

# My Mother, Myself: Using a Research Biography

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## Abstract

*Learning that takes place is generally a reflection of people's lives as they experience themselves and others. Therefore, learning is more likely to occur when a student engages in an experience that has personal meaning. The purpose of this paper is to provide the rationale, design, and evaluation of a "biography project," often referred to by students as the "mom biography." We describe how we structured the project within a course entitled "Women, work, and leisure." The values of the assignment, as well as the problems, are discussed based on data collected from students as the assignment has evolved over the years. We also offer suggestions for how the principles applied in this class can be transferred to other leisure studies courses.*

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, interviewing, writing, affective learning, teaching methods

## Biographical Information

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People learn...

10% of what they read

20% of what they hear...

70% of what they discuss

80% of what they experience...

(Source unknown)

Meaningful assignments that reflect the objectives of a course and provide a way for students to become personally involved in their education is a challenge to educators. Because students learn 80% of what they experience, we designed an opportunity for students to learn through their involvement in a personally based research project that reinforces learning principles.

Scientists and educators sometimes view the "self" as something to be separated, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled (Krieger, 1991). This view of the self must be altered if students are to learn to critically examine research and the meanings

of lived experiences. Learning that takes place is generally a reflection of people's lives as they experience themselves and others. Therefore, learning is more likely to occur when a student engages in an experience that has meaning for her or him.

The purpose of this paper is to provide the rationale, design, and evaluation of a "biography project," often referred to by students as the "mom biography." This assignment has offered ways to emphasize key objectives in the course cross-listed between women's studies and leisure studies entitled "Women, Work, and Leisure." It has become a way of learning that reinforces the experiences of others within a context that has meaning for the student.

### **Pedagogical Rationale**

An understanding of our teaching-learning philosophy is an important aspect to the rationale for using this project in our class. Much of our philosophy stems from the writings of Freire (1971). The following assumptions based on Freire's work relate to the ways in which we teach this class:

- education is never neutral;
- humans are free to act on their world;
- the focus of education includes changing the structures of society as well as the social situations in which people live;
- the educational process should be holistic and focus on the inter-relationship of action and reflection (praxis);
- knowledge occurs by the educator providing an analytical framework through which the participant's experience of society is examined; and
- the participant's own experience, through reflection and problem-posing processes, constitutes major source of knowledge (Freire, 1971).

These assumptions provide a context for experiential learning. Experiential education is holistic in the sense that it addresses students in their entirety as physical, emotional, spiritual, thinking, feeling, and social beings (Carver, 1996). Through this process a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experience (Luckmann, 1996). The following principles of experiential education illustrate commonalities with Freire's assumptions:

- experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis;
- throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning;
- the results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning (Luckmann, 1996, p. 7).

An additional component of this experiential philosophy is the emphasis on learning through critical thinking and writing. Several pedagogical researchers have expressed a need for greater efforts directed toward critical thinking and writing skills (e.g., American Philosophical Association, 1990; Capossela, 1993; Ehrlich, 1996; Tomlinson, 1990). These authors have called for an examination of dominant practices and institutions that engage students in critical thinking and writing through such efforts as examining assumptions from multiple view points and uncovering personal assumptions. Critical thinking evolved from Dewey's (1933) idea of reflective thinking perceived as a complex, transactional, context-based web of activity involving the whole person. His suggestion was that reflective thinking was a holistic way of thinking and an exploration of relationships. Critical writing, as a teaching tool, promotes critical/reflective thinking and involves both affective and intellectual dimensions, is sensitive to context, and extends the writer's ability to deal with closure, entertain contradiction, and deal with uncertainty (Capossela, 1993). As suggested by Capossela (1993) and Nickerson, Perkins, and Smith (1985), projects focused on critical writing demonstrate and foster critical thinking.

The belief that students learn to think critically without explicit instructions or assignments is questionable (Halpern, 1989; King, 1994; Kurfiss, 1988; Ruminski & Hanks, 1995). Critical thinking involves a recognition of personal attitudes and values as well as the purposeful, self-regulated judgment that includes skills in applying, analyzing, and evaluating information (Ruminski & Hanks, 1995). An assignment such as the mom biography is an opportunity for the students to learn and practice these skills of critical thinking and critical writing.

The final aspect underlying the value of the mom biography assignment arises from the women's developmental literature that suggests a need for recognition and acknowledgment of personal experiences in learning (e.g., Cooper & Holzman, 1989; Dooley, 1995; Emig, 1993; Fiddler & Marienau, 1995; Taylor & Marienau, 1995). Personal experience serves as a critical source of motivation, learning, and meaning-making to help the developing woman heighten awareness of self and identify needs, dilemmas, or challenges that may require social action or adaptive new strategies (Fiddler & Marienau, 1995). Apps (1979) suggested that the educational program of a learner should include a thematic research component that is basically a process by which a person begins to grasp her particular social reality, expressed as a series of interrelated themes or topics.

This focus on personal experiences, related to the construction of self, provides educators with powerful spaces in which to encourage learning. This learning can center on the significance of context and the radical subjectivity of knowledge as well as the validation of women's lives (Rich, 1979). As suggested by Dooley (1995), teaching students to think and write of the "plain and ordinary" experiences helps them become a part of those experiences. They have an opportunity to see that there is room for the way that they look at an experience, and a way for others to have their own views; they have a way in which to acknowledge the rich diversity of people's lives.

By asking students to complete the research biography project, we provide them with a powerful learning opportunity. They are asked to critically think and write about

issues pertaining to work and leisure faced by their mothers. They not only share these thoughts in their papers but with other students during the in-class discussions of the projects. This experiential project becomes an integration and synthesis of the varied perspectives covered throughout the semester that results in an opportunity for personal reflection, understanding, and growth.

### **Context of Assignment within the Course**

All together, we have taught “Women, Work, and Leisure” for over 15 years. During the past eight years we have used the “biography project” as a central focus of the course. Although we have strongly encouraged students to interview their mothers, this charge is not always possible. If it is not possible to interview one’s mother, we require that the student interviews someone who is at least a generation older with whom they have had a significantly close relationship. We believe that if the student has experienced something of the life of this individual, she/he will have additional insights into the person’s situation beyond what occurs in the interview. Only about 5% of the students have chosen to interview grandmothers, aunts, spouse’s mother, or a significant mentor whom they have known for some time instead of interviewing their mothers.

This assignment is due two weeks before the end of the term and serves as a way for students to apply many of the objectives of the course to understanding the meanings of “women, work, and leisure.” The specific objectives of this assignment that pertain to the objectives of the course include:

1. Apply the concepts of feminist research, interviewing, and qualitative data analysis to the biography research project.
2. Analyze how the women researched in the biographies were like or unlike the “mythical norm” of women.

The assignment directions are in the syllabus and discussed briefly the first day of class. The syllabus reads:

**Research Biography:** Each student will do an interview and write a research biography of her/his mother or some other significant female figure in one’s life. If possible, the interview should be in person. The interview should be taped, then transcribed. The guiding questions for the interview will be discussed in class. A 6-8 page summary of the interview will be turned in on the assigned day and an informal report given to the class.

Part I is written from the viewpoint of a researcher. This section consists of a narrative using the guiding questions and their analysis as the focus. Part II is written from a personal viewpoint. This section consists of the interpretation of the process questions. These process questions include: What conclusions can you draw about work and leisure in the life of this woman? What is your relationship with this person in the past and now and

what did you learn that you did not know before? In what ways are you like or unlike this person? How has this woman influenced your attitudes toward work and leisure? What did you learn from doing this research biography project?

The biography project represents one third of the grade for the term.

During each term prior to the halfway point, we spend at least one class period discussing feminist research including its characteristics and value (e.g., Henderson, 1990a; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1992). We discuss how feminist research addresses the goals of feminism that include: “to make visible women’s power and status; to redefine existing societal structures and modes of existence; and to enable every woman to have equity, dignity, and freedom of choice through the power to control her life and body, both within and outside the home” (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996, p. 13). We also talk about how no unique feminist method exists but that feminist perspectives are applied to the entire research process to obtain information to empower women (Henderson et al., 1996; Reinharz, 1992). We discuss the use of in-depth interviews and qualitative data as one way to analyze a topic with richness and depth. Students read articles such as those by Allen and Chin-Sang (1990), Bialeschki and Michener (1994), Henderson (1990b), Henderson and Bialeschki (1993), Hunter and Whitson (1992), and Whyte and Shaw (1994) to get an idea how qualitative data have been used to study women’s leisure. In small groups, the students develop questions pertaining to work and leisure that they would like to ask to the person they will interview. As instructors, we take those questions and compile them into a list of “guiding questions” (Henderson, 1991, p. 108) that the students can use in conducting the interviews. We discuss techniques of interviewing as well as how to write narratives about the woman being interviewed.

A sample of the interview guide that resulted from a recent class is the following:

What do you consider your career? How has it changed over your life?  
How was it perceived by your family?

What has been the nature and relationships between paid and household work over your life? Have you had to face any particular issues in regard to your work?

How do you define leisure? What have been meaningful activities in your life over the life span?

Describe a typical day for you. What would you consider leisure in a typical day?

What constraints to work and leisure have you experienced in your life?

How have race and socioeconomic status influenced your work and leisure?

Describe the ideal life that you would like to have for your children.

We make it clear to the students that the purpose of this assignment is not to psychoanalyze the person they interview or to generalize to all women because of the data collected. The purpose is to use a research method to interview a woman and then to relate the information obtained in that interview to other research about work and leisure and to what other students have learned. We encourage students to examine how the woman they interviewed is like or unlike other women. We also emphasize every woman has a story that is of interest. It is up to the student to find that story and present it in an interesting and academically grounded way. We also encourage students to conduct the interview as a conversation; therefore, the student may be sharing her or his perspective as well as “teaching” about some of the ideas presented in the course.

Students are required to tape record the interview. By taping the interview, they can draw on quotations to use in the paper and they can be free to interact conversationally with the person they are interviewing. We encourage them to do a face to face interview but sometimes a telephone interview is the only way to complete the assignment. As instructors we have had different requirements concerning whether the interview has to be transcribed verbatim and submitted with the final paper. If the student is not required to or does not want to transcribe the interview, it is essential that she or he uses quotes and anecdotes in doing the write-ups.

The criteria for grading emphasize the presentation of data and the analysis. These criteria are given the first day of class as part of the syllabus. They include the following:

The assignment is to be typed in an appropriate college style. The grade for the assignment is based on: a thorough analysis of the guiding questions that are developed and asked in the interview (50%), the analysis of the questions related to concepts discussed during the semester in the course (15%), the writing style and organization (10%), analysis of the Part II which includes the processing questions (15%), and the informal presentation/discussion done in class (10%).

The day the assignment is due, an entire class period or more is devoted to a discussion of the findings. We have structured this discussion in a number of ways. Sometimes we use small group discussions for students to compare and contrast their findings. Another technique is to put the class into a big circle and ask each student to share one or two significant comments that she/he learned from the interview. We then discuss themes that arise such as constraints to leisure or issues of discrimination.

During the final exam, one question is related to applying that group discussion about the biography projects to answering a question about the “common” world of women juxtaposed to the diversity of the women interviewed.

### **An Analysis of the Value of the Assignment**

Over the years the evolution of the structure and value of the assignment has led us to believe the biography interview has been successful in addressing the objectives of

the course. We will describe the success of the biography project based on data we collected over the past several years. These data came from teaching evaluations, comments from Part II of the paper, and an analysis of two recent courses in which students wrote their reactions to the assignment as part of the course evaluation and as an optional free writing opportunity during the semester. In one course, eight students volunteered to do a free writing exercise three times during the semester to describe what they were experiencing in terms of anticipation and reflection about the biography assignment.

On the basis of the principles about how students learn best, we designed this biography project assignment to give students an opportunity to take what they read, hear, and discuss in class and apply it to what they hear, discuss, and experience in their interaction with the interviewee and with their classmates regarding the project. Because they have some type of long relationship with the interviewee, they are in a position to practically apply the objectives of class. As a form of evaluation, we would like to highlight what students have said about the assignment as well as address some of the problems encountered with this assignment.

Although the assignment is perceived as “a lot of work,” most students have found it beneficial. It is one way that the ideas presented about women, work, and leisure during the entire semester can be integrated. This assignment, along with other planned class experiences, places work and leisure into perspectives based on the lives of ordinary women.

Students usually react when the assignment is described in the syllabus and discussed briefly on the first day of class. Most of the reactions are positive but some anxiety is also apparent. One student said, “We [my mother and I] have never really discussed a lot of feminist issues at length, especially with regard to the specific issue of work and leisure.” She also went on to say that she was interested in understanding work and leisure from the standpoint of someone in her generation. Other students anticipate how the interview may give them a chance to see a side of their mothers that they have never seen. Some students have concerns about interviewing their mothers, and some do not have mothers that can be interviewed. We try not to put too much of a focus on why the student should interview her/his mother but encourage it if at all possible. Students who think they will have problems often are pleasantly surprised. For example, one older student did not want to interview her 80 year old mother who had some dementia. Although the interview was not easy to conduct, she learned things about her mother that neither she nor her siblings had ever known. Now the information is permanently audio recorded.

Some of the students “experienced” how much like the women they interviewed they were as well as how they wanted to avoid some of this person’s problems. One student said:

My mother is one of the strongest women that I know and I want to have her strength, but I do not want to be as limited as she is, at this stage in her life, as far as

economic resources and leisure options go...I learned that my mother had some surprisingly strange and to me, antiquated ideas, about men and their roles in her life, and I am glad that she did not pass these ideas down to me.

Another student said, "I learned from doing this project that my mother is rather different from how I thought she was." She went on to say:

In many ways she was 'the typical woman' but in other ways she is very atypical. It helped me to understand some of the concepts we studied because I had a real life example to apply them to.

Part of the purpose of this assignment is to give students a chance to reflect on their own experiences as females or males and how these perceptions might relate to work and leisure. One student said:

I have seen from my mother over the years how burned out you can get if you do not have enough leisure in your life. Therefore, I try to take time for leisure no matter how busy I am. She has made me see the importance of leisure.

Another student realized the issues that his mother had to face and suggested:

What we do not realize is that society limits the choices for many people based on their sex, race, class and sexual orientation...One of the purposes of this feminist research is to find problems in society and to offer some solutions.

Another student indicated that she learned "that I want a family and a career. I need to find a balance between the two." Other students found it illuminating to hear what the person they interviewed wanted for them and for others of their generation.

A common theme that several students mentioned was how they never knew how much effort was involved in being a parent and how this effort influenced work and leisure. One student said:

I have always respected my mother, but I never really understood the sacrifices she made for me. When she said the one thing she is most proud of is raising her children, I was surprised, and then I realized how important I am to my mother, and I really should try harder to show her my appreciation.

Another student said, "Learning about others' moms makes me appreciate my mom's unique experience and grant respect onto others who chose different lifestyles." Another student reflected that the interview "makes me realize that I only have one mother, and instead of sitting on my ass accepting our pitiful relationship the way it is, I should try to fix it while she is still alive."

Most students enjoyed the project and felt that the learning was relatively "painless." A student remarked:

The mom interviews were a wonderful chance to put the feminist research principles into practice and they were also a great chance for me to get to



know my mother, all over again. It opened my eyes to issues that are bothering her and to the things that she likes to do, but I never really thought about...the mom biographies really taught me a lot educationally as well as emotionally.

Another student said, "I would definitely do a project like this again, because it was different, enjoyable, and I learned a lot." Several students each semester remark that it was interesting and they learned a lot but "it was a ton of work!" An honors student wrote in her last free writing response:

I thought the biography project was one of the best projects I have done in my college career. Not only was it a way to learn about the interviewing process and experience first hand how interviewing can be used as a tool for research, it personalized it in an important way.

Each semester several students describe how they rarely they sit down and talk to someone, particularly their mothers, as was required in the interview part of this assignment. From a personal perspective, one student reflected, "This interview has brought me closer to my mother. I understand her values and the decisions she has made in her life." Another student summarized some of these feelings by stating:

I learned things about her that I never would have known and I really listened to what she said. It's sad to say that a school assignment is the only reason I listened to my mom but I guess the important thing is that I did listen not why, right?

The assignment also gave most students a chance to talk to someone about what they were learning in the course. One student said:

She [mom] mentioned that the concept of a college course on women, work, and leisure, that you actually get a grade and credit for, was something she couldn't have imagined when she was growing up. She thought it was great that these types of issues were being given respect academically.

### **Problems with the Assignment**

The biography project is not without dilemmas for students, although over the years we have tried to minimize problems by making adjustments. One of the issues always seems to be the reluctance of some individuals to interview their mothers for various reasons. If a student's mother is living, we encourage the student to interview this person because she is someone whom they know very well. If the student has not had a good relationship with this person, the assignment is more difficult although sometimes the assignment is what begins to open lines for further communication. One student "came out" as a lesbian during the interview and found the sharing to be a wonderful opportunity for both her and her mother. Another student struggled for some time over whether she wanted to interview her mother. She felt their relationship was extremely closed and the two of them were so different that it would not be a pleasant

experience. Ultimately she decided not to interview her mother but to interview her grandmother instead.

For most students with these concerns, completing the project resulted in a positive interaction between the two of them that might have been difficult without the framework of the interview. For example, one student did not want to interview her mother because her mother was deaf and did not speak so she could be easily understood. The instructor encouraged the student to go ahead and do the interview and if it did not work out, she could interview someone else to complete the assignment. In a later discussion with the instructor, the student described how she was sitting at the computer center late one night transcribing the interview. She was frustrated because her mother's words were hard to understand and she resented having to do the interview and the paper. The more she listened and transcribed, however, the more she realized how interesting her mother's words were. She realized that this was the first time she had ever taken the time to "hear" her mother. As she sat transcribing with tears running down her face, she said it was a turning point in her life to realize how critical and insensitive she had been all these years.

A problem is that some students think they know all there is to know about the person to be interviewed and do not feel that they can learn anything new. Most of the time, if the interview is done well, students do learn something new. One student said two months before the project was due:

I would have to say that I honestly do not look forward to doing anything with this project...I already basically know everything about my mother because we have a very open relationship...I am concerned that the interview will be rather boring and therefore so will be the paper. My mother had a rather uneventful life so I am afraid there will be nothing interesting to write about in the paper.

Fortunately she learned several things she did not know not only about her mother but about the rest of her family. One student said, "A concern I have is that I won't be able to give an objective report on my mother's responses because I know her as well as I do." Another interviewer said that it was hard to go through the interview guide without writing 200 pages.

The context of the lives of some of the woman being interviewed was somewhat of a problem for some of the students doing this project. As instructors we have tried to turn these problems into points about the common world of women experienced through gender oppression but also the great diversity that exists among women that is only beginning to be acknowledged. Unfortunately many of the readings used in class largely reflect a white, middle-class heterosexual American model of work and leisure and some of the students did not uncover this model in their interviews. Several students raised issues about how "different they felt their mothers or the woman they interviewed might be." Race is an issue that emerges frequently during the term. The stories that African-American students relate about their interviewees' lives often have an impact on other

class members and reflect an experience that brings up discussion about how racism and sexism affect women. One Asian-American woman was interested in how work and leisure had changed since her parents immigrated from China 20 years ago. She also was concerned about the language problem because they spoke Mandarin at home and the student did not feel very fluent in interviewing in that language. She found the assignment challenging from the start since she even had to look up the word for leisure in her dictionary. Another student who had a lesbian mother and a gay father worried that her mother did not fit the dominant research. She stated prior to the interview, "It is not just that she is a lesbian mother—her homosexuality is certainly not her defining characteristic, but she is different across the board." These differences were sometimes difficult for individual students to analyze but they contributed greatly to the overall learning about the experiences of women.

We are not aware of any student indicating that negative outcomes occurred as a result of the interview. Some students have indicated that even though they learned more about their mother or the significant person whom they interviewed, they did not feel the experience strengthened the relationship. Strengthening the relationship was not a primary goal of the assignment. This perception of no negative outcomes may be because students did not feel comfortable telling us about problems or it could be that we effectively counseled students who had doubts about the interview ahead of time. No one was forced to do the interview with someone if she or he really did not want to do it. The assignment had to be done, but the guidelines give students the latitude to make their own decision about whether a mother, grandmother, aunt, or lifelong adult friend will be interviewed.

The biggest drawback to this assignment for us as instructors is the need to provide a grade. We have found it easy to give comments and to help students see the connections they are finding regarding the "norms" of gender and the person they interviewed. Although we encourage the student to put her or himself into the interview, we also want them to analyze the interview in relation to what research says. We want the student to critically examine the life of the person they interviewed to draw some conclusions about the meanings of work and leisure. As the distributions of the grades indicate, we want the student to write a meaningful story but also do a critical analysis of what the data mean in relation to the rest of the course. We want to make sure that the student can put this interview into a larger context in which the woman whom they interviewed is like or unlike other women. Most students do well with the assignment if they pay attention to the criteria. We have tried to make those criteria as explicit as possible as we prepare students to critically think and critically write about the interview.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

We have provided the rationale, design, and evaluative statements about the biography research project used in a course entitled "Women, Work, and Leisure." We have found this assignment to be meaningful in meeting the objectives of the course and providing a way for students to experience academic learning in a personal manner. The

assignment has allowed students to reinforce learning principles that incorporate hearing, reading, discussing, and experiencing.

A variation of this assignment may work for other leisure studies classes. We have shown it as one example of how an assignment has evolved over the years and the value the project has to students. In using an experiential assignment such as this with other classes, we offer several recommendations:

1. Be clear about the objectives of the course and how an assignment such as this one meets those objectives.
2. Spend time teaching interviewing techniques and helping students to develop and use critical thinking and writing skills for a project such as this one.
3. Be specific about the grading criteria so that students understand what is to be included in the paper and how they should analyze their data.
4. Allow the students to use their own creativity in doing the interview and writing the paper, but make sure that they address the objectives of the course.
5. Allow plenty of time in class for the students to share their projects with other students. This aspect opens up new insights that may not come forward if the instructor is the only one to read the reports.
6. Be sure that the students know that this assignment is not meant to infringe on the privacy of another person and that the purpose is not to psychoanalyze another individual. Rather, the focus is to understand the lived experience of a “real” person whom the student knows. The interviewer and the interviewee should be free to divulge as much or as little information as they want as long as the objectives of the course are addressed.

We believe that a project such as this “mom biography” is a way to combine critical thinking and writing in an experiential way that promotes learning. As we examine our teaching practices and strategies, reflect upon the learning described by our students, and share our experiences, we ultimately aim for an educational process that empowers our students as adult learners. Learning has the most meaning when we can relate it to our life contexts. The “mom biography” enabled many of our students to learn both cognitively and affectively from what they experienced. It may be a technique that can be applied in other leisure studies courses.

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