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Publication Details

This book chapter is published as Lysaght, P, Women returing to study: stories of trans formation, in Kell, P, Vialle, W, Konza, D and Vogl, G (eds), Learning and the learner: exploring learning for new times, University of Wollongong, 2008, 236p. Complete book available here.

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Chapter 8

Women Returning to Study: Stories of Transformation

Pauline Lysaght

What happens when women return to study after years spent in the home or in poorly paid jobs requiring limited professional skills? How do they assess their abilities on the basis of their experiences and how can professional advisers support them in this process so that their potential is realised? This chapter has as its focus the experiences of six women returning to study who were required to think about their skills and abilities in ways that they had never previously contemplated (Lysaght, 2001). Their understanding of intelligence, particularly as it was reflected in their own lives, was challenged at a very personal level. Through their stories they were encouraged to assess their abilities and potential in a manner that gradually led them to redefine themselves as individuals. The stories told by these women challenge the traditional approaches to intelligence and its assessment that are often undertaken by professional advisers. They require all who work in the educational sector to explore alternative ways of supporting new and returning students as they pursue goals related to study and work.

Regardless of age, the choice of an appropriate and rewarding program of study is part of a complex decision-making process. An issue of central importance involves the intellectual ability of the individual and whether or not the academic demands of a particular course will be attainable. Decisions of this nature are typically based on past experiences, with an assessment of ability and potential resting on a personal appraisal of earlier successes and failures. For women returning to study after years spent in unpaid housework or in poorly paid unskilled work, appraisal based on past experiences may be inadequate as a basis for determining future directions. Typically, activities of this nature are assumed to require limited ability and consequently attract little in the way of recognition or value (Bacchi, 1990). This was evident in the women's stories and is reflected in the words of one woman, Carla, who describes her feeling of being devalued by others because of her choice to stay at home rather than seeking employment when her children were younger:

Y*ou're always getting put down when you're at home…when you go to the shop they think 'Oh yeah, you're just a housewife and you got nothing else better to do.*

The lack of worth attached to women in this situation is reflected in both informal and formal views of intelligence that are based on traditional beliefs about ability. At the individual level, informal approaches to intelligence limit self-appraisal, leading to a lack of value being attached to a variety of skills and abilities. This problem can be compounded if professional advisers relying on traditional

approaches to assessment and counselling confirm the personal appraisals that have been made (Allen 1995).

When women fail to recognise and value their abilities, particularly as they return to study, they are more likely to be channelled into a relatively narrow range of study programs and occupations, with little encouragement to move beyond the limits that have traditionally been established. Their relative segregation and under-representation, both as students and in the workforce, reflects this pattern and is well documented (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Whilst this situation results from a variety of complex factors, the limitations of conventional approaches to intelligence, assessment and counselling contribute in some measure. These limitations have been criticised by proponents of current theories of intelligence who recognise the broad spectrum of abilities open to assessment (Gardner, 1999; Sternberg, 2000). For example, Howard Gardner (1983) points out that the two conventional measures of intelligence, linguistic and logical-mathematical, identify a narrow range of abilities only and yet we rely on them almost exclusively in formal assessments of ability. In fact, abilities that cannot be readily interpreted within these two categories tend to stand outside the realms of both formal and informal assessment. The challenge for those working within educational institutions is to encourage self-appraisal as well as formal assessment from a position that identifies and values a more diverse range of abilities. It is only from this basis that individual students will be able to consider study and career options that realistically reflect their abilities and potential.

The Multiple Intelligences (M.I.) approach, developed by Howard Gardner (1983), is important in this regard because it provides a broad conceptualisation of intelligence, giving credence to experiences that traditionally have been assigned limited value. It provides a basis for legitimating the abilities that may have been developed by women over the course of years spent in the home or in the paid workforce. It supports the process of self-appraisal by providing a framework for reinterpreting past experiences so that abilities can be valued in ways that will hold new meanings for the future. From the M.I. perspective, eight different domains of intelligence have been identified so far. In addition to the Linguistic and Logical-Mathematical domains currently recognised in conventional approaches, Musical, Spatial, Bodily-Kinaesthetic, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Naturalist intelligences have also been identified (Gardner, 1983; 1998). Gardner (1983) suggests that each one of us is born with the potential for developing abilities in these eight areas. Biological predispositions in combination with opportunities for experiences within the different domains result in the development of a unique pattern of relative strengths and weaknesses for each person.

An intellectual profile that maps the relative level of development of each of the intelligences can be constructed to reflect this pattern, providing a concrete record of one’s abilities. Unlike traditional assessments of intelligence, comparison with others is unnecessary as the pattern reflects a picture of the

individual's particular areas of ability, rather than ranking one person's abilities in relation to those of others. Construction of the profile is determined by an appraisal of abilities based on past and current experiences, gathered through conversation and interview rather than on the basis of responses to a test. The profile is an important resource because it stands as a tangible record of achievements that signal future directions. Another powerful outcome of this process is the personal stories that are revealed. They enable personal change for those involved whilst providing a basis for motivating others to take action. Where professional practice is concerned, the stories of these women present a challenge to accepted practice in educational institutions and provide a basis for transforming that practice in ways that will benefit all students.

Portraits and Profiles

The women engaged in this project were aged between twenty-five to fifty years and they all lived in a coastal region of Australia. As mature-age students, they were undertaking various programs of study at a number of different educational institutions providing courses at post-secondary and tertiary levels. Each had returned to study in order to gain re-entry to the workforce on a full-time basis although, at least initially, they had anticipated being re-employed in unskilled positions. With the exception of one woman, Carla, all spoke English as their first language. Two of the women were of indigenous descent and, of these, one had always been aware of her heritage (Jeannie) whereas the other, Narelle, discovered this as an adult. With the exception of one woman, the youngest (Sandy), all had children and each had assumed a marked degree of responsibility for her family. Three of the women, Denise, Narelle and Trish, were divorced and had sole custody of their children. All of the women came from working class backgrounds, with histories of existing on low incomes drawn either from welfare services or from poorly paid unskilled work.

The varied experiences and different personalities of the women made each of their stories unique although, inevitably perhaps, common threads were also discernible. This pattern of individual differences and commonalities was echoed through the intellectual profiles that each woman constructed, with clear differences as well as common elements emerging. Through the process of telling and retelling personal stories, initial profiles were gradually modified and shaped to reflect the deeper understandings the women developed about themselves and their experiences. These changes were sometimes obvious, with increased significance attached to particular intelligences but often the changes were quite subtle, reflecting a sense of empowerment as discussions focussed on the role that each woman could take in directing her own future.

In terms of common themes, one element that emerged was that all of the women expressed a lack of confidence in their intellectual abilities and academic performance, largely because of their earlier

educational experiences and the lack of value typically attached to the knowledge and expertise each had developed. Initially, at least, their ideas of intelligence were defined traditionally but gradually their views became more encompassing as they acknowledged the various areas of expertise that each had developed in relation to the different intelligences. Trish, for example, when reflecting on her experience of constructing her own profile, made the following observation:

> *You've stayed at home, you haven't worked, you haven't done anything for 15 years…And when you look at this [final profile] you think, 'Well, I have done things and there is knowledge that has built up'. It may not be the I.Q. type test knowledge but you do acquire all these things over these years and it does help you look at that and think, 'Okay, I can do things'.*

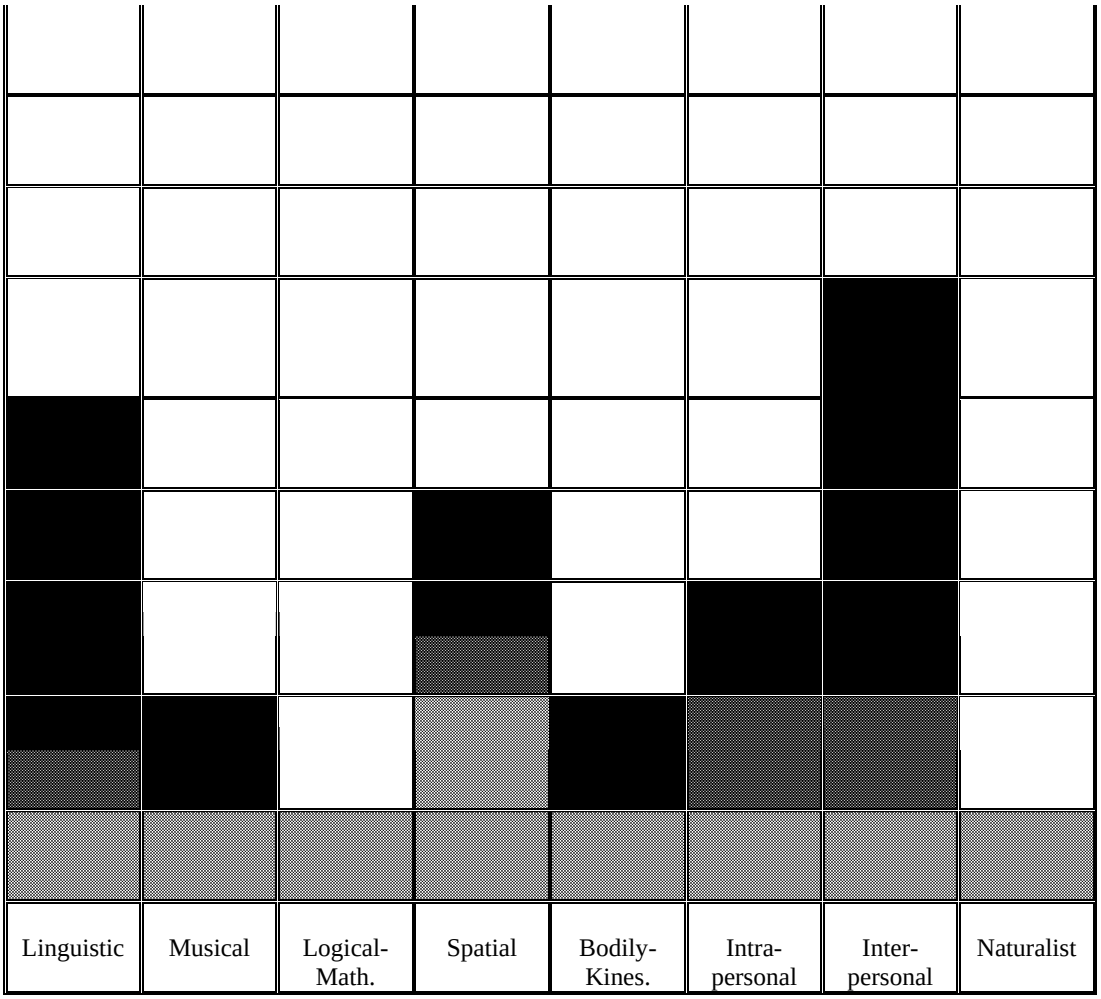
Trish was able to recognise and value the abilities she had developed over the years since leaving school. In particular, she was able to draw on a wealth of experiences from the time she had spent outside the paid workforce whilst caring for her children.

Denise's profiles serve as an example of the nature of the changes that took place during the process of profile construction for all of the women, although the patterns of abilities that are reflected in her profiles represent an assessment of her particular strengths and weaknesses. Denise was enrolled in a short course of six months designed to provide basic skills for women returning to work. She was 50 years old and had been divorced for nine years. Her two younger children, both teenagers, lived with her in a rented flat whilst the two older children were married and living nearby. She had intermittent contact with her ex-husband who had recently announced that he planned to remarry. Denise appeared quiet, conservative and impassive, at least in the earlier interviews. Her appearance, movements and speech were carefully measured, attracting little attention and, thereby, rendering her almost invisible. When discussing her childhood she noted that her parents and brothers rarely communicated unless arguing with one another and that she had learned not to draw attention to herself because of the unpleasant and sometimes punitive consequences that ensued: "*if you did shine a little bit, you always got put down anyway*". As the interviews progressed however, Denise became increasingly articulate and animated, reflecting gains in confidence that were evident in the profiles that she constructed as well as in her participation in the course she was undertaking.

Denise approached the construction of her first profile tentatively (Figure 1, lighter shading). She recognised little value in the knowledge and expertise she had gained during her life and commented wryly that, in terms of the profile, there would be very little to see. She assessed her leading strength as Spatial intelligence because of the skills developed during various art classes she had attended in her adult years. Linguistic intelligence posed an interesting challenge for Denise because, whilst being an avid reader and also an articulate speaker, she had little confidence in her abilities. At one stage in her

life, she had taken elocution lessons, hoping to improve the quality of her voice: "*cause my speech is all flat*". On another occasion she stated: "*I'd just love to be able to speak nicely and have something to say that people would be interested in…just the confidence and everything*". Denise recognised the importance of voice as more than its quality or timbre, but also the content of the words and the power that speech has in regard to relationships with others.

Figure 1. Denise – Initial Profile (lighter shading), Revised Profile (medium shading) and Final Profile (dense shading)



In her fourth interview, Denise revised her profile, adjusting it slightly to reflect an increasing confidence with regard to the Linguistic, Intrapersonal and Interpersonal domains (Figure 1, medium shading). In regard to the Linguistic domain, she noted that she could see that there was room for improvement and that this was becoming possible as she practised the skills involved in speaking and writing for assignments in her course. In addition, she commented that as her speaking skills increased, there was every chance that abilities within the Interpersonal domain would also develop. An

improvement in voice would lead to more productive interactions with other people. Denise had also given some thought to the idea that it is possible to express one's emotions through painting and other artworks and considered that this might well be the case for her. Accordingly, she allocated additional value to the Intrapersonal domain, but made the point very clearly that there was room for much greater improvement in all three of these areas.

A final profile was constructed in our last interview together (Figure 1, dense shading). The differences in the contours of this profile compared with the earlier profiles are marked, reflecting an increase in self-confidence, as well as the capacity to identify and value particular abilities. The Spatial, Linguistic and Interpersonal domains all increased, with the most dramatic differences reflected in the abilities associated with language use and interaction with other people. The perceived increase in Spatial intelligence reflected the greater value Denise now placed on the production of her artwork. In regard to the Linguistic area, she talked about an improvement in both her spoken and written language. This improvement in language, particularly the spoken word, was reflected through increased interactions with other people, enabling her to identify an increase in abilities related to the Interpersonal domain.

The use of language together with the greater personal power Denise now associated with her own voice led her to regard Intrapersonal intelligence as an area of increased relative strength. The Musical and Bodily-Kinaesthetic intelligences were now viewed as slightly improved, although still areas of relative weakness. Logical-Mathematical and Naturalist intelligences remained at the lowest point on the profile, with Denise expressing little interest in developing her abilities in these areas. Denise regarded three areas of intelligence, the Linguistic, Intrapersonal and Interpersonal domains, as significant in regard to her assessment of herself. She talked about putting a much more determined effort into improving her abilities in these three areas and regarded this as vital to her future development. Interestingly, for all of the women these three particular intelligences provided a basis for personal investigation and understanding that acted as a platform for overall change and development.

This example of one woman's approach to constructing her intellectual profile reflects the dynamic nature of the process involved. The particular configuration of relative strengths and weaknesses across the intelligences is subject to change depending on continuing interpretations of past and current experiences. The possibility of developing particular intelligences further can also be discussed so that opportunities for fulfilling potential through a wider range of study and career options can be explored. Rather than being viewed as an end product, the profile and its construction are regarded as part of an ongoing process of self-appraisal based on a comprehensive view of intelligence.

Developing a Platform for Change

Explorations of three intelligences, Linguistic, Intrapersonal and Interpersonal, were particularly important in the women's stories as they constructed their profiles. In different ways, these intelligences encouraged an exploration of each woman's knowledge of herself and of the experiences that had contributed to these constructions. Each of these intelligences provides distinctive opportunities for acknowledging and promoting a sense of personal agency. Investigations of strengths and weaknesses within the other five intelligences provide a basis for assessing ability within those particular areas. In addition, they contribute towards a comprehensive analysis of abilities and potential. It was through a combination of the Linguistic and personal intelligences, however, that coherence was brought to each story as it was told within the framework of the M.I. approach and that a platform for overall change could be developed.

When Trish discussed her relationship with her ex-husband, the distinctions between various aspects of these three intelligences became blurred simply because of the dynamic nature of her lived experiences. She began with an exploration of her abilities in terms of Linguistic intelligence and mentioned that she had been the "*silent partner*" in the relationship she had shared with her husband:

> *Unfortunately, it's easier to shut up a lot of the time, you know, you don't rock the boat, you don't stir things up. Often, you find that you're talking but nobody's listening.*

Trish went on to observe that her husband "*was not a good communicator…doesn't speak to you, he speaks at you. You just have to nod occasionally*". From these initial comments about what she believed indicated a lack of Linguistic intelligence on her part, she moved to acknowledging that although she had viewed her husband as orchestrating the breakdown of their relationship, her part in it had been greater than she had recognised at the time. She continued by saying that perhaps during the last few years of their marriage she had been less compliant than in the earlier years of their relationship:

> *I was really much stronger than him. Maybe I bounced back because I was already on the track anyway. When I look back I think, 'I had a role to play in this'. I think I had started to mature. I had changed but he wasn't really changing.*

Whilst appearing surprised by this self-revelation, Trish acknowledged the gradual changes that she had experienced within their relationship. As she saw it, she was challenging the balance of power in her marriage as she came to have a little more confidence in herself. Recounting her story made it possible

for Trish to appreciate the increasingly active role she had played in the relationship with her husband and, ultimately, in its dissolution.

Our experiences in Linguistic and the personal intelligences inevitably intertwine as we live our lives. The experiences we have in one domain are frequently embedded within experiences in the other domains simply because events do not take place in isolation (Gardner, 1983). This becomes obvious as stories unfold and events are explored. An examination of Linguistic intelligence for Trish resulted in a consideration of her verbal interactions with her husband. The nature of the relationship itself then came under scrutiny, opening further possibilities for the development of self-knowledge and understanding.

Linguistic Intelligence

Linguistic intelligence provides an avenue for exploring a range of experiences related to the use of language (Gardner, 1983). The language we use shapes our engagement with those around us and our own understandings are developed through the access we have to the language of others. Discussions of Linguistic intelligence with the women revealed the difficulties that many faced and the manner in which these problems were confronted. Some of the issues that emerged involved speaking directly with others, as well as, using the written word as a means of expression. Carla and Denise, for example, expressed greater concern for their abilities in regard to Linguistic intelligence than for any of the other intelligences. Both had experienced feelings of inadequacy and inferiority in relation to their use of language.

Carla's lack of confidence and concern with improving her oral and written skills in English had dominated her adult life. Humiliated by a school system that had failed to value her emerging oral skills in English or her competency in Spanish, her first language, Carla believed that she had been labelled as "dumb". During the first interview in which she discussed the importance of developing her ability with Linguistic intelligence Carla made the following observation:

> *Some people bring the worst out in me. They bring out the dumb side. As soon as they talk to me, I can't express myself properly and I make myself be that person, the idiot, who they want to believe I am. I am nervous, trying to impress them…but I make silly mistakes…I cannot be myself and that adds to my frustration.*

Carla's frustration with her linguistic skills and the feelings of rejection that accompany what she regards as failure in this respect are obvious. What is also apparent is the way in which she uses an

assessment of Linguistic intelligence as an indicator of her intellectual ability overall, referring to herself as “the idiot”. This reflects the manner in which linguistic expression is commonly relied upon as a “de facto measure of intelligence” (Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina, 2000, pg 95) when informal assessments of ability are made.

In contrast to Carla’s experience, Narelle rated Linguistic intelligence as extremely high in both her initial and final profiles. Narelle understood that judgements are often made of others when their skills in this area are not sophisticated and expressed concern for the well-being of people who may be treated unfairly because of this. Her particular concern was with indigenous people, as well as those who do not have English as their first language.

Trish indicated an awareness of the power of the spoken word in general terms but had been unaware of her own ability in this regard. She came to value her strengths in Linguistic intelligence and this was reflected in her final profile, but her initial assessment reflected the value she attached to the written word. Her initial evaluations of her own ability with regard to spoken language were challenged when she gave an oral presentation to her class as part of an assessment task:

> *My legs were shaking, my voice was going when I had to speak in front of my class. It was nerve-racking. I was astounded by the mark. Usually, I back away from public speaking. I don’t like to be the centre of attention for anything, but I had no choice. I had to do it.*

Trish had suppressed her own voice for much of her life but, despite being nervous, her speech was effective and she had received positive feedback from both her teacher and the other students in her class.

The profiles that Denise constructed have been presented earlier and an increase in her appraisal of linguistic intelligence was noted in the final profile. This change resulted from her performance in a written assignment that formed part of her coursework and her observations in relation to this reveal an increased depth of self-awareness:

> *I said we all had a voice, a different voice, and I said that we should all be sensitive to the quiet people too, that they still have feelings and they mightn’t want to say things and sometimes they do want to say things but they don’t. It was mainly that we all had our own voice, sort of thing…I wrote something else too, about women being in high positions…When I was saying ‘there’s power in speech’ I could see power in the written word too now.*

The experience Denise had gained through her assessment task in conjunction with the opportunities that were available for analysing her own experiences had led her to understand the value of different voices. An understanding of voice from this perspective helped her to develop a greater degree of insight into herself and the extent of the control she is able to exert in this regard.

Telling their own stories allowed the women to give shape to their experiences, whilst asking them to investigate and assess their abilities within the Linguistic domain provided each woman with opportunities to analyse and assess her facility with language. This experience enabled each woman to look at the ways in which her use of language shaped her interactions with others and, ultimately, her perceptions of herself.

Intrapersonal Intelligence

An exploration of Intrapersonal intelligence encourages an understanding of ourselves as individuals, of our emotional lives and of the part we take in shaping the events and experiences of our lives. Howard Gardner (1983) notes that Intrapersonal intelligence refers to the capacity of the individual to shape a viable and coherent model of the self so that experiences and behaviours can be effectively orchestrated in ways that have meaning for that person. The self-knowledge that we develop through increased abilities in this domain allows us to draw on the ever-increasing wealth of our inner experiences.

Whilst assessments of individual levels of ability varied greatly with regard to this intelligence, all six women understood the significance of it as a potent force in shaping their lives. Unlike the other women, Narelle viewed her ability as poor in comparison with the other intelligences. Despite increasing her assessment of her abilities slightly in her final profile, she emphasised the importance of continuing to work towards particular goals she had set for herself:

> *I feel that I'm always learning and that…I've learned a lot of lessons in my life, but to be a better person I need to be able to develop those things…I need to act on those lessons I've learned rather than doing it again and again…It would make me a better person, if I listened to what my self was saying. We always say, 'I should do this or that', but whether you do them or not…and I think perhaps I haven't been putting them into operation or listening to myself and I need to. I think I need to allow more time to develop that side of me and to allow that to come out.*

Unfortunately, Narelle's frustration for what she regarded as a failure to learn the "*lessons of life*" led her to underestimate what she had achieved. I challenged her assessment of herself, pointing to her continued responsibilities toward her children as an achievement, as well as the degree of commitment she had made to the course in which she was enrolled. Even her analysis of the way in which she lived her life spoke of insight and strength within this domain. However, whilst she acknowledged my

observations Narelle was concerned that she had not yet "*learned enough*" to satisfy the standards she had set for herself.

The women mentioned various experiences as they reflected on their abilities, yet they all commented that they had never before considered these experiences as being related to the term "intelligence". Nevertheless, the opportunity to focus on abilities and experiences in Intrapersonal intelligence increased the degree of insight each woman had gained into herself, allowing most of the women to value their particular abilities in new ways.

Interpersonal Intelligence

Interpersonal intelligence involves our relationships with others and our ability to distinguish between the feelings, moods and motives of other people (Gardner, 1983). It reflects our capacity to respond to others sensitively and is often demonstrated through empathy, as well as the ability to work co-operatively and collaboratively with other people. Narelle and Sandy assessed Interpersonal intelligence as a leading strength across their initial and final profiles, whilst the remaining four women increased their assessment of expertise in this intelligence between their initial and final profiles. The women all spoke of the relationships they shared with other people, often reflecting the self-knowledge and understandings that emerged through these experiences.

The assessments Narelle and Sandy made of their abilities in Interpersonal intelligence were for similar reasons. Both valued the skills involved in effective relationships, regardless of whether these existed with family and friends or within the workplace. In Trish's case, although she acknowledged the pleasure she takes in longer-term relationships, she observed that she was slow to make friends or to present herself openly to others, preferring instead to observe other people. She made the following comment in this regard:

> *This is hard for me because I communicate great with people that I'm comfortable with, you know, with my family, with my children, with friends…then I'm really good at this. Then, if you put me out into somewhere I'm not comfortable, then it takes me a long time to get comfortable.*

At a later point however Trish noted that she believed she would be able to improve her skills in this domain and that a greater degree of involvement with others would lead to increased confidence.

Jeannie regarded Interpersonal intelligence as a leading strength across both profiles. She reflects that, even as a child, her ability was well-developed in this area:

> *Even at school, everyone came to me with their problems. I suppose they saw me as someone who would listen to them and understand and not tell anyone else. I suppose part of the understanding is having been through so much myself.*

All of the women regarded the abilities involved in Interpersonal intelligence as significant in their lives, through their involvement with family members and also in the course of their daily lives as they encountered other people. Value was placed on the abilities involved in communicating with others and being sensitive to their needs, with each woman noting that an improvement in these skills would develop through continued interactions with others. A more critical view of their own abilities, as well as the abilities displayed by others, was encouraged through discussion of this intelligence.

Explorations of the personal intelligences in conjunction with Linguistic intelligence provide greater potential for access to the inner life of the individual than the other intelligences permit. They encourage an understanding of the contexts in which the construction of a sense of self develops. Intrapersonal intelligence, which involves the capacity to access one's inner life through an awareness of feelings, thoughts and ideas, has been described as the key to self-knowledge (Gardner, 1983) and, as such, involves knowing one's own particular pattern of strengths and weaknesses, as well as understanding how these may be regulated in order to achieve appropriate goals. Howard Gardner (1983) has described Interpersonal intelligence in terms of our awareness of others and our ability to understand and respond to them appropriately and sensitively. Abilities in this domain involve the capacity to look beyond ourselves, to the relationships we share with others and to the manner in which we position ourselves with reference to those people. It also encourages an investigation of the ways in which others position us. From this perspective we are able to explore understandings of the self across the variety of social contexts within which we operate.

Challenging and Transforming Practice in Education

The women's stories provide a basis for informing educators, academic advisers and counsellors about alternative ways of exploring and assessing students' abilities and potential. The words of these women support the argument for recognising a broad spectrum of abilities rather than the narrow range that has traditionally received attention. By challenging commonly accepted beliefs the approach used with the women has the potential to transform the lives of the individuals concerned as well as changing conventional practice. In addition to the benefit this is likely to have for women returning to study, all students, but particularly those who are disadvantaged or marginalised by current practice, will benefit. Rather than using assessment techniques that fail to recognise the broad range of abilities that may be developed and that exclude people from study and career options, our concern must be with developing techniques that encourage inclusivity.

Whilst the M.I. framework can be regarded as a vehicle for allowing people to redefine their abilities and potential, a narrative or storied approach provides the means for gathering personal information that will lead to the construction of a profile. From the perspective of narrative, the stories we tell fashion our lives, providing structure for our day-to-day existence whilst propelling us into a future that is shaped by our lived experiences of them. Words *give* shape to the meaning of experience in our lives (Frank, 1997). A narrative approach is important because it recognises that, although at times we may be constrained by our own stories, we can also become the authors of new stories for ourselves. Its power lies in the opportunities it provides for people to develop a sense of agency as they "re-story" their lives or conceptualise the course of their lives in new and more acceptable ways (Gergen, 1999; White, 1991).

When we engage in the process of re-storying our lives we become able to externalise our experiences (White & Epston, 1990). This process of separating the self from the story makes it possible to create a space in which people are able to explore alternative and preferred knowledges of who they are and of how they might conduct their lives (White, 1988). An individual who constructs an intellectual profile within the context of a narrative approach is afforded an opportunity for doing just this. The process of constructing the profile involves recalling and editing experiences from the past, as well as re-authoring the future. Constructing a profile presents the individual with an opportunity for externalisation or for providing space between the story and the self that then allows alternative understandings to be explored. The profile stands as a concrete and tangible record of abilities, open to observation, discussion and change. It mirrors the fact that different ways of speaking about one's experiences and abilities can lead to new ways of understanding and moving on in life. Importantly, it provides a basis for projecting and exploring alternative narratives for the future, contributing to the sense of agency that accompanies self-defined choice.

A number of the women commented on the significance of the process involved in constructing their own profiles. Carla, for example, was 40 years old, married with four children and had attempted a number of different courses at the post-secondary level. Her experiences as a child had been less than positive when she entered school at the age of five years with limited skills in English after her family migrated to Australia from Spain. Her treatment at school had sapped her self-confidence and, despite undertaking voluntary work with migrant women in her adult years, she continued to retain a very negative image of her abilities. At one point, Carla explained the importance that constructing her own profile had for her. She referred to assessment procedures that she had undertaken in recent years as she applied for courses that she hoped would eventually lead to work. In each case, these procedures involved someone else making judgements about her on the basis of her responses to questions that appeared to have little or no significance for her. She compared this with the experience of being able to

construct her own profile, albeit in collaboration, and with coming to understand that intelligence is more than something that can be measured through school-based tasks. As Carla saw it, she could be "*in charge*" of herself:

> *I can say to myself, 'I've got this [M.I. profile] and I know who I am'…I can see I can do something. Before, people always told me, they always said, 'This is you. This is who you are'. This time I can say it, 'This is who I am'.*

For Carla, as well as the other women, the construction of her profile was important because she was empowered through its process. In addition, it provided a space for her to stand back and consider a concrete representation of her abilities, strengths as well as weaknesses, an option that is generally not available when traditional techniques of assessment are used.

The accounts given by these women reflect the importance of an approach that is based on a pluralist view of intelligence, one that acknowledges and values a broader range of abilities than is possible when operating from the perspective of traditional approaches. Those concerned with improving practice so that equitable access to education for all is provided must be prepared to consider creative alternatives to those currently used. Recognition of alternative approaches that contextualise skills and abilities developed through a variety of experiences, within formal as well as informal settings, is imperative. It is only then that equitable access will be ensured and that students will become able to make informed choices with regard to study and career possibilities.

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