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## The Lived Experience of a Doctoral Student: The Process of Learning and Becoming

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## The Lived Experience of a Doctoral Student: The Process of Learning and Becoming

### Abstract

The PhD experience is often a transition from student to future faculty member, which involves considerable learning and development (Glaze, 2002; Hockey, 2004). Using a lifelong learning perspective (Jarvis, 2009), the purpose of this article is to explore, through a reflective self-study, my process of learning throughout the PhD degree. In this qualitative self-study, I kept a detailed personal, professional, and academic reflective journal over four years and used the journal entries as data to explore the process of learning. The results reveal my 'process of becoming', moving from a beginner PhD student to an aspiring professor and new mother. The results are discussed in light of how I learned during the four years of the PhD, and how my lifetime of previous experiences influenced the learning that occurred.

### Keywords

Learning, Reflection, Student, Mother, Coach, Experience

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## **The Lived Experience of a Doctoral Student: The Process of Learning and Becoming**

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The doctoral experience is a period of time when students learn about research, submit a dissertation with a rigorous methodology, and contribute to the literature in the field (Hockey, 2004). However, there is arguably more that is accomplished in this time. Doctoral students' experiences have often been researched in light of their transition into an academic career as a professor. However, not all students have such defined goals within their first year. The first year of the PhD has been described as the stage in which the students begin to identify with a new role (Braxton & Baird, 2001; Hockey, 2004; Viczko & Wright, 2010). Hockey (2004) notes that during the first year, students undergo unexpected difficulty due to major changes in their educational understandings and status. There are differences in academic demands, peer support, and social interactions with faculty. Some of the changes that have been noted as potentially problematic for doctoral students include: social isolation, time constraints, the need to take individual responsibility for work, the need to feel a sense of intellectual self-worth, and the need to have a solid relationship with their supervisor, particularly in terms of mutually shared expectations (Hockey, 2004). While reading about these difficulties may help other doctoral students feel a sense of relief and communion, these issues must all be understood as differing in importance depending on the personal context of the student, which plays a major role in how well the student adjusts to the new status. The level of adjustment is also dependent on the student's biography when entering the PhD process, which, according to Hockey (2004), is idiosyncratic and complex.

Not all students necessarily start their doctorate program with the intent of becoming a professor. Sweitzer (2009) describes two types of students. There are those who enter the program knowing that they want to get jobs as professors and publish in top-tier journals. They often describe academic relationships as the only important aspect of success. There are also those students who are more interested in individual development and learning. They may begin to develop professional identities as future

faculty members but do not necessarily fit the typical prototype of a graduate student striving towards becoming a professor by the end of their first year. The latter students identify relationships with faculty, peers, family, friends, and prior business associates as important to their learning and success (Sweitzer, 2009). Other research on doctoral students indicates that social contexts within and outside of the university environment, including relationships with supervisors, peers, family, friends, and business associates, may play an important part in their development (Devenish et al., 2009; Sweitzer, 2009). Therefore, it appears that students enter their PhD programs with varied expectations, and they experience personal development through their social experiences while in the PhD programs. Indeed, Glaze (2002) suggests that the PhD experience is a period of considerable development and learning. However, it cannot be discounted that students' past experiences as well as their social context influence their development and learning during the PhD.

Jarvis (2006) proposes a theory of human learning as part of lifelong learning where individuals become more experienced as a result of engaging in social situations throughout life, the perceived content of which is integrated into their biographies. Using Jarvis' theory as a conceptual framework can help to understand how the social context and an individual's past experiences over the course of his or her lifetime influence the learning that occurs during the timeframe of the PhD.

The concept of biography is important for Jarvis (2006, 2009) and he defines it as "the outcome of a lifetime" (Jarvis, 2006, p. 73). He further explains that:

We are constructing our own biography whenever we learn – whilst we live our biography is an unfinished product constantly undergoing change and development – either through experiences that we self-initiate or else through experiences which are initiated by others. (Jarvis, 2009, p. 25)

One's biography influences the way an experience is perceived and what an individual may choose to learn (Jarvis, 2006). We are *becoming* as long as we are learning according to Jarvis (2009) and the experience of starting, engaging in, and completing a doctorate is certainly a process of becoming: learning, changing, and reflecting (Devenish et al., 2009; Glaze, 2002; Sweitzer, 2009). While Jarvis' theory spans birth to death, he explains that mid-life learning is "a time of identity change which reflects both the changes in our lives and the processes of becoming" (p. 193). Throughout life, a person may have several roles (e.g., student, family member, friend, co-worker) but it is the whole person who learns (Jarvis, 2006). Therefore, the connections between the experiences within these different roles influence a person's learning.

Jarvis (2006, 2009) notes that an individual may learn by reflecting on information as it is presented in any given situation. Reflection "implies that we are questioning, in some way, the experience that we have had, whether that be receiving information, witnessing an event, seeking to solve a problem or experiencing some other phenomenon" (Jarvis, 2006, p. 99). Reflection may be analytical when it is a process of logically breaking down ideas and determining connections; it may be creative when it is a synthesis of thoughts that lead to a better understanding of an issue: this includes planning for the future; and it may be evaluative when it is a judgment of the meaning or relevance of an experience (Jarvis, 2009). Reflection invariably leads to a deeper

understanding that enables individuals to make meaning of their experiences, change, and become more experienced (Jarvis, 2009; Moon, 1999).

Research involving the first-person reflection of the researcher on various life experiences can be a valuable source of insight into an individual's process of change (Guérin, Arcand, & Durand-Bush, 2010). Glaze (2002) notes the importance of documenting researchers' written reflections in the form of a diary or journal, in order to learn from the daily experiences of engaging in the process of completing a PhD. One way of explaining the process of becoming during the PhD experience is through a reflective study of the self. Lussier-Ley (2010) notes that a self-study provides rich and in-depth, subjectively lived findings on experiences that can enhance our understanding of multidimensional, complex, and social phenomena. The goal of any self-study is on developing awareness of oneself and one's development (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003). Reflective self-studies have been reported mostly in teacher education literature through retrospective personal life histories as a means of exploring "who am I?" (Robertson, 2009). As Robertson explains, "The examination of self within a theoretical framework can provide insight into values, beliefs, and biases that underlie personal behaviour and inform individual professional practise and decision making" (p. 156).

Researching reflections written during the PhD program in a longitudinal self study could help to better understand students' processes of learning and becoming as unique due to their own biography, their social interactions and relationships, and the academic and non-academic environment in which they engage (Devenish et al., 2009; Hockey, 2004; Sweitzer, 2009). Shepherd (2004) suggests that reading a reflective journal enables individuals to understand how previous experiences guide what they do next. The purpose of this article is to explore, through a reflective self-study, my process of learning throughout the PhD degree, and how this learning is influenced by my lifetime of experiences to date. This article may serve as a guide for other doctoral students who are still deciding on their career goals and whose life experiences will play a part in their learning process. It is hoped that this article will help them understand the importance of reflection in determining their courses of action. With this in mind, this article contributes to qualitative inquiry by providing an outline of a reflective self-study, so that future PhD students might use this as a flexible guide for their own learning and development. One hope is that the article provides qualitative researchers with a resource for writing self-studies and furthering reflective practice and development.

### **Methodology**

For this self-study, the first author is the participant and the results are displayed in the first person to better understand the analysis of the reflective journals. However, the second and third authors played an important part in creating this article, in solidifying thoughts, reflections, and arguments, and in helping the first author analyze and examine the data. As the experiences of the first author are important in understanding the context of the data, a brief summary of the first author's biography is presented (Jarvis, 2009), including important experiences relevant for this article. Then, the three phases of a self-study according to Louie et al. (2003) are presented in order to

situate how the reflections were analyzed within a framework. Finally, the trustworthiness of this study is discussed.

## **Participant**

I am a 29-year old doctoral student in the fourth year of my PhD in Human Kinetics. This self-study spans the time frame of four years – my initial entry into the doctoral program; the four years of immersing myself in the literature on lifelong learning, coach learning, women in coaching, and qualitative methodologies; and collecting and analyzing data on five women coach participants. The doctoral research involved interviewing five coaches four times each, creating a narrative analysis of their lifelong learning from their retrospective biographical interviews, and completing the data analysis in writing articles for the dissertation. Personally, I am married and gave birth to two children while in my PhD program. During this time, I was also coaching alpine skiing, and had been for 13 years.

There were meaningful previous experiences that influenced how I perceived and learned from my experiences in my PhD program. My parents' actions unconsciously taught me numerous values that I carry into the actions and decisions I make as an adult. As avid alpine skiers, they first took me skiing when I was two years old. They enrolled me in the racing program when I was seven years old. They also believed in having well-rounded children, and so I was also enrolled in and encouraged to pursue whatever activities I enjoyed: skating, soccer, piano, gymnastics, swimming, art, and creative writing, to list a few. My parents both worked full time and they praised my scholastic success and my hard work ethic. I have an older sister who was passionate about music, and so I also loved music. I have a younger sister (seven years younger) whom I was always teaching – whether it was sports, school, or life skills. I learned to teach, mentor, and be a role model for her. As a child I always said that I wanted to be a teacher or a psychologist when I grew up. I developed a true passion for sports in high school, where I was on many of the school teams. I began coaching alpine skiing when I was 16 years old. In university, in addition to coaching, I began to teach coaches and facilitate entry-level certification courses. I completed a Bachelor of Science in Human Kinetics, where I learned about many topics related to coaching, and in particular I took an interest in sport psychology. I then completed a Master of Arts in Human Kinetics with a focus in sport psychology, and then I began my PhD in Human Kinetics in 2007. During these years, I learned a great deal that put me on my path in starting my PhD, and these experiences will be described in further detail in the results section.

## **Self-Study**

A reflective self-study (Louie et al., 2003; Lussier-Ley, 2010; Robertson, 2009), anchored by a constructivist paradigm was used to describe the process of becoming and the self-constructed nature of learning within a social context. I, the first author, documented learning from my life experiences in a journal, paying particular attention to changes that occurred within my life during the four years of my doctorate. I explored “who am I” based on what I had learned from my previous experiences when I started my doctorate. I documented experiences throughout the four years, and explored “who am I”

at the end of the PhD program, with the understanding that I am not a finished product, but will continue to learn and become more experienced long after I have completed my doctorate.

Under my two advisors' guidance, I followed Louie and colleagues' (2003) three phases of the self-study methodology: the assessment phase, the implementation phase, and the dissemination phase. In the assessment phase, the researcher assesses his or her readiness to engage in an honest critique of him or herself. The researcher must be prepared to document his or her behaviors, cognitions, emotions, and attitudes, as well as contradictions that occur within these aspects (Louie et al., 2003). As well, the researcher must identify the purpose of the self-study and place it within a theoretical framework (Louie et al., 2003). In this case, Jarvis' (2006, 2009) theory of human learning was used to guide the relevance of my reflections in terms of the life experiences that influenced my lifelong learning process and more specifically, my studies.

In the implementation phase, Louie and colleagues (2003) note that the researcher collects data on him or herself. Depending on the method (usually some form of narrative inquiry, in this case journaling and interviewing), the self-study might explore sensitive issues that are difficult to discover because they require the researcher to question deeply held beliefs (Louie et al., 2003). The journal became the data for this article, delineating my changes and developments in learning throughout the four years of my PhD. Furthermore, in collecting data, the researcher must articulate beliefs, meanings, and intentions, and continually engage in a process of self-understanding based on new experiences that occur. Trusted colleagues can help the researcher to draw out and critically reflect on what he or she means (Louie et al., 2003). In this case, I kept a detailed journal of my thoughts, emotions, and actions throughout the four years of my PhD, including academic endeavors, such as readings, projects and ongoing discussions with my two advisors, and non-academic endeavors, such as my family life and ski coaching experiences. These reflections were analyzed by choosing the relevant reflections that influenced my learning process and guided me towards becoming an aspiring professor.

Finally, in the dissemination phase, Louie and colleagues (2003) suggest that the researcher articulates the findings of the self-study to others, and clearly identifies how the results contribute to the academic discourse. In this case, this article serves as the dissemination phase of my own learning. At the same time, by including my own experiences in disseminating my research findings, other graduate students may better understand the process, learning, and emotions that encompass the lengthy PhD research process.

### **Trustworthiness**

Through case studies, the researcher can be considered trustworthy in writing results because she becomes personally knowledgeable about the case and the context (Stake, 1994). In a self-study, the researcher herself is in fact the case under study. Therefore it must be noted that my personal meanings are subjectively stated in this article, so that the relativist nature of learning, experience, and meaning must be kept in the forefront of the reader's understanding of this case (Jarvis, 2006; Stake, 1994).

Furthermore, trustworthiness was enhanced by providing descriptive and context-rich reflections of my experiences in the journal entries (Polkinghorne, 1995).

## **Results**

For my dissertation research, I developed a plan to study the biographies of women coaches in order to explore how they learned to coach. This was an area of interest to me because I was a female alpine ski coach. As I was using Jarvis' (2006, 2007, 2009) lifelong learning theory as a framework, in discussions with my advisors, we determined that an autobiographical analysis of my own learning throughout the four years of my doctorate, as a student, coach, and family member, and as influenced by my previous experiences, would be a natural addition to my research on women coaches and their process of learning. Perhaps other graduate students will find relevance in my reflections on the learning process throughout the doctoral degree and understand how they might embark on their own self-reflective process.

### **The Assessment Phase**

Following Louie et al.'s (2003) three phases, I first present results about the assessment phase. I critique my own actions and thoughts according to Jarvis' theory in which one's biography, composed of learned material from previous experiences, influences actions and decisions in subsequent experiences. Three important areas in my life include coaching, school, and my family life. Then, as Louie et al. (2003) suggest, I assess my readiness to engage in a self-study on my process of learning.

**Assessing my biography as I entered the PhD program.** In the years before the start of my doctoral degree, I was at what I now see as the pinnacle of my alpine ski coaching career. I was receiving funding to coach at the World University Games to complete my high performance coaching diploma from the National Coaching Institute, to work with the Canadian Alpine Ski Team at several camps, and to study coaching in academia. I had worked with the World Cup team from Argentina in the summer prior to the 2006 Olympic Games, and I had won awards for coaching at the development level. I had taken a job as a coach for an elite team in the region. At this point, my career goal was to coach high performance athletes in alpine ski racing.

I loved coaching but it was not without difficulties. I encountered jealous coaches, gender-based discrimination and comments from athletes and trainers regarding the need for, but lack of, opportunity and proper support for women in coaching at the national team level. I was aware of the barriers that women coaches faced through my own experiences as a woman coach and from reading research on the topic through my studies at the university, and I was aware of the time and focus required to coach from my coaching experiences and from my undergraduate courses in coaching and Human Kinetics.

While still coaching, I completed a master's degree in Human Kinetics, conducting an intervention study in which I acted as a consultant helping a coach to develop awareness of how his athletes wanted to feel to perform well and the strategies that allowed them to feel that way. I had enjoyed the research process and wanted to



continue to research coaches' experiences. Because of my own experiences as a woman coach who felt ready to coach at the national level but encountered many difficulties in doing so, I decided to research women coaches who had successfully established careers in coaching.

Finally, on the personal front, in the fall of my first year of my PhD, my husband and I got a puppy and we were in the process of moving into our first home. Throughout that year, I realized that I enjoyed being at home with my family in our new "nest."

**Assessing my readiness to document the process of learning.** In the first semester of my doctorate, I took a PhD course, designed to develop reflective skills, in which I was required to keep a journal of my reflections on the material I was reading to understand more about the topic that I wanted to study. The journal was also meant to help new doctoral students document our journey in the PhD program, develop an understanding of what we wanted to study, and determine how we would go about our research. I read an article on the use of a reflective diary during the PhD process. On 09-12-07, I reflected on the article.

I determined that writing in a journal is a way for the doctoral student to express ideas and emotions coming from whatever she is doing... Through the reading, I thought of ways that I could protect myself from certain things, or grow from others. For instance, I know how to protect myself from being constantly tired... My home life, buying a house, getting it to feel like mine, spending time with my husband, dreaming about the future and the not so distant future, all these things help me to relax. While not necessarily relaxing, they offer a complete release from other activities, and take my thoughts away from all else. This is so important in order to find balance when completing a PhD.

At the same time, I started to read Jarvis' (2006) theory of human learning, a book that my advisors thought could be an appropriate conceptual framework for my dissertation. Of course, in the beginning, I did not have a firm research purpose or question, and so I read a great deal of research on coaching, women coaches, and qualitative methodologies in addition to considering whether Jarvis' theory was in line with my own research interests. As my work evolved and I began to solidify what I would research, with my two supervisors, we began to think that including reflections on my own process of learning could be important.

Although I had only a superficial understanding of Jarvis' theory of human learning, it made sense to me. I immediately agreed with his explanation of how previous experiences influence how one learns in new situations. His theory seemed to me to be quite comprehensive because it included so much of the learning that occurs in informal situations with or without conscious deliberation. While reading the book, I began to reflect back on the many experiences I deemed meaningful in becoming the person I was, including my values of well-roundedness and therefore my interests in pursuing and excelling in not only a coaching career, but also an academic one, as well as a family life.

## **The Implementation Phase**

From Louie et al.'s (2003) recommendations for the implementation phase, I kept an ongoing learning journal throughout four years, reflecting on my experiences in academia, on my on-going coaching, and on my personal life. In my journal, I wrote about experiences and reflections that stemmed from interactions and discussions with fellow students, professors, family, colleagues, and the participants in my dissertation study. My experiences in these situations, perceived through the lens of my own biography, influenced what I learned. Therefore, in the beginning of my PhD, with my coaching career on such a high, I reflected on and questioned my interests in coaching.

**Reflections while becoming aware of my beliefs about pursuing a career in coaching.** As I moved through my first two semesters, I began to question my deeply held beliefs about what pursuing a career in coaching meant to me. I documented those thoughts and feelings in my journal. On 09-17-07, I wrote:

When I coach, I think of nothing else. I wonder why I go to school. But there are so many unknowns in coaching. My job is in large part dependent on others. I don't know if I will ultimately succeed in coaching World Cup because I may get held back. I know that I am a great coach. My athletes know it too... I feel confident in myself... But, when others don't have confidence in me, despite my own confidence, I doubt myself. At school, my success is dependent on myself. I choose when I complete things, how well they get done, etc. Coaching is different. These unknowns frighten me, worry me, keep me with one hand in the academic pocket. I know I will be safe if I keep a hold on it.

Not only did I feel conflict in thinking about choosing between coaching and school, but I also felt conflicted as a coach and as a wife. I saw that in alpine skiing, the World Cup coaches had a hard time finding balance between their careers and their personal lives. On 09-17-07, I continued to write:

If I coached World Cup, always nagging in my mind is the idea that I would be on the road nine months of the year. Tom (my husband) encourages me to go for this, he knows the time restraints, he wants to travel along. But, it would be difficult... My biggest worry would be that I would miss Tom and I would miss home. Then, I think of an even bigger worry: I want to have children. Yes, I know, I'm young, I have lots of time. But, I don't want time. I want to have children young. I want them to be part of my life while I'm young.

These reflections articulated my concerns. They helped me to realize how I had learned from my experiences as a wife that I wanted the stability of a home life. For me, this explained why I was not pursuing coaching whole-heartedly, but rather continuing to engage in my formal education, which kept me home.

**Reflections while becoming a new PhD student.** In my doctoral classes, I began to think about what theoretical framework I wanted to use. I wrote:

We talked about theories versus conceptual frameworks and I wondered how one goes about finding a theory... I wondered whether it is possible to take a new theoretical framework rather than one that has been already used in coaching research.

Throughout the year, as I read deeper on Jarvis' view of lifelong learning, I began to really appreciate his comprehensive theory of learning and its relationship to the many experiences we have throughout life because I reflected on the interconnectedness of my own experiences in coaching, as a student, and with my family. I was learning about how much these experiences were related in my path to becoming the person I was. Jarvis' theory helped me to reflect on my conflicting feelings of pursuing a career in sport coaching. On 06-12-08, I wrote:

There is something seriously flawed in the coaching system. According to Jarvis (and my own personal view), many interconnected life experiences are part of the process of learning. Therefore, I could argue that family life and the experiences outside of coaching greatly enhance a coach's understanding of the athletes and life in general. However, as I read articles on coaching and reflect on my experiences, I see that the nature of elite coaching jobs is one that does not appreciate the learning one may have from other parts of life, and indeed, it appears that alpine ski coaches must choose to coach at the expense of family, friends, and a normal life.

While I had made the link between the coaching literature and my own coaching experiences, I noted that the literature on the experiences of PhD students also seemed to reflect a narrow account of learning from a variety of life experiences. After reading a report by Golde and Dore (2001) regarding the ever-increasing number of graduate students and their haphazard release onto the job markets, on 09-18-08 I reflected:

I felt satisfied that the article showed that PhD students were not necessarily equipped to go out into the job market because they had few life experiences that readied them for this next step. In fact, this strengthened my belief of the importance of having varied life experiences and jobs that would help doctoral students learn from the "real world" outside of being a student. I think I have learned from many of my life experiences. For instance, I think coaching has helped me learn to teach and lead. I want to continue having varied life experiences throughout my PhD because I know that I need to grow as an entire person, not only to feel the way I want to feel and set myself up in the future, but also do to so for the present. I must keep in mind what I love to do to keep myself happy, and this includes school, coaching, and family life. It means keeping busy, learning, teaching, being stimulated and challenged, and

taking time to relax... This enables me to be successful (especially as I define it!).

My assumption of the importance of learning from a variety of experiences in order to coach or teach more effectively was further flushed out in a bracketing interview that I completed before my thesis proposal. Two doctoral students conducted the interview, with my advisor and another professor asking probing questions. This interview helped me to understand my assumptions, my biases, and my emotions around coaching. To me, it became clearer that Jarvis' theory of human learning was an apt framework for me to use in my dissertation because it fit well with a way to explore, in-depth, women coaches learning experiences and also my notion that experiences throughout life influenced coach learning and development. On 11-03-08, I reflected on my bracketing interview that I had just transcribed and noted my bias in researching coach learning:

According to Jarvis, life experiences are important to the way that people learn. But I feel like the coaching community wants me to stifle my broader life experiences in order to coach, and I question, is that healthy to elite athlete development and is that healthy for me as a coach? In my experience, I do not think so. Perhaps it is what is needed at that level. But I don't know. If I lay groundwork in my research to show that life experiences contribute to how coaches learn, stay in coaching, and improve as a coach thereby helping athletes develop, then this could really change the path for elite coach development. I know this is my biased opinion, but it is just a personal interest of mine as I conduct my research.

I felt good about this reflection because I began to think that my research could be a useful contribution to the field.

Nonetheless, keeping this balance of having and learning from varied life experiences was not always easy when attempting to excel in the doctoral program. In my third semester, I decided to stop coaching at a high performance level and coach instead at the development level, which required less of a time commitment so that I could focus on school. It was the summer, and I was not currently coaching as I had developing athletes who typically do not go to ski camps in the summer. I was preparing for and taking my comprehensive exams. I felt stressed because I felt as though I was engaged in mainly one type of learning situation to the exclusion of others. On 08-11-08 I wrote:

All I am doing is school related. I feel like I don't have time to do any other activities. I don't have time for all the things that bring me joy and that help me to balance all that I do so that I get the most joy out of each part of my life. Right now, it's school, school, school, so that I no longer am enjoying it, but it's all I can think about. My head hurts.

While I was seemingly not enjoying my PhD experience at that time, I was able to reflect that I felt dissatisfied simply because I was unable to learn from the balance of life experiences that I deemed so important for my own well-being.

**Reflections while becoming a mother.** On 09-21-08, I found myself reflecting about what I wanted in life. I loved coaching, but I wanted more – I wanted a child. I felt that both would not be possible. “When I coach, I am often away... I think that I’m learning what is most important to me at this stage, and it’s not coaching... I’m changing. I’m learning that what I want is to start my family.” As previously mentioned, I did not return to the elite team I was coaching the next year. Instead, I continued my studies, completed my comprehensive exams, dissertation proposal, and became pregnant.

By December 2009, I had a six-month old daughter, I was almost half way through my PhD, and I was still coaching, but only as a substitute coach at a ski club on the weekends. By becoming a mother, I learned that I could be a mother and a coach, but I was coaching at a different level than before. On 12-03-10, I wrote:

From my perceptions of interactions with other ski coaches, I had learned that truly being a “coach” meant I had to work full time with elite athletes. But now I see that I am still a coach, even if I only coach on some weekends with kids! I used to think that coaches needed to focus only on coaching to be considered successful. I felt stressed because I wanted to have a family, do my PhD, and coach. But in interviewing my participants, I have come to realize that these coaches are successful because they help athletes and live their life, which includes other experiences besides just coaching!

The coaches in my dissertation discussed their life experiences, how they had learned from these experiences, and how the experiences had influenced their approaches to working with their athletes. On 05-15-10, I reflected on how my participants’ stories were contributing to my own learning. One participant told me about how the interviews had helped her develop an awareness of how the different experiences in her life (e.g., coaching athletes; her relationship with her husband, children, and parents; her childhood and athletic experiences) had influenced who she was. I wrote:

I have started to realize that this research is cathartic to me because I am discovering that there are many experiences in one’s life that help coaches learn to become coaches and remain in this career. These full time coaches do not just coach but have other things happening in their lives that indeed impact their coaching (often for the better). This includes having children and learning from them!

I realized that I wanted a career where my life experiences, including the experiences on the job, my education, my family life, and all my other experiences were valued in helping me to continue to learn and develop within that career.

**Reflections while becoming an aspiring professor.** By 05-19-10, I had conducted the majority of my interviews with the women coaches from my study. The PhD work had become more and more rewarding because I was fascinated in the data I collected and reveled in the analysis. Additionally, I had created a work/life balance by deciding to coach on a part-time basis with developing athletes and by spending time

with my growing family. I reflected on a career change that I was developing because of my interest in research.

I want to be a professor. I can continuously learn, I can teach, I can mentor, I can help others find their dreams, I can make a difference. These are all characteristics that I loved about a coaching job too. However, I am not pursuing coaching at the World Cup level anymore because I no longer want to. I feel that it is too constricting in terms of the types of experiences that I am able to have.

Through the interviews with my participants, my own reflections and journaling, and my discussions with others about my research, I was beginning to personally learn, in greater detail, how priorities and interests played an important role in determining what people chose to learn and the decisions that they made. On 09-21-10, I wrote:

After doing these interviews with my participants and seeing these successful women coaches pursue their careers despite different barriers that they were up against, I can see how much it is dependent on the individual's perceptions of the situations that they are in and the decisions they make.

I noted that my own change in career goals from high performance coach to aspiring professor was in large part due to my own changing interests and priorities.

My change in career goals was still sometimes difficult to accept. On 05-30-10, I reflected:

Last week, in interviewing one of my participants, she explained that she never fully left the sport throughout her life. When she did not coach, she was still paddling as a master's athlete or volunteering. She said, "It's different than you because you left it all together." I said no, but smiled thinking about how I had left high performance coaching, and said yes. I was a bit furious with myself because no, I haven't ever left skiing, nor do I think I will. This winter I still free skied once or twice per week and I was substitute coaching, I gave courses to teach and certify coaches, not to mention the research I'm doing! That's not leaving the sport. I was a bit annoyed at my participant for making that assumption, but I did not show it and shrugged it off, thinking that she did not mean to make me feel bad. But it felt like she punched me.

At other times, becoming a professor instead of a high performance coach seemed like the best idea.

I find genuine pleasure in explaining what I read from various different points of view to my advisors in our bi-weekly meetings, and although it's "geeky", I really enjoy creating power point presentations to better get these points across. I have started to give other students advice on how to

prepare for their comprehensive exams and I really like to help edit their papers. I think I will enjoy being a supervisor. I find it rewarding to use the knowledge that I have acquired in helping other students clarify their thoughts.

At this point, I was starting to feel a sincere change in my position as a student from learning as much as possible from others to engaging in debate and teaching others. I learned that I enjoyed the work of being a researcher and a teacher.

In the third year of my PhD, we started weekly meetings with a “Coaching Research Group” and sub-group, comprised of professors and students studying coach learning and development. In these meetings, we would discuss articles in coaching science, read articles that we were preparing for publication, and debate coaching education and learning initiatives. I felt that my comments on the readings were sought out and debated. I always attended the meetings because I felt that there was always more to learn about the topic and I enjoyed reflecting with others on the process of coaching, regardless of the specific topic therein. Furthermore, some of the master’s and other PhD students told me that they appreciated reading my manuscripts and asking for my point of view, because, as one master’s student wrote in an email to me, “(your material) always makes a lot of sense and tends to clarify some things for me!”

In my fourth year, I was given the opportunity to teach an undergraduate course in sport psychology at the university, which played a deciding role in my move toward a career in academia. On 02-26-11, I wrote:

*I love teaching! I feel the thrill of giving information to one hundred students, of seeing their interest and motivation grow through classes designed to help them become whatever they want, and feel the high level of activation, enthusiasm, and yet harmony of being in front of the class. I perform well. I derive reward and pleasure from doing so. I also love exploring topics through research. Plus, I can pursue this career and have a family life, and continue to coach developing athletes. What could be better?*

### **The Dissemination Phase**

From Louie’s et al.’s (2003) recommendations for the dissemination of a self-study, I wrote this article. Part of the self-study includes learning from the process of trying to publish my dissertation research and learning from disseminating the findings of this article. In the final year of my doctorate, I wrote articles from my dissertation and began to send them to various journals for review. Finding the topics of the articles and analyzing the data to produce the results section was fun and relatively easy. However, I found the editing process between my advisors and me was a long process requiring much critical thought. On 06-11-11, I wrote:

*I acknowledge that my advisors comments and suggestions enhance the quality, thoroughness, and coherence of the articles, but it also seems like the articles change so much from the start of the editing process to the end,*

that they often do not have the same purpose or flavour. That is part of the co-construction process in having co-authors, and it's also the process of letting go of some of my control over my project I suppose... I am very satisfied with the final product that is ready to go to the publishers.

My supervisors played an integral role in helping me throughout the four years in the process of understanding how to go about synthesizing data and co-constructing articles. This was a hard process in the beginning because I was not aware of how many versions would be necessary but ultimately this process also gave me a sound understanding of how to write articles for peer-review. In the articles, I was able to articulate the findings of my research, and advance our understanding of the process of learning. The process in getting the articles published was sometimes long and often required multiple revisions. I did not mind the revision process because it helped me think about what I was really trying to articulate. Furthermore, it was good practice in helping me understand how to accept changes or defend my point, as I will do at my dissertation defense. However, when I sent in an article from my dissertation to a peer-reviewed journal which was rejected after three rounds of revisions, I felt quite frustrated. On 06-15-11, I reflected:

From my previous publications, I know that it feels so good to (a) finish writing the first draft of an article; then (b) send in the article for review to a journal; and then (c) have the article published. The many versions and edits in between become long, difficult, and often frustrating. When (c) does not happen, well, that's annoying. I see some of the work that gets published and I wonder how on earth mine is rejected! I have done a sound research project and have thoroughly written the article with two well-published individuals (my advisors). However, after seven months of going back and forth with the reviewers, it is not accepted. It feels like a waste of time... Now I need to re-submit somewhere else and start this process all over again.

I learned first-hand the frustrations of the world of publishing, and began to understand the time commitment that such a process entails. To lift my spirits, I thought about how far I had come in my understanding of the writing process and told myself that it would eventually feel great to get work published.

I also learned to take the process of completing a PhD in stride. The birth of my second daughter in the final period of my PhD became a cause of stress as I anticipated how long it would take for the editing process of the dissertation, and began to worry that I would not finish according to my timeline. I finished writing the entire dissertation, but I was still stressed that the revisions back and forth between my advisors and me would take too much time. In my last month of pregnancy, I noted spikes in my blood pressure due to my stress. For a couple of weeks, I felt unable to control these spikes, yet I understood that the pressure was self-imposed. Finally, upon reflection, I was able to gain a better perspective of my life. I knew I needed to control my blood pressure for my baby's well-being, and I became aware that I had done what I could do and that I needed to be happy with what I had accomplished. Learning about my stress, my priorities, and



my perspective on the PhD, on family, and on life gave me awareness of how my experiences tie together, emotionally, cognitively, and physically, and finding a solution in terms of my own acceptance of my position was a huge sense of relief. I felt a sense of restoration and harmony.

Finally, I gave a draft version of this article to my Coaching Research Group. It was September, and there were several new graduate students in the group. I felt vulnerable discussing this article because of its personal nature. However, the students noted how useful they found this article as new graduate students. They said it was inspiring, and helped them understand how they too could get through the graduate experience successfully. They noted how the article helped them become aware of the importance of reflection on their experiences to glean out lessons learned. I felt gratified because ultimately I wanted to provide others with a lived experience of learning to understand how the doctoral experience, with all the other life experiences that happen previously and concurrently, effectuate change in an individual. I noted that in general, the research, learning, and teaching process of engaging in a PhD was one that I felt was fulfilling and rewarding in my life, and I looked forward to continuing this process as a faculty member.

### **Discussion**

In the journal entries, it is clear that the research I chose to pursue and what I learned in my PhD experiences was greatly influenced by both my previous experiences before entering the PhD program and my experiences from the various roles I played during the four years, including my roles as a coach, as a student, and as a mother. Over the course of my four years as a PhD student, I moved from a high performance coach and a beginning PhD student to becoming an aspiring professor, a mother, and a part-time coach.

The research on students engaged in a PhD predominantly focuses on their social experiences within the academic environment (Braxton & Baird, 2001; Sweitzer, 2009). Braxton and Baird (2001) contend that PhD students have different demands and different relationships with faculty and other students as they move through three stages of a PhD: the beginning (e.g., the first year); the middle; and the dissertation stage (Braxton & Baird, 2001). My supervisors, my peers, and the Coaching Research Group at my university, played a part in supporting and advising me throughout the four years in which I felt a change from my first year exploring my interests as a coach and developing my role as a PhD student to my final year as a new mother and aspiring professor. As I progressed through these phases, as mentioned by Braxton and Baird, I began to take on a position in which I played a greater role in mentoring and advising other students, much like a professor would do.

In my third year, my understanding of what it meant to be a professor was starting to become clearer as I had the opportunity to mentor other students and as my comprehension of the research process advanced. Hall (1968) notes that PhD candidates begin to perceive themselves as being more similar to professors in terms of intellectual competence as they progress through the program. However, it was only when I had the experience of teaching a course and being dubbed a part-time professor that my interest in becoming a professor was confirmed. Jarvis (2006), in asking nurses about their

learning, found that the nurses could be taught to perform their role, but had to learn to feel like nurses through their experiences. As Jarvis (2009) notes:

We can see that we learn social identities through a combination of processes: there is external ascription and then internal realisation of the way that we perform our roles. However, we do not identify with our roles until we have learned to combine both the internal and the external. (p. 204)

I learned to feel like a professor when teaching the undergraduate course, and I learned that I very much enjoyed this job. My career path and biography changed based on these experiences within the academic environment.

I not only learned in my scholastic experiences throughout the four years, but I also learned in other roles that influenced my choices, decisions, and learning as a student. Throughout my journal entries, I reflected on learning from connections of life experiences in different roles instead of focusing on learning solely as a student, which reflects Sweitzer's (2009) typology of the student that engages in graduate studies for individual development and who learns from relationships with a number of different individuals in and out of the academic environment. Indeed, the experiences of this type of student are less often studied and not as well understood (Sweitzer, 2009). Family members, such as my husband and daughters played a part in influencing my choices and priorities. While there is a dearth of literature on the combined roles of graduate student and mother (Lynch, 2008), Pare (2010) notes that student-mothers prioritize motherhood and often experience a lack of support in the family and at the university. There are many institutional and personal factors that may help ease this dual role (Lynch, 2008), but that discussion is beyond the scope of this article. Indeed, in my experience, I was blessed with a great family and scholarly support system. Suffice to say that I prioritized motherhood to the extent of declining high performance coaching positions in which the travel schedule would be hectic, and this helped to push me in the direction of engaging more fully as a student. From there, I developed an interest in becoming a university professor.

Clearly, I learned in different experiences throughout the four years of my doctorate, and not only in academic experiences. However, while the timeframe for the journal entries was limited to four years, what I learned in all these situations was influenced by my previous experiences prior to starting the PhD program. As previously mentioned, I learned to feel like a professor by teaching my first undergraduate course, but my comfort level and enjoyment of teaching the course can only be explained by considering my previous experiences. I believe that my experiences teaching my sister when I was younger, coaching high performance athletes, and learning and applying the concepts in sport psychology through my master's intervention research project enabled me to feel confident and ready to teach this course. Research has shown that new faculty members making the transition from learner to teacher may experience an "imposter syndrome" due to feeling like a fraud or feeling incompetent in teaching undergraduate students (Cohen, Morgan, DiLillo, & Flores, 2003); however, I did not feel like an imposter when I finally taught the course in sport psychology because I had many

previous experiences that gave me the knowledge and understanding of how to teach and guide a group of young adults.

### **Conclusion**

This research is informed by Jarvis' (2006, 2009) theory of lifelong learning, which denotes the importance of learning throughout the lifespan. The process of learning throughout life was explored with the participants of my doctoral research study, but was also highlighted in my own reflections. Jarvis (2006) notes that an individual perceives a situation in a particular manner based on what he or she has learned in previous experiences. Consequently, one must look deeper than simply what was learned in the PhD program to understand the transition from student to aspiring professor. The time in undertaking a PhD has been described as a transition period from student to professor (Hall, 1968; Sweitzer, 2009), and it is an important time for reflection on change, development, and identity creation (Glaze, 2002). However, this reflection should arguably cover more than academic experiences over four years. Since my interest in becoming a professor started during my PhD program, one could argue that my academic experiences during the PhD are the reason for my career path choice, but this is not the case – my movement towards becoming an aspiring professor was influenced by many life-long and life-wide experiences. Indeed, it may be problematic for students to limit their reflections to their academic experiences in exploring their process of learning to become aspiring professors or other professionals. We argue that if doctorate students focus their reflections only on academic experiences, then they may not fully understand their career aspirations. Instead, the use of journaling on different life experiences that occur concurrently throughout the years in which one is engaged in a PhD, along with reflections of past experiences could be important. Such a journal may be a warranted inclusion in any researchers' methodological and development toolkit.

Moon (2006) notes that learning journals have been used in many higher education institutions as a way to help students reflect on their learning experiences in relation to future planning and career development. Indeed, in writing reflections throughout the four years, and in particular, in analyzing those reflections while writing this self-study, I have gained an awareness and learned just how much my previous experiences, from the time I was a child, and my more current experiences in these past four years, have influenced my chosen career path, as well as how career paths change over time due to life experiences. Moon suggests that individuals can further learn by going back over their written reflections and expanding on ideas or seeing linkages. In the process of writing this self-study, links between my experiences were recognized and made explicit through the compilation of journal entries so that the process of learning from my various experiences was clarified for me and for others. The students in the Coaching Research Group were also able to relate the article to their own experiences and note how important reflection is in the process of engaging in graduate studies, which can have such a profound influence on an individual. With this in mind, we urge graduate students to keep a journal of reflections within and outside of academia, and to review these reflections to deepen their learning process.

In this self-study, I explored my process of learning throughout the PhD degree, and how this learning was influenced by my lifetime of experiences in previous situations

and in various roles. I was able to critically reflect on my process of learning and becoming as a result of a mix of experiences in life, including the academic environment, family, and coaching. Jarvis (2009) explains that reflecting on oneself and on one's actions is a way of knowing about oneself, of articulating intentions, and asserting oneself. "The wider our experience of life and the more we learn to reflect on it and not take it for granted, the more we learn and the more we become whole people" (Jarvis, 2006, p. 50). Indeed, through writing personal reflections on my life experiences, I learned about my interests, my priorities, my career aspirations, and myself. In doing so, my biography changed.

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