Using Grounded Action Methodology for Student Intervention—Driven Succeeding: A Grounded Action Study in Adult Education

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Abstract: A *grounded action* (GA) study was conducted investigating the area of adults attempting to achieve high school-level competencies. Using GLASERian *grounded theory* (GT) methodology, over 50 Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Equivalency Diploma (GED) adult students were interviewed and observed within the classroom. Serving as the explanatory theory, a GT of *driven succeeding* emerged as the "core variable," which included the following five stages: embarking, visioning, investing, clicking, and ripening. An overview of the explanatory theory is presented along with examples of how the grounded action operational theory and intervention strategies (SIMMONS & GREGORY, 2003) were implemented in OLSON's educational practice. GA is found to be a useful tool for predicting student behavior, providing sustainable and meaningful intervention, and in providing a systemic impact on curriculum design and the facilitation and administration of adult learning.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

This study began with a general interest in exploring *how adults achieve literacy*. What are struggling adult students really working on? How do adult learners successfully navigate as they attempt to achieve their educational goals? Why do some students experience frustration, stall and slow, showing little progress, while others seem to get it right away or achieve success effortlessly? Is there a way to understand what is going on with them, and more importantly, find a useful way to effect lasting change that is reliable, meaningful, and sustainable? Grounded action (GA, see SIMMONS & GREGORY, 2003)[1] seemed like the perfect fit for really getting at what these adults were working on, and for discovering meaningful intervention strategies for providing transformative and lasting change. [1]

Classic GLASERian grounded theory (GT) methodology is an inductive discovery process that allows for the natural unfolding and emergence of a grounded theory that has a core variable (or core category) explaining what the research participants are working on. Inductively generated with as little forcing or preconception as is possible, this core variable emerges with categories, properties and subcategories that weave together and explain the main concerns of the research participants. [2]

It was evident even within only a few weeks of beginning the study that the eventual core variable of *driven succeeding* (for a more detailed explanation see Section 3.1 below) was present in the research participants and in the sampled data. Further sampling (interviews, field notes, and the inclusion of emergent and relevant data) followed to more fully develop and enrich each of the eventual five stages of the theory (see Section 3.2). As *succeeding* began to emerge as a provisional core variable, sampling included adults at various stages of succeeding and required patience and time to fully develop. The methodology of GA includes the following steps: 1) developing a fully integrated GT (explanatory theory), 2) the emergence and conceptualization of the operational theory, 3) the action plan and, 4) the action (and/or subsequent intervention) (SIMMONS, 2006, pp.487-488). [3]

Actual student succeeding and struggles were compared to the theory (GT), and then suggested action based on the operational theory and action plan was considered and implemented. Actual student progress was then compared to the action plan and intervention was developed and suggested based on the actual performance data. The action plan and subsequent intervention became more finely tuned and were modified as successes and/or obstacles were integrated into the action plan. This cyclical process involved asking, 1) "What is student is working on?" 2) "At what point (stage) of the theory are they?" 3) "What action is appropriate based on this discovery and comparison?" And, 4) "Is this action and intervention reliable and something that others can expect to find when they try

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1 For more information on the grounded action see http://www.GroundedAction.com/.

it?" The intervention and action were implemented with multiple students and replicated whenever possible. [4]

GA is a relatively new research methodology that was founded and developed by Odis SIMMONS (2006) in his private therapy practice and developed more formally later as he co-authored the *FQS* article with Toni GREGORY (SIMMONS & GREGORY, 2003). GA begins identically as any GT study would. The research 1) begins with an interest or topic area; 2) then an open question, or grand tour question, is developed that allows participants to speak freely without leading or forcing; 3) after several interviews the core variable emerges, inductively generated from the interviewees' main concerns. It is around this core variable that the GT is centrally developed, and where GA begins. [5]

The GT becomes the centerpiece from which develops an explanatory theory (see 2.2 below), action plan (see 2.4 below), and intervention (see intervention examples in section 4). Simply put, the explanatory GT identifies "what is" and provides a reliable account of the kind of behavior that one can expect in the action scene. The GA (operational theory) uses this explanatory information to address each of the main concerns found there, and then suggests possible change initiatives and/or intervention. The researcher re-enters the action scene to conceive, try and refine action initiatives based on the desired change. The resultant new data is then integrated back into the GA. Using constant comparison analysis, the researcher compares the explanatory theory, the operational theory, and the action plan with actual participant experiences. This cyclical process is efficient and effective for developing action because it starts from the reliable grounding of the explanatory theory, and becomes refined and tuned as it is applied and reconsidered. One caution: without an action scene or a place to try out or test the action, a hasty researcher could be induced into logical elaboration, resulting in forced or "made up" outcomes and "best guess" action intervention. What keeps GA "grounded" is that the action is systematically grounded in data derived from the actual experiences of the participants and not from the imagination of the researcher. [6]

While my original intention when starting this study was to understand adult literacy better and to discover ways to break the cycle of illiteracy, I had underestimated how I would be personally transformed by this undertaking. I found myself humbled as I co-journeyed with the participants—empathizing with their obstacles or struggles, and witnessing great courage and resolve. I have equally experienced my own transformative change when applying these interventive action initiatives and have seen substantive change in my own paradigm and practice. [7]

2. The Methodology of Grounded Action

"A theory is nothing more (or less) than a set of explanatory understandings that help us make sense of some aspect of the world. To the extent that making sense of existence is a natural activity, it is accurate to say that we are all theorists and that we all theorize" (BROOKFIELD, 2005, p.3).

GT is a primarily inductive, systematic, and empirical research methodology (GLASER, 1978, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). The purpose of the methodology is to generate theories directly from data to explain social behavior. The theory that emerges from analysis of the data accounts for how participants in an action context continually resolve their relevant issues and problems (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967), providing a reliable source for comparative analysis. As GLASER (2004) himself says, "Classic GT is simply a set of integrated conceptual hypotheses systematically generated to produce an inductive theory about a substantive area. Classic GT is a highly structured but eminently flexible methodology" (2004, ¶7). [8]

GA is a research methodology that incorporates all stages of GT (SIMMONS & GREGORY, 2003). Unlike traditional qualitative methodology, GT does not start with a research question or hypothesis but begins with an area of interest with the purpose of discovering a theory that gets at "what is really going on in a substantive area" (GLASER, 1978, p.3). Once the GT study (labeled in GA as the *explanatory theory*) is completed, it becomes the foundation for the *operational theory* and subsequent action and/or intervention. [9]

2.1 Data collection and analysis

As with a GT study, GA begins with a general topic area as the launching point, which in my study was "adults achieving literacy" (OLSON, 2006, p.5). Once an area of interest is chosen, the researcher begins data collection. The most efficient method of initial data collection is the open-ended intensive interview, which begins with an open-ended "grand tour question" (SIMMONS, 2005, personal communication; OLSON, 2006, p.5). A grand tour question is often the starting gate for the grounded theorist who wishes to obtain unforced or non-coerced interview data, and opens the door to discovering what is going on in the action scene. Further investigation is guided by careful analysis, which includes coding, memoing, and constant comparative analysis (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). A grounded theory is intended to get at "what is" in the action scene, not "what ought to be" (SIMMONS, 2006, p.483). What happens first is investigative —beginning with a clear, well grounded theoretical explanation and understanding of "what is" (2006, p.483) in the action scene. A "core variable" is discovered, which is the central concern for the research participants, and becomes the central focus for developing the full explanatory theory. [10]

2.2 The explanatory theory

An explanatory theory uncovers, names, and incorporates all relevant behavioral variables of the action scene around a core variable utilizing the classic[2] GT process, which consists of interviews, coding, memoing, literature research, and write-ups (GLASER, 1978, 1992, 1993, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). An explanatory theory is not about findings or descriptions but rather is an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses and the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method (GLASER, 1998). GT is

> "a 'discovery' method directed by a rigorous set of procedures that guide the researcher through a primarily inductive process from which emerges a theory that is systematically grounded in data and therefore gets at the real problems or issues in a system[3] rather than those derived by conjecture or logical elaboration" (SIMMONS, 2006, p.488). [11]

To avoid preconceptions and conjecture, the explanatory and operational theories are the primary sources from which action or intervention is developed. [12]

An explanatory theory has "fit, relevance, understandability, generality, control, workability, generalizability, and modifiability" (GREGORY & RAFFANTI, 2006, p.478), and as such is useful for predicting and contextualizing the behavior in the action scene, even if a specific action or behavior is not specifically present in the theory. Because of a GA's workability and modifiability, the new action is compared to the theory and if deemed relevant, must undergo the same methodological rigor and conceptualization, and actually becomes integrated into the theory. Therefore, a good explanatory theory is a "live" piece of research, inductively generated and conceptualized directly from the data of the action scene, and is workable and modifiable as new data is gathered, analyzed, and considered. From this theoretical foothold and understanding, the action is generated—starting by developing the operational theory. [13]

2.3 The operational theory

"Once the explanatory theory has been fully developed by means of the GT process, the operational theory is then generated. The operational theory is where explanatory grounded theory leaves off and grounded action begins" (SIMMONS & GREGORY, 2003, ¶31). GA looks at the underlying core variable as an "action problem" and then generates actions that address problems discovered at each stage of the theory (SIMMONS, 2005, written com-munication). The problems that emerged in the interviews, field notes, and research are integrated into a set of possibilities for optimal, sustainable actions toward mitigating the action problem (SIMMONS & GREGORY, 2003, ¶34). The

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2   The classic "GLASERian" grounded theory method has been used for the purposes of this study.

3   GREGORY and RAFFANTI suggest that GA practitioners are actually "systems scientists." See GREGORY and RAFFANTI (2006, pp.477-478) for more.

operational theory becomes its own conceptual response to the explanatory
theory and in turn serves to direct any intervention strategies or ground any
ideas, action, or initiatives that may follow. [14]

2.4 The action plan

SIMMONS and GREGORY (2003) suggest the following questions be considered
in developing the action in GA:

- What does the explanatory theory indicate the real action problem is?
- What are the desired outcomes of the action?
- What does the explanatory theory inform us about assigning priorities to
  these outcomes?
- What does the explanatory theory indicate about aspects of the action
  problem that need to be successfully addressed to bring about the desired
  change?
- What does this particular component of the explanatory theory indicate needs
  to be done in order to mitigate this particular aspect of the action problem?
- What capacity does each person or role in the action scene/context play, and
  how would they need to change to bring about the desired results?
- How could this change actually be achieved? What are the "pushes and pulls"
  (REGALDO-RODRIGEZ, 2001) in the action scene/context towards or against
  these changes?
- What is possible?
- What are the likely outcomes of implementing the operational theory? [15]

The action plan is the roadmap for measuring and putting the operation theory
into motion. In the education action scene of adult learning, much of the action
that resulted in the operational theory involved both intervention and discovering
"leverage points" (OLSON & RAFFANTI, 2006a, p.535)[4] where personal
transformation (paradigm shifts) were possible. MEZIROW argues that in order
for transformation learning to occur, "adult learning must emphasize contextual
understanding, critical reflection on assumptions, and validating meaning by
assessing reasons" (2000, p.3). A reliable and grounded action plan must
consider both "what is" (the explanatory theory) and must use a systematic
method that compares possible "what might be" actions (the action plan) to the
explanatory theory. [16]

2.6 Implementing the action

"The action is the realization of the action plan" (SIMMONS, 2006, p.488).The
final step in generating the GA is implementing the action (SIMMONS &
GREGORY, 2003). The generated GA becomes a reliable source for interpreting
"what is" and allows the practitioner to more effectively intervene by suggesting
initiatives specific to the problem area a person is working on. "It effectively

4   See, "Intervening in Educational Systems" (OLSON & RAFFANTI, 2006a) for more on this.

constitutes an empirical test of the explanatory and operational theories"
(SIMMONS, 2006, p.488). The action should lead the practitioner back to the
explanatory theory, comparing, and then through a process of conceptualizing
and integrating new behavior and actions into the existent theory. [17]

The result of implementing GA in an educational setting yielded reliable,
predictable, and satisfying results where despair and frustration formerly reigned.
Many teachers approach the classroom and lesson plans as if they were working
off of a script (BROOKFIELD, 1990); thus, interruptions or detours from this
prescribed lesson plan agenda causes teacher distress or anxiety. Implementing
GA must involve a dialogue between the "what is" in the explanatory theory and
the "live action" of the classroom or system, allowing this dialogue to inform one's
practice and shape the intervention. This dialogue is not surprised by
interruptions or frustration but rather embraces them as data, comparing them to
both the explanatory and operational theory and proceeding with a more informed
action. I have found that including students as co-learners in this process can
serve to demonstrate and encourage a more democratic learning environment as
we work together to solve problems as colleagues. This kind of collegial
interaction disarms frustration and helps to promote a shared learning community
(BROOKFIELD, 1990), opening the door for a more transformative learning
environment. [18]

2.7 Transformative learning

GA is "a process of continually discovering, learning, rediscovering, and
relearning" (SIMMONS & GREGORY, 2003, ¶37). As GA and intervention was
implemented in my own study, students began succeeding where only failure had
been realized previously. One student had struggle and retaken the same class
five previous times without improvement. Once these students began to move
forward into other classes, curiosity and attention spread from the classroom all
the way to the administration. The impact that these GA inventions had on the
participants, educators, and the wider educational systemic context was
profound. Students succeeded where before only despair and apathy had been
realized. Students felt they mattered and that their concerns and frustrations were
part of my learning and transformation, too. I underwent a paradigm shift of my
own as my teaching methodology and pedagogy underwent profound
transformation. A new pedagogy that I call *grounded learning*[5] emerged as my
interactions with students and the educational system shifted, and as my teaching
methods were modified. The most powerful transformative change occurred as
the learning climate became more of a shared process and classroom discovery.
Students and teacher worked together to overcome hurdles in the classroom
learning, and I saw students become owners of their own educational process. I
developed interventive teaching techniques to target specific learning problems,
such as developing "headlining" (OLSON, 2006, p.208), a concept for capturing
the main ideas of any story we were reading. In some cases, those students who

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5   Grounded learning is an application of the GT methodology to the art and practice of teaching.
    For more on grounded learning, see OLSON and RAFFANTI (2004, 2006a, 2006b), OLSON
    (2006).

had already mastered a certain classroom concept became the "instructor" and helped other students who were still struggling. O'SULLIVAN (2003, p.327) argues that,

> "transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world." [19]

GA causes a constantly shifting paradigm where new discovery begins to shape and alter old ways of knowing and being. This new paradigm becomes the new norm for a more informed and engaging classroom. WEIMER (2002) argues that engaging and getting students motivated is hindered by the continuing teacher centeredness of most instruction and that students are used to being told what to do all the time. The more effective way is for teachers to position "themselves alongside the learner" and keep "the attention, focus, and spotlight aimed at and on the learning processes" (WEIMER, 2002, p.76). The theory of *driven succeeding*, introduced below, is not exhaustive or fully comprehensive but a reliable, conceptually theoretical picture of what behaviors and intervention can be expected in the action scene—in my case the adult basic education classroom —which can lead to meaningful understanding, and may induce more reliable future intervention. [20]

3. The Theory of *Driven Succeeding*—The Serpentine Path of Adult Learning

This study began as any classic GT study should begin: as an inductive, non-forced, non-preconceived curiosity with a desire to get at what the participants were working on. A GA study (just as in a GT study) begins with an area of interest with the purpose of discovering an explanatory theory that gets at "what is really going on in a substantive area" (GLASER, 1978, p.3). Unlike qualitative or quantitative studies where research begins with a research question and a hypothesis, a GA study begins with a general interest area like *adults achieving literacy*. The general topic area is a launching point for further investigation guided by constant comparative analysis (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). [21]

I was interested in understanding adult students' world by entering it with as little preconception or bias as possible. As in any GA study, I intentionally avoided consulting the literature so as not to force student questioning as the study progressed, yet late in my study, once the core variable, categories and properties were established, I did sample the literature to enrich and fill in any missing gaps. My study began with a grand-tour question (a very general, yet unforced, question that will trigger a participant to speak about a general interest area without leading, directing, or forcing any questioning). It was simply, "Tell me about your involvement in the ABE/GED program[6] here at ..." Students were very

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6 Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Equivalency Diploma (GED).

quick to tell me what was on their minds—and the core variable (core category) of "driven succeeding" was very present even in the first interviews. The study included around six taped interviews, yet as I got better at coding and more confident, I was able to write field notes and memos from classroom observations without having to formally interview students. Sampling, writing, field-note taking, both formal and incidental interviews, formal and informal observation, etc. continued for almost two years, as I immersed myself in the study group as an instructor as well. [22]

The GA portion of the study began almost simultaneously, yet informally, in the classroom as I considered both problems and successes as data. Even my own quest for deeper student information and understanding became a transformative learning for me: students were eager to "help" me and genuinely felt that I needed them. This greater purpose placed the learner and teacher on an even playing field—I needed them to understand what they were working on, and they needed me to resolve a learning barrier. I would log and journal my experiences, also using note taking, field notes, and often thinking about it overnight and returning to a student or students for more sampling and further questioning. When I got to the write-up phase of my theory, I relied heavily on my field notes and student data for addressing the action or intervention. [23]

3.1 A definition of terms used in the study

Drivenness: Drivenness refers to both an internally and externally motivated push towards succeeding. It is not incidental or passive but is an intentional, systematic, and identifiable process through which adults navigate as they proceed in an educational endeavor. When drivenness is occurring, the adult is choosing to accept or be influenced by one of several internal or external driving forces. Driven-ness can be prompted by interpersonal interaction, external crisis, an internal prompt, an experience, or even a life situation.

Succeeding: Succeeding refers to a series of successes or completions in adult learning. It can be attaining a personal goal or mark or can be a final point of completion for the learner that marks a time of celebration. Succeeding in this context has the goal of completing a desired course of action or achieving something that previously was untried or seemed unattainable.

Driven succeeding: Driven succeeding is the bumpy negotiation through the five stages (see below). Learners may experience each stage successively or can find themselves quickly moving through or skipping a particular stage.

Serpentine path: The path in *driven succeeding* is not always straightforward. It is a serpentine path that represents a winding path for some, a cyclical or spiraling path for others, or a straight path for others that may include all five stages. It may also lead to transitional dead ends or plateaus within a stage.
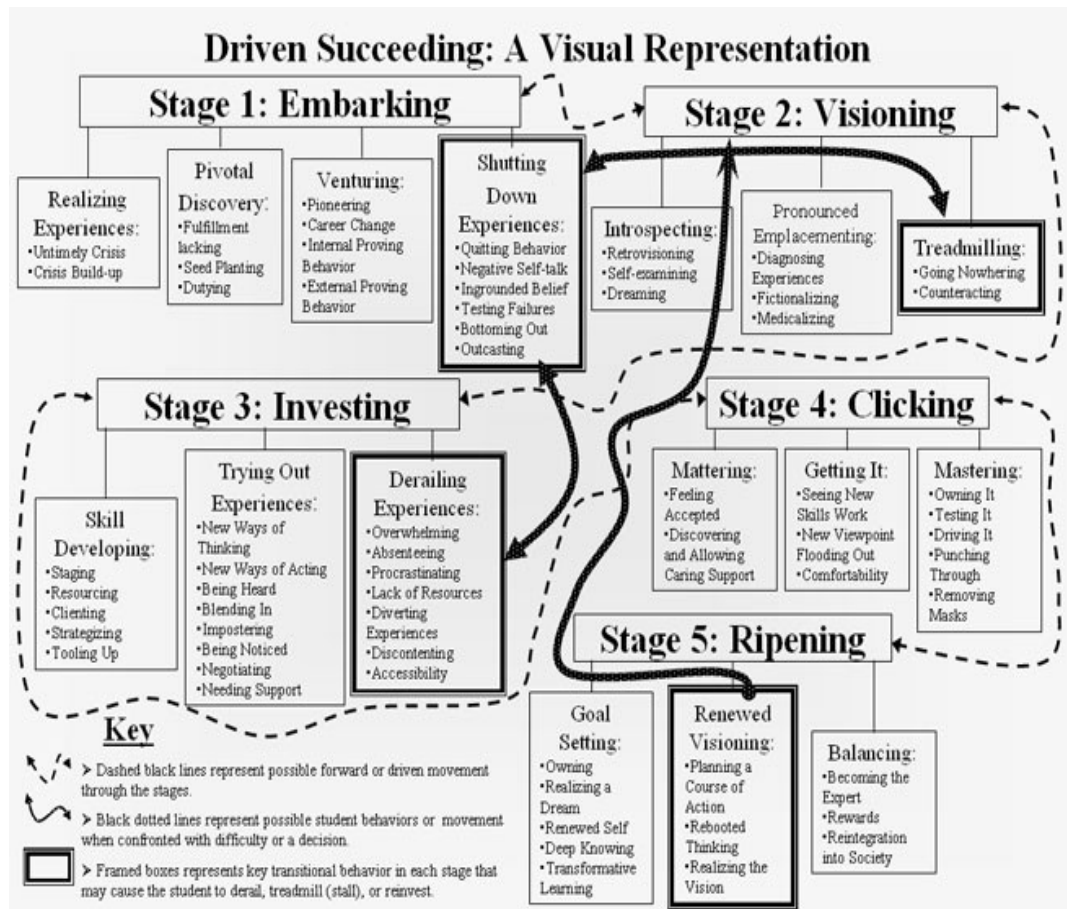
Figure 1: A Visual Representation of the five stages of Driven Succeeding [24]

3.2 The GA explanatory theory

The theory of *driven succeeding* has five stages: *embarking, visioning, investing, clicking and ripening*. Student succeeding involves navigating these stages. Since each student defines and personalizes succeeding or completion, succeeding is unique for each student. These five stages are reliable predictors of the kind of action and behavior that one can expect from students who are navigating an educational endeavor. The progress a student makes in navigating the stages is directly impacted by his or her disposition, skills, ability to learn, previous success, understanding, and motivation. An adult may even be working on different stages simultaneously (for example, they may be taking multiple classes or balancing school with life issues at home, leading to varying degrees of success at school). The following outlines the five stages, categories and properties of those stages, and illustrates the cyclical, non-specific, serpentine nature of navigating *driven succeeding.* I use this map to locate where students are (the "what is") and consider intervention after I have compared their situation to the theory. [25]

Stage 1: Embarking

In *driven succeeding*, *embarking* contains entry points by which learners consider their receptivity to change or improvement, putting them on the path toward succeeding. Every adult who enters an educational endeavor begins by *embarking*. Four different properties of *embarking* include:

· *Realizing experiences* (BIGUS, 1974) prompt adults to action and enable them to look beyond their present situation and consider an alternative future. This property includes two sub-categories: *untimely crisis*, an unexpected realizing experience, such as a job loss, that can ignite an adult student to enter the educational arena; and *crisis build-up* (BIGUS, 1974), an internal realizing experience of an adult who feels backed up against the wall of a life situation or may have a nagging dissatisfaction with their current life direction, whereby they desire to better themselves through an educational program.

· *Pivotal discovering*, including three sub-categories: *fulfillment-lacking*, which occurs when an adult looks back and reviews their past with regret; *seed planting,* a more implicit, less direct form of embarking, as when an adult is lured to enter a program through word-of-mouth endorsement or advertisement, which may plant the critical seed that fuels learner curiosity and pivotal discovery; and *dutying*, which often occurs when an adult feels the pressure of outside expectations upon them, including the expressed or implied expectations of others to see them succeed or make something of their life.

· *Venturing*, where adult learners are often seeking answers to the questions or curiosities that brought them to the classroom. This property includes four sub-categories: *pioneering*, which occurs when an adult honestly faces his or her deficiencies head-on and remains open to whatever might guide him/her to deeper knowing and understanding even if s/he has never gone there before*; career change*, which has some adults entering the educational scene realizing they may improve themselves in their present job, or desire a change of career or improved financial situation*; internal proving behavior,* the motivation to join an educational program which stems from the simple desire to *prove* to themselves that they can do it; and *external proving behavior*, which represents learners who are driven to succeed because it seems like the thing to do, out of a sense of obligation, or to please others.

· *Shutting down experiences* may occur in the *embarking* stage. (Each stage has a kind of trap-door or derailing transitional point when a student becomes frustrated or overcome by stress or pressure. It can serve as both an inhibitor to or may drive succeeding, depending on the student's choice or reaction.) This property includes six sub-categories: *quitting behavior*, that is, a learner who quits due to overwhelm, stress, dissatisfaction, or some negative consequence; *negative self-talk*, which may have its roots in imitating the prejudice and cruelty of others and can either inhibit students or drive them to try to beat the system; *ungrounded belief*, which are misconceptions the learners may have about what education can deliver for them, becoming the framework for a fictionalized reality of what education will accomplish in the

students; *testing failures*, which can be a shutting-down experience for an adult who expected to reverse previous failures in an area of assessment (adults who view testing failures as a learning experience can actually be driven forward if they begin seeing testing as an opportunity for improvement); *bottoming out*, which can stem from burn-out prompted by over-commitment or stress, excessive drug or alcohol use, previous patterns of truancy, getting expelled from school, anti-social dress or behavior, or attitudes of not caring and can keep one from embarking or succeeding in an educational program; and *outcasting*, which may occur when an adult learner feels unaccepted or cast out by the dominant or prevailing peer group. For some, being an outcast creates a safe place to find camaraderie and identity with similar individuals, where they feel they are included and matter. [26]

Stage 2: Visioning

Visioning is the second stage in *driven succeeding* where the adult learner considers and begins to accept the potential of moving forward with her or his educational endeavor. Every learner inevitably visits or revisits this stage as he or she encounters stumbling blocks, crossroads, or plateaus in his/her learning. Some adults enter the visioning stage drawing from past educational experiences from which they consider investing in further education. Three properties of *visioning* include:

- *Introspecting,* which is an internal consideration of future possible outcomes for them. Three sub-categories of this property include: *retrovisioning*, when a learner develops an impression of his or her past by looking backward, which may result in impulsive investment; *self-examining,* a more formal, intentional, or critical examination of self that results in investing in education; and *dreaming*, which can be a dream planted by another—like Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech—but ultimately is accepted or taken on by the learner.
- *Pronounced emplacementing*, where testing, measuring, or some kind of diagnosing has been pronounced upon and accepted by the learner). Its three sub-categories include: *diagnosing experiences*, which is data to which students are subjected, both formally and informally through various testing instruments; *medicalizing*, where a doctor, professional, teacher, or authority figure determines that the adult has a learning barrier or disability that will slow the progress; *fictionalizing*, a believable yet untrue or made-up diagnosis that casts doubt over the learner's ability to succeed; and *experting,* where an instructor has made a pronouncement against the student that may have marked a shift in the student's attitude, commitment, aptitude, or resolve.
- *Treadmilling* is an impeding force in *driven succeeding* and the key derailing transitional point in the *visioning* stage. *Treadingmilling* differs from *shutting down* because although it may seem like forward movement, it is not. This property includes the following two sub-categories: *going nowhering*, a frozen or blighted period of learning, which may be either a derailing time or a time

for reflection or respite for some learners; *counteracting*, which often finds students in denial who have known deficit areas, such as a disability, a weakness in reading, poor study habits, or the inability to manage time, yet h/she intentionally fails to include him/herself in that reality including *avoidance behavior* which may manifest itself in truancy when tests or quizzes are given, or intentionally throwing a test by not participating or trying, providing them with a temporary feeling of victory over the system. [27]

Stage 3: Investing

Skill developing is an important property of *investing*, and once a learner successfully navigates this category he or she may move forward to getting to *clicking* (Stage 4). Three properties of *skill developing* include:

- *Staging*, the steps needed to gain forward movement toward student understanding by presenting the learning in comprehendible chunks or stages, which has the following two sub-categories: *resourcing*, that is, connecting students with the human or physical resources needed to succeed or meet learning expectations; and *tooling up*, the learned and accumulated past experience, skills, strategies, and dispositions that become tools for learning.
- *Trying out experiences,* a testing-out place or the student's learning lab, including: *new ways of thinking* (MEZIROW, 2000), replacing the old ways students had once held to as they begin to discover their importance in the classroom and in the overall learning experience; *new ways of acting*, which can occur in or outside the classroom (as learners invest in their learning, they inevitably bring their new selves into their worlds—their workplaces, homes, social lives, and ways of thinking); *being heard*, when a student's voice is heard and the uniqueness is affirmed; *blending in*, or being aware and careful not to vary from the perception of the norm for the class, which can drive students once they feel they have found acceptance or that they are ready to invest; *impostering*, which occurs when adult learners are not able to accept who they are in the educational context and may feel as if they are role-playing a character instead of living out who they really are; *negotiating*, that is, maneuvering or juggling a loss of personal or family time against the rewards of investing in a program; and *needing support* to provide for the emotional resources required to succeed.
- *Derailing experiences* are impeding forces in *driven succeeding*, including: *overwhelming,* when adults feel that balancing everything around them is either too much or out of control; *absenteeing,* or truancy patterns that result in stalled progress; *procrastinating*, where those learners who wait until the last minute to invest often feel regret when experiencing failure and blame others or themselves for not succeeding; *lack of resources*, the inability to easily access learning resources like books, technology, the Internet, or the public library; *diverting experiences*, such as a new job that can require students to work during class time, or they may find that the rigors of a new job, a new work schedule, or added responsibilities make it impossible to

remain enrolled in the study program; *discontentment*, when learners are so focused on their own vision or issues that they do not see the relevance of classroom activities and cannot place themselves into the picture; and *accessibility,* when the ability to enter any learning environment is hindered due to physical disability or impossible physical circumstances of any kind. [28]

Stage 4: Clicking

Clicking occurs when adult learners begin to really "get it" and understand, accept, and apply their learning. Three properties of this stage include:

* *Mattering* (JONES-RASBERRY, 2004), which includes feelings of self-worth, acceptance, and significance. Students may exhibit signs of connecting on new levels with their instructors, peers, and their learning. Two sub-categories of *mattering* include: *feeling accepted,* or a drivenness that is born from a positive connection with their peers and instructors, and with the learning itself; and *discovering and allowing caring support*, where it often is a surprise to discover a caring, concerned teacher or mentor. (Such support can serve to drive learners, as they realize that they are not going it alone and that another expects them to do their best.)

* *Getting it,* which simply means that learners are stakeholders in their learning and experience a sense of confidence and ownership. Getting it has four properties: *seeing new skills work,* the affirmation of the succeeding and clicking that has previously occurred in their learning career; *new viewpoint*, when the learner exhibits an almost no-fear attitude in approaching a subject matter; *flooding out*, when a learner becomes overloaded with incoming dialogue or information and h/she shuts down, unable to process any more information; and *comfortability* in utilizing strategies and skills of learning.

* *Mastering* is when adult learners succeed in their learning, they begin to show signs of owning and manipulating it. Five sub-categories include: *owning it*, when a learner revisits past goals, retooling them from their new learning perspective, and creates new goals that build upon the student's new way of knowing while reframing a forecast for new future possibilities; *testing out*, which can include practicing a new skill, doing a problem at the board, writing an essay, etc. where failure is not "held against" them but they can feel safe to test out a new skill or knowledge; *driving it*, which is that self-driven force where the learner chooses and pursues a course of action; *relentlessness*, which can be externally and internally driven (internally, the learner chooses a course of behavior based on experience and earlier succeeding achievement); *punching through*, which is when a learner continues to try and adjust where learning seemed impossible before and failure reigned; and *removing masks*, when learners who are open allow themselves to drop their defenses and remove their self-imposed barriers (masks). [29]

Stage 5: Ripening

Ripening is a transitional stage of succeeding. When learners are ripening, they "get it" and are ready to venture out, to apply their new learning or knowledge outside of the classroom. Ripening is characterized by three properties:

- *Goal setting*, where learners begin succeeding on their own terms, exhibiting greater confidence and the ability to apply what they have learned. Five sub-categories include: *Owning,* in which new confidence and fearlessness built in learners can drive them as they approach new subjects because previous succeeding had proven fruitful; *realizing a dream*, when learners feel like they are realizing a dream or vision they formerly may have doubted they would ever achieve, thus validating and affirming their present situation; *renewed self,* when a learner is ready to move out and try new learning or an application for new skills, like a new job; *deep knowing,* the ability to use and apply, manipulate, and understand the knowledge they have obtained during the course of their learning career; and *transformative learning* (MEZIROW, 1990, 1991, 2000), including new skills, dispositions, abilities, renewed learner optimism, and a paradigm shift (OLSON & RAFFANTI, 2006a).
- *Renewed visioning*, in which the learner envisions new possibilities. While *ripening* is the final stage in this theory, it may, however, not be the final step for driven learners, as they may choose to continue or further their education, go on with certification, or seek different employment, marking *an* end—but possibly not *the* end. Three sub-categories emerged: *Planning a course of action* (MEZIROW, 2000), when learners are now ready to begin the application of their learning, showing evidence of new ownership and confidence; *rebooted thinking*, looking at the world with learned, fresh eyes, which may prompt new confidence that drives them to take on new challenges out in front of them; and finally, *realizing the vision*, wherein as learners believe the patterns of clicking going on in their educational endeavor, they begin to realize success and competence building (MEZIROW, 2000) and may return to Stage 2—*visioning*.
- *Balancing* is when learners begin to consider and balance their many roles: student, teacher, expert, parent, employee, etc. Balancing is where costs are counted and risk is balanced with the status quo. Three sub-categories are: *Becoming the expert*, when learners show confidence and assurance in their abilities and skills—an almost instinctual knowing where adults share themselves as either "learner" or as a "expert"; *new rewards*, in which the prospects for new pay, a new job, and a new outlook can cause as much stress as the realizing experience that first brought them into the program, balancing the new self with new possibilities can cause stress that may either derail or drive them; and *reintegration into society* (MEZIROW, 2000), which involves balancing new choices with their new excitement. (Learners may have a new perspective, new skills, and renewed confidence that needs to interact and connect with the reality of the outside world.) [30]

4. Adult Student Examples of Navigating Driven Succeeding

The following three examples illustrate how the students navigated the stages of *driven succeeding* and demonstrate its serpentine nature. They illustrate the broad application possibilities that exist by using GA: discovery, intervention, transformation, and meaningful action intervention that achieves sustainable results. In the first example, it was I who underwent transformative change. [31]

4.1 Using the explanatory theory for deeper understanding and transformation

Carlos[7], an adult Mexican-American Adult Basic Education[8] (ABE) student, attended a few classes and then for some unknown reason abruptly quit. Carlos entered (*Embarking*) the program and appeared to have sufficient excitement and motivation. His abrupt exit did not seem congruent with his initial interest, and subsequent interaction with him yielded no results. Earlier in my career, I may have found myself blaming "the system," the student, the college, or more importantly: myself—making up or logically elaborating unfounded reasons why this happened, eventually discussing the situation over a cup of coffee with a colleague. I had previously believed that this lack of progress must happen to a percentage of students. I don't believe that anymore. Practicing GA also has a transformative property to it—a way of disarming potentially wrongful assertions or unfounded prejudice by objectifying behavior instead of profiling or vilifying my observations. GREGORY (2006) asserts that GT and GA is not about "finger pointing" or fixing another person but is about "setting aside preconceptions and self-interests in an attempt to 'get inside' the tension, to understand its complexity, and to work through the tension with integrity and responsibility" (p.546). By comparing new student behavior against the behavior patterns found in the explanatory theory, one can begin to reliably compare and predict what the student may be working on at this early stage. Since the explanatory theory is the primary source for understanding "what is" before intervention is even considered, this *shutting down experience* (a property of Stage 1) allows me a more informed behavioral understanding, which will impact the way I approach and begin future classes, providing me with a tool for providing more meaningful intervention and action initiatives if and when I encounter this behavior again. [32]

4.2 Using grounded action for deeper understanding and for specific intervention

Anica, a working mother of four young children, enrolled in my ABE math class with trembling and fear. She hoped to eventually enter the GED[9] program

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7   The names of all individuals in this study have been changed to protect their identity.

8   The general aims of Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs are to provide instruction in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics to adult learners in order to prepare them for transitioning into the labor market, higher academic (like a GED training program), or vocational training.

9   The tests of the General Educational Development, or GED® Tests, are a battery of five tests that, when passed, certifies the taker has American or Canadian level academic skills.

someday but must first pass the post-test exam or TABE[10]. She believed that she would make more money (*Embarking: realizing experiences—crisis build-up*) after completing her high school equivalency diploma and began with both anxiety and determination. Anica is married and is working two jobs around her husband's schedule so that someone is always at home with the children (*Investing: skill developing—resourcing*). She worked the third shift and attended classes in the morning following work so she could be at home in the afternoons when her children get home from school. Anica was forced to drop out of high school when she began missing too much class and became pregnant at age 17 (*Investing: derailing experiences: absenteeing*). She had not even considered the need to return to school until the connection of the possibility for a better job and pay, helping her children with their homework, and being a better role model all collided and inspired her to give school another try (*Embarking: venturing—internal proving behavior*). She was also especially motivated by the fact that her oldest child was beginning to exceed her ability in math (*Visioning—introspecting: self-examining*). [33]

Anica has had some deeply planted fears when it comes to formal education. She became very emotional and moved to tears whenever she had to take any kind of test, as it reminded her of prior failures and fear. When she took her first math quiz, she cried so hard that she never even finished it. Luckily, I was able to meet with her about it before she quit the program entirely (*Embarking: shutting-down experiences—negative self-talk; testing failures*). However, the problem persisted, and she experienced repeated failure (*Derailing: discontenting*) in spite of her determination and the fact that she really seemed to know the material. I turned to the operational theory at this point to consider possible intervention strategies. We decided together (*Operational theory: collaborating—listening and negotiating*) that if we tried practicing testing (*Operational Theory: encouraging or facilitating new skills*) every day, she might not experience the same trauma. Each time she had to test, no matter how confident she was going into the test, tears would well up in her eyes, but she would wipe them away and proceed anyway with determination (*Investing—new ways of thinking*). After several days, she finally smiled when I handed her a practice quiz. (I believe I had authored over 30 practice quizzes by that time.) Many other students joined the "quiz club" and as it turned out, this action did resolve her concern. By the end of the semester (four months later), she had gained the needed confidence to try the "big" post-test. Her pre-test score had been at a grade level 3.5, but she post-tested at a 10.0 in math[11]. Similarly, she moved up to an 8.5 on her reading post-test, needing a 9.0 or better in reading to get into the GED program. Knowing she was so close, it ignited her all the more (*Clicking: getting it—new viewpoint*). She re-enrolled and took one more semester of reading and indeed scored high enough to get into the GED program by the next semester (*Ripening: goal setting—realizing a dream*). [34]

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10 The TABE (Tests of Adult Basic Education) is a test containing sections on English, Math, and Reading assessment. See the following website for more information: http://www.MHCONTEMPORARY.com/PAGES/TABE.PHP.

11 The graded placement testing used in this adult participant setting is the TABE test by McGraw-Hill. More information can be found at http://www.CTB.com/.

4.3 Using grounded action for understanding, specific intervention and systemic change

Juan entered an adult basic education (ABE) math class intending to "learn enough math to pass [a] carpentry proficiency exam" (*Embarking: shutting down —testing failures*). His former life as a gang leader had come to an abrupt end, and he wanted to make a clean break by living and working in a new environment (*Embarking: realizing experience—crisis build-up*). The arrival of a new baby and a desire to provide for a new wife and family added incentive, but his stated primary concern was to learn enough to pass the carpentry entrance exam that he had previously failed three times and to take the job he had been offered (*Embarking: venturing—career change*). He let me know from the beginning that he didn't "want to work through the whole math book—but learn the kinds of math [problems] that [he] needed to pass the test" (*Visioning: introspecting— retrovisioning*). [35]

I began to compare his story and events to the explanatory theory to discover where he was in the theory. Further, I integrated data from an informational sheet with questions like, "Why did you sign up for this course?" and, "What do you expect to learn during this semester?" Juan provided me with three handwritten pages detailing his situation. My next step was an informal interview with him where he could share his story and we could negotiate his purpose and intentions, which appeared to be outside the traditional classroom model. Since we had a small class size, this became a kind of class discussion activity each week which yielded rich stories, sharing, and shared compassion, empathy, and support (*Clicking: mattering*). (I later memoed and wrote detailed field notes to capture what was going on and how to provide meaningful intervention or make adjustments to the curriculum.) BROOKFIELD suggests that discussion[12] plays a key role in classroom pedagogy for developing more effective and democratic (BROOKFIELD, 1990, 1999; CANDY, 1988) classrooms. While the school's administration placed great systemic pressure to carry students through to post-testing, I chose to allow Juan the space he needed and, as the whole class had, embraced his choice to come clean and succeed. After about four weeks of intense study, Juan abruptly stopped coming. A week later, a handwritten note from Juan addressed to the class was found on my desk as we entered the classroom. It read, "I'm liking my new carpentry job! Thanks for putting up with me" (*Ripening: goal setting—realizing the dream*). [36]

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12 BROOKFIELD (1999) suggests 15 benefits of classroom discussion (pp.22-23), and details the benefits of each throughout Chapter 2 (pp.23-42).

5. General Observations From Implementing Grounded Action

Grounded Action is both enlightening and rewarding. It has proven to be a very reliable measure for predicting behavior and for instigating change initiatives. GA (like GT) is modifiable and while a reliable methodology, is not a quick fix but can consider the bigger systemic picture or even data sources that an intervener might or might not even have available to him or her. It is critical to consult the explanatory theory first and to utilize the constant comparative method of analysis before considering any change initiatives or before implementing intervention or action. The modifiability of GA must integrate and compare what is (the learner's actual situation or any new data) with the explanatory and operational theory. Many students are surprised that a teacher is interested in assisting them towards reaching their goals. I have heard many stories of how students seemingly perceive teachers as the enemy, performing more as gatekeepers than facilitators of meaningful and lasting change or even concerned with intervention. I have found that a GA approach to education has yielded collaboration and co-partnering with students as we share and consider the theory together and I include them in my analysis. This GA equips the instructor with a reliable intervention tool and a method for moving them forward. Intervention became more successful once students began trusting me and considering me as a co-learner or partner. They responded with renewed energy and *drivenness*, as if they really *mattered* (*Clicking*: *mattering*). [37]

I have found the entire GA process useful in providing a more informed, meaningful, democratic teaching experience and has opened doors for more relevant curriculum development, sustainable and driven student intervention, and through the subsequent discovery of *grounded learning* (OLSON & RAFFANTI, 2004, 2006a, 2006b); OLSON, 2006), has transformed my own educational practice. [38]

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