From Community College to University:

Preparing Community College Business Students for University Success

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the impact that a community college diploma has on students' confidence as well as on their decision to attend and be successful at university. It also looks at the extent to which transformational learning theory can help to explain this transition. There has been considerable research looking at transformational learning at the university level. There is very little research at the community college level looking at transformational learning. Specifically, this thesis explores the hypothesis that pedagogical actions that engage students in transformative learning give students the confidence in themselves and their skills to pursue university education and to feel more successful. The methodology used for this thesis was the personal interview. A series of one hour one on one interviews were conducted with 12 students who have made the transition from community college to university. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed to form the basis of the findings and discussion of this thesis. The thesis found that all 12 of the participants indicated that their confidence had improved. Additionally, 10 of the 12 participants indicated that this improvement in confidence affected their decision to further their education. Evidence is provided through the use of Mezirow's 10 phases of transformational learning that a transformational learning experience has occurred during the 2 year diploma program. This thesis has provided evidence that specific pedagogical actions have improved students' confidence and changed their views on their abilities through transformational learning enabled by critical reflection. This work may help to inform future curriculum development at both community college and university as well as teaching and

learning strategies. The work has also identified other areas of interest that future research may be able to build upon such as confidence improvement at community college vs university in the early years.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Until recently, many people in Nova Scotia have seen the community college as a place to acquire and develop knowledge and skills to enable a person to directly enter and be productive in the workforce. While job skills development continues to be a major goal of the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC), many students now use their community college education as a stepping stone to further learning at university. In recent years, NSCC has signed various articulation agreements with universities in Nova Scotia to provide NSCC School of Business students an opportunity to obtain a business degree following their time at NSCC.

This thesis explores the transition that business students experience as they move from diploma to degree. Specifically, it investigates the impact that a community college diploma has on students' confidence as learners as well as on their decision to attend and be successful at university. Information was gathered through a series of one-on-one interviews with business students at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). The majority of the students interviewed in this thesis had no intention while they were in community college of furthering their education beyond their diploma. However, many of these students experienced transformational learning through tdonoheir critical reflection of the independent learning skills they developed during their program, and gained confidence that ensues in their abilities as learners.

Background

During my 10 years as academic chair at Nova Scotia community college, I

witnessed hundreds of people change their lives or careers through their participation in

the business diploma program at NSCC. There are two very different groups of students

that attend NSCC. One group comes to community college from the workplace, often

with years of life and work experience; the second comes directly from high school.

Although there are differences between these two groups of students, the majority share

the common attribute of being non-traditional post-secondary students compared to those

who go directly to university. Many students attending NSCC directly from high school

are considered non-traditional post-secondary students for many of the same reasons as

the older cohort. For example, both groups of students may be working either part or full

time, have children, or be the first within their families to attend post-secondary

education. Kim, Sax, Lee and Hagedorn (2010) indicate that non-traditional students have

been defined for the most part as students who are older than 25 years. Traditional

students are generally 18-22 years of age within a university and begin as freshman direct

from high school. They argue, however, that criteria other than age must be considered

when determining whether a student should be considered a non-traditional student. They

state that non-traditional students often occupy multiple roles such as student, employee

and parent. When these characteristics are taken into account, the authors argue that the

majority of students enrolled in community colleges in the United States should be

considered to be non-traditional students regardless of age. In this thesis, I explore those

non-traditional community college students who chose to further their post-secondary

studies at university following completion of their NSCC business diploma to determine if transformational learning has occurred within this student group.

For the purpose of this thesis, Hirschy, Bremer, and Castellano's (2011) definition of "student success" will be used, "the degree to which individuals meet their educational goals" (p. 312). This student-focused definition of student success accurately sums up the notion of student success broadly held at the community college. Students set their own educational goals and meeting those goals is considered student success. Success may come in small doses for some students and large doses for others. Some students will build upon small successes and continue to develop and grow. Mirroring what happens at the community college, for the purposes of this thesis, the participants of the study have been encouraged to offer their own definitions of what student success means to them. This is important because many community college students are non-traditional post-secondary students. As such, I have resisted using traditional measures of student success such as high grades, full-time status, or on-time completion. Instead, student success in this thesis will include such factors as realizing that the student actually has the ability to perform at post-secondary level. Student success may be the building of self-confidence and self-esteem through meeting their educational goals.

Perspective transformation is a term used by Jack Mezirow to help explain how adults learn. Essentially, every person views the world through his or her own frame of reference. A perspective transformation occurs when, because of some transformational experience, a person changes his or her view or perspective and creates a new frame of

reference. Based upon the work of Brock (2010), it is evident that a perspective transformation can occur at the four-year degree level. Given that business administration students in a community college system are often non-traditional post-secondary students as defined by Kim, Sax, Lee and Hagedorn (2010) with many responsibilities outside of their school-based responsibilities compared to university students, is it possible that transformational learning can take place within a two-year community college setting? Understanding whether or not NSCC provides students with the opportunity to transform their worldviews while enrolled in its programs could significantly impact the teaching, learning and curriculum development in the College. It could shape the way NSCC interacts with and explores the world of business with its students. More importantly, understanding what it was that helped the students to transform their perspectives might help NSCC faculty and staff understand the impact they are having on students.

Mezirow (1997) defines transformative learning as "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience – associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses – frames of reference that define their life world" (p. 1). He adds that we use these frames of reference to help us understand our life experiences. Given that we have developed these frames of reference through which we view the world earlier in our lives and have used them, often successfully, to make sense of things we experience, we often tend not to accept easily new ideas or directions that do not fit within our current frames of reference. When transformational learning occurs, learners are able to alter their frame of reference

through a process of critical reflection. This allows new ideas to form and new experiences to occur.

Throughout their two-year diploma at NSCC, business students develop many skills related to their discipline. In addition, they develop strong independent learning skills necessary to make them successful at NSCC and, if they decide to continue studying, at university. However, it is not always the development of disciplinary knowledge or study skills that helps them to make the decision to proceed further or to be successful when they do so. It is the fact that community college students will experience a deep shift in fundamental aspects of their identities that places them in an unexpected and significant position of confidence in themselves as learners. This transformation in confidence in their skills often results in a decision to continue their studies at university. It is apparent that, by themselves, the development of skills or an increase in confidence would be insufficient to enhance the success of students. Rather, it is a combination of both, the development of the skills accompanied by an increase in confidence that comes from a critical reflection on those skills and experiences best prepares the learner for further study.

Jack Mezirow explains that it is our meaning perspectives that help us to understand or conceptualize our experiences. He also indicates that our meaning perspectives have a significant impact on things that we remember. He continues by noting that experiences that are compatible with our own meaning perspectives will be more memorable than those that are incompatible. Mezirow (1991) states, "If the

emotional stress of a conflict of beliefs causes us to transform a meaning perspective dramatically, that transformation will be remembered" (p. 38). Mezirow indicates that the major learning transformations that occur are transformations of our meaning perspectives. He argues that transformation theory is important in the study of both adult learning and adult development. He believes that perspective transformation is central to the development of adults in their learning and decision-making: "an essential point made in many studies … is that transformation can lead developmentally toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated perspective and that, insofar as it is possible, we all naturally move toward such an orientation. *This is what development means in adulthood*" (p. 155).

Based upon Mezirow's ten precursor steps to perspective transformation, which are listed below, Brock (2010) completed a survey of 256 undergraduate students in the United States to determine whether or not a perspective transformation occurred during their four-year undergraduate degree.

The 10 phases of Mezirow's transformative learning as described by Kitchenham (2008) are as follows:

Phase 1	A disorienting dilemma.
Phase 2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame.
Phase 3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural or psychic assumptions.
Phase 4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change.

Phase 5   Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and
               actions.

Phase 6   Planning of a course of action.

Phase 7   Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing
               one's plans.

Phase 8   Provisional trying of new roles

Phase 9   Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles
               and relationships.

Phase 10   A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions
               dictated by one's perspective. (p. 105)

From these 10 steps Brock (2010) was interested in determining whether or not

there was a perspective transformation in the students and, if so, which of the steps was

most prevalent for those who experienced transformative learning. He reports that 48.8%

of those responding to the survey indicated that they had experienced transformative

learning. All of the 10 precursor steps received checkmarks by some of the respondents.

However, the most common precursor step identified was that of a disorienting dilemma.

56 percent of those who experienced transformative learning claimed they had

experienced a disorienting dilemma during their learning. Another key finding of the

survey was that the more steps identified by a respondent, the more likely that they had

experienced a transformative learning experience. Additionally, those students who were

further along in their studies reported a greater incidence of transformative learning. The

fact that the longer the students were enrolled in their program the higher the incidence of

transformative learning was very interesting to me. I wanted to understand if, within a

one- or two-year program, community college students might actually experience

transformational learning to the same extent as they might in longer degree programs.

When determining a topic for this thesis, I wanted to ensure not only that the topic was something that I was interested in, but that would potentially be useful in my daily work and helpful to community college business educators. The information gathered from this research will be beneficial to community college schools of business and to college institutions as a whole. Any research that helps business educators understand our students' learning experiences, especially those that support deep and transformative shifts in the confidence of learners, promises to help further develop educational programming and services. The results of this research will be of interest to community colleges and universities that are collaborating in providing business education to students.

After graduating from community college many students enter the workforce and begin their careers. Alternatively, and increasingly, based on unprecedented and oftentimes fairly dramatic transformative learning, many continue their studies at university and complete their undergraduate degree. This thesis describes how a transformative learning experience in community college helped those students to decide to go on to university

Research Question

The primary question that I explore in this research is whether, during their two-year diploma program, community college graduates experience transformative learning

that affects their confidence as learners. A second question is whether the transformative learning experience at community college helped the students decide to further their post-secondary education at university. A third question is what it was at community college that facilitated their transformative experience.

Understanding that, despite their importance, these questions are very broad in nature, narrowing the question for this research down to a more specific topic was needed to provide a greater benefit to those at community colleges who wish to understand the changes our students go through during their time at community college. Having specified the group of students to be studied as being those who transferred to university from community college the thesis aim was to determine whether or not students are experiencing an improvement in their confidence as learners. The thesis also aimed to explore the effects that an improvement in confidence and feeling of success had in helping community college students make their decision to further their education at university. Finally, the thesis investigated whether a transformative teaching methodology that deliberately moved students from directed learners to self-directed learners throughout their program affected the confidence and feelings of success of community college students. I believed that answering these more directed questions would provide a better understanding of some of the reasons that college students feel confident enough to continue their studies at university. For example, determining that the deliberate transformative learning teaching methodology of bringing students from directed to self-directed learners over time has a positive effect on their confidence and readiness for university provides a basis for beginning to understand the larger questions

of whether or not students at college are actually experiencing a perspective transformation and the effect that this transformation has on their decisions to further their post-secondary education.

Burns (2010) points out that "extensive research shows the characteristics of students most likely to graduate are students who have strong high school preparation, enter college immediately after high school, come from high income families, have parents who attended college, and attend full-time uninterrupted" (p. 35). As previously noted, community college students are not traditional post-secondary students carrying with them all of the attributes required as listed above to guarantee success at the post-secondary level. When they started community college, the majority of students in this study did not see themselves as capable of being successful at university. They did not have confidence in their scholarly capacities. If they did, they would have been much more likely to have enrolled directly in a four-year university institution. So why would a non-traditional community college student upon completion of their diploma go on to further their education at a four-year university? What can account for the transformation in their abilities and in their confidence as learners?

The purpose of this thesis is to begin to answer this question and to identify specific teaching methodologies that help to build the confidence of students and contribute to student success as determined by the individual student within a two-year community college business program. I provide evidence for the assertion that student

success at community college is a significant factor in determining whether that student will continue their post-secondary studies at university.

Hypothesis

This thesis explores the hypothesis that pedagogical actions that engage students in transformative learning give students the confidence in themselves and their skills to pursue university education and to feel more successful as a result.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

There are many possible theories that might be used as the basis for studying the transition of community college students to university. Brock (2010), however, reveals the great power of Jack Mezirow's theory of "transformational learning" to uncover interesting things about the learning of community college students making a transition to university. Specifically, Brock applies Mezirow's 10 steps of transformation to a group of students at university to uncover interesting things about their learning. Given that community college students are not traditional students in the sense that they do not enter the university system directly from high school, and given that they may be older, may have had trouble in secondary school, or may have had many responsibilities outside of school such as work and family, Jack Mezirow's theory of transformational learning is a very appropriate underlying theory upon which to base this thesis.

During their time at NSCC, many non-traditional students, the majority of whom had no intention of pursuing a university degree, choose to follow the completion of their diploma to study at university. This indicates that, during their time at community college, a change must have occurred in their view of university education. Given this change in their own perspective about university, it is apparent that some form of transformation or change has occurred. This suggests that Mezirow's theory of

transformational learning should constitute an appropriate lens through which to view this development.

Transformation Theory

In an article for the *Journal of Transformative Education*, Andrew Kitchenham (2008) describes the evolution of Mezirow's transformative learning theory from inception in 1978 to 2008 by offering a timeline of changes and influences on transformative learning theory. He also notes that Mezirow conceived of his theory as part of a qualitative study that investigated the reentry of women to college and to the workforce after many years at home. The main outcome of his study was that, in addition to incremental kinds of learning, at some dramatic points in their lives, the women in the study often experienced significant, transformational learning that had major implications on the way they saw themselves, other people and their world.

In 1981, in order to come to grips with the type of learning processes that might underpin more transformative learning experiences, Mezirow turned to the work of Habermas and adopted his three domains of learning: technical, practical and emancipatory. Mezirow's adoption of Habermas's ideas was important in the development of his theory. By examining the work of Habermas, Mezirow was able to describe the type of learning required in order to ensure that a perspective transformation could happen. According to Kitchenham (2008) he described the perspective transformation as:

The emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the

structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see

ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more

inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new

understandings. (p. 109)

With this evolution of his theory, Mezirow was able to explain the underlying learning required as the basis of the theory. In 1991, Mezirow added an additional component to the theory by stressing the importance of altering present relationships and forging new ones. Additionally, Mezirow identified three different types of reflection: content, process and premise reflection. In 1995, Mezirow reemphasized how important self-reflection is in perspective transformation.

Through his theory of transformative learning Mezirow explains that our meaning perspectives help us understand or conceptualize things and events that we are exposed to via our senses. He also indicates that our meaning perspectives have a significant impact on things that we remember. We are more likely to remember events, situations and activities that line up with our own meaning perspectives. He goes on further to say that experiences that are compatible with our own meaning perspective will be more memorable than those that are incompatible. Mezirow (1991) states, "If the emotional stress of a conflict of beliefs causes us to transform a meaning perspective dramatically, that transformation will be remembered" (p. 38). Mezirow indicates that the major learning transformations that occur are transformations of our meaning perspectives.

Mezirow defines meaning perspectives as sets of habitual expectations that govern our perception, comprehension and our ability to remember. Our meaning perspectives are created according to Mezirow through our ideologies, learning styles and neurotic self-deceptions. An ideology for example could be our strong religious beliefs and/or morals that shape the way we look at the world. Learning styles are unique to each individual: some learn best through watching (visual), listening (auditory), or acting (hands on). Neurotic self-deception refers to the way that we behave socially which may not be a true representation of our motives and beliefs that occurs subconsciously. Mezirow also says that our meaning perspective is the way that we interpret and understand our activities. Importantly, Mezirow (1991) states that, "Experience strengthens our personal meaning system by refocusing or extending our expectations about how things are supposed to be" (p. 5). Mezirow suggests that we can use our internal meaning system to basically hide from the reality of a situation. The quote noted above is important to transformation theory and is the central idea of the theory. Through our learning experiences as adults, two very different things can happen. On the one hand, we can refocus our internal meaning system and take on a new outlook toward the world. On the other hand, we can reaffirm our existing meaning system. Mezirow (1991) defines learning as follows: "Learning may be understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (p. 12). This definition of learning implies that, in every action we undertake, we use our previously developed meaning system to interpret the new situation or learning opportunity and potentially change or update our

meaning system accordingly. Mezirow and Associates (2000) state that, "learning occurs in one of four ways: by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view or by transforming habits of mind" (p. 19). From Mezirow's perspective the only way to transform our frames of reference or habits of mind is through critical reflection.

Reflection is a key concept in transformational learning theory. Mezirow describes the difference between reflection and introspection clearly. Introspection, he points out is our awareness of what we are thinking, feeling or how we behave in certain situations. Reflection as similar to introspection in that we are aware of what we are thinking or feeling, or how we are behaving, but he adds that there is also a critique involved and subsequently a potential for changing our meaning perspective. Mezirow claims that we use introspection for the majority of our thinking. However, he indicates that the majority of research on learning has focused upon problem solving, perception and memory and that there has been a complete disregard of reflection. Mezirow (1991) argues, contrarily, that reflection "makes enlightened action and reinterpretation possible, especially for the crucial role that reflection plays in validating what has been learned" (p. 100).

Mezirow (1991) argues that transformation theory is important in the study of both adult learning and adult development. For him, perspective transformation is central to the development of adults in their learning and decision-making. As he states, "an essential point made in many studies, including my own . . . is that transformation can

lead developmentally toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable, and integrated

perspective and that, insofar as it is possible, we all naturally move toward such an

orientation. *This is what development means in adulthood*" (p. 155).

Mezirow (1991) further clarifies the difference between meaning schemes and

meaning perspectives. He argues that we constantly change our meaning schemes

(specific beliefs, attitudes and emotions) through reflection. However, he also argues that

our meaning perspectives are changed much less often and require significant self-

reflection and critique in order to change. As he relates:

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

Mezirow explains that a perspective transformation can be triggered by a series of

events over time or due to a significant incident such as a death, illness, loss of family or

loss of occupation. He refers to this event as a "disorienting dilemma" as phase one of

transformation. A disorienting dilemma, according to Mezirow, begins the transformation

process. He acknowledges that a disorienting dilemma can be caused by less innocuous

events such as an open discussion, reading, or exposure to other cultures. Regardless of

the type of event causing the disorienting dilemma, it is commonly experienced as painful

and often causes a person to question their personal values and/or belief systems. Mezirow and Associates (2000) point out that "transformative learning, especially when it involves subjective reframing, is often an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions undergirding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change" (p. 6).

Robert Kegan (2000) describes the difference between informational learning and transformational learning by distinguishing the effects they have on a person. He describes informational learning as learning designed to increase our skills and/or knowledge. He explains that this type of learning is crucial to society and uses the example of the airline pilot. Every passenger on board the plane would prefer that the pilot had spent the majority of his training on the technical aspects of keeping the plane in the air when it is supposed to be in the air and returning it safely to the ground during landing. Transformative learning on the other hand causes a person to critically think about the information they are receiving and potentially to reframe their views and change the way that they apply the informational learning. Kegan makes a strong point that both types of learning are crucial to the development and growth of people and society at large. Thought of broadly, informational learning can be seen as a process that keeps society moving along in its present form whereas transformational learning stimulates and supports personal and social change.

Some have criticized Mezirow's analysis of reflection. Malkki (2010) states, "Mezirow's theory implies a rather idealized and rational process of reflection, compared

to the understanding emerging from empirical studies. In fact, the insights emerging from empirical studies seem to suggest that reflection is more than a rational process, and that it is not always easy to carry out" (p. 43). The biggest criticism of Mezirow's critical reflection is that it does not take into account the non-rational, emotional and social aspects of reflection. At an anecdotal level, in my own experience with adult learners, I have noticed that when some adult learners are asked to reflect on their past for the purposes of portfolio development, they are often reluctant to explore any emotional difficulties or experiences that might be shaping their learning.

Merriam (2004) purports that, in order for individuals to perform a perspective transformation, they need to critically reflect on their disorienting dilemma. Merriam claims

> What I maintain here is that although transformative learning appears to lead to a more mature, more autonomous, more developed level of thinking, it might also be argued that to be able to engage in the process in the first place requires a certain level of development and in particular, cognitive development. (p. 61)

Although Merriam herself does not specify what level of cognitive development is required, I suspect that the majority of those adults who are capable of completing post-secondary work should have the cognitive ability to participate in critical reflection.

Transformation and Self-Directed Learning

There is ample evidence showing that, to be successful at university, students must have developed significant self-directed learning skills such as time management, study skills, stress management, independent reading skills, and goal setting among others. This thesis asserts that these self-directed learning skills are being developed at community college but it is not skill development alone that is prompting transformation. Students are critically reflecting on their skills and abilities as learners and building significant confidence in these abilities. It is this critical reflection on their newfound skills, the thesis will show, that seems to be catalyzing perspective transformation and that influences their decision to pursue further education at the university level.

Studies in the United States and Europe have found that when students transfer from community college to university, there is no significant difference to their achievement when compared with those students who started as freshmen within the university setting. Despite the paucity of research on community college/university transfer programs in Canada (and more specifically, Nova Scotia), there seems little reason to doubt that the broader research findings would also hold in this context as well. Of considerable interest, however, would be research examining transformative learning in community college students within Canada and more specifically within Nova Scotia. Understanding the connection between transformative learning and transfer success would be very significant as it would help explain ways non-traditional students eventually succeed at the university level.

Child et al. (2001), for instance, use the work of Taylor to build a definition of self-directed learning. In Taylor's work, they identify four phases of self-directed learning: disorientation, exploration, reorientation and equilibrium. Child et al. (2001) argue as learners pass through these phases, they essentially go through a transformation process that allows them to assume greater responsibility for their learning: "Although self-directed learning empowers learners to take increased responsibility for decisions related to learning, hence increasing their autonomy, student participants acknowledged that the process of becoming a self-directed learner is a painful one" (p. 121). They also noted that many students experienced frustration and periods of negativity during the transition phase, which required significant support from faculty. Relationships with faculty improved greatly as the students became closer with the faculty and there was less of an authoritarian relationship. They conclude that "continued experience and the opportunity to engage in self-directed learning activities enhanced students' confidence and they became increasingly involved in mutual goal setting, negotiation and collaboration with peers and faculty" (p. 121).

Schloemer and Brenan (2006), in their paper *From Students to Learners*, explain the benefits of self-regulated learning among business and specifically accounting students in developing lifelong learners. These authors describe how, in the very early stages of the courses, faculty members asked students to set very specific goals around their learning they also asked students to monitor their progress and alter their goals if necessary. Faculty members have observed that students tend to take a greater control over their own learning and therefore become more successful. They note that, "we have

used this process for developing self-regulated learners for over three years. During that time, we observed several changes in students' behaviours and attitudes. Student enthusiasm increases as they realize the impact of taking ownership for the learning process" (p. 83). Schloemer and Brenan's work is relevant to this study as it provides the linkage to lifelong learning and student success through the deliberate use of a self-directed learning methodology. At NSCC, many faculty members in the School of Business deliberately support the development of students from a very dependent state to a state of self-directed learning. This contributes to their students' confidence and success at university.

Fee, Prolman and Thomas (2009), in their study on students transferring from college to four-year university programs, found that the:

Opinions of transfer students suggested a continuing need for colleges to challenge students while providing support for success, the need for engaging pedagogy rather than straight lecture, for small classes and for accessibility of faculty – many of which factors students found lacking in former community colleges or large university settings. (p. 1214)

This article was based on the work by Light (2001), "Making the Most of College". This Harvard University study was one of the largest qualitative studies of the factors contributing to student success. Similar to the topic of this thesis, Fee, Prolman and Thomas investigated the factors supporting academic success within their smaller university. Their research is relevant to this thesis due to the fact that the student makeup

of both institutions is very similar. The university received an equal amount of freshman and transfer students annually allowing for a large sample size of approximately 300 transfer students. Data was collected in a similar way using focus groups, individual interviews and notes of researchers. The results of the study by Fee, Prolman and Thomas (2009) were similar to those produced in this thesis. They found that the factors contributing to a successful transition were small class sizes, connection to faculty, organization skills, time management skills as well as group work and case studies.

Dynan, Cate and Rhee (2008) studied 250 business students in a single course in both structured and unstructured learning environments. The authors believe that the development of self-directed learning skills within business students is a key to their ability to become lifelong learners upon leaving the institution.

Dynan, Cate and Rhee (20080 contend:

Ultimately, the skill of self-direction in learning is one that is essential for students and workers to remain lifelong learners. It is, at least in large part, up to professors to encourage and develop this skill in their students so that they will be equipped for educational opportunities beyond their formal education. (p. 100)

Based on the results of their study, they also indicate that it is possible to improve self-directed learning skills of students. This study suggests that, when courses are specifically designed to improve self-directed learning skills, students will succeed. In situations where the learning environment is unstructured, only students with developed self-directed learning skills will excel leaving other students feeling left behind. This is

very relevant to this study because faculty at NSCC deliberately and systematically develop the self-directed skills of students. That being said, this article focuses on university students as opposed to community college students. Therefore, would the same be true of community college students in their two-year diploma program?

Anecdotally, I have heard for many years from colleagues both within the community college system as well as the university system that business students who transfer into their third year of university from community college tend to be excellent students. I have often wondered if this anecdotal information is accurate and if so, what the reason might be that college students perform so well when they enter university as opposed to those students who enter university in their freshman year and complete their degree the more traditional way. Kennett and Maki (2014), reference a 2012 work of Drewes, Maki, Lew, Wilson and Stringham which indicates how college transfer students entering university from an articulation agreement received significantly higher grades and had a higher retention rate than those students who enter directly from high school. They also indicate that evidence is mounting to show that college transfer students are doing very well at university. They found that college and `university transfer students are well prepared. They believe that being a resourceful student is one of the keys to success. They also found that college transfer students tend to spend more time employed off campus and tend to have greater family responsibilities indicating that college transfer students tend to be non-traditional students. However, there is little evidence as to which factors are contributing to the success of the transfer students. This thesis will contribute information to help answer this specific question.

Kim, Sax, Lee and Hagedorn (2010) indicate that non-traditional students have been defined for the most part as students who are older than 25 years. Traditional students are generally 18-22 years of age within a university and begin as freshman direct from high school. They argue that criteria other than age must be considered when determining whether a student should be considered a traditional or non-traditional student. Kim et al. (2010), state that non-traditional students carry multiple roles including student, employee and parent. When these factors are included the authors argue that the majority of students enrolled in community colleges in the United States should be considered as non-traditional students regardless of age. Given the topic of this thesis, this article is suggesting that all community college students are considered non-traditional due to their age, work responsibilities as well as family responsibilities. They have chosen community college for the most part as a direct line to the workforce. This thesis is suggesting that a process of transformation happens to these non-traditional university students that encourages them to go to university following the completion of the community college diploma. The results of the study will help to inform colleges and universities as to why this transition takes place.

In her article, *Intellectual Development in the College Years*, Magolda (2006) describes students entering college as being uncritical. They often consider their teachers as being all-knowing. She believes that colleges must assist students in transforming their thinking processes from being all-accepting to being critical thinkers. I would suggest that, in order to think critically, it is necessary to be confident (even though it is possible to be confident and not a critical thinker). In her article, Magolda does not go into detail

as to how long a transformation to become a critical thinker generally takes. Nor does she differentiate between community college and university when looking at transformation. This piece of work is important in the context of this thesis because I am interested in determining whether or not a transformational experience happens within the college environment to encourage students to pursue their education further at university. Magolda believes that students entering are not thinking critically and therefore need to transform their world-views to think more critically and to challenge taken-for-granted knowledge.

Within the last few years, there have been considerable strides made in articulation agreements within Nova Scotia to allow community college students to transfer into degree granting institutions within the province. The acceptance of community college students unfortunately varies by institution within the province, as several universities still do not recognize the level of education received by community college graduates.

The belief that community college graduates are unprepared for university work is very dubious given the findings of Kennett and Maki (2014) mentioned previously and the findings of a study by Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) who conducted research to determine how well community college students integrate into their degree-granting institution. They indicated that there is very little research measuring the engagement levels of community college transfer students. To measure the level of engagement of community college transfer students, Ishitani and McKitrick used the NSSE (National

Survey of Student Engagement). They sampled a total of 535 students all of whom were seniors. Of the 535 students 118 of them were transfer students from a community college system. The authors indicated that the group of community college transfer students was older and also had a larger proportion of first generation post-secondary students. The institutional GPA for community college transfer students was slightly higher than those who were native to the institution starting as freshmen. However, they did find that community college transfer students were less likely to be engaged in their degree granting institutions than those students who started at the institution as freshman. Some of the rationale given for the differences included the fact that peer groups are already formed within freshman and sophomore years, therefore it is harder for transfer students to break into these groups. Factors identified by Kim et al. (2010), such as employment and family responsibilities, would also likely affect the engagement of community college transfer students in their degree-granting institution. During the course of this thesis, given that transfer students are not as engaged in the receiving institution as those students who enter directly from high school, it will be important to understand the implications on their transition and their feelings of success at the receiving institution.

Melguizo, Kienzl and Alfonso (2011) completed a study comparing the educational achievement of community college transfer students and students who started at their four-year institution as freshman. The authors indicated that recent studies have shown a significant increase in students using community college as a pathway to completing the four-year requirements of a degree. They contend that, "this question is

relevant because nearly half of all high school graduates with bachelors degree aspirations follow the community college transfer path" (p. 267). The authors used propensity score matching to perform their research with groups of individuals based upon similar observable characteristics. They also performed linear regression analysis. In essence, they determined that, "When the educational outcomes in terms of baccalaureate attainment between transfers and rising juniors, holding all else constant are compared, no difference in bachelor's degree attainment rates between these two groups was found" (p. 277). Given the topic of this thesis, it will be interesting to understand better why students are using the community college path to university. Are they using it as a cost-saving measure? Is it a perceived easier path to a degree? Is it a means to achieve multiple credentials? Or was there any intention at all to pursue further education at the university level?

Confidence and the Decision to Transfer to University

The above literature review have shown that, in general, non-traditional students who transfer to university from community college perform as well or better than their direct-entry counterparts. Previous research shows that the development of independent learning skills such as time management, study skills, and note-taking are significant for the success of the transfer student. Is it enough to simply develop the independent learning skills mentioned above to be a successful student? Would the development of these independent learning skills alone lead to a perspective transformation on their abilities to be successful at university, or is there a need for a second element to be

present such as the student's development of confidence in their skills through critical reflection?

Development of independent learning skills is certainly an important factor in student success. Confidence is also an important factor in the success of students at university. With this is mind; is it possible to be successful at university while obtaining only one of these important variables? This section of the literature review explores the importance of confidence and specifically, confidence in the student's independent learning skills, as it pertains to the student's ability to be a successful university student.

Christie, et al. (2013) studied twenty students who entered either second or third year of university direct from community college. 11 of the 20 students were enrolled in business programs with the remainder spread across disciplines. Researchers asked participants about their previous and current learning experiences and asked them to assess their preparedness for university. Although researchers did not specifically ask students about independent learning, it emerged as a significant theme of the interviews. Students identified that there were two main themes that were central to their successful transition to university. Christie, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green (2013) found that becoming a successful university student required the development of independent learning skills and also indicated that development of confidence was a significant factor. They quoted student 14 who said, "good marks, this helps make you confident that you can do the work. I now know I can do it and the way to do it" (p. 629). Another student said, "I feel quite confident with my time management. I am quite organized. I was a

little worried about time management before I started. When I was at college I always worked fast and was well in advance. I don't like being late with any work, and am doing the same thing here" (p. 629).

Christie et al. (2013) indicate that students were helped significantly in their overall success if they had confidence in their abilities and time management skills. These researchers divided participants into three groups. Those who became successful independent learners adjusted very well to university and excelled. The second group, who were struggling with independent learning, had to work extremely hard to be successful at university. The third group had a difficult time coping with the transition to university. This study is very relevant to the work of this thesis given its focus on business students transferring from community college to university. Christie et al. provide evidence to support the claim that, although many self-directed skills are learned at community college, it is not only the development of the skills that is critical. An improvement in the confidence of the learner that comes from having these skills also must be present.

In a 2011 *Community College Week*, magazine article researchers asked community college students to write about their most rewarding learning experience with a faculty, staff or administrator at their college. According to Bradley (2011) the researcher found that the common thread was, "that making students believe in themselves appears to be the key to unlocking the door to academic achievement" (p. 6). The fact that the faculty and staff are helping students believe in themselves indicates that

confidence in their skills was a very important factor in their success. This evidence provides further evidence that confidence in ability is an important academic success factor.

In the preceding paragraphs evidence has been provided that confidence is important in academic success. It is also important to understand the difference between confidence and self-esteem when researching academic success. Sara Briggs (2014) compares the level of confidence a student has with the level of their self-esteem. She purports that confidence plays a significant part in our learning. That being said, she has found that simply believing in yourself or your self-esteem is not enough to guarantee success at university. Briggs quotes Roy Baumeister from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland who warns educators not to conflate self-esteem with confidence. A high self-esteem does not necessarily equate with confidence in that it may simply be a case of conceit, arrogance and ego. There are many examples of unsuccessful students with significant confidence and self-esteem. This research finding is significant in the context of this thesis because it clarifies how, although confidence is important, appropriate skills also need to be present. Developing successful skills is not enough alone to provide success; the development of confidence in these skills that is the second critical piece. A side benefit of skill and confidence development is the improvement of student self-esteem.

Dipane Hlalele and Gregory Alexander (2011) found that for students to persevere and stay in university, these students need to have confidence in their abilities

and skills. They also indicate that there is very little research about higher education students and their perceptions of their academic abilities. In their study, they specifically looked at humanities students who were planning to enroll full time in a humanities program upon completion of an access program. They found that students entering the access program had moderate levels of independent learning skills such as ability to study on one's own, be on time, and write academically. They found that faculty and staff can improve student confidence in their abilities by helping them to see their learning as a result of their own work. The work of Hlalele and Alexander is significant to this thesis as the students they studied were not direct-entry students to the university level but would be more like community college students who are non-traditional post-secondary students. The work also adds to this thesis in indicating the need for students to be confident in their ability to ensure student success.

Summary of Literature Review and Gaps in the Literature

The literature contributes substantially to our understanding of the topic of this thesis. It indicates that community college students are non-traditional students as they tend to be carrying multiple roles, such as student, employee, parent, etc. It also shows that being an independent learner and having confidence in independent learning skills, (such as study skills, time management, writing skills) is a good predictor of success at university. The literature also suggests that transformative learning is important in the development of successful university students. Transformative learning helps students develop critical capacities to look at the world and the information provided to them.

Students need to think critically and question information and not simply take it as truth. The literature that I have encountered does not address whether or not transformational learning can take place within the community college context. Research exists that examines transformational learning at the university level but none exists that examines transformational learning at the two-year college level.

This thesis begins to address this gap in literature. It provides evidence that Mezirow's theory of transformational learning is an appropriate lens to apply to the transfer of community college students to university. This thesis contributes to the literature because it provides evidence that students are critically reflecting on the skills developed within their two-year program and as a result of this reflection gaining significant confidence in their abilities as independent learners and successful university students. There has been little research to date in this area of transfer to university from community college around the development of confidence, which could provide a good foundation for further research and improved teaching methodologies at both community college and university.

Chapter 3

Methodology

As previously stated, this thesis aimed to investigate whether or not students within a two-year business diploma program at NSCC experience transformational learning. As well, the thesis explored whether or not the transformational experience of any interviewees played a part in improving their confidence and success as learners. Finally, the thesis investigated whether an improvement in confidence that came from transformational learning had a direct effect on the decision of community college students to study at university.

Perspective transformation is a subjective and personal event. As such, one must take great care in indicating how to measure whether or not transformational learning has taken place within an individual or a group of individuals. For the purposes of this thesis, I decided to use a method commonly used in transformational research: the personal interview. To gather data for this thesis I conducted a series of one hour, one-on-one interviews with twelve students who have made the transition from community college to university. All participants in this study were graduates of NSCC and all were registered at MSVU in either their third or fourth year. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher. The data that was gathered in this fashion forms the basis of the findings and discussion sections of this thesis.

In the following section, I consider alternate possible methodological choices in order to further justify my approach in this thesis.

Selection and Justification of Method

Exploring transformational learning requires researchers to use a range of research methods. Researchers interested in exploring the specific mechanisms of a transformational learning episode tend to use intensive and individualized approaches to understanding the phenomenon of transformational learning. Where as researchers interested in understanding the implications of transformational learning in specific contexts tend to use broader approaches involving a number of subjects.

An example of a more individual and intensive approach is offered by Tosey, Mathison and Michelli (2005) who investigate the use of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) to measure transformational learning. The authors recognize that NLP is merely a methodology and not considered a theory within academia. That being said, they believe that NLP may have a significant place when analyzing subjective events or experiences. Consistent with the intensive and rather individualized approach of NLP, the researchers used a single case study of a manager who was experiencing a significant change within the work environment that was creating uncertainty and distress for himself and others. The authors collected data in four, ninety-minute interviews, spaced three to five months apart. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer revisited items from the previous interview to determine any linguistic changes that may have occurred. They concluded;

> Through the analysis of Ed's case we have synthesized a tentative map of
> transformative learning through the lens of NLP. If we were to sum up Ed's
> learning, it appeared to be a process of coming to terms with the way his world
> changed around him and gradually experiencing himself more at cause than at
> effect. (p. 160)

Continuing on they added, "in conclusion, this case has illustrated the potential of frameworks taken from NLP to identify differences – in this instance, linguistic differences – that may help to codify transformative learning" (p. 163). The use of NLP is very limited with regard to the measurement of the broader effects of transformational learning. The approach requires multiple interviews over a long period of time, followed by the analysis and comparison of each interview. While the approach might yield insight into the specific mechanisms that produce transformational learning, the individualized approach would likely produce results that are very difficult to generalize. The specific mechanism of transformational learning might be a more a feature of an individual's specific learning experiences than a generalizable human capacity. For this reason, I decided that the intensive approach of these NLP researchers would not be an appropriate method for me given my interest in learning more about the larger effects of transformational learning on the skills and confidence of community college learners.

Many researchers have used the work of Mezirow's 10 phases of transformational learning when studying transformative learning. Snyder (2008) completed a literature review of 10 articles that attempted to identify and code the transformative process of

participants using broader, less individualized and less intense research approaches. All of the articles chosen were qualitative in nature, although four of the articles also employed some quantitative analysis. The most common approach used was the interview, however, others also used questionnaires and/or surveys. Five of the studies used grounded theory as way of collecting and analyzing data, five used self-reported data by the participants, and three of the studies required participants to journal. Half of the studies were considered longitudinal as they lasted longer than one semester. Each of the studies authors based their research upon Mezirow's theory of transformational learning. All articles were concerned whether or not transformation had occurred within the individuals. When measuring whether or not a transformation occurred within participants, Snyder (2008) identified three studies that focused solely upon Mezirow's 10 phases or steps of transformative learning. She identified two studies, which focused upon Mezirow's four ways of knowing, and three studies, which were specific to Snyder's needs. All three authors who focused upon the 10 phases or steps of Mezirow's theory used questionnaires and surveys to determine whether transformation indeed took place. They did not, however, focus upon individual steps or phases or determine how many phases the participants experienced. The sample sizes were fairly small as well. Snyder reported, "findings indicate that studies of transformative learning are most effective when multiple data pathways are used, particularly to support self-reported claims of transformation on the part of participants, and when longitudinal designs are used" (p. 179).

Sabra Brock (2010) focused upon measuring the 10 steps identified by Mezirow as to whether or not transformation took place. The purpose of her study was to measure the effect that the precursor steps to transformative learning had on undergraduate business students. The goal of this study was to determine which of the precursor steps might have provided a greater incidence of transformative learning. Based on this research, Sabra hoped that business educators would be better positioned to create an environment for transformative learning of students. The study was based upon quantitative research methods and is one of the first to report on transformative learning and the 10 precursor steps.

In order for a respondent to have been identified as having experienced transformative learning, the subject had to reply in the affirmative to three very specific questions. For the purposes of gathering information, the students were provided a quantitative survey, which was reviewed and critiqued by a panel of transformational learning experts. The survey was also piloted on three separate occasions and reworked before the live survey was introduced. Respondents answered questions on each of the 10 precursor steps. The study was administered to 256 undergraduate business students via a web delivery system. Of the respondents answering the survey, 64.2% were women and more than half of those responding were of Asian descent. Freshman were the largest group of respondents. However, there were representatives from all classes.

In Brock's study, 48.8% of those responding to the survey indicated that they had experienced transformative learning. All of the 10 precursor steps were experienced by

some of the respondents. However, the most common precursor step the subjects identified was a disorienting dilemma (56.3%). Another key finding of Sabra's survey was that the more steps identified by a respondent, the more likely they were to have experienced transformative learning. Additionally, those students who were further along in their studies reported a greater incidence of transformative learning.

All of the research that I was able to find regarding transformative learning and higher education focused upon transformative learning within four-year degree granting institutions. I was unable to locate any studies that explored whether transformational learning occurred within a two-year college program.

There has been considerable research conducted in measuring transformational learning using Mezirow's theory at the university level. Given that this thesis aims to study the transfer of community college business graduates to a four-year institution and that there has been significant use of Mezirow's theory in measuring transformational learning, I have based the methodology for this study on Mezirow's transformational learning theory. As indicated, the majority of studies using Mezirow's theory have used questionnaires to gather the data based upon large sample sizes. For this study, I chose to utilize the interview method as opposed to survey or questionnaire due to the fact that my sample size was quite small in comparison to university studies. I also chose the interview method, because I wanted to have a conversation with the participants and have the ability to obtain the context for their answers. I was able to use follow-up questions to ensure that I understood the answer the participant was giving. Although this method may

appear to face subjectivity by the researcher, the detailed answers provided by the participants provided greater clarity and context than the use of a simple questionnaire. Further research in this area may include other methodologies such as the questionnaire and larger sample sizes.

Description of Research Method

During my research I interviewed 12 students who had completed a two-year business diploma and are currently enrolled or graduated from Mount Saint Vincent University in the Business Administration degree. As the study investigates human subjects, I obtained the required ethics approval of both the Department of Business and Tourism and Hospitality Management and the Ethics Research Board at Mount Saint Vincent University.

The School of Business at Mount Saint Vincent University identified individuals who fit the criteria of the study (students pursuing university after college). Using a letter of invitation that I had developed for this purpose, the administration of The School of Business invited all transfer students from NSCC to the university to participate in the study. Students were directed to contact the researcher if they were willing to participate.

The advantage to having the participants identified by the university was that the researcher, an NSCC employee, could not influence who agreed to participate select those participants who could potentially bias the data. A limitation associated with the selection process was that all participants were chosen from the same university. Since

participants were all chosen from one university, there was the potential that students attending a different university may have had a different view of their experience and transition to their new environment. For example: other universities may not have had the same level of openness to transfer students or may not have had appropriate orientation programs that may have changed the results.

Students were also informed that they would not be financially compensated for their participation in the study. The fact that no compensation was provided to participants indicates that they were interested in the topic being researched and legitimately were interested in helping future students with their transition to university. Had students been compensated, it would have been difficult to determine their level of commitment to their answers. Compensation may have encouraged those with less passion and commitment to participate in the study thereby potentially altering the data.

I selected 15 possible participants from the names provided to me by the university. During my selection, I endeavored to ensure that I selected participants from different areas of the province to get a better perspective on the provincial data. Potential participants were contacted using a combination of email and telephone. Using an introductory letter, I informed participants of the nature and reasons behind the study and described the measures I had put in place to insure that their anonymity and confidentiality would remain intact. Of the 15 possible participants, 12 agreed, finally, to being interviewed. All interviews were conducted during the period of November 1 to November 30, 2013.

I arranged for most of the interviews to take place at Mount Saint Vincent University. I completed two interviews by telephone for participants who were distance students at Mount Saint Vincent University. All interviews were less than one hour in duration to encourage busy participants to actively volunteer and participate in the process.

I asked each participant the same questions and audio recorded the interviews to ensure that all information was captured and reported. Students will receive a copy of the completed research upon successful completion of the thesis. Recording the interviews allowed me to focus on the answers of the participants and provided me more opportunity to formulate follow-up questions during the interview without having to worry about writing down responses. Writing responses during the interview would have detracted from the process and lengthened the interviews.

During the interviews, I asked participants about their experience at Nova Scotia community college and how it has prepared them for success at university. The following are questions that were asked of the students:

1. Define what student success means to you.

2. Do you consider yourself a lifelong learner? Would you have said the same thing prior to attending NSCC?

3. Do you believe your level of confidence improved over the two years you attended NSCC?

4. What do you feel contributed to your increase in confidence?

5. Tell me about your experience with self-directed learning at NSCC.

6. Did your experience, growth and success at NSCC contribute to your decision to further your education at university? If so why?

7. At what point in your community college education did you feel you had the confidence and ability to be successful?

8. What was the most difficult thing with regard to transition from college to university?

9. Do you feel that the skills developed at NSCC – mainly self-directed learning skills – had a large impact on your confidence?

10. What in your opinion is the skill developed at NSCC that has contributed the most to your success?

It was important to ask each student the same questions so that the data would be easily organized. The questions were tailored to solicit answers from students that would provide evidence to the contention that community colleges engage students in transformative learning experiences that raise their levels of skill and confidence, and that open new possibilities for students to continue their education at university.

The research method that I chose provided both advantages and limitations. The major advantage of the small sample size was the ability to spend more time with each

participant and to use the interview method to explore the participants' learning experiences. If I would have used another method, such as survey, for example, I would not have been as able to follow-up on answers to gain rich insights into the ways transformative learning impacted the participants. During the interviews, I was able to ask follow-up questions of the participants to ensure that I understood the context of their answers. The interviews allowed for richer reporting of the results and discussion. On a more practical note, the small sample size enabled me to conduct all interviews over a fairly short period of time. Given the significant travel that these interviews required for me, the small sample size made the research possible logistically. I was satisfied that, although the sample size was small, it included participants who had attended several NSCC campuses across the province. The variety of participants provided good access to student experience from across the province of Nova Scotia.

The major limitation of the small sample size is that it is difficult to extrapolate global conclusions from the data. Only 12 participants were interviewed out of the hundreds of students who graduate and go on to university at institutions across the province. Given the participant selection methods I utilized (I did not deliberately select a random sample, rather, I used a rather purposive strategy of selecting participants), the data generated by the research probably contains some selection bias. For example, even to agree to participate in the study, participants may have had a positive bias toward the community college program they attended. Those who did not have a positive experience in the program may have chosen simply to not participate.

The fact that the researcher was an employee of NSCC, and disclosed this to all participants, had the potential to bias the answers of the participants as they may have wanted to please the researcher. During the course of the interviews, participants were encouraged to provide both positive and negative answers. I provided opportunity at the end of the interview offer any other information they deemed appropriate to the research at hand.

The methodology used in the development of this thesis has both advantages as well as limitations, this will be the case with any research methodology. In the case of this research project, the advantages outweigh the limitations significantly. The fact that participants were interviewed directly and were able to provide clarity and context to their answers was a significant advantage over the use of a survey questionnaire. For the purposes of this introductory research project, potential bias of a small sample size was outweighed by the depth and quality of the information gathered during the interviews. With this in mind, future research in this area could employ multiple methodologies such as interviewing and questionnaires in order to increase and diversify the sample size. Research could be expanded to include multiple receiving institutions and expanded programming options across different schools that encourage and support transfer to university.

Ethical Issues

The main ethical issue faced during the course of this research was ensuring the privacy of the participants within the study. Prior to beginning the research project, it was

important to obtain the necessary approval from the ethics board at the university. In order to obtain this approval, it was necessary to develop a research plan and methodology that ensured the data collected was held in the most prudent and secure manner possible.

Participants were fully aware of the intent of the study and the expected outcomes. They all received a detailed letter of invitation to participate in the thesis that included details about the study and its purpose and that described the ways the information would be gathered and reported (see Appendix A for a copy of this letter). Participants were assured and understood that no harm would come to them or others based upon their participation in the research. No disciplinary action would be taken upon any NSCC employee based upon information received in this study.

In addition to privacy concerns, it was imperative to reduce the implied power relationship between the participants and the researcher so that the participants were comfortable providing their true feelings and not what they feel the researcher wanted to hear. Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2000) indicate that one of the main principles of ethical qualitative research is the notion that the research provides a benefit to people while at the same time minimizing any harm that may come from the research itself. As they explain, "qualitative researchers focus their research on exploring, examining, and describing people and their natural environments. Embedded in qualitative research are the concepts of relationships and power between researchers and participants" (p. 93).

Throughout the research process, all protocols to clearly inform participants of the nature and risks of the research, to record their willingness to participate, to maintain confidentiality and privacy, to securely store digital and paper data, and to honor commitments to the ethical inclusion of data during the reporting phase of the research have been upheld.

Chapter 4

Findings

This study explored the transformative learning experiences of Nova Scotia

Community College graduates and investigated whether or not transformative learning in

community college helped build student confidence in their abilities and decision to

pursue further post-secondary education at university. To narrow down the research

topic, I deemed student success and confidence as two main threads of the

transformational experience and whether or not an improvement in confidence or success

had an influence on their decision to further their studies at university.

Student Success

Student success has multiple interpretations. Some students consider grades to be

the true identifier of success, others consider the learning and potential to grow as

success, and still others consider graduation and finding work as their version of success.

For the purposes of this study, student success was defined by each of the participants.

The majority of the 12 interviewees did not indicate that academic grades alone

would mark student success. Only two of the 12 included academic grades first in their

responses. All students did indicate that receiving good grades helped to improve their

confidence and enhanced their experience. Although the participants had very personal

ideas of what student success meant to them, there were several main themes that were woven through all of their stories.

Community college students are often non-traditional post-secondary students, not because they are older, which many are, but because they tend to bring many other responsibilities with them to community college. The participants that I interviewed were primarily non-traditional post-secondary students. Many of the students were not only enrolled in a full course load at Mount Saint Vincent University but were also working full-time. The students were also interested in getting the skills required to obtain a job. Several of the students indicated that public school was an unpleasant experience. They reported that, in public school, they were uninterested in the subjects they were asked to learn. As a result, several reported that they were not as focused on academics as perhaps they should have been. The non-traditional community college students interviewed suggested that they had a different definition of student success than a more traditional direct-to-university student.

The major comments that emerged from the question about student success were overwhelmingly connected to the positive experience many reported of learning things that they were interested in and that were going to be relevant to the job market where they hoped to find employment. Some comments from the participants in this area included:

"Student success means that what you are taking from your studies as a student is relevantly applied to what you will do when you graduate and you are doing well in those specific areas."

"I try to get good grades but what's important to me is getting relevant experience I need to get a good job and build on that."

"Getting what you paid for, having an expectation of what you are going to get out of your education and achieving that."

"Good grades make you feel great but I think the success comes in knowing that you can really do something and you are doing something you really enjoy. I know when I finish my degree I can do something with it."

"My definition is if you fail or find something hard you figure it out no matter what. You keep trying to make sure you succeed. If you are 100 on everything I am not sure you are as successful as someone who has failed and then retaken and [had] success."

"Learning things that are going to be helpful when you graduate and then being able to find a job and apply those things that you learned to the job. You might have gotten good grades but can you apply the skills that you learned in a job?"

The majority of students spoke about the ability to balance schoolwork, work life and grades as a true indicator of student success. As an example of this one participant said:

"Basically being able to balance work life and school life, keeping your

grades up and expand into the community with your studies."

Students who choose community college prior to attending university appear to be interested in achieving skills that provide opportunities to obtain employment connected to their field of study. Almost all stated that their main goal is learning and being able to effectively apply that learning in the workplace. In the majority of answers related to student success, it is evident that the definition of student success as provided by the participants would certainly lead to improved confidence in their academic ability.

University vs. Community College

As noted within this thesis, community college students appear to be non-traditional students. Non-traditional students do not generally decide to enter university direct from high school. They either enter the workforce directly or enroll at community college. The participants in this study exemplify this.

Seven of the 12 participants indicated that when they entered community college they had no intention of attending university prior to their enrollment at community college. Those who did plan to attend university indicated that the two-plus-two option provided by the university and community college was a very attractive option. Only two

students indicated that the cost of tuition was a major factor for choosing community college first. They also indicated that it was a cheaper way for them to find out exactly what they wanted to do. One of the participants who had planned to go to university prior to enrolling at community college described their pathway. The student described them self as a high achieving high school student in science and math headed toward engineering. Realizing they didn't enjoy the program, they decided that enrolling in community college to find their way prior to going back to university was the way to go. They are now successful and enjoying their university studies.

There were some interesting discussions around this question with the participants. When asked the question of whether or not they intended on going to university, some of the direct responses were:

"I did not know about the two-plus-two prior to enrolling at NSCC so no, I did not."

"No, not in a million years."

"No I didn't. When in high school all the universities came and did presentations and it was so overwhelming. It frightened me. When NSCC came they talked about the class sizes and how personal it was."

"No I never felt like a university student. After high school I took a year off and never looked up university programs. That was me personally. I figured I would do the two years at NSCC and I would be done. I figured

why not do it for another two years and get the degree. Being at NSCC

made me realize I really like what I am learning. Being at the Mount now I

know I am going to get something out of it. It is making me really excited

for the future."

As indicated throughout this thesis, the main question was whether or not students

who transfer from community college to university experience transformational learning

during their time at community college that contributes to their decision to further their

education. Many of the quotes taken from participants above provide evidence that

something happened during their time at community college to help them determine that

they wanted to pursue their education further at the next level. Certainly further

exploration will be required but I believe that the above noted facts are significant

evidence of a transformational learning experience in several of the individuals involved

in the research project.

Lifelong Learning

Throughout the literature review, I have shown that becoming a lifelong learner is

a strong indicator of success within the post-secondary environment and within the

workforce.

In this area participants were asked if at this stage in their academic career they

considered themselves to be lifelong learners. If they indicated that indeed they

considered themselves lifelong learners, they were asked whether they would have considered themselves lifelong learners prior to attending community college.

All 12 participants indicated that they currently consider themselves to be lifelong learners. Of the 12 participants four indicated that they would not have considered themselves a lifelong learner prior to attending community college. Some of the comments around lifelong learning by participants are provided below:

"Since I came to the Mount I realize that I do like learning. I was going to stop after NSCC and get a job but I realized that if I kept going I would be able to get a better job."

"When I went to high school I never cared about anything as long as I passed. I had no motivation to go on to College. I just ended up going to NSCC for something to do but it completely changed my perspective. In high school everything is general; I always wondered how would I apply the learning. After going through NSCC I focused on my subjects. I now love to learn and apply the learning."

Although the majority of participants indicated that they considered themselves to be lifelong learners prior to enrolling in community college, the above comments provide evidence that several of the students experienced some sort of transformational experience at community college that changed their perspective on learning. Four of the students did not consider themselves to be lifelong learners prior to their enrollment at community college. One of the students indicated that they really did not like to learn and

they did not care about learning when they were in high school. They went to community college on a whim and realized that they really did love to learn and apply their learning to real-life situations. The fact that the student changed their perspective on learning indicates that they experienced perhaps a disorienting dilemma within the community college experience and changed their perspective.

Confidence Improvement

At this stage of the interview process, participants were asked if they believed their confidence improved over their two-year period at community college. If they answered in the affirmative they were asked a follow-up question which asked if the improvement in confidence had any impact on their decision to attend university following graduation at community college. Finally, the students were asked what it was at specifically at community college that helped to develop their confidence.

All 12 participants indicated that their confidence improved during their two-year diploma at Nova Scotia Community College. Participants spoke about the small class sizes, connections to faculty, the fact that they excelled in their program, and the hands-on nature of the learning. Being required to present their work in front of others, and in the engagement in work experience all contributed to the growth in their confidence level. The following are some powerful quotes from participants about the fact that their confidence improved during their time at NSCC:

"It was a small campus and small program and graduating at the top of my class was a huge confidence booster knowing that I was capable of something like that."

"With all the different courses and tons of presentations, I was always the shy kid that sat in the back row and now I can do presentations in front of hundreds of people and it's all because of NSCC."

"When I was a hairdresser, I thought I was only smart enough to be a hairdresser. Not that hairdressers are dumb but I always wanted to be in the business world and didn't think I had the capability of doing that. I had instructors that pushed me to do competitions and we did quite well. With my teachers' support it gave me confidence to realize that I am actually smart enough. I started out wanting to be the assistant to the CEO of a company, but now I want to be the CEO."

"My grades in high school weren't spectacular. At NSCC, I excelled and it gave me more confidence coming into university. It reassured me that I could handle what university threw at me."

"The fact that I did relatively well gave me confidence that I liked the content and gave me the confidence to know that I could make it at university."

The comments from the participants regarding their experience at NSCC and the impact that it had on their confidence as well as the fact that 100% of the participants indicated an improvement in their confidence is further evidence to me that at some point during their community college career they experienced some form of perspective transformation. I will discuss this perspective transformation in the next chapter.

Next, I will provide the details on the impact the improvement in confidence had on the participants with regard to continuing their post-secondary education at university.

10 of the 12 participants indicated that the improvement in their confidence either partially or wholly affected their decision to further their studies at university. Many of the students stated that the two-plus-two program together with their knowledge that they could be successful at the post-secondary level had a significant impact on their decision to continue on. Those who had planned to continue on to university from the beginning indicated that their time at NSCC certainly reinforced their decision to go further.

> "I think the main reason for furthering my education was knowing about the two-plus-two program. Confidence was a factor and knowing I could get my diploma made me know I could get the degree but the main reason I went on was because of the partnership between the two institutions."

> "By the end of my first year I realized that (a) NSCC diploma would get me a good job. I actually have a full-time job now with XXXX in the finance department and they are assisting me with my schooling now."

"I felt I could do it."

"I felt like two years at NSCC was more like a stepping stone from high school to university which was the best decision I could have made. I feel like NSCC gave me that encouragement to go to university and do the final two years because I don't think I could have done four years. It made me grow and made me more sure of what I was doing and made me more happy, confident and encouraged to do it."

Participants were next asked what it was about the experience at NSCC that helped them to improve their confidence. There were several key themes that came out of each interview conducted. The caring and supportive faculty and staff at the college, the applied nature of the programming, the work experience component, the requirement to complete many presentations, small class sizes and the focused nature of the programming were all key elements identified by participants that helped to allow them to grow as students and build their confidence.

"Definitely the instructors. I don't even need to think about it. The instructors are amazing and really personalize everything. They think of you as more than a student and give you job leads; they really care and want you to succeed. They took our input into account."

"A lot of it for me was the small class sizes so there were opportunities for me to be more outgoing because of how close-knit our group was. I used

to be very shy and we were doing practical things which encouraged me to come out of my shell and be more confident."

"So many people believe in you. The academic chair had me on interview panels. Faculty and staff support you and are there to give you a swift kick in the butt when you need it. The faculty are there because they want to be there and they want you to be the best that you can be."

"Presentations. I was one of the students nominated by my teachers to talk to future students about our program which helped to build my confidence. The work-term also helped a lot."

"I left NSCC being very close to my teachers which I have never had before, not even in high school. The teachers you have want to see you succeed. They will help you and encourage you so you don't feel alone. They made me feel that I can do it and supported me when I didn't think I could. I never felt they were just doing their job. They really cared and made sure that I did well."

"I would say that there was a specific teacher that really helped to improve my confidence. I was hard on myself. This teacher came up to me and said if you need a reference let me know as she would do it for me. It made me feel so good about myself and that I should continue on with school."

"Small class size, it wasn't intimidating. Public speaking which I have

never done and never had to do. I now know that I can do it. The

instructors were very helpful."

The stories provided by the participants about their individual experiences were

highly positive. It is obvious that the caring and positive atmosphere at NSCC is a

significant factor in the building of confidence in the NSCC School of Business. These

stories provide further evidence of a transformational experience that community college

students are experiencing which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Aha Moment

According to the work of Brock (2010), a disorienting dilemma that students will

experience is a strong element of the transformational process. Within this area of

questioning, I was looking to see if students experienced an aha moment or disorienting

dilemma which would provide evidence of a transformational experience.

Participants were asked at which point in their community college career they

realized that they had what it took to be successful. Eight of the 12 students reported

having somewhat of an aha moment or trigger when they realized that they knew they

wanted to go to university. For some students it was early on in their studies at

community college. For others it wasn't until their second year and finally for others it

wasn't until they graduated. Four of the 12 participants reported knowing that they could

succeed at it but either wanted to ease into university or take advantage of the price

differential of tuition. Some direct examples from students explaining their trigger

moment are as follows:

> "I figured that I was going to be an accountant but it didn't really work out
>
> for me. I didn't like it. I had an amazing marketing teacher and she did a
>
> wonderful job of making marketing really compelling and interesting.
>
> That is when I realized I knew what I wanted to do. It was a pretty big
>
> realization for me and this is when I realized where I was headed."

> "My aha moment was the second competition put on by Saint Mary's. We
>
> were first-year NSCC students competing against fourth-year marketing
>
> students and we came in tenth overall."

> "It wasn't until I graduated. I was going to take a year off. The day of
>
> graduation I was talking to one of my teachers who mentioned again the
>
> two-plus-two program and it really sparked me."

> "After high school or first year at NSCC I didn't even think about
>
> university. In my second year I started to believe that two years wasn't
>
> going to be enough. If there wasn't a two-plus-two program I don't know
>
> what I would have done. It is probably one of the greatest opportunities
>
> NSCC has given me. I had to do all of these things at NSCC that I didn't
>
> know I had in me, like write a 30-page report. If you really want a degree
>
> go to NSCC because it builds up all the things you can do and you will
>
> feel better going to university."

"I talked to some of my teachers at NSCC and asked them is university

really that much different than NSCC and if they thought I could do it.

They were really supportive and motivated me to go on."

"It was second year before I really started to think about going on."

Eight of 12 participants indicated that they had some sort of trigger or moment

when they realized they had the-skills or abilities to move on to university. This was

when they realized that they had the skills and talent to take their education to the next

level. This further supports the hypothesis that during their time at NSCC they

experienced a transformative experience through the building of their confidence that

changed their outlook on a university education.

University Success

Participants were asked whether or not they felt that they were successful

university students based upon their own definition of student success that they had

identified earlier on in the questions. 10 of the 12 participants identified themselves as

successful university students based upon their definition of student success. One student

felt that they were not quite at the level they wanted to be and another identified that once

they complete their second year they will feel successful but right now it is a difficult

transition.

Participants explain their level of success in the following excerpts:

"I am doing well in my courses however I did much better at NSCC and could here as well if I was able to change some things."

"The workload is harder but I have been buckling down and am doing pretty well for myself."

"I won't graduate with honours but I am quite happy with Bs. I work Monday to Friday from eight to four and go to school Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Thursday and am still doing well."

"In my first year I was feeling out the experience. In my second year I am very comfortable. I am working and volunteering and growing into a university student."

"As of right now yes. If you had asked me last year when I went to Saint Mary's I would have said no. The classes were too big. Here at the Mount I know my professors and I feel comfortable."

The interesting thing for me with this section of the questionnaire was the change of opinions that many of the students had with regard to success. For instance, after leaving NSCC and starting at university several of them talked about grades and working at an honours level. It is unclear whether students at university look at student success differently than students at community college, or whether students who graduate from community college and go on to university have such an improved confidence that they expect more from themselves and hold their academic performance to a higher standard. I

am confident that based on this research the strong majority of participants felt that they had made a successful transition from community college to university.

Skills Gained at Nova Scotia Community College

Participants were asked which skills developed at NSCC did they believe helped them to be successful university students. The majority of students mentioned their confidence, learning how to be an independent learner, study skills, and time management, i.e. work life balance. One student mentioned the fact that one of their teachers also taught at university and tailored the class to be similar in structure. Improvement in writing and presentation skills was also cited as a skill that has helped students with their university studies. Some examples that the students provided are as follows:

"Learning how to be independent."

"I suppose finding a work-school balance. At NSCC I was taking a full course load and working a full schedule. Doing both at the same time was great in developing my time management and organization. It kept me focused."

"A really big one is the confidence thing that we talked about earlier, the ability to go through school going to a goal and develop my personal skills."

"Communication skills and writing skills and common knowledge. Being able to take that to university has definitely helped me with how I talk and contact people for different things."

"I think that what helped me at NSCC [prepare] for university was that everyone believed in me when I didn't think I could and I got that encouragement and I got those pushes to move forward so it was the passion that I got from everyone else that made me feel more like I can do it. Doing things that I had never done before and being successful."

"The whole study skills improvement. I didn't do it in high school but when I went to NSCC I really studied a lot which helped me in my transition to university."

"Study skills and writing reports really helped with my university success. There were some courses that really helped me at university, especially finance. It was a little easier for me than for students who entered direct from high school."

Transition from Nova Scotia Community College to University

Participants were asked to explain their transition from NSCC to university and describe some of the easier and some of the more difficult transitional elements. In general, students were able to transition from NSCC to university fairly seamlessly. However, they have identified some areas of concern for the transition period. Several of

the students indicated that they really did not know what to expect when they entered university for the first time. Even though the class sizes are fairly small the atmosphere is quite different from community college. At community college students go through a cohort program model where they are in the same classes with the majority of the same people. The participants noted that students develop closer bonds with their classmates and teachers at community college when compared to university. Several students also compared the transition experience at Mount Saint Vincent to some other larger universities and felt the transition to the Mount was much easier due to its similarities to NSCC in philosophy and size. The transition was different for many participants because some were full-time, in-class students where others were full-time, online students. Both online and in-class students indicated that the transition was very good. Some direct thoughts from students are as follows:

> "I didn't know what to expect. It's a lot bigger even though class sizes are small but its hard to meet new people because the same people aren't in all of your classes. The workload is a lot more assignment- and research-based than hands on."

> "It was a big change and also my first year living on my own. Moving was a big change. Although the Mount has smaller class sizes than other universities it is still quite a lot different than NSCC. It is harder to get one-on-one here but the teachers do a good job. The entire culture and way

of thinking is different because there are a lot more younger students here; they don't seem as focused as the learners at NSCC."

"My first year doing in-class and distance classes I learned that distance was a much better fit for me. I didn't realize the support we have here. This school is amazing to be honest. MSVU is basically a university-level NSCC."

"The most difficult thing was the reliance on exams and midterms. There is not as much reliance on exams and midterms at NSCC; more on projects."

"Some things still get me out of my comfort zone at the university like writing papers but once I get through it I feel more confident."

"I found that when I went to NSCC it was structured more like junior high in that you are in the same classes with everyone for all your classes. MSVU is more like a high school model where you are in different classes with different people. Other than the first week or so the transition was easy."

Transition Skills Developed at NSCC

Participants were asked what skills in their opinion they received at NSCC that helped them with the transition to university. This question elicited many similar responses to the question of what skills they developed that helped with university

success. There were however some distinct differences. Some students spoke of the leadership skills developed at NSCC through their participation in group work and student government as well as interview panels and work experience. Others spoke about developing their adaptability skills through the diverse training received at NSCC. Problem-solving skills and maturity as well as communication and time management skills were also cited as key to a successful transition. One student identified the fact that NSCC students are not required to take any online classes. This participant noted that if NSCC students were required to take at least one online class they would be in a better position to transition into university classes online. Below are some direct quotes from participants:

> "Adaptability because the program was so diverse at NSCC. Learning to be adaptable will help [students] ease into university."

> "NSCC helped with my maturity. A lot of the staff had relevant prior work experience which helped with my learning and gave a more personal feel instead of a textbook feel."

> "The ability to figure things out. I learned how I learn at NSCC. I had instructors who taught in different ways."

> "I haven't felt not ready or not prepared for university. Maybe the workload could be a little more at NSCC"

> "Doing presentations at NSCC helped build confidence and knowing how
> to do a good presentation has been very helpful."

The growth and maturity of the students as learners was acknowledged as a major skill developed at NSCC that helped significantly with the transition from community college to university. Students gained confidence in their abilities from an academic perspective that allowed them to transition easily into the university environment.

Students Final Thoughts

At the end of the interview participants were asked if they would like to make any additional comments about either their time at NSCC or university. This is what they said:

> "I absolutely preferred NSCC over MSVU which gave me a
> roadblock. I am still glad I am here finishing my degree. I wish we
> had more clear expectations for the transition between the two. If
> NSCC could do some more research and theory it would help with
> the transition. Overall it was a good experience."

> "Convince students to do things outside the classroom. It really
> adds to your education. It helped with my confidence and growth."

> "Excellent experience at both, great teachers at both, structure is
> different. Mount is really based on exams and NSCC is really
> based on assignments. I would recommend to anyone to do the

two-plus-two. I hope all universities do it in Nova Scotia at some point. I had intended to go to Saint Mary's but the recruitment officer for the Mount came to NSCC and totally changed my mind."

"The only thing I would say is that the accounting courses at NSCC I don't think put me up to the level I should be at here. The accounting classes at NSCC were easy but are more difficult here."

"I think what I would say is that since I did two years at NSCC and now at the Mount there have been a lot of times that I have recommended the two-plus-two model. I feel like NSCC is a very good stepping stone between high school and university because it makes you grow as a person, your abilities and passion that you have not felt before, and it makes you so much more confident because you are doing things that you have not done before and you are doing well. I feel like if I went to university right away, I wouldn't have been mentally or emotionally ready to do it."

"The NSCC workload caters to students who need more help where the workload here is so much more self-directed study. Every week we have a chapter to read at MSVU and at NSCC it would be a chapter every two weeks."

"There was some self-direction at NSCC but I think it could go a

lot farther to get people a little more prepared."

"The only people I think who have trouble with transition is the

ones that thought NSCC was going to be easy and didn't take it

seriously. If they didn't apply themselves at NSCC university will

be a lot harder."

"The first year of NSCC, I entered the ideas competition and won at

Yarmouth and then provincially. This was a huge experience for me and

also helped build my confidence. It would be great to have more students

involved."

In the hypothesis, it was indicated that the overarching theory that was guiding

my work was transformational learning theory with a particular focus on the elements of

student success and the building of confidence in the student that will allow them to

consider their move on from community college to university to be successful. Based

upon the findings in this research study, I have provided evidence that indeed there is an

improvement in the confidence level of graduates of NSCC business programs. This

growth in confidence through student success had varying degrees of relevance as to the

decision making of individual students with regard to their decision to pursue further

post-secondary training at university. I contend that a significant number of the students

reported their improvement in confidence as a factor in making that decision. It is also

evident that the building of skills and confidence was very important, but it was the

realization through critical reflection or that aha moment that changed students'
perspectives about university.

I have also provided evidence that some community college students experience
some sort of transformational experience as defined by the 10 phases of transformative
learning by Mezirow (1991). I will discuss the relevance of transformational learning
theory to the improvement in confidence, student success and successful transition to
university in the discussion chapter.

Chapter 5

Discussion

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, I am interested in learning more about the transition process from community college to university. Specifically, I am interested in learning more about the impact that community college education has on a student's confidence and how this affected their decision to further pursue their education at the university level and the extent to which transformational learning theory can explain this transition.

Keeping in mind that I chose to guide this research project on Mezirow's theory of transformational learning. As community college educators are we providing our students with the opportunity to transform their perspectives on the value of education? Did this transformative learning experience at community college help students make their decision to further their education? Finally, if we are providing the opportunity for students to transform their meaning perspectives what specific teaching and learning strategies are we employing that are facilitating this transformation? These questions are important as they may help to define curriculum development, teaching and learning strategies, as well as university transition strategies.

Considering the complexity and depth of transformational theory, it was important in the context of this thesis to narrow my research question down to a manageable level that will begin to allow us to understand some of the broader questions

as to whether or not community college students are experiencing transformational learning. The specific purpose of this thesis was to begin to allow us to answer the question as to what specific teaching methodologies are helping to build the confidence of students and contribute to student success as determined by the individual student in a two-year community college business program. I have also argued that student success at community college is a significant factor in determining whether the student will continue their post-secondary education at university.

This discussion of results is broken down into five segments. First, I discuss how the students in this particular study defined their idea of student success. Second, I discuss whether or not participants felt that there was an increase in their academic confidence during their time at NSCC. Third, I discuss reasons cited by participants for an improvement in their confidence. Fourth, I discuss the participant's feelings around success both at community college and university. Throughout the discussion I will use Mezirow's transformational learning theory through the 10 phases of transformation to provide evidence that perspective transformation did happen at NSCC and that transformational learning theory is an appropriate lens through which to view the transfer from community college to university. Finally, I identify implications from this research project and provide a conclusion.

Student Success Defined

During the interview process participants were asked to define what student success meant to them. The vast majority of students – 10 out of 12, or 83% of

participants – indicated that academic grades were not the true marker of student success. Two students identified student success based on the achievement of a high grade. Many of the students did indicate that doing well in their courses improved their confidence but it was not the major factor in determining if they felt successful. The participants had their own opinion of what student success meant to them but there were several themes that emerged through their stories. As indicated in this thesis, community college students tend to be non-traditional post-secondary students with many carrying on outside responsibilities over and above of their academic responsibilities. I would consider this group of participants for the most part to be non-traditional post-secondary students as many were carrying full-time academic loads and full-time or part-time jobs and some had other responsibilities. Even though they have transferred on to university they continue to carry these outside responsibilities. Several participants indicated negative experiences in the public school system such as not being interested in the learning and therefore not being focused on academics, as they should have been.

The major themes identified by this group of participants around their definition of student success included: acquiring the necessary skills to obtain a good job, a great learning experience, learning things that they are interested in and that are going to be relevant to the job market when they are ready. Many of the participants defined success as the ability to balance schoolwork, work life and grades. Some examples of direct comments of the participants outlining their thoughts on student success are as follows:

"Student success means that what you are taking from your studies as a

student is relevantly applied to what you will do when you graduate and

you are doing well in those specific areas."

"I try to get good grades but what's important to me is getting relevant

experience I need to get a good job and build on that."

"Good grades make you feel great but I think the success comes in

knowing that you can really do something and you are doing something

you really enjoy. I know when I finish my degree I can do something with

it."

"Basically being able to balance work life and school life, keeping your

grades up and expand into the community with your studies."

As I reflect on the answers and comments provided by the participants in this

research study it is evident to me that these students are focused on the end prize. They

are truly interested in developing skills that they will be able to utilize in the workforce as

they build their career. The participants' strong focus on the job market would be another

indicator of their being non-traditional post-secondary students. It is also evident that the

definitions provided by participants with regard to student success would indicate that

upon having achieved their version of student success they would indeed experience an

improvement in their academic confidence. Understanding the attitude and meaning

perspectives of the students entering community college is important when attempting to

evaluate whether or not a perspective transformation has taken place. It was evident that

these students upon entering community college had their eye keenly on obtaining the

skills that would allow them to enter the job force immediately. There are several implications for further study in this area of student success in community college students versus direct-to-university students that I discuss in the Implications section of this document.

Improvement in Confidence

It was interesting that all participants indicated that their confidence had improved during their time at NSCC. Additionally, 10 of the 12 participants indicated that their improvement in confidence either partially or wholly affected their decision to further their studies at university. This is an important piece of information when we keep in mind that seven of the 12 participants had no intention of attending university prior to their enrolment and completion at NSCC. The following quotation from a student sums up their thoughts about pursuing a university education:

> "No, I never felt like a university student. After high school I took a year
>
> off and never looked up university programs. That was me personally. I
>
> figured I would do the two years at NSCC and I would be done. I figured
>
> why not do it for another two years and get the degree. Being at NSCC
>
> made me realize I really like what I am learning. Being at the Mount now I
>
> know I am going to get something out of it. It is making me really excited
>
> for the future."

Some of the following participant comments will provide greater context as to the degree of confidence change:

"When I was a hairdresser, I thought I was only smart enough to be a hairdresser. Not that hairdressers are dumb but I always wanted to be in the business world and didn't think I had the capability of doing that. I had instructors that pushed me to do competitions and we did quite well. With my teachers' support it gave me confidence to realize that I am actually smart enough. I started out wanting to be the assistant to the CEO of a company, but now I want to be the CEO."

"With all the different courses and tons of presentations, I was always the shy kid that sat in the back row and now I can do presentations in front of hundreds of people and it's all because of NSCC."

The above comments succinctly sum up the idea that participants were critically reflecting on the skills developed at NSCC and that they are willing to take the risk to further their education at the next level.

The fact that seven out of 12 students had no intention to further their education at university following their community college diploma and then subsequently followed that path indicates that something during that time changed or triggered their change of heart. Could this have been a perspective transformation? The above comments from students provide evidence that a perspective transformation indeed occurred during their time at NSCC. The most compelling quote for me in this regard is the student whose

previous career was as a hairdresser. The student did not believe that they had what it took to be successful in the business world. However, their time at NSCC changed their perceptions about their ability. They were being pushed and supported by faculty to come out of their comfort zone and to try new things and they were successful. When looking at Mezirow's 10 phases of transformational learning I see many of the phases within this student:

Phase 1 Disoriening dilemma – the student is placed in a situation by faculty members where they are required to be stressed and afraid through the participation in the competitions.

Phase 2 Self-examination and reflection – student reflects on their performance and conversations with faculty and realizes that they have the ability to be successful and to be a leader in the business world. They reflect on the skills developed and see new things in themselves, which improves overall confidence.

Phase 5 Exploration of options and new roles – the student clearly has improved their confidence and has set their sights on achieving the highest level of work and education that they can. Additionally, the student continues to excel in the external competitions.

Phase 6 Planning of a course of action – through completion of the community college diploma and entering university to complete the degree the student has set forth an educational goal that will allow them to achieve the plan that they have set out for themselves.

Phase 7 Acquisition of the knowledge and skills – again through work experience and the continuation of the university degree the student is developing the skills and knowledge necessary to carry out their new direction

Phase 8 and 9 Trying on new roles and building of competence and self-confidence – the student through their enrolment in university and through taking on leadership roles within the second year of the community college diploma has shown that they have gained the confidence to take on the new direction.

Many of the participants indicated that having the confidence in their newfound skills and knowing they could be successful at the post-secondary level and the fact that NSCC had two-plus-two agreements with universities significantly impacted their decision to further their education beyond NSCC. Keeping in mind that 7 of the 12 originally had no plan to attend university, this appears to be a significant piece of information beneficial to both community colleges and universities alike. I will further discuss this topic in the implications section of the thesis. The following quotes from participants provide evidence that improvement in confidence is a factor in deciding to further post-secondary education beyond community college:

> "I felt like two years at NSCC was more like a stepping stone from high school to university which is the best decision I could have made. I feel like NSCC gave me that encouragement to go to the university and do the final two years because I don't think I could have done four years. It made me grow and made me surer of what I was doing and made me more happy, confident and encouraged to do it."

"By the end of my first year I realized that NSCC diploma would get me a good job. I actually have a full time job now with XXXX in the finance department and they are assisting me with my schooling now."

"I think the main reason for furthering my education was knowing about the two-plus-two program. Confidence was a factor and knowing I could get my diploma make me know I could get the degree but the main reason I went on was because of the partnership between the two institutions."

These are examples of some of the powerful quotes from participants speaking of the improvement in their confidence in their abilities and the great opportunity provided to them that they would otherwise not have taken advantage of had the two-plus-two agreements not been in place. This is significant for the post-secondary sector as well as the future of our province, ensuring that students achieve the highest level of post-secondary education possible. The quotes from this section on confidence provide significant evidence that transformational learning has taken place with the students at community college. Once again looking at the 10 phases of transformational learning, the above quotes provide evidence that many of the phases were used in decision-making. For example, the students indicate that through their diploma they gained the confidence, maturity and encouragement from their faculty that would ensure their success. This is definitely an indication that Phase 2, self-examination, is evident. In order for these students to come to these conclusions, critical self-reflection on their experience in community college was necessary. Also evident in their quotes comment for in this section is Phase 6, planning of the course of action. Given the fact that the students had

obtained the necessary confidence and success and the articulation agreements were in place it allowed them to successfully plan their route. Evidence for Phase 7, 8 and 9 are also indicated in the above quotes. Due to the encouragement, maturity, and success achieved at community college students were more comfortable with trying on new roles and building confidence within those roles.

As another indicator of an improvement in confidence all of the participants were asked at what point in their community college career did they realize they had what it took to be successful in a post-secondary environment. In other words, was there an aha moment for them. The reason that the question was asked around the aha moment was to ascertain as to whether a disorienting dilemma occurred for the students. Keeping in mind that Mezirow indicates that a disorienting dilemma can be a single event but doesn't necessarily have to be, a disorienting dilemma can occur over time as well. Mezirow identifies the disorienting dilemma as the most important of the 10 phases of transformational learning.

Eight of the 12 students reported having an aha or trigger moment. For some participants it was early on in their diploma, for others in their second year and finally some realized upon completion of their NSCC studies. The four students who indicated that they felt they had what it took to be successful either wanted to ease into university or take advantage of the price differential between community college and university. Some examples of the aha moment are:

"After high school or first year at NSCC I didn't even think about university. In my second year I started to believe that two years wasn't

going to be enough, if there wasn't a two-plus-two program I don't know what I would have done. It is probably one of the greatest opportunities NSCC has given me. I had to do all of these things at NSCC that I didn't know I had in me like write a 30-page report. If you really want a degree go to NSCC because it builds up all the things you can do and you will feel better going to university."

"My aha moment was the second competition put on by Saint Mary's. We were first-year NSCC students competing against fourth-year marketing students and we came tenth overall."

"I would say that there was a specific teacher that really helped to improve my confidence. I was hard on myself. This teacher came up to me and said if you need a reference let me know as she would do it for me. It made me feel so good about myself and that I should continue on with school."

"I figured that I was going to be an accountant. But it didn't really work out for me. I didn't like it. I had an amazing marketing teacher and she did a wonderful job of making marketing really compelling and interesting. That is when I realized I knew what I wanted to do. It was a pretty big realization for me and this is when I realized where I was headed."

These examples point to an improvement in confidence by NSCC students convincing them to further their education at university. These quotes provide evidence that a disorienting dilemma has taken place which causes the student to begin to go

through the remaining phases of transformational learning. The disorienting dilemma of realizing that they have the ability and skills to be successful builds their confidence and encourages them to continue. For example, the student who participated in the business competition against university students and after doing well finally realized that they are smart and can be successful at whatever they want to try, to the student who felt they had their life plan in place wanting to be an accountant and coming to realize that they were not interested in that field but were sparked by one particular faculty member who was the trigger for them to change their meaning perspective, and finally the student who realized they actually had the academic skills to complete the work necessary to be successful and go on to the university level. All of these examples provide evidence of a disorienting dilemma.

Student Success at University

Ten of the 12 participants indicated that they feel they are successful university students following their time at NSCC based on their definition of success, keeping in mind that the majority of these participants did not identify high grades as the sole identifier of success. What is interesting about their responses in this section of the interview is that there appeared to be a slight change in their attitude about success. Several of them spoke about their grades and whether or not they were honours students at university as opposed to their answers about success at community college. This makes me ponder the questions: Do university students place a higher importance on grades as a measure of success than community college students? Could this be that students are also

continuing their perspective transformation as they enter the new environment around student success? Further work would be required to determine if in fact transitioning students are indeed continuing to experience transformational learning. In the case of these participants does the immersion into a new environment change their definition of student success or does the fact that their confidence has improved significantly enough that they will expect more from themselves when it comes to grades? Some examples of the changes are:

> "I won't graduate with honours but I am quite happy with Bs. I work Monday to Friday from eight to four and go to school Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Thursday and am still doing well."

> "I am doing well in my courses however I did much better at NSCC and could here as well if I changed a few things."

For the most part, students felt the transition from community college to university was fairly seamless, however, they did identify some potential issues for consideration for both the community college and the university. Although we have the two-plus-two partnership, participants indicated that there should be more interaction between the students and the university during their two-year period. This would give them a better understanding of what to expect at the university as far as expectations and environment is concerned. Some participants compared the transition to MSVU with some of the larger institutions and felt that the transition to the Mount was much easier due to the philosophy and class sizes at the MSVU. Some of the issues identified by students were as follows:

"I didn't know what to expect. It's a lot bigger even though class sizes are

small but it's hard to meet new people because people aren't in all of your

classes. The workload is much more assignment- and research-based than

hands on."

"The most difficult thing was the reliance on exams and midterms. There

is not as much reliance on exams and midterms at NSCC."

There are implications for both NSCC and universities in regards to successful

transition that I will discuss in the implications section.

Skills for Improved Confidence and Student Success

In this section of the thesis I will discuss the specific skills acquired at NSCC that

helped to improve the confidence of the participants as well as their preparation and

success at the university level.

The participants indicated that small class sizes, connection to faculty, hands-on

learning, excelling in their program, requirement to do presentations and work experience

all led to an improvement in their confidence.

"It was a small campus and small program and graduating at the top of my

class was a huge confidence booster knowing that I was capable of

something like that."

When pressed about specific items that may have improved their confidence at the

community college several key themes came out of each interview. The main theme was

the caring and supportive faculty and staff at the College:

"Definitely the instructors; I don't even need to think about it. The instructors are amazing and really personalize everything. They think of you as more than a student and give you job leads, they really care and want you to succeed. They took our input into account."

"So many people believe in you. The academic chair had me on an interview panel. Faculty and staff support you and are there to give you a swift kick in the butt when you need it. The faculty are there because they want to be there and they want you to be the best that you can be."

"I left NSCC being very close to my teachers which I have never had before, not even in high school. The teachers you have want to see you succeed. They will help you and encourage you so you don't feel alone. They made me feel that I can do it and supported me when I didn't think I could. I never felt they were just doing their job. They really cared and made sure that I did well."

"I would say that there was a specific teacher that really helped to improve my confidence. I was hard on myself. This teacher came up to me and said if you need a reference let me know as she would do it for me. It made me feel so good about myself and that I should continue on with school."

The above noted comments also provide evidence that transformational learning has taken place during students' time at NSCC. For example, the fact that students are indicating that faculty is there to encourage them and guide them and believe in them

identifies the fact that students are certainly engaging in critical reflection on their abilities, showing self-doubt and discontent. Faculty are providing the advice, guidance and support needed to help students to successfully make the transformation required to change their perspectives of their ability and their competence and self-confidence. Additionally, faculty and staff are helping the students to plan their course of action for their future path and careers.

The second theme that emerged was the small class size and the fact that students form a cohort group that provides for a safe learning environment and almost a family-like atmosphere:

"A lot of it for me was the small class sizes so there were opportunities for me to be more outgoing because of how closeknit our group was. I used to be very shy and we were doing practical things which encouraged me to come out of my shell and be more confident."

When asked what specific skills the participant picked up at NSCC that helped them become successful university students and have an easier transition the majority of students indicated their improved confidence, learning how to be an independent learner, study skills, time management skills, and communication and writing skills.

"Learning how to be independent."

"I suppose finding a work-school balance."

"A really big one is the confidence thing we talked about earlier, the ability to go through school to a goal and develop my personal skills."

"Communication skills and writing skills and common knowledge. Being able to take that to university has definitely helped me with how I talk and contact people for different things."

"NSCC helped with my maturity. A lot of the staff had relevant prior work experience which helped with my learning and gave a more personal feel instead of a textbook feel."

"The ability to figure things out. I learned how I learn at NSCC. I had instructors who taught in different ways."

In this section students provided feedback on the specific skills learned at NSCC that helped in their transition to the university level. Many of the examples they have provided here would also indicate that transformational learning has taken place. For example, students spoke about the ability to have the confidence to speak with people at the university about their

learning plans. They never would have had the

confidence to do this without their participation in the

NSCC program. They developed maturity and

understanding of their own learning abilities and style.

In chapter 6, I will discuss the implication and

conclusion of this thesis.

Chapter 6

Implications and Conclusion

Student Success

In this research project 10 of 12 participants who were former community college students defined their student success in terms such as learning things that will help them get a job, learning things that they are interested in, doing well but not necessarily focusing on grades as an overarching identification of success. These same students when asked about whether they felt they were successful university students spoke more readily about their grades as an indicator of whether or not they felt successful. This certainly bodes the questions: Do university students have a different definition of student success than community college students? Is it possible that these community college students have now immersed themselves into a different culture that places a greater influence on grades? For example, if you want to get into graduate school you must have high grades. This would be an interesting topic to further explore and may help to provide some significant information to help both the community college and university assist students with their transition.

Many community college students would be considered non-traditional post-secondary students due to the fact that they are in school full time and are generally carrying many other responsibilities outside of the classroom such as work and families. Participants in this study indicated that some of the skills they developed included time

management skills, study skills, learning to be independent learners. Reflecting on this information, I ask myself: Does being a non-traditional post-secondary learner better prepare a student for the rigors of university than a direct-entry university student? This would certainly require much further investigation into whether or not transfer students are as successful in their university studies as direct entry students are. Is there an opportunity for students who are unsuccessful in their first attempt at university be counseled to enroll at community college to prepare for the rigors of university? Better understanding the success levels of direct-entry students versus community college transfer students could provide important information for both community college and university researchers.

Confidence

I have provided evidence through this thesis that the majority of the participants achieved an improvement in academic confidence over the two-year duration of their time at NSCC. What I was not able to measure was the significance of the improvement. In other words, to what degree did their level of confidence improve in their academic ability? That being said there is a strong indication that there was an improvement in the confidence level attained through the critical reflection of the new skills developed and academic successes of the participants that did play a part in their decision to further their education at the university level and be successful. Participants spoke of the fact that faculty and staff were very supportive of their needs. They became very close to their faculty and classmates due to the small class sizes and cohort nature of their program.

They indicated the fact that they have become independent learners and were required to do presentations and competitions that improved their confidence. They spoke of the hands-on nature of the curriculum with less emphasis on midterms and exams as major milestones or determinants for as improving their confidence. I am interested in determining if there is the same improvement in confidence for direct-entry university students. If so, what are the indicators for these students that helped them to improve their confidence and help with their success? I would like to see a study where community college students' level of academic confidence was measured prior to entry and then again at the end of the first year and again at the end of the second year. Also, simultaneously measuring direct-entry students' level of confidence prior to enrolment, after the first year and then at the end of the second year. I believe that there could be significant learning for both the community college and university that could help students in their transition to College and university.

It is evident that the two-plus-two model is an important educational tool and pathway for the non-traditional post-secondary student. Students who would not otherwise attend university are being exposed to the post-secondary environment, building their confidence and success, and deciding to go further on their educational journey. In this small sample alone, seven out of 12 participants had no intention of attending university however had a change of heart and are now on their way to achieving great success. If we are able to determine that a change in confidence can influence approximately 60% of those in this study to further their education what type of impact could be made on the province if the same type of methodology was employed on

those who do not meet prerequisites to obtain their high school diploma let alone a post-secondary credential. This would certainly require much further investigation and work but I believe the potential is there to make a difference for the post-secondary institutions in the province on the economy as a whole.

Transformative Learning

The central question of this project was whether or not transformative learning was taking place during the two years that students were enrolled in their diploma at NSCC. Through this work I was able to provide significant evidence that transformational learning can occur at the community college level. Also this thesis provided evidence that Mezirow's transformational learning theory is an appropriate lens through which to look at community college students and their transfer to university. I believe that further research in this area may provide community colleges and universities significant information that may help in their curriculum and teacher development. Through this thesis I was able to provide evidence that participants improved their confidence about their abilities to perform at the post-secondary level. Using a methodology used by Brock (2010), who studied university students using the 10 phases of transformation to determine whether or not students experienced transformational learning during their four-year degree, I believe it can be applied to the community college environment as well as to the university environment here in Atlantic Canada. This would provide valuable information for both community college and university faculty and administrations. Information that could be significant in improving student

retention and identifying proper pathways for students, i.e. should they enter university directly or pass through community college first.

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Appendix A

Excellence • Innovation • Discovery

Informed Consent

The researcher for this study is Fred Tilley, a graduate student in the Masters of Arts in Education program. The thesis supervisor is Dr. Donovan Plumb, professor in the Graduate Studies in Lifelong learning program. This study has received ethics approval through the University Research Ethics Board at MSVU.

The community college in Nova Scotia has the reputation as a place people can acquire skills to perform productively in the workforce. Although job-skill training continues to be a major purpose of the community college, many students now use their community college education as a stepping stone to further post-secondary learning at university. In recent years, the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) has signed a variety of articulation agreements with universities in Nova Scotia that enable business students to obtain a degree following their time at NSCC. This thesis investigates the transition process of School of Business students as they move from NSCC to university. Specifically, it explores the efforts at the NSCC to foster self-directed learning and how this affects the confidence of learners as well as their decision to attend and be successful at university. This research includes a series of one on one interviews with business students at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). The thesis will investigate whether deliberate efforts to enhance self-direction in learners at NSCC builds confidence and contributes to student success at university. The thesis also argues that student success at community college is a significant factor in determining whether that student will continue their post-secondary studies at University.

 Participants will be asked to take part in a recorded interview (max 1 hour) with the primary investigator.

The research may provide benefit to both Mount Saint Vincent University and Nova Scotia Community College in better understanding how the teaching methodologies and curriculum are helping students to be successful. It may also benefit participants to better understand the impact that education has had on their success.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during or after the research project. All data from withdrawn participants will be destroyed immediately and will be removed from the results of the study. No participant will receive any penalty due to withdrawal from the study. You may withdraw during the research interview simply by informing Fred Tilley that you wish to withdraw from the study; alternatively, following participation, you

may withdraw from the study by email (fred.tilley@msvu.ca).

Participants information will be kept strictly confidential throughout the course of the study. Electronic data will be stored on a password protected external hard drive and laptop computer. Paper data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. All data will be destroyed six months following completion of the study. Absolutely no identifying information will be used in any resulting publication or presentation of this project.

The results of the study will be published through the Mount Saint Vincent Library Masters Thesis publication process. All participants and stakeholders will receive an email with a weblink to the final research thesis. The results of this study may also be presented at workshops, conferences etc.

At no time will your academic status or privileges be affected due to your participation in, lack of participation in, or withdrawal from this research study. If you have further questions about the study, please contact Fred Tilley at fred.tilley@msvu.ca.

If you have questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone not involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research Office 902-457-6350 or via email at research@msvu.ca.

Fred Tilley

_____   _____

Fred Tilley   Participant
Date: Date: