classroom and outside of the classroom. Where this study has impacted the field of adult education is the importance and impact of hidden curriculums on unemployed adult learners. What it does not discuss further is how learners transcend or successfully maneuver and shape their pathways through such systems. It may be useful to understand how learners successfully navigate their way through these systems in order to aid the field of adult education to improve the outcomes of adult literacy programs and job-training programs.

### **Workforce Development**

**Unemployed to Self-Sufficient.** Kaye and Nightingale (2000) commented on how a healthy economy can absorb individuals coming off of public assistance into the

American workforce. Today in 2013 as the U.S. economy attempts to recover from the recent recession low-wage workers with a high school diploma or less struggle to find employment even within job industries where they were once successful in finding placement. Loprest and Nicholes (2011) in a report for the Urban Institute discuss the dire state of unemployment for these workers who before the recession were able to find low-wage employment, but currently do not fare as well when compared with those who have at least a Bachelors degree.

The current efforts and methods of training the unemployed and displaced workforce fall primarily under the guidance of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). The DOL through the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) is responsible for the programs and initiatives that serve unemployed adults namely through the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Wagner-Peyser Funded Employment Services, and the WIA Dislocated Worker Program. The overall goal of each of these programs is to provide unemployed adults with job preparation and training as well as providing a pipeline of able workers to industries and employers looking to hire (Decker & Berk, 2011).

O'Leary, Straits, and Wadner (2004) from the Urban Institute lay out in *U.S. Job Training: Types, Participants, and History* that practitioners, policy makers, researchers, and educators should understand there are five types of job-trainings most often supported by the U.S. government. These types of job-trainings are the following: 1) occupational skill training customized to suit the needs of an employer; 2) remedial training, which attempts to remedy basic skills gaps in reading and mathematics; 3) classroom soft skills training, which covers workplace job behaviors and job search skills, 4) postemployment training, which is a combination of classroom and practical

skills with an focus on advancement, and 5) youth training programs that cover basic work skills and school to work transitions.

**Educating the Unemployed.** Adults participating in many of these non-formal learning programs tend to be disengaged from traditional formal learning curriculums, and have for the most part received inadequate preparation for participating in an economy that demands higher level of education and skills than was required of the generations before them (Hansman, 2010). According to Hansman (2010), many of these adults are limited due to welfare to work policies, and the focus that many training programs have on placement into low-wage work rather than assisting with educational opportunities. At the end of September 2012, the ETA had served over 32 million individuals and spent close to 9.5 billion dollars with its employment and training services (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). Alfred, Butterwick, Hansman and Sandlin (2007) point out that many welfare to work and government sponsored job-training programs operate under a neoliberal framework. This framework places individual responsibility on the participant, while at the same time hindering their opportunities to pursue and further their education in institutions of higher learning.

Some of the research (Sandlin & Cervero, 2003; Alfred & Martin, 2007; & King & Heinrich, 2011) on adults in workforce training programs has examined the effectiveness of the training programs from a structural and ideological perspective, but they do not really examine these sites for their potential in possibly influencing an unemployed adult's development and growth as a learner. In Sandlin and Cervero, (2003) discussion of welfare to work job-training programs they develop a case for demonstrating how historically our culture has constructed a discourse of personal

accountability, on the part of the participant, for job-training programs, but fails to examine the larger structural system when they fail to find employment. Alfred and Martin (2007) in their study of job-training programs establish the multiple barriers that even with training continue to affect unemployed adult's progression toward self-sufficiency, but also point out that through collaborations with educational institutions, social service agencies, and community based organizations learners can overcome some of their barriers. In other words, in addition to training, networks beyond placement into employment are needed to be successful.

Sandlin and Cervero (2003) in their research used a qualitative case study design to perform 20 observations in an adult literacy program and 25 observations at a job-training site preparing women with life skill and work simulations. In addition to the observations, data were collected through interviews, informal conversations and a review of program curriculum. Both programs received funding through the DOL. What they found through the interviews was that both participants and instructors discussed individualistic and structural explanations as influencing the success of participants in completing programs and finding work. "The curriculum-in-use supported dominant discourses upholding myths of educational amelioration, meritocracy and racist and sexist stereotypes of welfare recipients" (pp. 263). Both participants and instructors were aware of these factors, but did not feel comfortable challenging them. Participants and instructors discussed structural barriers that were beyond the control of learners such as, the availability of jobs, access to educational capital, and access to economic capital. During the observations, Sandlin and Cervero (2005) noticed that students and instructors often had to negotiate between the structural and individualistic explanations, but the



individualistic explanations of the curriculum were more frequently discussed. Sandlin and Cervero (2005) argues that our cultural views of social mobility, which suggests that work requires only hard work and perseverance on the part of the unemployed individual is one that continues to be upheld and supported in job-training programs.

In an examination of a Wisconsin welfare to work training program Alfred and Martin (2007) looked to identify the barriers of former program participants and what impedes them from becoming economically self-sufficient. Through the use of a Likert type scale-survey and telephone-surveys the researchers were able to collect data from participating agencies representatives on what services were and were not useful in assisting low-income participants toward becoming self-sufficient. In the analysis of the data researchers concluded that the barriers considered as having the greatest impact on the development of self-sufficiency were the following: 1) situational barriers, 2) educational and learning experience barriers, 3) personal issues, and 4) disabilities. What the above studies raise as a concern, but do not fully explore, is the separation that appears to exist within our culture between work and education. In a discussion on the sociocultural perspectives of learning through work, Livingstone (2001) states “a critique of dominant social forms in and of themselves shed little light on the actual worker and learning practices of most people” (pp. 20-21)

### **Places and Spaces for Learning**

**Where Learning Happens.** When it comes to the politics and practices of continuing education, the field of adult education has a responsibility to its learners to discuss the impact that such issues as class and place have on learners. In a discussion of class and place within adult and continuing education Nesbit and Wilson (2010) point out

that , “as class and place play a significant role in the mediation, production and reproduction of power relations, they heavily influence the knowledge, skills, attitudes and learning of people involved in adult education” (p. 389). In their discussion of class, place, and space they point out the narrow understanding western culture has of place and space, which tends to lean toward an understanding of space and place as containers for the unfolding of social actions and behaviors of those within it, but as a whole has little impact on our actions. In their proposal of the field’s further examination of the impact of place and space, they point to research (Unwin, 2000; Gruenewald, 2003; Kipfer, Goonewardena, Schmid, and Milgrom, 2008) that use as a theoretical framework *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre’s work, which operates out of a Marxist tradition, examines how space and time is structured to benefit some in society while marginalizing others (Nesbit & Wilson, 2010). According to Nesbit and Wilson, (2010) analyzing adult education programs from a spatial perspective may help in illustrating how some educational policies and activities benefit some in society while marginalizing and disadvantaging others.

With Nesbit and Wilson’s (2010) charge to better understand adult education practices through a lens of class, place, and space, it is important to further locate how adult education as a field has attempted to move toward an understanding of educational spaces and learning environments. Hiemstra (1991) took to defining the learning environment and the multiple facets that make up the space of learning environments within the field of adult education. In *Creating Environments for Effective Adult Learning*, Hiemstra (1991) defines learning environments as “all the physical surroundings, psychological or emotional conditions and social or cultural influences

affecting the growth and development of an adult engaged in an educational enterprise” (p. 8). With this definition, we gain some perspective of learning environments as they may impact the development of learners within the space. In the same journal, Vosko (1991) goes deeper with Hiemstra’s (1991) definition by discussing the physical elements of a space and their impact on a learner’s ability to learn. In his proposal he discusses that various physical aspects of a learning environment, such as furniture arrangement and personal space, can either aid in learning or operate as barriers within an instructional setting. In the same journal, Mahoney (1991) takes to expanding Hiemstra’s (1991) definition of learning environments by looking at the context from the perspective of the learner and the types of barriers (Cross, 1992) that learners bring with them into the learning environment, which may impact their level of motivation and participation.

For the field of adult education definitions like those above have dominated and directed the conversation of space and centered mostly on a discussion of educational spaces as learning environments or context within which the learning happens and a focus on the physical elements of the environment. Other discussion around educational environments (Merriam et al., 2007; Caffarella & Merriam, 2000) have taken to trying to understand the different types of learning environments and the relationship between the experiences adults bring with them and the environment itself. As an example, Merriam et al. (2007) discuss the distinct types of learning environments that adult learning takes place in, such as formal, informal, online, and community based settings. In addition to pointing out the different contexts that learning for adults may happen in, they also point out the varying experiences adults will bring into each of these learning environments, such as culture and prior personal experiences, requiring adult educators to use different

approaches in the planning of instruction. Caffarella and Merriam (2000) further examine learning environments by looking at how the field of adult education has traditionally viewed learning and its link to the context of the environment. The traditional view of learning for the field is based in psychological models that base individual learning styles and learning as something that happens internally within individuals and lacks any discussion of the impact the external environment might have on learning (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000).

An additional perspective on learning examines the context. Two often-used models that look at the link between the learning process and context are the interactive and structural models. Caffarella and Merriam suggest that the interactive aspect of learning environments takes place when an individual has some level of interaction with their surrounding (Bateson, 1994; Jarvis, 1985). Whereas the structural approach takes into consideration such factors as race, gender, power, and class as having some influence on the environment and thus learning. In their proposal, they suggest a combination of both the interactive and structural approaches should be considered as a way of linking the learner to the context of the learning environment and understanding learning. Caffarella and Merriam (2000) suggest “[the] need to look at each learning situation from two major lenses or frames: an awareness of individual learners and how they learn, and an understanding of how the context shapes learners, instructors, and the learning transaction itself” (p. 62). Using their suggested lens and framework might help the field better position adult education’s understanding of learning environments and its impact on the development of adult learners.

In a further attempt to advance our understanding of learning environments and its impact on development, Grabinski (2005) uses the theoretical frame of holding environments (Kegan, 1994; Winnicott, 1990). Grabinski (2005) gives consideration to Keagan's (1982) theory of adult development from which Keagan constructs the concept of "holding environments" (p. 81). According to Grabinski (2005) "holding environments are characterized as the social, physical, psychological, context(s) in which and through which an individual develops and comes to know and define his very self" (p. 52). In the use of holding environments to explain and understand adult development Grabinski (2005) details how the holding environment has three functions: 1) the environment must "hold well" by meeting the needs of the learner while validating and supporting their experiences, 2) the environment must "let go" and challenge the learner to move beyond their current state of existence, and 3) the environment must "stick around" and allow for continuing support to the learner (p. 82). In her proposal of holding environments Grabinski (2005) goes on to suggest that adult development and the impact of learning environments need to be further considered when planning programs for learners across the lifespan because the development of learners into adults does not end with young adults. Youth transitioning into adulthood and adults at various stages of development and transition will encounter many learning experiences in a multitude of planned and unplanned context, some of which may be holding environments.

**Unexplored learning space.** The above explorations into learning environments are consistent with Nesbit and Wilson's (2010) position that our current understanding of space in the field of adult education and western culture remains limited and confined. Further, it does not fully address how some spaces are culturally structured to marginalize

populations of learners (Nesbit and Wilson, 2010). In a conference proceeding for 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of the Adult Education Research Conference, Edwards et. al (2002) examine the need for the field of adult education to undertake a closer examination of the spatial metaphors and their meanings to our field. In their proceeding they explore the following two interest: 1) the sociology of space by examining the spatial orderings in specific pedagogic practices and forms of knowledge, learning and identity, what they include and exclude and 2) the spatial and spatializing metaphors in the discourse of adult education. Further, in their examination they point to examples where as educators we have ignored the complex nature of educational spaces and how they are socially differentiated. They make a point to explain how in order to understand a learner's experiences we need to understand the power relations that both exist within and impact the nature of the space. Edwards et al. (2002) state "space plays a significant role in producing power relations in adult education. Where we locate our educational programs influences not only their purposes and process, but also helps to produce the power participants exercise in society" (p.3). Edwards et al. (2002) is integral for further understanding and exploring what Nesbit and Wilson's (2010) argue in terms of our current understanding of what space means to the field of adult education. Currently, the field has explored the context of the learning environment itself from psychological, sociocultural, and developmental perspectives (Caffarella & Merriam, 2000; Grabinski, 2005). But what do we know about spaces of learning that are tied to particular policies, have been developed and produced for specific populations, and produced under assumed cultural norms of what education and training should look like for the unemployed adult. Especially when these spaces use curriculums that further marginalize learners (Sandlin

& Cervero, 2004) and contains multiple levels and layers of participation, motivation, individuals in transition, and procedures for entering and exiting the space? Aside from the participant, how are these spaces any different from other learning environments such as universities or colleges in their purpose and mission to aid the adult into jobs and careers opportunities? What do we know about the learners who find success within these spaces despite the overarching hegemony of the space?

Gulson (2005) explores educational spaces by examining the relationship that exists between spaces and the policies that construct those spaces. In a study using the approaches of ethnography and critical policy-analysis, Gulson (2005) examined the policies of the Department of Education and Skills, which incorporated Tower Hamlets Local Education Authority in the United Kingdom, situated in an economically deprived and physically isolated area of the city. The policies were a part of the Excellence in Cities partnership in an inner London Borough, meant to address the disadvantages experienced by those living in the borough.

According to Gulson (2005) “space” needs further theorizing as an analytical tool” (p. 142). In developing a theoretical framework for his research, Gulson (2005) uses Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (1993) to theorize about the social relations developed as a result of spaces produced under government policies. In this research, Gulson looks at the impact that U.K. government structured educational programs have on the aspirations of learners in a marginalized area of the country. He argues that the discourse of these spaces often argue that students can achieve better lifestyles, high paying jobs, and high academic results by participating in programs. But the effects of these program and their reported achievements are presented without considerations to the access

individuals will have to well-paying jobs. Gulson argues that, due to the structural set up, learners coming out of these programs may contribute to the current economy, but as supportive workers who will provide cleaning, administrative, and retail support, which is often unstable and underpaid. He concludes with the arguments that due to the structural set up of the program learners have to go through an “educational renovation of identity.” In other words, for learners to have the success proposed by the program, they have to recognize their supposed individual deficiencies and strive toward a goal that may not be obtainable. Gulson suggest that in this manner the government does not have to deal with the structural inequalities of the economic system, but instead makes the learner culpable for her or his success or failure. If what Gulson (2005) proposes is the case, might his proposal of “education renovation of identity” reveal something about the agency and development of the learner that has yet to be examined? As well, might we as adult educators learn something about these “in-between” learning spaces that learners such as the ones in Gulson studies are placed into because of their supposed lack of skills? Might there be something to learn from those who have entered into these programs, complied with the program rules and procedures, only to exit the program, but with an identity of a learner that they did not previously have?

**Hybrid learning spaces.** Educational research (Barton, Tan, & Rivet, 2008; Jegede & Aikenhead, 1999; Seiler et al, 2003), particularly in the field of science education has examined the idea of border crossing between culture and how students apply knowledge and resources across cultural boundaries. Barton, Tan, & Rivet (2008) in a study on urban middle school girls take up the exploration of hybridity theory. Hybrid spaces are learning environments that merge the learning environments of the



school space and the home space therefore creating a third or “hybrid space” taking up a process of enculturation rather than assimilation for those within the space (Barton, Tan, & Rivet, 2008). Further it is thought that the creation of these spaces bring together not only different cultures, but bring together different knowledge, discourse, and relationships as a means of “collapsing oppositional binaries” (p. 73). In education research (Moje et al., 2004; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tajeda, 1999) examining science education, the idea of third spaces was examined in the following ways 1) third space is a link between academic learning and marginalized learning, 2) as a navigational space of crossing boundaries and succeeding in different discourse communities, and 3) an epistemological space of change with competing knowledge and discourses challenging both academic and everyday knowledge (p. 73).

In this ethnographic case study of three schools between the years of 2003 and 2005 researchers examined female student participation in each of the schools science programs. It was the belief of the researchers that how young girls are positioned in traditional learning environment of a science class greatly affects their identity and level of participation within the class. In this study, the researchers hoped to gain some understanding of how the young girls created for themselves hybrid spaces thereby taking on the role of a cultural bricoloure (Barton, Tan, Rivet, 2008). In other words, the girls brought tools from their own cultural understanding into the cultural of the science class. By combining these two cultures, the girls are in effect creating a hybrid space for learning. By combining, the cultural spaces of home and school the learners are able to manage the competing differences of these two worlds through a process of cultural bricolage, where historically their identities and knowledge would be marginalized. In the

blending of the two social worlds the third space allows for the development of a space that is both porous and fluid enabling for new forms of participation (Barton et al., 2008).

In a qualitative investigation of adult educators, providing educational programs in the global south, English (2005) examined the practice of educators whose use of a third space standpoint was a means of troubling their regulated practice and identities as adult educators. The interviews of 13 female adult educator practitioners working for non-governmental organizations were analyzed by researchers for common themes on how they positioned themselves as third space practitioners. Through the interviews, it was anticipated that researchers would gain a better understanding of what motivated the women to take up international work. In addition, it was theorized that by using the framework of third spaces, the field would uncover the contested spaces of knowledge production in the lives of these practitioners.

Through the interviews of the women it was revealed that each had a strong commitment to international work as adult educators, but were at the same time aware of the binaries and contradictions that existed between their own cultures, the cultures of their organizations, and the cultures where they elected to work. English (2005) goes on to further point out that with the use of third space, adult education practitioners, in this study, have positioned themselves in a liminal space of flux and fluidity where structured identities labels are disrupted to make room for new knowledge and ways of knowing.

**Learning space as liminal.** The above study explores spatial themes from the perspective of the adult educator, but little has been done to introduce the field of adult education to how spatial frameworks affect the experience of the learner. As discussed earlier, space in the field of adult and continuing education is viewed as a vessel for

learning to happen within and the field of education has yet to fully incorporate the idea of spatial theories within programming (Gulson & Symes, 2007). Gulson and Symes (2007) further argue that the use of spatial theories will allow for the development of “explanatory frameworks” meant to “disrupt” how we currently view and think about educational programs as learning spaces (p.2). One such framework that examines the porous nature of space and its ability to impact identity is that of liminality (Buckingham et al, 2006; Bettis, 1996).

For this research the concept of liminal spaces uses as a frame of reference the work of ethnographer Van Gennep (1960) and social anthropologist Turner (2002.) Van Gennep in his work *Rites of Passage* examined the development of social structures in human culture and the ways in which societies develop passages for its members as they pass through various life stages such as birth, marriages, parenthood, acceptance into religious communities and death. In his work he proposes that there exist three common phases to these passages that are similar among most cultures. First is the preliminary phase (separation), second is the liminaire phase (the marginal or liminal phase), and third is the post-liminaire phase (aggregation) (Turner, 2002).

Turner would later expand on Van Gennep’s (1960) second phase of liminaire (liminality), based upon his field studies. He referred to the liminal period as a “between and betwixt” period when an individual is not a part of the group they are leaving nor a part of the culture they are soon to join. It is in this in-between period that Turner suggests “[the liminal] paradoxically exposes the basic building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and before we re-enter the structural realm.”

**Spaces of transformation.** In what ways do the discussion of liminal spaces translate to understanding the learning that happens within a learning environment such as a job-training programs. A recent look into higher education examined the liminal period of students who enter into college and the in-between and betwixt period of their “studenthood” and its impact on their identity (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010). In this theoretical discussion it is proposed that students entering into higher education are entering into a liminal and institutionalized status that is bounded by time, comes with prearranged criteria for admission and exit, while also being a temporary status. During this status, an individual’s identity is impacted by the temporal and provisional nature of the liminal space. During such times, transitions into and out of the space will be marked by ritual practices and ceremonies, such as graduations.

It is during this phase that Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) point out that the role of student during this liminal period is easier to transition into for those who come from a cultural capital, which prepares them to fit into the role of student versus those students labeled as non-traditional, which automatically places them into a marginal role. The study goes further to discuss the transformation of student identity and their developing sense of self.

**Grappling with the Tension.** The above review of literature gives an understanding of the current state of affairs for unemployed adult learners, often referred to as a skills gap. But the debate explains the skills gap in terms of skills that are lacking within the individual learner holding the systems and structures without fault. As job-training programs currently exist there appears to be some tensions within the practice of these programs that are worth further exploration. The unemployed adult as a learner is

often left to navigate through the space and expected to overcome structural inequities. Grappling with the tensions within the space might help in further re-imagining how these learning spaces could potentially be used to help unemployed adult learners expand their skills and bridge the skills gap, which they currently face. Further, it may demonstrate that this “gap” is not due to the lack of ability of the learner, but in a system that continues to marginalize. Acquiring some understanding of the history behind formation of workforce programs, how and why unemployed adult learners enter these educational training programs, how they manage and function within the program, as well as understanding how they employ the skills learned in the space may foster more knowledge in the area of continuing education and program planning for adult learners.

In this research, I intend to examine the practices and experiences of unemployed adult learners who make use of these job-readiness training programs to gain some perspective on their movements through these spaces and the purposes these programs have in the development as learners. This study will serve as an interrogation into a job readiness training site for unemployed adults for the purposes of examining how we traditionally think about the space where workforce education programs typically take place.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design and my decision to approach the study of unemployed adults in the liminal space of a job-training program through the empirical method of a case study. The chapter begins with the problem currently facing unemployed adult learners. Given the background provided by the earlier review of literature, the problem statement provides context as to why the study is pertinent to both the field of Adult Learning and Workforce Development, and their respective practitioners. Next, the chapter will provide some rationale for why I selected to approach this study from a qualitative research stance versus a quantitative approach, followed by a discussion of my research paradigm and theoretical frameworks, which will highlight some of the assumptions inherent within the study. Additionally, I provide my research design, which I use as a means to outline my process for data collection and the protocol I used at my site in the collection of data. As well, I discuss how I address the weaknesses of qualitative, in particular case study research, by addressing the areas of rigor, transferability, and credibility within this study. Next, I discuss my plan for how I analyzed my data from the site. Finally, I provide some discussion on the

considerations the ethical concerns I have as a researcher within the setting I have selected and my effort to resolve these concerns.

### **Purpose & Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to answer the question how do unemployed adults make sense of their experience within the liminal space of a job-readiness training program. In this research proposal, I considered the topic of identity for unemployed adult learners. Did the practices and the social context of the job-readiness learning environment transform the identities of unemployed adults as a learner? Using a case study design (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, Murphy, 2013; Darke, Shanks, Broadbent, 1998), I examine the impact the program, as a liminal space, had a on the learner identity of unemployed adults. Guiding my investigation into understanding how this space influenced an unemployed adult's learner identity and why this is important to the field of adult and continuing education I use the following research questions as my guide:

1. What meaning do unemployed adults make out of their experience going through job-training programs?
2. What are the liminal aspects of job-training programs?
3. In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training programs influence the development of an unemployed adult's learner identity?
4. What are the ways job-training programs shape the views of unemployed adults toward learning and continuing education?
5. What are the ways in which this experience was transformative for them as learners?

## **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to explore how the liminality of job-readiness training programs influenced the learner identities of unemployed adults. I began this study, interested in understanding how unemployed adults make meaning out of their experience transitioning through a job-training program and in what ways aspects of the program and their experiences within the program impacts their learning identity.

It is common within workforce development programs to hear mention of the need to develop career pathways for adults (Finegold, Wagner, & Mason, 2000; Alssid et al., 2005) and the demand among policy makers and practitioners to close the skills gap among skilled and unskilled workers. Discussions (Hilliard, 2011) among workforce development and job-training practitioners propose the development of new job-training models, such as pathway models, that will help participants navigate their way through training programs with the aid of supportive services that will hopefully lead them to short-term credentials and into employment with job sectors that are in current demand. Conversations on the development of pathways and closing of the skills gap are characteristic of programs usually directed toward adults identified as having low skills (2005) and little academic preparation. President Obama in 2011 spoke about the need to “close the skills gap” for the unemployed in the U.S. Similar conversations are also taking place within national organizations such as The Center for an Urban Future (2011). The Center for an Urban Future has adopted what they consider a holistic model of career pathways that combines educational programming, workforce programs, and supportive services as a means of helping individuals to navigate to higher levels of self-sufficiency. Similarly Pleasants (2011), on behalf of Jobs for the Future, the National



College Transition Network, the National Council on Workforce Education, and the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, discussed the need for connecting state, local workforce investment boards, colleges, and other stakeholders in the development of pathways for adults with little to no skills or credentials. While the federal government has started to align job-trainings programs funding under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), now Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA) to pathway models, populations of unemployed adults are still finding it difficult to become self-sufficient (Alfred, 2010).

Job-training programs such as those funded under WIA/WIOA and predecessor programs, such as the Jobs Training Partnership Act (JTPA), have undertaken the role of aiding the unemployed to become self-sufficient through job-readiness skills intended to prepare and connect them to services and employment (Decker & Berk, 2011). However, are these job-training programs alone capable of adequately resolving the issue of unemployment? Research on job-training programs by Sandlin and Cervero (2003) has shown how programs operate under preconceived notions of the types of work that participants should enter. The curriculums used by job-training programs maintain hegemonic ideologies of participants and their work abilities. According to Sandlin and Cervero (2003), the current system does not address the needs of participants in a way that will place them into jobs leading to self-sufficiency, or for that matter credentials, which might aid in helping to close what politicians consider as a skill gap. Further complicating the nature of these programs are whether or not the field of workforce development truly understands what factors motivate how and why some adults participate in job-training programs. Are unemployed adults only motivated to participate

in job-training programs out of a desire to gain employment, or are there other factors in their lives that as practitioners and researchers we are unaware of that motivate them to participate?

One factor greatly influencing the motivation of unemployed adults to participate in job-training programs was the 1996 passage of the Personal Responsibilities Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Through this enactment of government policy on workforce programs and public assistance programming the system of training and educating low-skill and unemployed adults fundamentally changed (Alfred, 2003). Through PRWORA, the federal government gives discretion to the states to determine how to use their federal dollars in assisting the poor and unemployed. Through the enactment of this policy, most states elected for a work first models, which meant that in order to receive cash assistance recipients had to actively job search or participate in a work-preparedness programs (Loprest & Zedlewski, 2006). As it currently stands, many adult learners come to these programs with multiple and different barriers, varied experiences within formal educational programs and having stopped and started their education at various points (Hansman, 2010; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2010; Martin, 2010;), but despite these challenges they have not ended their pursuits of continuing their education in some form. Some adults enter into these job-training programs with self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy and different levels of unpreparedness to take on the task of learning in a formal educational environment (Nesbit, 2005) due to the lack of adequate academic preparation during their secondary education. Further complicating the matter is the curriculums used that are not adequately addressing the development of learners but instead preparing individuals to fill low wage and temporary jobs.

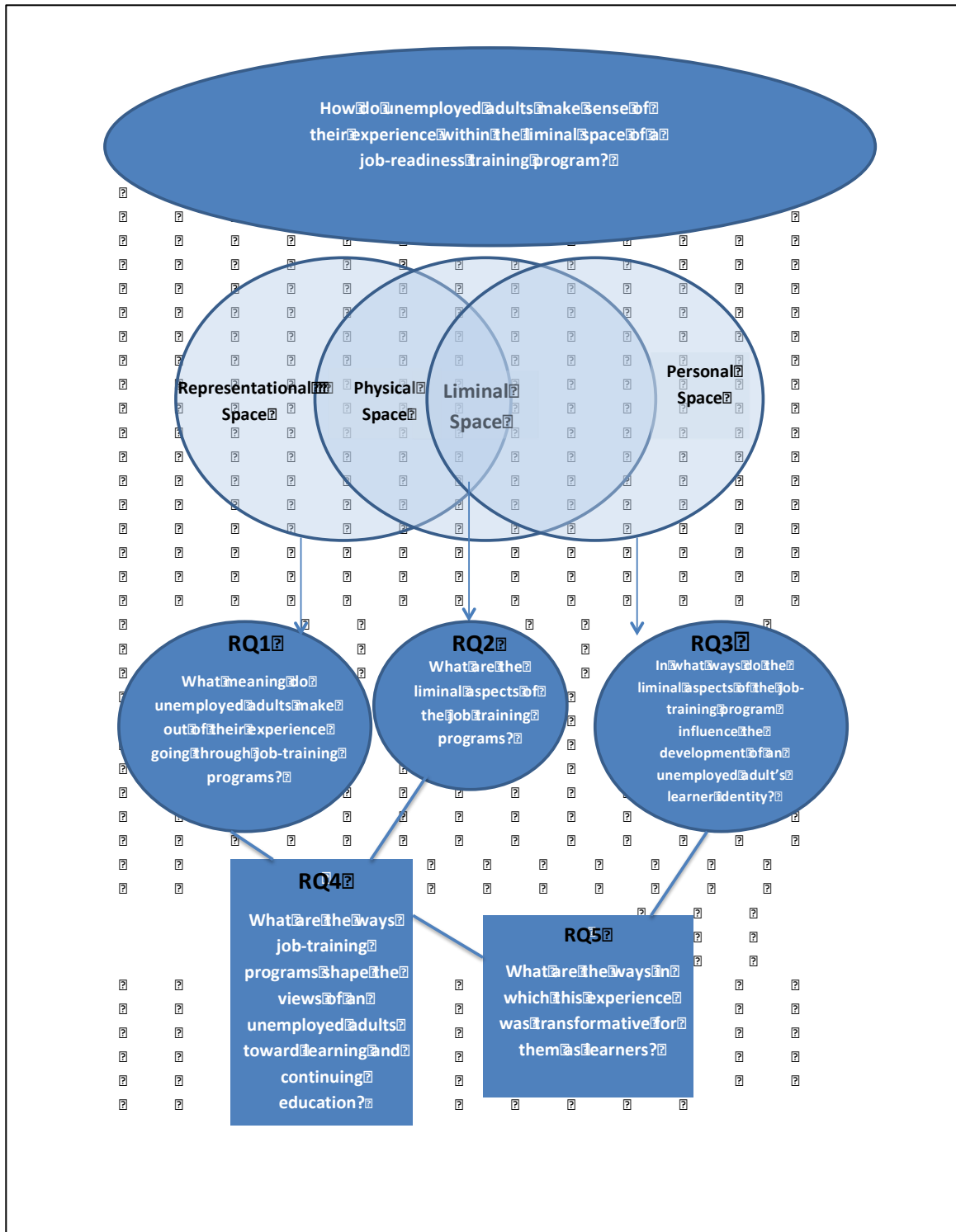
Despite both the opportunity and challenges job-training programs present to unemployed adults, this research proposed that there may be ways the unemployed adult is able to make use of programs to further develop their identity as learners. Furthermore, this research attempted to examine the unplanned benefits and unexplored outcomes of these programs despite the hegemonic curriculums and the predetermined job prospects. As these programs exist in their current state, researchers and practitioners have little understanding of what meaning unemployed adults make of their experiences. This research attempts to inform the praxis of workforce development practitioners and the adult educators who facilitate programming by adding the voices of the unemployed adult and the development of their agency as learners. As pointed out by Bullock-Yowell, Andrews, McConnell, and Campbell (2012), little research has examined unemployed adults. In both the field of career development and adult education, we know very little about the experiences of unemployed adults as learners, even less about their transitions and learner identity development as participants in job-training programs. Knowing what we know about job-training programs, their intended purpose, and the reasons why some adults participate in them, this study explored how adults negotiate this complex landscape; take part in the ritualistic practices of the job-training programs, and transition through this representational space to a place of the work world to take on a learner identity much different from when they entered into the program.

### **Conceptual Model**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine a job-readiness training program for unemployed adult learners to better understand how the unemployed make sense of their experiences within the liminal space of the training program. To undertake

this study I draw upon four areas of research 1) adult learners, specifically those who are unemployed, 2) workforce development job-training programming, and 3) learner identity development, and 4) liminal space.

In the following conceptual model (Figure 1.) I visually demonstrate the liminality of this program and how it is created through the overlapping of representational, physical, and personal spaces. The representational space is signified by aspects of the program, which mimic the work world in which the participants of the program are getting trained to enter and is set up by those who plan the job-training programs. The physical space is represented by the actual space of the workshop and learning environment created for the participants by the organization. Lastly, the personal space is the discrete individual space of each participant who enters into the program their backgrounds, identities, and understandings they each uniquely bring to the larger space of the program. It is from the interaction of each of these areas that I developed my research questions represented by the smaller circles and squares in the figure below. It is through these research questions that I investigate a job-readiness program for unemployed adult learners.



**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**

## **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

In the previous chapter's review of literature, there are few studies that focus on the psychosocial development of adults as a learner within the social environment of a job-training program. Further, there is little research, which examined how unemployed adults construct meaning out of their experience of going through job-training in order to gain employment. In order to develop more effective programs to serve this underserved and understudied population of adult learners, it is necessary to understand their reasons for participation and experiences within the actual learning environment. One of the reasons for this study was to add to the body of research with a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of unemployed adult learners, specifically those in a job-training program. Furthermore, it was the intention of this research to understand the impact that a program, such as the one at GUW had upon their psychosocial development as one aspect of their life course. More explicitly, this study explored the experiences of unemployed adults in the liminal space of the job-training programs, which may or may not influence their identities as learners. Similar to the work of Buckingham, Marandet, Smith, Wainwright, and Diosi (2006), it was the assumption of this study that job-training programs function as both a physical and metaphorical in-between space, in other words a liminal space, for unemployed adult learners. Within this assumption of the liminal space, I sought out to explore if this particular job-training program aids learners in expanding and exploring their identities in ways unplanned by the curriculum of the program. The intended purpose of job-training programs is to instruct the unemployed adult on how to become a better worker through the instruction of particular characteristics called soft skills (Rao, 2012), but alternatively some participants, possibly

unknowingly, employ the use of bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001; Lincoln, 2001; Levi-Strauss, 2000; Harper, 1987; de Certeau, 1984; Reilly, 2009). Within the space of the program, the unemployed adult learner uses the resources supplied to them in a manner more conducive to their own personal needs and expectations. In other words, they take what the program has provided them—soft skills training and repurpose it for their own use and development as learners who have agency within the social environment of the training program.

In order to understand what, if any, transformations are taking place within the learner, it may prove useful to understand how the learner makes use of the liminal aspects of this educational space and how the customs and rituals of the space potentially aid in the development of the learner. The plan of this research was to investigate the above through a qualitative investigation. Compared with the use of a quantitative approach, a qualitative approach allowed for an in depth exploration into how individuals make sense of their particular experience or phenomenon (Merriam, 1998), and how the adult learners who participated in this study interacted with both the representational space and the physical space of the program. As a researcher, I wanted to better understand whether the adults transform their views and perceptions of themselves as learners due to their experiences within the program.

The data for this case explains how the unemployed adult makes sense of his or her experience within a job-training program and how the program affects their learner identities. According to Merriam (1998), qualitative research requires the researcher to do the following: 1) to take an emic or insider approach, 2) to place the researcher as the primary instrument for the collection of data, 3) to involve the use of fieldwork outside of

a controlled lab setting, 4) to employ an inductive strategy, and 4) to provide a rich and descriptive understanding of the participant(s) within the study.

The reviewed literature gives only a partial and limited understanding of unemployed adults participating in job readiness training programs. In the case of this research, my plan was to demonstrate through a qualitative investigation how unemployed adults made meaning out of their experience in job-training programs, while potentially exposing the ability of learners to develop their agency despite the unsatisfactory power structures that attempt to determine and position the identities of the unemployed. Through the use of a qualitative case study approach I provide a rich, thick description filled with personal experiences of the unemployed that allowed for a better comprehension into their experiences of this group and adding to the existing body of research that examines the experiences of unemployed adults.

A qualitative approach was the best to best address the above problem. In conducting the research, I hoped to understand and make known the experiences of unemployed adult participants at the GUW organization and how these adults make sense of their experience within the job-training program. More specifically, I selected to use a case study approach, which allowed me to investigate a program where adults are engaged in job-readiness programs. Creswell (2013) defined case study as a research methodology that allows a researcher to explore a bounded system or unique case using multiple data sources. In the instance of this research, GUW is an organization that operates multiple job training programs, for which participants are screened and assessed prior to their entrance into the program. Each program based on the population it serves has time limits such as a 2-week accelerated program or a 4-week intensive program. As



a bounded system, according to Creswell, the program consists of integrated system, which serve the participants, such as case management, job placement services, and supportive services. All of these aspects of the organization exist autonomously but work together to meet the needs of the participant. According to Merriam, (1998) criterion for selecting a case gets defined by the number of people that a researcher intends to interview. If the number is infinite it “is not bounded enough to qualify as a case” (p. 28). With that in mind, my case will be an agency called GUW in Northeast Ohio, which operates job-training programs for unemployed adults.

For this study I observed two job-readiness workshops and interviewed seven job-training program participants following the completion of their workshop as a means of gaining insight into their experiences within the program. I gained further insight into the programs by interviewing two program facilitators and gathering program curriculum used in the classroom. I see the curriculum as an important artifact based on Sandlin and Cervero’s (2003) demonstration that job-readiness training curriculums operate under an ideology that is counter to the needs of those participating in the programs. My assumption was that, in spite of how the curriculum operates, adult learners continue to develop their identities as learners due to the liminal nature of the program (Buckingham et al., 2005), and in a sense become bricoleurs. As bricoleurs they take the tools that are given to them from the program and within the space of the training, fashioning it for other purposes not always readily identified by the creators of the program.

My hope with this research was to inform both the practice and practitioners working with unemployed adults of the ability of these unemployed adults to develop a sense of agency and identity as learners. Another assumption is that the curriculum and

structure of the programs, unemployed adults passing through job-training programs have the capacity to transform beyond the limited expectations of them as simply workers. Further developing this assumption about adult learners within the context of the program may aid in developing programs that provide broader visions and aspiration for these learners

## **Background**

The program in this study (Table I) has operated in the Northeast Ohio area for 31 years. As a social service organization, in an urban community, the organization primarily serves unemployed and underemployed adults, youth, and adults disconnected from employment due to past felony charges who are all seeking employment opportunities. The organization receives funding to operate programs through multiple sources such as foundation, state and federal grants (WIA/WIOA), private corporations and fund raising.

The research gathered through this study holds great importance to me as a researcher as well as a practitioner working within the field of workforce development managing programs for unemployed adult learners. I serve as a Program Manager within the G UW organization since 2011, which gives me an insider view to the operation and administration of job-readiness training programs. My role as administrator may be seen as opening the way for bias in my analysis. For this study, since I was the primary collector of the data within the site, I was careful that in the collection of my data I was not collecting data from participants within my own program. Not only is this an important note to make due to the bias it might have brought about in my data, but because participants within my program are on Transitional Control, a status which

designates them as incarcerated individuals who are still wards of the state. Since prisoners and those incarcerated are a protected group when it comes to research, I took great effort to ensure I was not selecting them to be a part of this study.

### **Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions**

The philosophical assumption reinforcing this research was one that is ontological in nature. As this study is attempting to understand the experiences of unemployed adult learners, I as the researcher wanted to gain greater understanding of the participants' reality within the program and their interpretations of the overlapping context of the program with its structures, curriculum, and rituals thus creating the liminality of the program. Creswell (2013) points out when doing ontological research it is necessary to include multiple realities. In the case of this research the overlapping context or realities are symbolized by the representational, physical, and individual spaces. I investigate these multiple realities through the use of classroom observations, participant interviews, and interviews with classroom facilitators.

Going into the study I used a social constructivist paradigm to frame this study. Creswell (2013) described how the use of social constructivist worldview allows researchers the ability to develop meaning out of complex situations on the subjective views of the individual participant and how they make sense of their environment. He goes further to point out that the subjective views of participants are socially and historically situated. In a study by Matthews, Andrews, & Adam, (2011), examining the social learning spaces within higher education a social constructivist paradigm is used to demonstrate how learning is largely a social process.

A social constructivist paradigm was in order here because much of how a job-training program are structured is not based on the needs of the participants, but instead, on the needs of the job market and potential employers. However, despite the structure of the programs, I proposed that learning and development outside of prescribed curriculum is taking place based upon the social interactions I predict seeing within the training program. This study grounds itself in an understanding of job-readiness training programs experiences of unemployed adult learners and their interaction with the tools of the liminal environment of the job-training program. Given the conversation and focus of job-training programs as primarily focused on the needs of businesses and an emphasis on direct job placement (Hopkins, Monaghan, & Hansman, 2009), the development of these programs has yet to take into consideration the experiences and needs of the unemployed.

### **Research Site**

As a Program Manager within GUW, I was granted permission from the Executive Director, access to the workshop, its participants, and facilitators for the purposes of collecting data in this study. The case in this study, GUW, provides programming to unemployed adults through multiple programs for unemployed and underemployed adult learners.

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Prior to the start of my data collection, I submitted and received approval from the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is responsible for ensuring the protection of any human research subjects taking part of any study at CSU. The proposal detailed the demographics of the study, my considerations

for any special populations, detailed project description, and discussion of any possible risk or benefit to the study participants and my handling of these concerns.

Agency (Case)	Programs and Services	Number of Unemployed Served
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>GUW</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4-week intensive and 2-week accelerated Job Readiness workshops for ex-offenders including job search skills and soft skills needed to succeed in employment</li> <li>• Supportive services including legal services</li> <li>• Sector based vocational training for health care and manufacturing</li> <li>• On-site training and supportive services for employers</li> <li>• GED Classes</li> <li>• Youth Employment Services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 120,000+ low-income and disadvantaged adults served since 1976</li> <li>• 1,000+ ex-offenders placed in full-time permanent jobs since 2004</li> <li>• 2,000+ former welfare recipients placed in full-time permanent jobs since 1998</li> <li>• 6,789 support services provided to over 1,699 clients in 2011 alone</li> <li>• 32,000 retention and advancement services provided to 4,000 entry-level employees at 30 employer sites since 2001</li> </ul>

**Table I Program of Study**

## **Data Collection**

For this study, I collected data through the observation of job-training workshops, interviews with workshop participants, interviews with workshop facilitators, and a review of program curriculum for the agency. During the phase of my data collection, I took steps to remove myself from my role and position as Program Manager by taking time off so that there did not appear to be a conflict in my role as supervisor and researcher. This is necessary due to my closeness to the site and to ensure that during the collection phase I limit any amount of bias or influence over the workshop.

With permission from the executive director and agency consent forms (Appendix A) signed, I presented my research to the GUW 2-week and 4-week workshops. I introduced myself to both classes and read the purpose of my study informing those in attendance that their participation was voluntary. After reading my studies purpose, the criteria required to participate, and answering questions from the class I sent around a sign-up sheet for interested participants to sign. After I had done this for both workshops, I had collected a total of 10 interested participants who met the criteria. I based my selection of participants for the study using purposeful sampling. Merriam, Cafferella, and Baumgartner (2007) state that the use of purposeful sampling within a qualitative study is necessary for building an information-rich case in order to learn about the primary issues within the research. In order to participate in the proposed study, candidates must successfully complete their respective training programs and meet the established criteria for this study. GUW determines the criteria for successful completion of their respective workshops. Since the primary concern of this study is how unemployed adult learners make meaning of their experience in a job-training program, I

am choosing to select those participants who have successfully completed and transitioned through their programs according to that criteria set forth by the agency. The additional criteria for participation within this study are the following: 1) the participants identified as currently unemployed, 2) are 18 years of age or older and hold at least one adult social role 3) have recently and successfully completed the training program in either the two or four-week workshop, and 4) participants were not associated with a community based supervision program.

The observation for these workshops consisted of my sitting in for one full day on workshops, watching and taking notes on how the curriculums are used and the interactions between participants and facilitators. After completing the observations, I met with each participant to set up individual interviews with each qualified workshop participant agreeing to be in the study. With each participant I set up a time and location to conduct the interviews suitable to the participant. Prior to the completion of the workshop, I additionally solicited interviews from the two workshop facilitators. As a part of the informed consent, participants and facilitators received and signed consent forms (Appendix B) informing them of the research purpose and their right to remove themselves from the study without question. Each was able to take a copy of the form home with them.

After successfully completing the workshop, I met with the selected participants at our scheduled times for the one on one semi-structured interview. Each interview took at least an hour to complete. I recorded each interview using a tape recorder. Each interview with a participant consisted of the same questions (Appendix D) about their experiences within the workshop and their motivation on whether they wanted to seek out

further education upon completion of the workshop, and the impact they believe the workshop had on their decision. Before I initiated the questions, I completed with each participant a Research Questions and Protocol form, which provided me with demographic data on each participant (Appendix D). I followed a similar procedure for interviewing the facilitators (Appendix E). For the facilitator, questions were asked about the workshop and process of instructing the curriculum. Each series of questions for both participants and facilitators followed an established protocol. The protocol were used as a series of checks and balances to ensure that I remained consistent across all interviews with the questions I was asking and information I was requesting. The creation of protocol is crucial in a case design, in addition it will aid in extending a study's reliability (Yin, 2014).

After completing the observations, the examination of curriculum and the interviews with both participants and facilitators, I proceeded with transcribing all interviews and compiled my data and notes into a central location for later analysis. In order to ensure that I am remained consistent across program with how I collected data, I adhered to the guidelines laid out in my protocol. For a thorough analysis of all data I used Microsoft Excel as my system for collecting my notes, themes, and other data collected. This tool allowed me to organize my data in an efficient manner.

### **Rigor within Case Study Research**

Because I selected to use case study as my approach to this research, I am also operating from the understanding that I am the primary instrument in the data collection process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Interpretations of my participants experiences are presented through my analysis and evaluation of the collected data from my



observations and interviews, which means I needed to ensure that what I observed and am reporting out is what the participants actually described about their experience and not my own bias as a staff member of GUW or as a researcher. It was also crucial that I take steps to manage my data collection in a way that did not negate the lived experiences of the participants while ensuring the credibility of the study. The steps I implemented to ensure credibility was the use of member checks in order to confirm that what I actually wrote and interpreted was as true to their experiences of the participants as possible. Following each observation of the workshop and interview with the facilitator, I shared my observation notes with the facilitators to ensure that what I observed was as accurate as possible. In addition, following the interviews with participants and facilitators I worked on aggregating themes across both the observations and the interviews. These steps are additionally outlined in my Participant and Facilitator protocol. In addition to following the above steps to ensure rigor of this study I addressed what are sometimes considered the limitations of case study research—transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability.

Scientific studies historically consider qualitative research to be limited in scope and very low in its reliability, objectivity, and generalizability (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). However, the use of terms such as reliability, objectivity, and generalizability do not fit the scope of what this research as a qualitative study hoped to capture. The methods of judging the strength of quantitative studies are not the same for measuring the strength or use of qualitative studies (Houghton, Casey, & Murphy, 2013). In order to ensure the rigor of qualitative research it is proposed that the use of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) be applied. It is

not my intention to make this study generalizable as much as it is to ensure that the research reveals the unique experiences of unemployed adults participating in job-readiness programs. Generalizability (Creswell, 2013) and replicability (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) are not goals for qualitative researchers, instead qualitative studies seek to provide descriptive description of the world through interpretive materials such as observations and interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Darke, Shanks, and Broadbent (1998) addressed the many criticisms of using case study as a method of research, in doing so they make suggestions for improving the rigor of a study by paying attention to the design of the study ensuring that it is appropriate to the organization [case] and ensuring the effective use of procedures in the collection of data.

In the case of this research, I followed suit and attended to the rigor of this study by employing the four approaches of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a researcher can establish credibility through prolonged observations and presence in the field until saturation of data is reached. I observed each individual workshop for one day, in order to gain an understanding of how participants came into and interacted within the space. In addition to establishing credibility, my observations provided me with first-hand knowledge of the context of the learning environment, the learning taking place, and the participants interactions with one another, the facilitator and the social learning environment. These observations allowed me to understand how adults construct their experiences of a job-training program and their identities as learners through the environment.

## **Credibility**

The study's credibility was impacted by my plan to triangulate my data within my data sources. Triangulation allows researchers in the collection of data to bring multiple sources together in order to support points of data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) makes the point of triangulations importance for addressing a wide ranges of historical, attitudinal, and behavioral issues in order to improve the certainty of data. Triangulation of my data allowed me to confirm my data through the use of several checkpoints, namely the participants, the facilitators, and my in-class observations. Following my interviews, I offered to share notes and recordings with participants for member checking prior to doing my data analysis, I informed participants that they were allowed to make comments on what has been written or recorded if they so desired. Additionally, during each interview I employed the use of my interview guides to ensure the credibility of the study by establishing consistency in my processes with each participant and facilitator. Additionally, I took notes of my observations of the classroom instruction and provided a detailed write up to each facilitator. Included, as a part of my data analysis, are any comments, suggestions or changes provided by the facilitators and participants on observation notes I submitted to them. These comments and changes were important for allowing me to see where I might have made generalizations or misinterpretations.

## **Dependability and Confirmability**

In order to demonstrate my dependability I relied on the use of audit trails (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to provide checks on the decisions I made throughout the process of data collection and analysis. My audits were based on my established protocol

in order to ensure that my data collection remained consistent across workshops.

According to Houghton, Casey, and Murphy (2013) creating data trails ensures that the reader is able to discern how interpretations of data sets are made thus providing some consistent record of my choices in the process. My data trail entailed the tracking of all notes and journal entries during observations and my rationale for the choices I made. To aid in my collection of data, notes, and journal entries, I used Excel software for coding and organizing data.

### **Transferability**

When compared against quantitative studies, the transferability and generalizability of case studies is considered problematic (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), because case selection within a case study is purposeful and may not directly apply across context. To counter this argument, qualitative researchers employ measures to ensure other researchers find the data from their case study useful. One measure of addressing this concern for this study is to adhere to theoretical frameworks of collecting and analyzing data of other social constructivist studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By following prior studies with similar theoretical frameworks, I checked that I was following similar processes and procedures for collection and analysis of data. It is further helpful for researchers developing qualitative research to provide sufficient descriptors and details in their work in order to aid in a studies transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Researcher as Instrument**

Because I have selected to use a case study as my approach to this research, I am also operating from the understanding that I am the primary instrument in the data

collection process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Interpretations of my participants' experiences are presented through my analysis and evaluation. Due to this, I needed to ensure that what I observed and reported was what the participants were actually describing about their experiences and not my own bias as a staff member of one of the organizations or as a researcher. To assist my research process and analysis of my data, I followed specific protocol for interviewing participants, analyzing of data, and writing up results.

Merriam and Simpson (1995) discuss the importance of researchers identifying any shortcomings and biases a researcher may have, which may impact the study, as a way of gaining awareness of how one's subjectivity and influence upon the study. Marshall and Rossman (2016) refer to it as the researcher's positionality; in other words, the personal bias and experiences I brought to the study. As the principle researcher of the study, I am responsible for the development of all instruments, gathering of data, analyzing data, any concluding write-up—it is these tools that will communicate my interpretation of events to the reader (Stake, 2000). In order to capture the experiences of the participants separate from my own beliefs and actions, I implemented certain measures to separate out my own personal bias while informing the reader of such. One measure I took is to state my personal place and stake within this research and the power I have over making choices and decisions within GUW, as a manager. As a manager within the organization, I have knowledge and a certain amount of power and control over program participants, staff, and curriculum. Having such knowledge might make the process of accessing and analyzing materials easy, but it can also create a dilemma in that I am evaluating my own program. For this reason it became important to use the practice

of triangulation and member checks as a means of checking my own bias as much as possible within the study with the program participants and the program facilitators. A concern that must be kept in the forefront is that I brought to this study a certain amount of power as a researcher and my participants may default to my position and power and fear making any true honest comments to my interview questions.

Because of this closeness to the case in question, extra special precautions were taken to separate my role as a Program Manager for the organization from that of researcher. During the times when I conducted my observation, I requested time off from my position, which consisted of no more than two days in order to conduct workshop observations and participant interviews. By doing this I hoped to remove myself from a place of power over the program as much as possible and demonstrate my role as a researcher gathering data for the purposes of the study. I outlined this further in the agency consent forms GUW signed prior to my doing any data collection. During the observations and interviews, I informed participants that should they feel the need they could have access to another agency administrator to whom they may voice their concerns in order to not compromise the relationship between the participant and myself during the observation and interview phase. Additionally, participants had access to the principle investigator for this study as well as the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at any time should they feel they required it. Information for both the principle investigator and IRB were outlined in the participant consent forms (Appendix B).

## **Data Analysis**

This study required the use of observations of GUW workshops, interviews with both participants and facilitators, and a review of workshop curriculum. The research was based upon a social constructivist theory (Kasworm, 2005) which when discussing identity takes into consideration a learner's social and cultural context. Because I was taking a social constructivist approach to this research, the interviews with participants are the main sources of data triangulated against what I am additionally gathering from interviews with program facilitators and workshop observations and a review of the curriculum. These multiple sources made up the context of the job-training environment for the unemployed adult learner. Interview questions were structured to gain some perspective on participant motivation to participate in the job-readiness program, their experiences in the job-readiness workshops, their prior experiences with learning, and their intentions on continuing their education at the conclusion of the workshop. The responses to those questions in addition to other data sources were the support to give a richer explanation of the context of the learners and their experience within the workshops and the impact the experience had on their identity. From the collected data, I employed categorical aggregation of themes as supported by Stake (1995) and Merriam (2002), as well as the singling out of unique instances of emergent data, establishing patterns between emerging themes and unique instances, and finally developing "naturalistic generalizations" (p.209) of the data for the reader. Melrose (2010) contends that through naturalistic generalizations readers will reflect and make decisions as to what experiences merit further generalization to their own practice and experience.

## **Ethical considerations**

Multiple considerations weighed into my approach and execution of this study, such as whether it was feasible to conduct this study, and what was my commitment to sustaining the study through to its completion (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). These considerations are rolled into the fact that I am also a Program Manager for the organization. As a manager of one of the programs, I am in a position of power to make decisions about the program, the curriculum, and staffing selections. Mills, Cervero, Langone, and Wilson (1995) discuss how the personal and organizational interests of adult educators impact the planning of adult education programs. Specifically they found that structural factors of the organization impact planning, the availability of resources, and factors of individual power and position play heavily on planning that takes place. For these reasons, I decided to remove myself as Program Manager during the phase of data collection. During this phase my duties and responsibilities as supervisor were handed over to the Director of Programs whom, until data collection was complete, maintained responsibility for the program, staffing, and curriculum direction.

It was also a concern of this research project that I would have access to private and sensitive information about the personal lives of participants and their histories through their answers to my interview questions. Participants in this community have a history of distrust not only with formal education, but with medical as well as research communities. Early on it was my intention to observe workshops at G UW with different populations of adult learners. When it was time to begin data collection, only workshops with participants with criminal backgrounds were scheduled and available for me to observe. So for this study, all of the unemployed adults participating have had prior



experience within the criminal justice system. It was not my intention to screen for or screen out those with criminal backgrounds. It should be understood that participants within this study are not currently incarcerated, but come to the job-training programs of their own free will in order to find employment. Due to the sensitive nature of the information, which was shared by some participants, this study will protect the identity of each participant by ensuring that any documents, writings, or other materials acquired are not traceable back to the participant. In the Participant Informed Consent form for this study I outlined the confidential nature of this study. In signing the informed consent form participants received information stating that they may back out of the study at any point in time and that their information will remain confidential. I also allowed participants to create a pseudonym in order to protect their identity.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the decisions to engage in this study from a qualitative social constructivist approach. This chapter gave details on the research design, data collection and data analysis procedures used to determine the themes to answer the research questions of this study. In chapter four, I will present the details of the findings of this study..

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

Using a case study design, the purpose of this study was to examine how job-training programs as liminal spaces have an effect on the development of an unemployed adult's learner identity. Guiding my investigation into the program were the following research questions (RQ)

RQ1. What meaning do unemployed adults make out of their experience going through job-training programs?

RQ2. What are the liminal aspects of job-training programs?

RQ3. In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training program transform the development of an unemployed adult's identity as a learner?

RQ4. What are the ways the job-training programs shape the views of unemployed adults toward learning and continuing education?

RQ5. What are the ways in which this experience was transformative for them as learners

The purpose of this research was to answer the question how do unemployed adults make sense of their experience within the liminal space of a job-readiness training program. This chapter will present the findings of a study, which looked at the experiences of unemployed adults transitioning through a job-training program. Little empirical research exists about the experiences of unemployed and underemployed adults (Bullock-Yowell, Andrews, McConnell, & Campbell, 2012). By using this opportunity to gain insight into the spatial practices of the job-training program, observing workshops, reviewing curriculum, and interviewing both the participants and facilitators—I gained insight into the learners experiences and how they made meaning of this experience within their lives thus adding to the literature on unemployed adults.

In the instance of this study, the liminal space in question is the job-training programs for unemployed adults at Geared Up for Work (GUW). The experience of unemployment as an unanticipated event (Schlossberg, 1989; Merriam, 2005) for many adults poses moments of flux and instability, particularly when the learner comes from an underserved community of learners (Martin, 2004). Furthermore, underserved populations of learners seeking employment opportunities transition through government supported job-training programs, which often connect them to low-wage jobs only to face future unemployment. It was an assumption of this study that the job-training program at GUW operates as liminal spaces where learners, through certain rituals and right of passages, transform and re-shape their identities in a manner different from when they entered. Operating under a cultural understanding of bricolage (de Certeau, 1984), I examined how adults move through the liminal space of job-training programs acquiring

tools that were repurposed and used to re-shape and transform their identities into learners as opposed to simply workers.

The data I present for this chapter were collected from GUW, a non-profit community based organization in the Midwest serving unemployed and underemployed adults. First, I provide some background on the organization its history, types of programming and populations served. Next, I discuss the background on the participants within the workshop who agreed to participate in this study as well as some background on the facilitators responsible for leading the workshops. After providing some context of the organization, its program and those involved in the program, I present my research questions and the themes that emerged from the data analysis process to answer them. Each theme will begin with a definition followed by supporting material from the data collected.

## **Background**

**Geared up for Work.** This case study takes place in a community-based not-for-profit organization, Geared up for Work (GUW). GUW is located downtown in a midsize urban city in Northeast Ohio. The organization has served unemployed clients for over 20 years as a workforce development organization. GUW operates multiple job readiness programs for youth and adults. Some of its programs serve unemployed and underemployed adults seeking work in the fields of health care or manufacturing. At an offsite location, the organization serves youth ages 14 to 23 who have never had employment so that they can research careers and develop a career path. Additionally, GUW serves unemployed and underemployed adults who have barriers to employment such as criminal convictions, misdemeanors, and possibly time served in prison. Due to

one of a combination of these barriers clients seek out the assistance of the GUW program in order to connect to employment networks, learn to discuss their backgrounds with a potential employer, and improve their professional skills. All GUW workshops are provided free and based on clients need.

**Physical Space.** The actual offices and classrooms represent the physical space of the GUW program. Walking into the space I encountered GUW staff, former participants, and current participants. Within the space were also four large and separate training rooms and two large computer labs. On the outer wall of the suite were staff offices, which almost encircle the four training rooms. Two of the offices house lawyers that provide legal support to the participant on an as needed basis. One of the four training rooms houses the GED class that is hosted in the suite four days a week. Sitting in the middle of all this are staff cubicles. Throughout the day, participants move about the suite and interact with the staff of the agency. It was common to hear staff stop former clients in the hallways and ask how their job was going or ask current program clients how their mock interview went earlier in the day. At all times participants have access to not only supportive services such as GED or legal advice, but they have direct access to program staff and administrators.

I provide this layout to give greater context for how the clients of GUW and the participants of this study are integrated into the physical space of the larger organization along with agency staff and program resources. Through the integrated use of the physical space participants are provided with learning opportunities and supports—supports that function as a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Alfred (2009) Bourdieu saw social capital as a means through which an individual determines

his or her economic effectiveness to the larger society based on known networks and relationships.

**Programming.** Within the programming space of the GUW program, participants come in order to enhance their skill sets, learn how to discuss their criminal backgrounds, and gain access to employers willing to accept their backgrounds. Entering into the program they are expected to not only learn and acquire new skill sets, but they are required to follow a set of established rules, policies, and regulations, a structured environment that mimics the work world. They are expected to sign in and out each day. They are required to complete tasks and assignments. In other words, the programmatic space is produced, by the organization, to represent an employer. But is a space like GUW capable of representing every imaginable workspace or job that exist? Or are they only representing a fraction of work scenarios that could potentially exist? For those that they are capable of representing do they necessarily match with the career paths of each individual learner? Or are learners expected to acclimate themselves to some form of generic work ethic that may or may not match the environments they are transitioning into. In the case of GUW it would first appear that participants gain an understanding of a work space that operates 9am to 5pm, requires individuals to physically punch in or out, and complete written assignments.

The organization required that for all programming a client must first attend an orientation as a way of learning what the program offers and if it's appropriate to their needs. During orientations, clients complete program applications, learning assessments, and have the opportunity to ask staff questions about the program. After completing the orientations, clients are given an appointment for a one on one assessment with a GUW

Case Managers. One on one assessments allow Case Managers to meet and talk with potential clients to discuss their work history, the results of their learning assessments, individual health, legal issues, and any other concern or problems, which may be a barrier to that person obtaining employment. At the completion of the one on one session with a Case Manager, clients are enrolled into one of G UW's programs based on the assessments. Individuals may be enrolled in either a four-week intensive or two-week accelerated job-readiness workshop.

***Four-Week workshops.*** When findings from an assessment reveal a client does not have their high school diploma or GED, has not worked in the recent five years, or scores below the seven to nine grade levels in two or more areas of the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) locator they are enrolled in the four-week intensive workshop. This allows participants more time to work on their skills training and more time to work with staff on the removal of any barriers they may have in gaining employment.

***Two-week workshops.*** According to documentation provided by the organization, clients are assigned to the two-week accelerated course, which is more self-directed, when they meet the following criteria: 1) they have their high school diploma or GED, 2) they have work history during the past five years, 3) they test at a moderate level of computer literacy, and 4) they score at grade level of seven to nine or higher on the Test For Adult Basic Education (TABE) Locator in at least two of the three areas measured, which are language, mathematics, and comprehension.

Both the two-week and four-week job-readiness workshops teach clients work preparedness skills such as online job searching, interviewing, how to construct a resume, cover letter, or thank you letter, and for those with a criminal background they are

instructed on how to discuss their background with a potential employer during an interview. The two-week course moves at a faster pace and clients are expected to be more self-directed in their learning, whereas the four-week course is more intensive and provides more time for students to practice certain skill sets such as interviewing.

Once enrolled, clients are each given a badge with their picture and a bar-code specific to them. Each morning, before being allowed to enter the suite, the organization required all clients to scan-in with their badge on a computer that is located in the front lobby near the receptionist thus documenting their arrival time as well as their departure at the end of the day. Client's hours are tracked within the agency data management system. Every staff member has access to it and uses it to enter case notes on clients.

Once clients scan in they are buzzed into the suite by a receptionist and go to their assigned workshop. It is also a requirement of the organization that each client must wear their client identification badge in a visible place, which has their name and their picture

Upon completion of either the two or four-week workshop clients are then advanced on to stage two of the program called Job Club. During the Job Club phase of the program, clients are expected to make use of the skills they just learned by actively seeking employment and working with an assigned Staffing Specialist who helps them in their job search and connecting them to employment networks. Individuals can spend anywhere from one week up to eight weeks or sometimes longer in their job search phase based on their level of motivation, the field in which they are seeking employment and their level of work experience.

**Participants.** This case study looked at two different workshops in GUW from which I recruited 10 individuals who were interested in taking part within the study Table



II at the end of this section provides a summary of all the participants. I first observed a four-week workshop, where I recruited and observed a total of five individuals; four males and one female. However when it came time for the interviews, two males had withdrawn from the program leaving three participants. I next observed the two-week workshop where I was able to recruit an additional five participants; two females and three males. All five participants completed the workshop and were available for a one on one interview. In total for the study, I was able to observe 10 participants, and seven of the 10 were interviewed.

<b>Type of Workshop</b>	<b>Total Workshop Participants</b>	<b>Participants Observed</b>	<b>Participants Interviewed</b>	<b>Facilitator Interviewed</b>
Four-Week Workshop	15	5	3	1
Two-Week Workshop	12	5	4	1
Total	27	10	7	2

**Table II Participants Observed**

**Four-week workshop participants.** For the four-week workshop I solicited the participation of Curtis, Theo, Sharon, Carlos, and Willie. Curtis is a 21-year-old Caucasian male who had completed high school and at the time of the study was only doing temporary part-time work. Up to this point, Curtis has only held odd jobs and temporary employment such as assisting neighbors with landscaping. He had also completed two years of college but did not finish. During the workshop, Curtis was very talkative, moved around a lot and loved to tell jokes to his fellow classmates and facilitators.

Theo is a 25-year-old unemployed African-American male who did not complete high school and has never been employed. During the workshop, he was often dressed in

casual but neat attire. In the workshop setting, Theo had a tendency to pay more attention to the other team sitting across the room than he did his own team often-making gestures across the class to the other team in an effort to get their attention. Theo did not make it to week four of the workshop and thus did not successfully complete or participate in an interview for this study. He was scheduled to start another workshop at a later date but never followed through.

Sharon is a 58-year-old African-American unemployed female. Sharon has at least two years of higher education experience, but never completed a degree. She completed her GED while she was in prison. Her last employment was as an attendant in the prison facility in which she was incarcerated before she was released. Before serving time in prison she was a Home Health Aide. Sharon discussed wanting to return to school to pursue certification as a Drug Counselor. During the workshop, Sharon was very attentive to what was said by the facilitator and workshop guest. She also spoke very quietly when asked questions by the facilitator, who would often try to persuade her to speak up.

Carlos is a 21-year-old African-American male who is unemployed and did not complete high school. Carlos is a part of G UW youth employment program. Because of his criminal background, it was recommended that he enroll in the agency's four-week job-readiness program. Carlos is very friendly and presents a very laid-back personality. During workshop he interacted with both teams. At one point during the day that I observed, Carlos was late coming back from break for which the facilitator provides a verbal warning to him about lateness. He accepted responsibility for his tardiness and quickly took his seat with his team.

Willie is 40-year-old African-American male who has not completed high school and at the time of this study was unemployed. Willie was not present at the start of the class on the day of my observations. An hour into the start of class, Willie finally arrived breathing heavily, noisily entering into the room and appeared to be frustrated. Upon his arrival the facilitator was in the middle of a presentation, which Willie interrupted by making noise at the back of the room, putting his things away before taking a seat with his team. The facilitator pointed out his rudeness and lateness, which irritated Willie more and he mumbled under his breath. Later during a break the facilitator approached Willie and discussed with him his lateness and the inappropriate way he entered the room. At the suggestion of the facilitator, Willie later apologized to the class for his tardiness and the abrupt way he entered and disturbed the class. During class I also observed that Willie liked to talk and frequently share his opinion when the facilitator asked questions. Often Willie's comments consisted of long tangents that moved the discussion into personal issues. I witnessed several times fellow classmates shaking their heads and mumbling each time Willie makes a comment. Willie did not make it to the fourth week of the workshop successfully and did not participate in an one on one interview. Staff made note that he was scheduled for a later workshop but he never returned.

**Two-week workshop participants.** For the two-week workshop I solicited participation from Mark, Jessie, Seth, Nicole, and Robert. Mark is a 22-year-old African-American male who is unemployed and did not complete high school. On the day I observed the class, Mark was late for class, but silently took his seat upon entering. Mark

was very quiet, kept to himself, attended to his work and listened to the morning speaker. On a few occasions, I observed him falling asleep during the morning presentations.

Jessie is a 47-year-old African-American mother to a son in his junior year of high school. Jessie graduated from high school and has at least two years of college experience. Jessie spent the first five minutes of the interview talking about her son, how proud she is of him and his plans to spend his senior year of high school out of state at a feeder school for Harvard University. She talked about not wanting to let him go but understanding how important it is toward his future. Jessie has a wealth of knowledge and experience in both the medical and in the health insurance fields. She discusses opportunities she has had working for a small private billing firm before she was laid-off. Jessie pointed out that she thinks she doesn't belong in the program, like some of the other participants, because her criminal background is old and can no longer be found, but she is hoping to take advantage of some of the additional supports the organization offers such as legal services. Jessie sat next to Nicole, and the two seem to have created a bond while in the workshop.

Seth, a 54-year-old Caucasian male had temporary part-time employment through a call-center. Seth shared that he had some college experience and wished to make plans to return to school for a Masters in Counseling. Seth was very withdrawn, quiet, and kept to himself during the workshop. While the instructor and guest speakers talked he took notes and worked on class assignments. During my interview with Seth, he spoke very softly and kept his responses very brief, almost as if he were afraid to speak or say something wrong. This was his second time coming through the workshop. Nicole is a 32-year-old African-American mother to a young daughter. Nicole does not have a

high school diploma, but did attend several online degree programs. She talked about taking classes to be a paralegal but did not complete them because she did not like the online learning environment but preferred to attend in person classes. She mentioned her primary reason for being in the GUW program was that she heard they would expunge her record. After meeting with GUW legal services, she found that expungements were done on a case-by-case basis, and that individual cases are not cleared automatically just by entering the program. Nicole sat next to Jessie in the workshop and the two appeared to be very close. Nicole later mentions her close friendship with Jessie and that the two bonded and supported one another through the workshop.

Lastly, there was Robert. Who appears to be in his mid-30s and is an African-American male who is unemployed and did not complete high school. On the day of the class observation, Robert was not present. He showed up an hour later, due to his participation in a job interview. Robert came to class dressed professionally in a suit and tie. During the rest of the morning Robert took notes and participated in activities with the class. Before lunch, Robert stayed behind to speak with the class facilitator. He asked about what he missed and some pointers on how to properly do an interview.

**Facilitators.** The facilitators for the two and four-week workshop were two African-American females. One facilitator, Marsha, has facilitated job-readiness workshops with GUW for six years and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree, while the other facilitator, Judy, has facilitated and coordinated trainings at GUW for eight years. Judy has worked in the field of training and development for over 20 years. The facilitators, both have the responsibility for carrying out the job-readiness curriculum for both the workshops and monitoring students' progress while in the program. As instructors for the

workshop, they also observe and make comments on client behaviors sometimes correcting students on behaviors that would be unacceptable in the workplace and are therefore unacceptable in the workshop.

Marsha, who facilitates the four-week workshop is described by some of the participants as a “heavy weight” because she “she pulls no punches” and talks with many of the clients at their level. Her style of facilitation is one that is very assertive, and she was observed calling clients out on their incorrect behaviors as they happen as well as praising students when they do well. The students also described Marsha as having a great sense of humor because she likes to tell jokes, and her jokes usually are pertinent to what she is teaching. I often heard her saying throughout the course of the workshop “you are going to pay for that” to clients when they are caught having their cell phones out, entering into class late, or giving an incorrect answer to a question.

Judy facilitates the two-week workshop, and she is described by the students as more motherly and having a “softer touch” with clients. In spite of her “softer touch” students see her as strict, but less assertive than Marsha. Judy is a hard-liner when it comes to how clients use their time and adheres to the schedule for the day. Several times throughout the observation I witnessed Judy pulling students aside to have one on one conversations with them about their behavior, unlike Marsha who would call clients out in front of the entire class.

<b>Participant Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>
<b>Four-Week Workshop Participants</b>				
Carlos	21	African-American	Unemployed	Did not complete high school
Curtis	21	Caucasian	Temporary Employment	1-2 years of college
Sharon	58	African-American	Unemployed	1-2 years of college
Theo	25	African-American	Unemployed	Did not complete High School
Willie	40	African-American	Unemployed	Did not complete High School
<b>Two-Week Workshop Participants</b>				
Jessie	47	African-American	Temporary Employment	1-2 yrs. of college
Mark	22	African-American	Unemployed	Did not complete High school
Nicole	32	African-American	Temporary Employment	Did not complete High school/Certification in Medical Assisting
Robert	Mid-30's	African-American	Unemployed	Did not complete High school
Seth	54	Caucasian	Temporary Employment	2 or more yrs. of college
<b>Facilitators</b>				
Judy	65	African-American	Employed	1-2 years of college
Marsha	66	African-American	Employed	Bachelors Degree

**Table III Participant Demographics**

### **Themes**

Table IV displays six overarching themes that emerged in similar as well as distinctive ways across the various data formats for this study in addition to several key definitional terms further providing meaning and context to how I see the theme emerging to answer the research questions. The overarching themes are the following: 1) Confidence, 2) Structure, 3) Skill, 4) Expectations, 5) Background, and 6) Support.

Theme Position	Major Theme	Definitional Terms	Research Question (RQ)
Theme 1	Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Self-Worth</li> <li>○ Motivation</li> <li>○ Procrastination</li> <li>○ Identity</li> </ul>	RQ1
Theme 2	Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Former Participants</li> <li>○ Staff</li> <li>○ Teams</li> <li>○ Bonding</li> <li>○ Encouragement</li> </ul>	
Theme 3	Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Teams</li> <li>○ Mocks</li> <li>○ Assignments</li> <li>○ Routines</li> </ul>	RQ2
Theme 4	Skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Tools</li> <li>○ Preparation</li> <li>○ Learning</li> <li>○ Classroom</li> </ul>	RQ3
Theme 5	Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Timeliness</li> <li>○ Rejection</li> <li>○ Future</li> <li>○ Approval</li> </ul>	RQ4
Theme 6	Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Mistake</li> <li>○ Felonies</li> <li>○ Barriers</li> <li>○ Stigma</li> </ul>	RQ5

**Table IV Themes**

Next I will examine each of my five research questions individually, along with the emergent themes I believe best address the question. With each theme I will additionally provide some of the definitional terms used to explain how the theme was further used within the experience of the participants. Following the definition and context for the theme, I will provide data in the form of quotes from participant and facilitator interviews that will either provide support and meaning to the question or illustrate some of the participants counter perspectives.



**RQ 1: What meaning do unemployed adults make out of their experience going through job-training programs?**

Answering the question of how the program made meaning for the unemployed adult learners, confidence and support emerged as major themes. For the theme of confidence program participants discussed aspects of the workshop where they experienced motivation either to enter the program or continue the program when it became difficult. Participants also discussed the support they experienced through other participants and GUW staff members.

**Confidence theme.** The theme of confidence emerged from my interviews with both the participants and facilitators. All eight participants and the two facilitators discussed how the workshop either increased the participants level of confidence or provided them with meaning and hope to move their lives forward beyond just trying to obtain employment. Procrastination versus motivation were seen as some of the definitional terms that emerged in the interviews with the participants. Several participants discussed their tendency to put things off in the past or put their lives on hold and how the workshop was a motivating factor for pushing forward in their lives currently.

During the portion of the workshop where participants work on developing their interview skills, they are provided with professional dress attire. The agency has an on-site room with lightly used donated professional clothing where participants are allowed to select items and are expected to wear these items for their mock interviews and any future interviews they might have. What may seem like a small act of putting on a suit or dress clothing to some becomes very important and a big deal for these participants.

During the interview Carlos, a 21 year old African-American male in the four-week workshop, mentioned how putting on professional work attire for the first time in his life made him feel confident about himself.

My image of myself changed. I would have to say dress clothes because I have never been the type of person to wear dress clothes. I hated dress clothes but someone told me I looked good in it so I was like man I might as well keep it on. Yeah it does makes you feel good and gives you more confidence.

The experience of putting on professional attire for the first time had meaning for Carlos's self-image and became in some sense a rite of passage for him. If we think about many young people Carlos's age, they may have had the opportunity to dress up at an event like a high school graduation. Since Carlos did not graduate from high school, transitioning through and completing the job-readiness workshop was a rite of passage that many young adults have had that he did not.

Looking at the other end of the age spectrum of participants, Jessie a 47-year-old unemployed African American female in the two-week workshop talked about confidence in the following way. "I am a little more confident than when I started. I was pretty depressed for a while. This [program] kind of brightened things up for me because I felt I was at a dead end, I was desperate." For Jessie, the meaning she made of this experience was one that shifted her from a place of depression of not finding employment to finding hope through the program. Jessie, at the age of 47, is at a very different place than Carlos developmentally and experientially. Jessie has held employment before, has attended college, and has a child. So the class provided her with an opportunity to reflect

back on her prior life experiences while also using the program as a place and space to help her find the confidence to transition into a new phase of her life.

Sharon a 58-year-old African American female in the four-week workshop shared how there were things in her life she had put on hold, but now found the motivation to begin to face-up to some of these challenges.

Before coming here I would probably be nervous [in an interview]. I'm nervous now. I had planned to do that [return to school], but this really helped me. I have a student loan that was in default so I went to see the lawyer here and I am getting that taken care of now so that I can apply for grants and go back to school

Sharon in this statement talks about how the program has helped her on two levels. It has provided her with confidence going into job interviews, although she admits to her nervousness with me interviewing her. She also talks about wanting now to go back to school and how it was something she had “planned to do” but now with the assistance of the program she seems motivated to now take care of her student loan that went into default and continue what she had put-off.

Judy, a facilitator for the two-week workshop, witnessed the participants’ gain a new sense of identity and self-worth by going through the workshop.

I see a lot of more confidence in themselves to move forward. I see them seeing skills maybe they didn't realize that they had or that they didn't think about it in that way that there are skills that are useful and valued by employers. So one of the biggest things is that they see themselves differently and where there was a certain amount of discouragement and hopelessness, I think they are more hopeful about the future based on going through the program.

Judy's comment about the participants' experience in the program and how it impacts their confidence supports what Jessie says in moving from a place of despair to a place of

hope. The participants begin to find value in themselves and transition from a place of feeling discouraged to a place of hope for their futures.

Confidence emerged as a major theme in this study. Participants and facilitators alike recognize the difference in participant's attitudes about themselves and their future direction in regards to employment and the possibility of continuing or furthering their education. Participants did not come to the program with the expectation that they would gain confidence, but instead that they would gain get a job. However as a result of going through the program participants experienced a boost in their self-esteem.

**Support theme.** Support was an second theme, which emerged to answer RQ1. Both participants and facilitators alike consider ways that the program provides support for participants while they are in the program as well as support once they transition from the program and obtain employment. Support to the participants came in the form of peer-to-peer support both when participants worked within teams while in the workshop and when former participants returned to class to share in their success as motivation. Support also came in the form of encouragement from members of the GUW staff to the program participants that they had the ability to accomplish their goals. An example of team support experienced within the workshop came from Jessie who said "it was a pleasure being around so many positive people who don't know you but they are on your team 100% and they are on your team and they look out for you." It was noted as a part of my observation that the teams, which Jessie references are created on day one of the program. Teams within the workshop compete for play dollars by completing classroom assignments but also lose dollars for inappropriate behaviors, missed time, or incomplete assignments. Over the course of the program participants

appear to bond not only with classmates as a whole, but they seemed to form tighter bonds with their teammates. Teammates in both the two and four week workshops sat together and completed their assignments together. During my observations, I observed Curtis and Theo sitting and working together to answer a question that was presented to the Theo by the facilitator. When Theo answered incorrectly, the facilitator explained that he would have to pay for the incorrect answer. Because Curtis had assisted Theo and provided him with the incorrect answer, Curtis forfeited five of his own play dollars on behalf of Theo. When I spoke with facilitator Judy about the bonds formed in the workshop she stated

It is amazing to me because we do the four-week workshop and we do the two-week workshop and doesn't matter which workshop. I think it's the fact that we put an emphasis on teamwork. They have a common goal and common background and it really binds them together and it really it is amazing to see how supportive they can be of each other and how they can encourage each other and in this short time frame you hear them say that they become a family and they become a group and they really bonded together and they can point to different people in the workshop and say you know man those talks that we had really made a difference and if it wasn't for you I don't think I would have made it. So its just important its just I don't know its encouraging and inspiring for me to see that that can happen in that a short period of time and its sincere and really sincere and they really try to keep in contact with each other its something that is a good thing.

Not all participants readily took to participating in the team concept, Seth, a 54-year-old Caucasian male who I observed to be very quiet in the workshop, said "I think I was pretty much concentrated on working on my own stuff I don't know. I would go to work after [the workshop] at 4:30pm everyday so between doing work and doing classes that filled up my schedule." It should be noted that this was also Seth's second time going through the program within the past year. Seth pointed out that coming through the

program a second time was necessary for him because there were barriers and challenges he still had the first time around that prevented him from gaining employment.

Well this is the second time I am doing the accelerated program. The first time I don't think I was adequately prepared and I also didn't have a car at the time so it would be difficult to find a position on the bus line and you know trying to get to it. My goal was to purchase a car.

At the point of our interview, Seth had purchased a vehicle that allowed him to get to his temporary employment after the workshop.

When it came to other forms of support, such as that experienced when former participants would come back to provide testimony of their success, Curtis, a Caucasian 21 year old male, commented on the motivation he felt from former participants,

I can't remember his name but he had his welding mask on and he talked about it [his welding program] and I was interested in it that's like what really solidified it for me. If they can do it what makes me unable to do it I can do that it really was a good motivator.

Several participants also spoke about support that was received from the staff of GUW. Sharon, a 58-year-old African American female, talked about the support of the program as a reason why she would recommend others to come.

Well I would tell them it was a good program and its helped me a lot and they should give it a try and even if it seems overwhelming at times stick it out because its worth it and you can get through and you have a lot of support.

In addition to Sharon's earlier comment about receiving support on her defaulted student loan, Sharon shares here how the program is able to offer participants support when things may seem overwhelming. The participants in this program are often attempting to juggle multiple life events at once on their own. While they are in the program, they are provided with access to Case Managers, Career

Coaches, and Staffing Specialist who work to help them work through some of their barriers which are keeping them out of work. In this case Sharon is willing to promote the program to future participants based on her positive experience.

Similarly, Carlos shares an experience of staff support and what it has meant to him,

It's helped me a lot because I went to a job interview and they [GUW staff] backed me up. They sent her [the employer] a couple of emails saying who this guy is so they really support me and they help me get my foot in the door and they helped me and I wouldn't have had that if I were going to do it on my own.

It's the support such as this, which according to program materials extends beyond the space of the workshop. Once a person is employed they continue to work with Staffing Specialist and Case Managers for up to nine months and sometimes more.

## **RQ 2: What are the liminal aspects of job-training programs?**

Participants talked a great deal about the structures of the program. When I asked about ritual practices both the participants and the facilitators spoke about aspects of the program that were required daily routines such as forming teams, completing assignments, and scanning in at the beginning of the day as well as scanning out at the end of the day.

**Structure theme.** Both Turner (2012) and VanGennep (1960) discuss the period of liminality, which is commonly used to refer to a between or betwixt period of time within rites of passage moments. Participants of the GUW program are in such a space as they transition through the program and work on developing their skills, while simultaneously having the unexpected benefit of gaining confidence in themselves. When it comes to the liminal aspects of the GUW program, all participants of this study speak about some

aspect of a program structure or routines they experience. The facilitators talk about the need to establish “a base” for the participants in which they build upon and further shape the participants’ ability to learn as a way of talking about the program structured learning environment. The definitional themes that emerged as a part of discussing the program structure were students having to participate in mock interviews, completing workshop assignments, or participating in team activities with other workshop participants. Each of these activities were structured aspects of the programs curriculum meant to simulate aspects of a real job and what employers will expect of them in the work world.

Nicole, who was in the two-week workshop talked about how it was required that participants of the program use their ID badges to scan in and scan out each day. “As far as the signing in and scanning out I feel that pertains to jobs because some jobs you might have to scan or write in [time]. That was a ritual and it was different.” Nicole talks about this aspect of the workshop as a daily ritual that everyone participant is required to do. Nicole, several years before the GUW program, had been through another job-readiness program where she earned a home health certification. For her the experience of having to each day routinely scan in and scan out to record time was different for a job-readiness program. The typical methods of recording attendance in these types of programs are doing a class roll-call or having participant’s sign-in on a piece of paper. GUW has a computerized data management system, which records a participant’s time to not only provide a system of electronically tracking attendance, but mimicking what an employee might experience on a job. By establishing this structure in the program and making it a routine it further teaches the participant a level of accountability and punctuality, which an employer will expect.



Facilitator Judy shares multiple programmatic routines, even talking about some of them as rituals.

We have a lot of rituals. We try to mirror the workshop to the job and like any job there is a procedure when you arrive to work your supposed to do. So we have our participants scan in as ritual in terms of something that they are required to do every day. We like to reinforce workplace skills such as organizing their materials, having assignments turned in on time every day, to some degree there is scheduled time for things like breaks, lunches, computer lab, that happen on a daily basis that we would do. At the end of day you know it's organizing your workspace, those types of things.

From the aspect of someone who helps to plan the workshop and has input on the program curriculum, Judy provides examples of program structures and “rituals” that are a part of the participant’s experience. Activities such as giving students assignment to complete are structured into the workshop and again have two levels of significance. First, the assignment provides an opportunity to learn a job-readiness topic such as interviewing or time management, but it further serves as a tool in completing assignments to meet deadlines. This is something Marsha, as the facilitator points out in class during my observation of the four-week workshop. She starts the class off by discussing with participants assignments that they were to have completed the day before. She communicated to participants that if they were not complete they would need to find time during either their breaks or lunch to complete them, but they should not be working on them while the guest speaker for the day was present.

Mark and Curtis also mentioned structural aspects that were unique to the GUW program. Mark, who was in the two-week workshop, briefly mentioned the need for each participant to have at their desk a name placard identifying who they were. “Yeah in the class we do daily routines. We had to put our name in front like we were in an office so

people can see who you are and talk to you and keep everything neat and organized, everything had to be organized.” Curtis, on the other hand, discussed a different liminal aspect of the program, which G UW structured more in the form of a ceremony for those participants who complete the workshop. “Signing out and signing in at the beginning of the day was one, and the graduation ceremony for us that was nice we got a certificate.” Once students complete either the two or four-week workshop, G UW puts on a graduation ceremony for the students as recognition for completing the first phase of their program. The week following the ceremony students’ transition into phase two of the program, which is referred to as a job club. Here students begin the process of looking for employment and putting into practice the skills they recently learned.

Timeliness was also a structural aspect, which participants mentioned during their interviews. Students that were late to class more than once, or missed more than one day of class or a combination of these factors were told they risked dismissal from the program. Case Managers would give those on the verge of dismissal the option to start another workshop at a later date. Mark, who was a participant in the two-week workshop, stated,

You know that you can’t be late or you get penalized. We have this little money thing where if you were late you were deducted. It’s kind of like when you are late at the job you get deductions from your pay so same here, so you late you lose money. If you are going to be absent or you know you can sign a notice you have to leave early you have to fill out a paper like an early release slip. It was just like a job.

Here Mark explains the way in which the facilitators structure the workshop so that it simulates an actual work situation. Participants are given the play dollars for which they are penalized and lose them for being absent or late. They are also rewarded with the play dollars for demonstrating positive behaviors. In his response, Mark compares this to what

might take place in a work situation if an employee is late for work and money might be deducted from their pay.

While some of the participants demonstrate an understanding of the structural aspects of the program that are used to aid their learning of certain skill sets, Carlos presented a different understanding of liminality of the workshop. Carlos shared his future plans after completion of the workshop, “After I complete workshop job search, then my GED, then going to college and getting into construction. Five years from now I see myself completing college and on the road to owning my own construction business.” Carlos’s response tells us that he has plans and future goals beyond the goal of the program to place him into employment. Employment is only one part of his future path, and the GUW program is his catalyst move beyond gaining employment but also obtaining his future goal to continue his education and possibly open his own company. This is an example of liminal space for Carlos, a “between period of time” (Turner, 2012).

The GUW program is based on a job-readiness curriculum. As a job readiness training program, it is structured to teach employment skills to those who participate, as a means of connecting them to work opportunities. What makes this program and its structures liminal is that it figuratively speaking sits between the participant’s old patterns and ways of being and their newfound confidence in developing new patterns, which they will use for enacting a new self post-workshop. The use of these structures and practices transition the participants into a new place and space.

**RQ 3: In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training programs influence the development of an unemployed adult's learner identity?**

Emerging, within the liminal space of the GUW program as an influence on their identity as learners were the skills that participants were to learn from the curriculum. Both participants and facilitators spoke about the preparation participants needed as they transitioned into the next phase of their lives.

**Skill Theme.** Prior knowledge as well as a willingness to adjust was important in how the participants gained the needed skills to move their journey forward in their search for employment. The liminal aspects of the program, i.e. the structure, provided a framework in which the participants were provided access to the skill-sets meant to aid them in their search for employment. The seven participants were able to reify the learned concepts into their own lives, but how they did that seemed to be based on their ages and lived experiences. Younger participants, with little or no work history, learned new skills such as the proper way of completing job applications for the first time and conducting an interview properly. However, older participants, with a work history, talked about how the program reinforced skills they already knew. Both younger and more mature participants shared how the structure of the program impacted their attitudes toward learning and becoming further involved in additional forms of learning. Curtis, who is 21 and has had some college experience, shared

[The program] is set up like school. Half of the time is like a regular day at school and the other times its like you are doing your own research project and you're getting you're information from the computer, but then it's also hands on as well. It was like I was in 2nd grade and we had teams and that was a good flashback and all the worksheets we did and they graded them and having to re-do them.

Here Curtis expresses how the set-up of the program reminded him of his earlier experiences in grade school with the structure of the classroom and the assignments. Curtis does not have much work experience, so he reflected back to elementary school as a point of comparison. He also revealed that a portion of the workshop was also self-directed in that participants are given time to do their own research. In the case of the GUW program, the research he did was concerning job or career exploration. So we see here where the program was structured in such a way to allow participants the time to practice the learned skill set before taking them out into the environment beyond the workshop.

Curtis later points out his desire to return to school when he met a former classmate who comes back in to visit the program. “I am going to try and go to welding I really like working with my hands and I have seen the stuff you can do. When I was 14 I messed around with copper and soldering.” Curtis’s desire to go back to school to take up welding is a mixture of the socializing he has done within the program with other participants, but also connected to an earlier experience he had as a child.

Carlos, who is also one of the younger participants’, shared that,

I learned a lot in high school, but [in the program] I learned better interview questions and how to do an interview. The interview, I can say, determines whether you are going to get the job or not. I believe when you go on the interview they look at you and they get to talk to you more and are like wow I can’t believe you have this on your record and they look past that and they look past judgment or they look past my record.

Prior knowledge and experience was common among participants in the GUW program. The context in which that knowledge came from seemed to be based on the age of the participants and their life experience. Because GUW does not parcel out students

based on age or level of experience when filling classes, students socialize together and share experiences. This socialization across ages and shared experiences also becomes a part of the liminal space of the GUW program for participants.

**RQ4. What are the ways the job-training programs shape the views of unemployed adults toward learning and continuing education?**

Interviews with the participants and the facilitators revealed that there were expectations not only of the participants in terms of their behaviors in the program but expectations of their future endeavors after successfully completing the program. Participants shared their plans about future employment and continuing their education, while also sharing how they expected to face rejection due to their criminal backgrounds.

**Expectation Theme:** Participants in this study held three types of expectations. The first was the expectation of stigmas and barriers they might face, from potential employers due to their background. They looked to the GUW program to help them in this area. Tied to this expectation was also the expectation that the program would assist them in learning how to openly and honestly discuss their felony records. The second was a newly formed expectation of gaining meaningful employment and having the confidence to speak to a potential employer about their background. The third expectation was that the next steps in their path was going to involve more than just obtaining employment, as all seven of the participants were making plans to continue their education.

Studies (Cross, 1992; Aslanian & Bricknell, 1980; Tønseth, 2015) in adult learning have examined what life circumstances have on the steps adults take toward a decision to participate in certain learning activities. In this study, the participants had a common precipitating life event that prompted them to participate in

the learning activity of the job-readiness program. In addition, through their participation in the GUW program they developed additional expectations resulting in desires to further seek out educational opportunities.

Seth talked about his expectation of the GUW as a program, which is unique in its ability to help him because of his background. “The help that you can get from the staff members going over things you are uncertain about. I didn’t get that from [another] program. I was in a program that wasn’t confident they could address my misdemeanor and search for a jobs that would accept my background.” So the GUW program had particular value to Seth, as they were able to teach him how to address his background to employers and thus connect him to a pool of potential employers. Seth also shared that he had plans to return to school after the completion of the GUW program. “I am looking at nursing or getting a masters in counseling.”

Nicole, who has a desire to continue her work in the medical field, came to the program with the expectation of getting an expungement of her criminal record.

I have a misdemeanor of carrying a concealed weapon I got that misdemeanor because I was in a relationship and I took a wrap for him so he wouldn’t go to trial. Now I am here so I can get my record expunged so that I can focus on my career goals that I have set for myself.

She, has a desire to continue in a field of work with which she has prior knowledge and experience. What had stopped her from continuing in her path was that she has a charge on her record that prevented her from continuing in the field. She came to GUW with the hope that the program would expunge her criminal record and allow her to reenter the field. She said, “I actually want to go back to school after this program I want to make sure first my record is clear because what I want to go to school for is nursing.” So for Nicole, the GUW program was

a path for her to not only overcome her barrier, but to get back on her path to continuing her education.

When it came to expectations toward future goals and learning, Mark pointed out his educational goal upon completing training after completing the job-readiness program. Mark was introduced to the program through a friend of the family who encouraged him to attend due to Mark's felony conviction. "Because of my background it's not easy [to find work]. When you have a felony its tough to go find that job so he [friend of the family] made the recommendation." Mark later connects this experience and opportunity to plans he has for continuing his education.

My goal is to complete [job-training], get employed, get a job right now. My all time goal is to go back to school and get my Associates in Business, I would like to become a talent scout for a record company. That's the big goal but you know there is steps and all of that like me having my own place and I have to get financially stable before I can start doing that.

Mark was one of the younger participants. During the interview Mark was unemployed and had not completed high school. One of the activities done in the workshop or as a part of activities in GUW was a process called career mapping. This process helps participants develop goals and action steps toward achieving said goals. It also provided them with an opportunity to research a field of interest and learn if it's a field that will be open to their criminal conviction. In Mark's case he was interested in manufacturing and through his research and developing a career map found out that there are employment opportunities in the field of manufacturing for those with felony convictions.

Mark, in his interview shared some of the steps he had laid out and expected to accomplish upon completing the job-readiness course. When I later checked in with Mark



weeks after our interview, he had obtained an entry level full-time job with a local manufacturing company and was enrolled in GED classes.

Participants entered into the workshop with some knowledge and understanding the program would benefit them in regards to gaining employment. What is more is that they also came into the program with an expectation that it would assist them in learning how to address their criminal background with potential employers. Through participation in the program they further gained the potentiality to further their education.

**RQ5: What are the ways in which this experience was transformative for them as learners?**

The last theme, which emerged from the data for this study, was background. Participants spoke about their ability to move beyond the label of felon or criminal that was placed on them by the mistakes in their past. They spoke in reference to the GUW program as a moment that helped them transform and work toward a future for themselves.

**Background Theme:** Each of the seven participants in this study openly discussed their criminal backgrounds as the foremost reason they selected the GUW program as the place they would seek assistance from in gaining employment. While it was not the intent of this study to discuss any of the participant's criminal convictions, it was a topic readily brought up when asked to discuss what meaning they got from the job-readiness workshop. When a participant has a criminal background, a history of arrest, time served in prison, or multiple convictions, they often find it difficult and challenging to obtain employment or find employers even willing to consider them for work. If a position requires an employee to work with or around protected populations

i.e. seniors, the disabled, or children employers may be selective in their hiring process and disregard those with felonies and misdemeanors in their background. Curtis put it well when he said,

I have learned that I am not the person that piece of paper [arrest record] makes me out to be. I am my own individual who just made a huge mistake and I have learned from it and I can be a valuable member of society. I am stronger than I give myself credit for.

Curtis in this statement displayed a newfound level of confidence in himself that he gained through his participation in the GUW program. He went on to say,

I can talk from personal experience it [the program] not only helped me get job-ready, but it helped me rediscover myself and realize that there is hope for a felon in the job world. I mean there is this part of the back of my mind when I think there are my friends that are in their senior year for at OSU, and I am here. I am here because I have a felony so it was humbling and it made me realize I am not alone and made me think I am probably stronger than the people who I went to high school with by being able to survive a felony conviction and then be humble enough to come here and ask for help.

This experience has been a transformative one for Curtis. In his statements he explained some of the personal changes that took place because of this workshop, but he also talked about how his own personal perspective changed when he contrasted his experience, in the workshop, to the experience of friends who are in college.

Mark brought up his criminal background when he mentioned how a friend of the family in a similar situation recommended he go to the program in order to learn how to discuss his felony.

My mother's a barber and she was cutting a client's hair and my name was brought up. The guy was recently through this program [and] referred me and said this would probably be a nice program and would be beneficial for me. Because of my background and its not easy when you have a

felony its tough to go find a job. So my mother told me about it and I gave it a try.

Mark during our discussion talked with a great deal of confidence, and at one point during the interview he even says, “I came in already with a little knowledge, but I didn’t want it to seem like I got a big head so I am still taking the advice the whole time.” But following that he readily admitted needing the help of the program to deal with talking about his conviction. “I tried to apply for jobs before but people hear my record and they automatically see a felon and that I’m all bad. It’s [the program] taught me how to approach the interviewer better. Even with all his confidence, Mark pointed out his difficulty dealing with the stigma employers have toward individuals with felonies. He shares that the program has provided him with the opportunity to learn a different approach with interviewers when discussing his felony and background. Judy, one of the facilitators discussed this point, made by Mark, of the stigma that individuals face from society in her comment,

I would say a sense of self worth from where they have come in the past and how society thinks and categorizes people who have convictions in their backgrounds. It can be very challenging when you made a poor decision and you regret it and you feel like you are labeled with the scarlet letter on yourself. I think again going back to that sense of hope and feeling that they can work through it that there are places with opportunities for them.

Judy, in her years of working with participants in the job-readiness training programs, has witnessed the challenges, stigma, and barriers participants continually face because of their poor decisions in their past as they search for employment. She also pointed out that a time comes when individuals are transformed as they transition and gain a sense of hope for their futures due to their participation in the program. “One of the biggest things is that they see themselves differently and where there was a certain amount of

discouragement and hopelessness I think they are more hopeful about the future based on going through the program.”

Through Judy and Mark’s comments we gain the understanding that the participants have changed not only behaviorally, but they have reified their belief system about their self as well. Behaviorally they have acquired the skills of appropriately conducting an interview with a potential employer and discussing their convictions. Additionally, they developed a different belief system about their potential futures and ability to obtain employment.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this research was to answer the question how do unemployed adults make sense of their experience within the liminal space of a job-readiness training program. Guiding my investigation into understanding how this space influenced an unemployed adult’s learner identity and why this is important to the field of adult and continuing education I asked the following questions:

1. What meaning do unemployed adults make out of their experience going through job-training programs?
2. What are the liminal aspects of job-training programs?
3. In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training programs influence the development of an unemployed adult’s learner identity?
4. What are the ways job-training programs shape the views of unemployed adults toward learning and continuing education?
5. . What are the ways in which this experience was transformative for them as learners?

While a discussion of criminal backgrounds was not part of my original research proposal, or the questions I asked during the structured interviews, participants comfortably discussed this as being an important factor for motivating them to be in the GUW program. The experience of going through the GUW job-training program meant gaining knowledge in how to address their backgrounds. In addition they found the support of an organization and community of others to be very meaningful for their journeys venturing out beyond the program to seek employment. In both the two-week and four-week program the participants believed that the program further increased their self-confidence. Whether it was helping them get through a depressing and challenging part of their lives or giving them courage to discuss their conviction with a potential employer

Additionally, the participants in this study felt supported by the staff of the agency, their classmates, and others who had been through the program prior. When it came to learning though, while the students did learn in the traditional sense of a classroom most felt that they entered the program with a set of professional skills already. This was reinforced by, the facilitator, Marsha's comment that many students come into the setting with some college and some understanding of professional skills. While this may have been the case the participants still believed the program to be beneficial and worth their time. Lastly, what came out about their experience was that all students had some form of criminal background uniting them and placing them in the program. The students felt that going through the program was a way of starting over new.

Finally, we see that the participants were able to enter a liminal space, betwixt and between, and leave it transformed to a certain degree based on new skills confidence in themselves, and most importantly with a new vision and path for their lives.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

This chapter provides a summary of the research study and a discussion of my findings as they relate to my larger research question and the conceptual framework shaping the study. Following the summary of the study, I provide my three conclusions that are framed using the major themes of this study in addition to literature on adult learning, workforce development, identity development, and liminal spaces. I will conclude the chapter with the limitations of this research, recommendations for future research in this area, and my final thoughts on this study.

#### **Summary of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how the liminality of job-readiness training programs influenced the identities of unemployed adults. Guiding this research investigation into understanding how these spaces influenced an unemployed adult's identity and why this is important to the field of adult and continuing education I addressed the following research questions:

1. What meaning do unemployed adults make out of their experience going through job-training programs

2. What are the liminal aspects of job-training programs?
3. In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training programs influence the development of an unemployed adult's learner identity?
4. What are the ways the job-training programs shape the views of unemployed adults toward learning and continuing education?
5. Are there ways in which this experience was transformative for them as learners?

The answer to the above research questions address the problem statement laid out earlier in this study on whether unemployed adults are only motivated to participate in job-training programs out of a desire to gain employment, or are there other factors in their lives that as practitioners and researchers we are unaware of that motivate their participation as learners?

Upon conclusion of the literature review, I established that there are a plethora of studies that examine adult learners, who are unemployed and transitioning through formal institutions of learning, but few empirically examine how unemployed adults construct meaning from their experience of transitioning through a non-formal learning environment of a job-training program. Through the use of a qualitative case study, I was able to investigate the experiences of a group of seven unemployed adults for the purposes of understanding their transitions and transformations as learners through the liminal space of the Geared Up for Work (GUW) program.

GUW is a community based not for profit organization located downtown in a midsize urban city in Northeast Ohio. The company helps both adults and young adults



who are unemployed and underemployed. Additionally, GUW serves adults who have barriers to employment such as criminal convictions, misdemeanors, and possibly time served in prison. GUW programs work to connect its clients to employment networks, learn and discuss their criminal as well as employment background with potential employer, and improve their professional skills.

Programs for GUW are situated at a central downtown location and several offsite locations serving clients throughout the city and one first ring suburb. For the purposes of this study, I focused on participants located at the downtown location who were participants in either the two-week or four-week workshops.

For this study, I collected program data through the observation of job-training workshops, interviews with workshop participants, interviews with workshop facilitators, and a review of program curriculum for the agency. Concluding the collection of my data, I found the following overarching themes: 1) Confidence, 2) Structure, 3) Skill, 4) Expectations, 5) Background, and 6) Support. Through these six themes I was able to answer my five research questions and thus generate the three conclusions, which I will discuss next.

## **Conclusions**

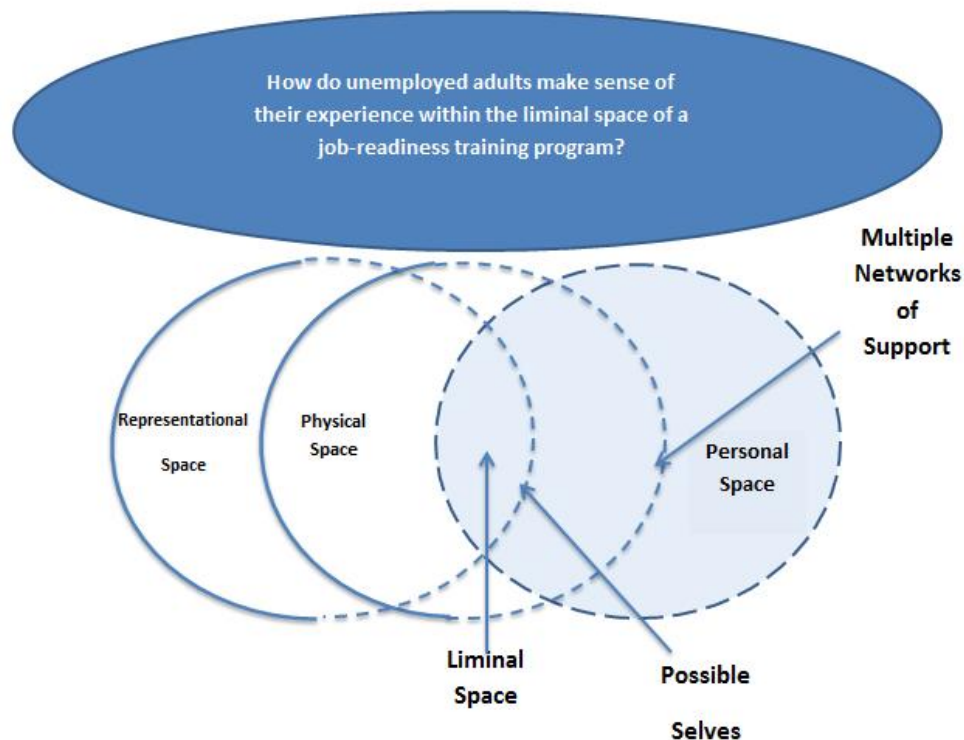
After analyzing my data from the observations of the four-week and two-week workshops, participant and facilitator interviews, and review of curriculum the following six themes emerged answering the above five research questions, confidence, structure, skill, expectations, background, and support. Having provided examples of these six themes in my findings chapter, I next discuss my three overall conclusions to this study and its findings connecting the major themes to the literature on learner identity in liminal

spaces, the importance of multiple networks of support, and the use of liminal spaces to mirror and reflect the next space learners will enter. Furthermore I demonstrate how my original conceptual model has changed to include my findings and conclusions to this study.

The overall conclusions to this study are:

1. Participant in job training programs enter into the liminal space with an identity of a learner, but require reinforcement to gain self-confidence in order to continue developing and making progress toward their possible selves.
2. Multiple networks of support help unemployed adults with backgrounds create meaning of their past and current experiences as they transition through job-training programs
3. The liminal structure of the job-training program affects the expectations of participants as it mirrors the period of the job search process as well as the rituals and practices of employment to set the participants on a path toward success.

**Figure 2. Revised Conceptual Model**



**Possible Selves.** The first conclusion of this study has to do with possible selves, which are future-oriented identities symbolizing how learners conceive of themselves as they hope to become. In developing a future-oriented concept of him or herself, the learner is influenced by past representations “to the extent that past possible selves will be reactivated when certain situations in the present trigger a past experience” (p. 61). Operating from a place of possible self, individuals experience a process of transition from an old identity to an imagined future identity. In a study on possible selves, Rossiter (2009) focused on career transitions for nontraditional undergraduate adult learners. Using possible selves as a framework she sought to understand the career changes and identity transitions of nontraditional students. What she concluded, using possible selves as a framework was that first possible selves provides a different and unique approach

when working with adults in career and/or educational transition. Second, possible selves direct educators to the actual process and importance of the liminal period learners experience as they transition. Third, the liminal period of possible selves provides opportunity for exploration of career, personal, and educational goals. Finally, she notes that possible selves bring to the forefront the importance of support from educators during this transitional phase as guides in negotiating the process.

The participants in this study are positioning themselves to create new identities through the GUW program. Self-admitted, the participants had issues in their past, which they were attempting to overcome and required guidance to learn how to move beyond who they once were toward a future possible self. Participants, for this study, were placed into a space that provided the opportunity to visualize their prior selves, learn and explore new professional identities, while also visualizing their possible and future selves. Marsha, a facilitator, used the adage “sitting on a fence” when talking about where participants find themselves once they are a part of the GUW program. Mark, a participant, commented during the interview “it takes a lot of will power to come here every day. I don’t want to be unemployed. I want a career, I want a future, I want something because there is nothing out on the streets.” Participants, while in the liminal period of the program have an awareness of where they have come from as well as an awareness of where they are trying to go. With the assistance of program facilitators, participants work on transitioning from an old self-identity toward a new and more confident identity as either a person with a job or learning career, who happens to have a criminal background, but is no longer defined by their background.

In the instance of the participants of this study, possible selves brings to the forefront that identity is fluid and ongoing process of growth and development. Understanding identity as fluid is to also recognize that adult learners experience life events, which bring them to place their goals and pursuits on hold. At times it becomes necessary for learners to pause and find space in order to transition from a past identity to that of a possible and future self.

**Multiple Networks of Support.** The second conclusion of this study had to do with the multiple networks of support within the GUW program. In the GUW program workshop attendees make use of social capital within the multiple levels of networks that exist in the GUW program. In part, due to the overlapping of the representational, physical, and personal spaces the participants of this study interfaced with fellow classmates, former workshop attendees, and program staff while in the program. It was through these supportive relationships that networks were created, information exchanged and encouragement to persevere took place. The program, as a liminal space, became a conduit for individuals to interact and dialogue with others, outside of the space these relationships may have never had the opportunity to exist.

Each of these networks of relationships also came with some form of social capital. Using the work of Lin (2001), on social capital, Alfred points out the ways which social capital benefits the adult learner. However, as Alfred (2009) points out social capital does not come without some risk as well. In regards to the positive aspects of social capital, the program provided a space and time for the facilitation and transmitting of knowledge from those who are in the know to those in need of knowing. In the case of the job-training program those in the know could be seen as former program clients and

those needing to know where the current workshop attendees. During moments where both former and current attendees occupied the space, former attendees would share their successes in how they gained employment and how they believed the program worked for them. Curtis commented on an interaction he had with a former participant, which inspired him to want to explore a career in welding.

The former participants have social capital in the form of feedback, shared insight, and encouragement for those going through the program currently. The same could be also said of those former clients who obtained employment and shared in their success. Their social capital came in the form of affirmations of what worked and what it took for them to make that transition from a program participant to now someone on the other side with employment.

Also within the space, social capital was acquired by workshop attendees from the staff of GUW. Alfred (2009) points out how social networks with inside knowledge have the ability to influence those in power. In the GUW program, the staff has inside knowledge and power of what the needs of the employers are and what workshop attendees need to do in order to influence an employer's decision-making process. The staff of GUW, with connections to networks of employers, will speak to employers on behalf of successful workshop attendees serving as "credential to those seeking to enter into employing organizations" (pg. 6). Carlos made the comment "they help me get my foot in the door and I wouldn't have had that if I were going to do it on my own." The notion of serving as a credential, for the workshop attendee, means GUW as an organization puts itself out there as a supportive organization for the participants. In doing this it says to an employer the individual not only has skills, the agency vouches

for, but also comes with the backing of the organization. As Alfred (2009) states “it makes visible [the] individual’s assets that may not be apparent to those who do not hold membership in that person’s network” (p.6). The individuals of the GUW program are those individuals Alfred speaks about in this case. The participants of this study shared that they have experiences and skills, but often these skills go unrecognized due to the stigma of their criminal backgrounds that become a barrier to them gaining meaningful and long term employment.

One last way in which the multiple networks of support take shape within the space is through the use of teams. Workshop attendees, while in the workshop, were placed into teams. Teams competed against one another for different rewards and recognition. It was not uncommon during the workshop that team members would form bonds with one another. Teammates would group up and support each other throughout the four-week or two-week workshop. As a group, members would take personal responsibility for getting one another to class on time, providing food for one another, and helping teammates out with class assignments. Marsha, a facilitator, commented how participants express frustration at times trying to get through the two or four week workshops. For many of the participants, this was the first time in years they had sat in a structured classroom setting and been required to do work. When participants did experience moments of difficulty, workshop attendees would turn to their teammates for support. This level of support provided on a peer-to-peer level by the participants provided needed encouragement to come back another day and persist to forge ahead and to get to the end of the program. For several of the participants, finishing the program was the first time they had ever completed a class.

Alfred in her discussion on social capital points out that family, friends, and associates become important aspects of building social capital, which can be capitalized on during times of need and can be leveraged for capital gain (p. 5). In this instance participants relied on one another as support while in the workshop.

Alfred (2009) also points out the risk involved with using Bourdieu's social capital theory within marginalized populations. As a drawback, she points out that social capital as a resource can and is often distributed unevenly between those of different economic backgrounds. Those in higher positions of power, such as employers, may use their social capital to exclude those of lower economic status; in this case those with criminal backgrounds. This must be taken into consideration by organizations such as GUW when working to help participants enter into these networks. Through my observations of the GUW program, this risk does not escape those who plan and facilitate the program, but is something they are keenly aware of and work to assist participants with overcoming. In the case of GUW, participants in this study were unique because they each had criminal backgrounds as a barrier to gaining employment. So distinctive is the structure of the GUW program that both participants and facilitators were aware of the challenging dynamics that placed each participant within this program. Discussion of their backgrounds was a large component of the curriculum. It was therefore inevitable that participants and facilitators would discuss their backgrounds as a barrier to employment and the ways in which they would have to operate outside of the GUW program in order to gain employment.

In the instance of the physical context of the program, fluidity again comes into discussion as it relates to the flexible nature of the program boundaries. While the



program is a physical and solid space, it is also a space created to allow participants and former participants to interact within the space. It is also a space, which allows participants to interact and have access to the staff of GUW. While we have learned that the identity of adult learners is fluid, we are reminded that the learning spaces in which they participate must also have some level of fluidity as well in order to allow participants to experience networks of support.

**Liminal Space.** The last conclusion of this study is that of liminal space. Liminal space is not an actual space but a figurative space created by the interaction of the representational, physical, and personal space. Borrowing from Turner (2002) and Van Gennep's (1960) concept of the social anthropological term of liminality we gain some understanding of how human culture and societies develop rites of passages for its members as they transition through various life stages such as birth, marriages, parenthood, acceptance into religious communities and death. In his work Van Gennep (1960) proposes that there exist three phases to rites of passage that are similar among most cultures. First is the preliminary phase (separation), where the individual is separated from the world and culture they once knew, second is the liminaire phase (the marginal or liminal phase), the between or betwixt period where the person is not a part of their prior culture but they are also not yet part of the culture they are being prepared to enter, and third is the post-liminaire phase (aggregation). It is the final period of aggregation where the person leaves the liminal period and transitions into the new identity (Turner, 2002).

In a study that looked at college student retention, Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) looked at a liminal period in the life of a learner referred to as "studenthood." This

liminal period for the learner was a period of time bounded by criteria for when and how they entered college as well as criteria for how and when they exit. During this provisional period, milestones and achievements marked the studenthood or student identity. Similarly, the space of the job-readiness workshop became an integration of representational, physical and personal space—all combining together to create the liminal space for the workshop attendee. As a produced space (Lefebvre, 1991), it was marked with milestones and measurements of achievements specific to the curriculum of the G UW program that determined if a participant would successfully complete or not. The program as a space required them to learn how to complete resumes, fill out applications, and interview for a job. These programmatic aspects, although important and measured as outcomes to determine success by the program, were only one aspect determining the effectiveness of the program. Speaking to the participants of this study, success to them was seen as the ability to approach an employer with confidence in themselves and the ability to effectively speak about their criminal background. As Curtis put it during our interview,

It [the program] helps you realize you have to prepare and it also teaches you how to love yourself again. Its been since a year and a half since my conviction and I am finally to the point I can accept it and talk about it without going home and crying myself to sleep.

It's transformational moments like the one described by Curtis that created meaning in the lives of the participants. Those moments become the determining factor in how a program impacts the lives of its participants and its effectiveness in being able to change lives.

Once again the fluid nature of the GUW program is a necessary part of this discussion about the space of the program. The program with its curriculums, structures, and marked milestones physically represents the job search period and the physical workspace once someone gains employment. It becomes necessary to recognize this representational space as having some level of fluidness to its boundaries. While it is important to have structure, rules, and representations of the real work world, it is also necessary to recognize the diversity of learners that will participate in job-readiness program. With the diversity of learners participating also comes the diversity of career options and pathways into which learners may transition. It becomes difficult for programs to represent every career choice that may exist, but some level of flexibility is needed for helping learners understand how to transfer learned skills into other context.

### **Limitations of study**

The research was done as a qualitative case study. It is understood that case study research is not necessarily generalizable to the larger population, but meant to develop insight into how unemployed adults make meaning of their job-training experience in this particular case. Additionally, what further limits this study is the small sample size of participants used in the case. In my original proposal, I planned to do a multi-site case study of two organizations, but due to time constraints and the unavailability of one proposed organization I was limited to looking at just GUW. A final limitation of this study was my closeness to the case for this study. In chapter two I discussed the steps I took as a research and employee of GUW to distance myself from the case during data collection. While I took steps and made every effort to reduce bias, I am aware of

position of power within the organization and the impact it may have had on the dynamics of the study.

### **Further Research and Implications**

Operating out of a social constructivist paradigm for this study, I would propose further research that looks at the experiences and resilience of program clients beyond the liminal space of the program. Do those who successfully gain employment maintain their new level of confidence once they are no longer in the liminal space and face non-supportive employers? Studies could be done looking at participants who return to GUW asking them to report out on their experience once they are on the job and interacting with co-workers and employers. Do they see a transition of what they learned through the representational space into the real space?

In addition, I would suggest, further research that expands on understanding the facilitator and his or her stance in the job-training program, in particular when it comes to working with adult learners with barriers such as criminal convictions. As Rossiter (2009) points out the educator plays a pivotal role in how possible selves' plays out within the classroom. Finally, another study would be to look at multiple job-training sites that use different methods within similar populations. This would broaden the perspective of this study to see if it is truly transferrable outside of this study site.

An important implication that this study highlights is that more than content is required to help unemployed adults be successful. Administrators, program planners and educators need to see these programs as liminal spaces where they need to create for clients a system of multiple networks and opportunities to see their future possible selves as learners who can move beyond their pasts and thrive.

## **Final Thoughts**

In doing this study, I sought to examine a job-readiness training program for unemployed adult learners to better understand how the unemployed make sense of their experiences within the liminal space of the training program. I gained insight into one particular agency that works with individuals with criminal backgrounds. I concluded that the liminality of the job-training program provided a space for learners to reconnect with their prior identities as learners and make plans on developing their future identities. Learning and education were already a part of their identities, but due to personal challenges and barriers it was also something they had to put-off and delay. The program served as a place and space for them to work through these challenges and barriers in order to move forward.

This study further demonstrates the fluid nature of the participant's identity similar to the fluid and liminal nature of the program space. As learners reflect on past identities they further begin to imagine possible and future identities as they interact with the physical space and others within the space.

I opened this study with the story of Nicole, who entered the G UW program because she believed the program would assist her in expunging a weapons charge from her background. She hoped that removing this misdemeanor from her background would allow her the opportunity to return to the work she loved in the medical field. While participating in the G UW program, Nicole learned that expungement was something that was done on a case by case situation and that even with her record expunged she would not be able to re-enter working in the medical field. What Nicole also discovered was that she had a passion for learning, a passion that she had lost her focus on once she had her

daughter and she got a weapons charge. While Nicole loved the medical field and did very well in it, she also gained many transferrable skills, which would serve her well in other career paths. Nicole needed an opportunity to learn not only how to talk about her background to an employer; she needed to learn a way to market the skills she had within other industries. The space and place of the GUW program allowed her to do both. Many urban adult learners, similar to Nicole and the other six participants, are struggling with challenges and barriers that we as educators and planners of programs often do not see or choose to overlook. Many are in need of similar opportunities to experience supportive spaces of learning in order to work through their challenges and barriers and reconnect with prior aspects of themselves as learners and develop a possible self with newfound confidence.

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## **APPENDICES**



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**Appendix A**

**Participant Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

I \_\_\_\_\_ agree to volunteer to take part in a study.

- My taking part in this study is voluntary.
- I may stop at anytime without giving reason and with no consequence.
- I can ask to have all my information returned and removed from the research.
- I know the study is about the experiences of adults in job programs.
- I understand there are no direct benefits to me.
- My input may help to understand more about job training programs.
- By sharing my story, I may gain some personal insights on my experience.
- I have been informed I may ask questions at any time for anything I would like explained better. Also, I have been told I will receive a signed copy of this form to take with me.
- If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:
  - a. Agreeing to take part will mean the researcher will take notes during the workshop. I agree to two interviews with the researcher. Each interview will last no more than one to one-half hours. The first will be an interview using a tape recorder. Interview questions will focus on
    - i. my experience in the workshop
    - ii. my work history
    - iii. my future career plans and
    - iv. my educational plans
  - b. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded and that the interviewer will take my words and turn them into a story about my experience.
  - c. In the second interview, I will look over my written story from the first interview. I can then make any comments or changes that I want. After



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reviewing my story, the story and any changes will be returned to the researcher.

- I understand some discomfort and stresses may occur, but they will not be more than I would face in my normal daily life.
- During the interview, the topic of barriers to employment will come up. This may lead in some cases to a discussion of my background and personal items. If for any reason, I do not feel right discussing this topic, I can say so and only answer what I feel comfortable talking about. I have the right not to provide personal details that make me feel uncomfortable. The questions asked of me will not directly inquire whether I have a criminal background or not.
- I have read the attached copy of the interview questions and know the questions I will be asked. If at any point I feel uncomfortable during the interview, I have the right to let the researcher know and stop the interview.
- All information collected during this study will be kept confidential.
- All interviews, notes, consent forms, and contact information will be kept at Cleveland State University, MC 212 in a locked file cabinet for at least three years.
- Any publications from this research will use a fake name to protect my identity. The audio recording of my interview will be destroyed at the completion of the study's write-up, December 2015.
- I understand the researcher will answer my questions about the research now or during the course of the project.
- I also understand the researcher can be reached at 216-255-8368 or by email at [a.adkisson@vikes.csuohio.edu](mailto:a.adkisson@vikes.csuohio.edu)
- I understand participation is as a volunteer. I may stop at any time.





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It is the hope of the researcher that you enjoy this chance to share your experiences with others.

Thank you very much for volunteering.

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records.

**Consent Statement and Signature:**

***I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject I can contact the CSU Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630,***

_____	_____	
_____		
Name of Participant (please print)	Participant Signature	Date

_____	_____	
_____		
Name of Researcher	Researcher Signature	Date

Anthony Adkisson  
Phone: 216-255-8368  
Email: [a.adkisson@vikes.csuohio.edu](mailto:a.adkisson@vikes.csuohio.edu)

PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES AND RETURN ONE TO THE RESEARCHER



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## **Appendix B**

### **Facilitator Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

#### **The Unemployed Adult in the Liminal Space of a Job-training Program: Experiences and Transformations of Adult Learner Identities**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Catherine Monaghan, 216-687-5509

**Co-Principle Investigator:** Anthony Adkisson, 216-255-8368

You are being invited to participate in a research study, which will inform the doctoral dissertation of the Co-Principle Investigator named above. This form provides information on the details of this project, what will be required of you, and any associated risk as well as benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from this study at any time by contacting the above investigators. Please review the following information carefully. Know that you may ask any questions for clarity at any time for anything you do not understand or would like further explanation of. In addition, you will receive a signed copy of this form to take with you.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is the examination of unemployed adult learner experiences within workforce job-readiness training programs. It is the intention of this study to answer the question of do job readiness training programs operate as liminal spaces influencing the development and learner identity of participants? Data from this research will potentially aid in addressing how unemployed adults view themselves as learners and the impact that these spaces of learning have on their motivation to seek out continual forms of education. In order to examine how this happens, within a job training program this research will center on addressing the following questions: 1) What meaning does an unemployed adult make out of his or her experience going through a job-training program? 2) What are the liminal aspects of the job-training program? 3) In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training program influence the development of an unemployed adult's learner identity? 4) What are the ways the job-training program shapes the views of the unemployed adults toward learning and continued education? and 5) What are the ways in which these learning experience are transformative for the learner?

It is the plan of this study to answer the above questions by observing and interviewing unemployed adult women and men who currently participate in your job-training program. It is the hope of this research to demonstrate that job-training programs have the unexpected potential to do more than just prepare marginal populations of adults with job skills but to also impact how unemployed adults see themselves as learners.



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**Procedures:** The study will include a one day observation of your agencies job-training program, audio recorded interviews with both facilitators and participants, and a review of curriculum where data will be collected on the ways in which individuals interact and participate in the workshop. I will solicit the participation of a program facilitator such as yourself and 3 to 5 participants. The facilitators and participants will have the chance to engage in one on one interview where they will answer questions about their experience in the job-training program. Everyone participating in this study will have the opportunity to have their identity protected by the use of pseudonyms in place of their real name. The interviews will consist of one session with the facilitator and two sessions with the participants. The first round of interviews will be an informal discussion, which I will do an audio recording of your answers to my interview questions for later data analysis. Questions in the interview will cover topics such as work history, experience participating in the job-training program, and plans for future career and educational ambitions. Questions for the facilitators will consist of providing information on the structure and format of the workshop. Data collected from the first round of interviews I will use to develop a narrative of the participants experiences. I will during the second interview share the developed narrative for additional feedback with the participants. For additional information and analysis, I will collect and record certain demographic information of consenting facilitators and participants such as age, gender, level of education, and current level of employment.

**Benefits:** While there are no direct benefits of this study, participants of this study may benefit by having the opportunity to reflect on their development as learners and the impact programs have on their future careers. Further benefit may be the additional opportunity that facilitators teaching job readiness programs will have in better understanding how their courses serve unemployed adults with barriers and understanding their future goals and aspirations as it relates to developing pathways to learning and continued education.

**Risk:** As with any research study, some discomforts and stresses may occur but the discomfort and/or stresses are not expected to be beyond those of daily living for the facilitator. During interviews the topic of barriers participants have to employment, which in some cases may include items such as felonies, misdemeanors, or other personal items may come up as a part of our discussion. It is not the intention of this research to explore particular barriers participants may face. You have the right to not provide personal details you may be aware of concerning participants that make you feel uncomfortable. The questions you will be asked do not directly inquire about participant convictions. Below I have attached a copy of the interview questions for you to review. If at any point you feel uncomfortable answering questions during the interview, you have the right to stop.



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**Privacy and Confidentiality:** All information gathered during this study will be kept confidential. All interviews, notes, consent forms, and contact information will be kept at Cleveland State University, MC 212 in a locked file cabinet in the office of the principal investigator named above for at least three years. Any publications from this research will use pseudonyms to protect my identity. The recording of my interview will be destroyed at the completion of the study's write-up, December 2016.

**Voluntary Participation:** Taking part in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw without consequence to you or the program at any time.

**Consent Statement and Signature:**

*I understand the proposed research and my responsibility of my organizations. If I have any questions about going forward about this research project I can contact the CSU Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630, or either of the investigators named above.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Facilitator (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Agency

\_\_\_\_\_  
Facilitator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Signature

Contact Info.:

Anthony Adkisson

Phone: 216-255-8368

Email: [a.adkisson@vikes.csuohio.edu](mailto:a.adkisson@vikes.csuohio.edu)

*Mailing Address: 2121 Euclid Avenue, JH 275, Cleveland, Ohio 44115*

*Campus Location: Julka Hall 275, 2485 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, Ohio*

*P: 216-687-4613 F: 216-687-5378*



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## **Appendix C**

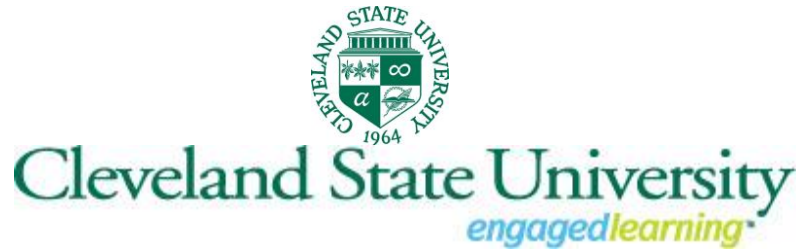
### **Recruitment Script**

#### **The Unemployed Adult in the Liminal Space of a Job-training Program: Experiences and Transformations of Adult Learner Identities Cleveland State University**

Hello, my name is Anthony Adkisson; I am a student at Cleveland State University. I am currently working on completing my dissertation in Adult, Continuing, and Higher Education. As a part of completing my program, I would like to conduct some observations and interviews with some of you who are currently in this workshop. The research I am conducting is looking at how job-training programs, such as the one you are in, influence your identities as learners. In other words, do trainings such as this one have the ability to motivate you transform how you envision yourself as a learner? If they do, what are the aspects of the training that impact your identity as a learner and are there ways those characteristics can be replicated in other job training programs with unemployed adults.

In order to do this I am soliciting your participation in this study. I will be doing classroom observations of the job training class and interviews with those who are interested in sitting down for a one on one personal interview. My observation of the classroom will involve sitting in on a training session and taking notes on the types of things you are learning and how those students whose permission I receive participate within the class. For those who are not interested you need not do anything. For those who would like to participate, instead of using your name I will use a pseudonym or fake name to reference you in the study. I will also sit down with each of you who decide to be a part of the study to explain the process of how I will collect information from you for the interview portion of the study.

If you would be interested in learning more about the study and participating in the study please place your name, phone number, and email address on the sheet I will pass around now. I will use this information only so that I can contact you to provide more information and set up a time with you following the observations to conduct an interview. Again, if you are not interested in being a part of the study you do not have to do anything. If you also have questions about the study please feel free to ask them now.



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**Participant Criteria:**

1. Participant must be in good standing with host organization
2. Participant must identify as both unemployed and currently seeking employment
3. Participant must be age 18 years or older and hold at least one adult social role i.e.
  - a. Parent/caregiver
  - b. Prior employment
  - c. Have participated or completed some form of post-secondary education or training

Name	Phone Number	Email Address	Pseudonym	Host Agency

## Appendix D

### Research Questions Protocol for Participants

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee (Pseudonym): \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Facilitator: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently employed: Yes No

If no, how long have you been unemployed?

Highest Level of Education Completed?

- ☐ Did not complete High School
- ☐ Completed High School
- ☐ GED
- ☐ 1-2 years of higher education
- ☐ 2 or more years of higher education

Interview Checklist:

- \_\_\_\_\_ A: Research Explained
- \_\_\_\_\_ B: Follow-up Contact information provided
- \_\_\_\_\_ C: Research Consent form signed and dated
- \_\_\_\_\_ D: Demographics collected
- \_\_\_\_\_ E: Interview Questions asked
- \_\_\_\_\_ F: Member Check Done

Other Topics Discussed: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Documents Obtained: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Post Interview Comments or Changes:

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Participant Interview Questions:

#### Research Question 1: *What meaning do unemployed adults make out of their experience of going through a job-training program?*

1. So tell me a little about yourself and what brought you to this program?
2. Talk to me about why you decided to come to a job readiness training program?
3. Can you talk to me about the set up of the program and what is expected of you while you are here?
4. Would you describe in your own words what this program does?
5. Talk to me some about what you first experience coming into this agency? What did you experience when you first went into a workshop? In what ways is it different from other classrooms or workshops you have experienced?
6. Before coming to this program, talk to me about how you searched for employment? What resources, tools, people, and networks did you depend on?
7. Talk about what the experience was like for you going through this program.
8. What were the things over the course of this program that were important to your experience?
9. Are there any things in particular that you wish the workshop included or provided but did not that you would have found useful in your job search?
10. Now that you have completed the workshop, what ways do you believe this will help you moving forward?
11. In what ways do you believe it is important for other adults such as yourself to go through programs similar to this?
12. What about your experiences here are different from someone trying to find work on his or her own without the program?
13. Have you participated in other job training programs before? If so what were they like? How long ago were they? Did you find employment through them? What happened to that employment? Why did you come back to another job training program? What will be different about this experience?
14. How long have you been in search of work?
15. What is next for you?



16. Can you tell me about the curriculum of the program – what you learned and how it was taught to you? What type of assignments did you have to complete?
17. Was there anything you learned or had to do that was unexpected?
18. Can you tell me about the friendship and relationships that developed out of the program?
19. What was one thing in particular that stood out for you about this program?
20. How do you think your facilitators would describe you and your class participation?
21. Having completed the program, what does that mean to you?
22. Is this a program you would recommend to others?

**Research Question 2: *What are the liminal aspects of job-training programs?***

1. What aspects of this program were beneficial to your experience?
2. What aspects of this program were not beneficial to your experience?
3. How do you see yourself using the tools of this program outside of this program?
4. How do you see this program as unique from what you might do on your own without the program?
5. What are the things that are unique about this program or process that you would not take place in other programs?
6. Were there any special routines that were a regular part of the program that were similar to rituals? Which of them were required by the program or where there any you developed on your own as a group?

**Research Question 3: *In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training programs influence the development of an unemployed adult's learner identity?***

1. What have you learned about yourself from this program that you may have not known before?
2. 5 years ago would you have imagined yourself participating in a program such as this one?

3. So, what is next for you now that you have completed the workshop?
4. In what ways do you believe this program has or will help you in making further transitions or changes in your life?

**Research Question 4: *What are the ways the job-training programs shape the views of unemployed adults towards work, learning, or continuing your education?***

1. What are you learning from this program that you did not know before?
2. What type of employment do you see yourself doing in the next 5-10 years?
3. What will be your plan of action if the next job you get is only short-term?
4. Aside from attending trainings like this – what are some other ways you think you might be able to improve getting longer term employment?
5. Prior to this program how long were you unemployed?
6. Are there other points in your life where you have experienced short or long term unemployment?
7. I see that you
  - a. (*Graduated/did not graduate*) from high school. Can you tell me about your experiences as a student in high school?
  - b. Obtained your GED. Can you talk to me about what motivated you to go back for your GED and complete that process?
  - c. (*Have some college experience/graduated college*). Can you tell me about your experiences as a student in college?
8. What current role does education play in your life?
9. How similar would you say going through a program like this is similar to going to school i.e. high school or college?
10. In what ways has this program potentially helped you to potentially seek out further education and training?
11. If you had the opportunity to return to school would you? Why or why not? What might you go for if you did return to school?

**Research Question 5: *Are there ways in which this experience was transformative for unemployed adults?***

1. In what ways do you think differently now about your approach to work since you have attended this program?
2. In what ways do you view education differently than you did prior to the program?
3. How has your image of yourself changed, if any, since attending this program?
4. Are there any major transformations or changes you feel have taken place with you because of this program?
5. What major changes or transformations do you feel you are going to make in your life now after completing the class?

## Appendix F

### Research Questions Protocol for Facilitators

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee (Pseudonym): \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Facilitator: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been employed with this agency: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Highest Level of Education Completed?

- ☐ Did not complete High School
- ☐ Completed High School
- ☐ GED
- ☐ 1-2 years of higher education
- ☐ 2 or more years of higher education

#### Interview Checklist:

\_\_\_\_\_ A: Research Explained

\_\_\_\_\_ B: Follow-up Contact information provided

\_\_\_\_\_ C: Research Consent form signed and dated

\_\_\_\_\_ D: Demographics collected

\_\_\_\_\_ E: Interview Questions asked

\_\_\_\_\_ F: Member Check Done

Other Topics Discussed: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Documents Obtained: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Post Interview Comments or Changes:

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix G

### Facilitator Interview Questions

#### Research Question 1: *What meaning do unemployed adults make out of their*

#### *experience of going through a job-training program?*

1. Tell me about the structure of the workshop; what is a participant likely to experience during the time-span of a workshop?
2. What particular moments stand out for you when you think about a learners experience in the program?
3. Can you describe the physical environment of the learning environment that the participants have access to?
4. What are some of the tools you use with the participants to aid them in their job search?
5. What are some of the tools students come into the workshop already equipped with?
6. What tools do you feel are going to be most important for the students to know after completing the workshop?
7. Are there any particular tools you think are missing from the workshop?
8. How do you see the program helping to connect students to employment after they complete the workshop?
9. Why do you feel it is important for unemployed adults to go through this program?
10. What recommendations would you provide to students who are considering entering into the program?
11. What type of relationships or friendships did the students develop in the program?

12. Can you tell me about the curriculum used in the program and the types of assignments students were expected to complete?

**Research Question 2: *What are the liminal aspects of job-training programs?***

1. What aspects of the workshop do you believe contribute to a participant's success?
2. Are there aspects missing from the program that you believe may contribute to a participant's success in gaining employment?
3. Are there certain practices that exist as part of this program that are rituals and expected for every class? If so can you talk about what they are and what makes them ritual practices?

**Research Question 3: *In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training programs influence the development of an unemployed adult's learner identity?***

1. In your opinion, how are the participants different upon completion of the program than they were when they started?
2. What comments do participants make about their ability to learn the material in the workshop?
3. So what is next for students in your program?
4. How do you believe this program has helped shape them or will help them in making a transition to the next phase of their life?

**Research Question 4: *What are the ways the job-training programs shape the views of unemployed adults towards work, learning, or continuing your education?***

1. What comments do participants make about going to school or furthering their education?

2. In what ways would you say this program is similar or dissimilar to school?

**Research Question 5: *Are there ways in which this experience was transformative for unemployed adults ?***

1. What dilemmas have you witnessed with learners in the workshop?
2. What comments if any do the participants make about their desire to continue their education?
3. What comments do the participants make about their ability to find work after completing the program?
4. What major changes or transformations have you seen take place with participants from the time they start the program till when they successfully complete?
5. Are there any major changes or transformations you believe participants will make in their lives in the future that may not be taking place right now?
6. What are the characteristics of those students who are more likely to make transformations in the direction of employment or education that come through your program?
7. What are the characteristics of those students who less likely to seek out employment or educational opportunities in your programs?

## **Appendix H**

### **Classroom Observation Guide**

#### **I. Physical Setting (What are some of the physical characteristics of the environment?)**

- a. How is the workshop set up?
- b. What are tools, objects, and resources in the workshop?
- c. Where is the workshop located in reference to other classrooms or offices?
- d. How do participants behave when they enter or leave the space?
- e. How do the facilitators behave when they enter or leave the space?

#### **II. Workshop Participants (How do the participants use the space?)**

- a. How many participants are in the workshop space?
- b. How many facilitators are in the workshop space?
- c. How do the participants interact with one another?
- d. How do the participants interact with the facilitator?
- e. Do the participants seem similar or different in age?

#### **III. Workshop Facilitators (How do the facilitators use the space?)**

- a. What tools does the instructor use to facilitate?
- b. How many instructors are there?
- c. How does the facilitator interact with the students?

#### **IV. Workshop Activities (What goes on in the space?)**

- a. What activities happen in the space?
- b. How are the activities sequenced?
- c. Do certain people participate in the activities?



- d. How is it decided who participates?

**V. Conversations**

- a. What are the conversations taking place?
- b. Who talks to whom?
- c. Who does the listening?
- d. Is there a particular time conversations happen?

## Appendix I

### Agency Form of Consent to Perform a Qualitative Case Study Research Investigation

At

#### Towards Employment

#### The Unemployed Adult in the Liminal Space of a Job-training Program: Experiences and Transformations of Adult Learner Identities Cleveland State University

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Catherine H. Monaghan, 216-687-5509

**Co-Principle Investigator:** Anthony Adkisson, M.Ed., 216-255-8368

Your agency has been selected to participate in a qualitative research study about the experiences and identity development of unemployed adult learners. This form will provide information on the details of the project, what will be required of your agency, staff, and program participants as well as the associated risk and benefits of the research. Your agency participation is voluntary and you as the agency representative may withdraw your consent at any time.

Please review the following carefully. Know that you may ask questions of either investigator for clarity at any time for anything you do not understand now or at a later point in the study. Your agency will receive a signed copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is the examination of unemployed adult learner experiences within workforce job-readiness training programs. It is the intention of this study to answer the question of do job readiness training programs operate as liminal spaces influencing the development and learner identity of participants? Data from this research will potentially aid in addressing how unemployed adults view themselves as learners and the impact that these spaces of learning have on their motivation to seek out continual forms of education. In order to examine how this happens, within a job training program this research will center on addressing the following questions: 1) What meaning does an unemployed adult make out of his or her experience going through a job-training program? 2) What are the liminal aspects of the job-training program? 3) In what ways do the liminal aspects of the job-training program influence the development of an unemployed adult's learner identity? 4) What are the ways the job-training program shapes the views of the unemployed adults toward learning and continued education? and 5) What are the ways in which these learning experience are transformative for the learner?

It is the plan of this study to answer the above questions by observing and interviewing unemployed adult women and men who currently participate in your job-training program. It is the hope of this research to demonstrate that job-training programs have the unexpected potential to do more than just prepare marginal populations of adults with job skills but to also impact how unemployed adults see themselves as learners.

**Procedures:** The study will include a one day observation of your agencies job-training program, interviews with both facilitators and participants, and a review of curriculum where data will be collected on the ways in which individuals interact and participate in the workshop. I will solicit the participation of a program facilitator and 3 to 5 participants. The facilitators and participants will have the chance to engage in one on

one interview where they will answer questions about their experience in the job-training program. Everyone participating in this study will have the opportunity to have their identity protected by the use of pseudonyms in place of their real name. The interviews will consist of two sessions. The first interview will be an informal discussion, which I will record for later data analysis. Questions in the interview will cover topics such as work history, experience participating in the job-training program, and plans for future career and educational ambitions. Questions for the facilitators will consist of providing information on the structure and format of the workshop. Data collected from the first interview I will use to develop a narrative of the participants experiences. I will during the second interview share the developed narrative for additional feedback. For additional information and analysis, I will collect and record certain demographic information of consenting facilitators and participants such as age, gender, level of education, and current level of employment.

**Benefits:** While there are no direct benefits of this study, participants of this study may benefit by having the opportunity to reflect on their development as learners and the impact programs have on their future careers. Further benefit may be the additional opportunity that agencies operating job-training programs have in their ability to better serve unemployed adults with barriers and understanding their future goals and aspirations as it relates to developing pathways to learning and continued education.

**Risk:** As with any research study, some discomforts and stresses may occur but the discomfort and/or stresses are not expected to be beyond those of daily living for the participant. Due to the nature of the interview, some participants may share their experiences in relation to why they are unemployed. Such experiences may at times be personal to the participant. Participants are informed ahead of time that they are not required to share or divulge any personal and private information they do not want. Any private information shared will be held in confidence and used only for the purposes of this study. In no manner will any personal information shared be connected back to the individual. Attached below is a copy of the interview questions for you to review.

**Privacy and Confidentiality:** All information gathered during this study will be kept confidential. All interviews, notes, consent forms, and contact information will be kept at Cleveland State University in a locked file cabinet in the office of the Principal Investigator named above destroyed at the end of 3 years.

**Voluntary Participation:** Taking part in this research is voluntary and participants as well as your agency may withdraw without consequence at any time.

**Consent Statement and Signature:**

*I understand the proposed research and the responsibility of my organization (\_\_\_\_\_). If I have any questions about going forward about this research project I can contact the CSU Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630, or either of the investigators named above.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Agency Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date