

Freedom to Connect: Insight Into the Existential Dimension of Transformative Learning in a Graduate Seminar

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Abstract

Previous analyses of transformational learning (TL) focused on rational or non-rational processes such as critical reflection on an uncomfortable personal situation or emotional learning. In this phenomenological study, researchers examined existential dimensions of TL. Individual interviews were analyzed to identify the lived experiences of eight participants in a graduate seminar. Participants described their experience to be “different” from other courses and “relevant and applicable” to their lives. They found the “atmosphere” of the course to be “free” from institutional obligations and “open” to ideas. They were “collaborative” in exploring course content and “connected” with other students, “safe” to share perspectives and understandings, and “comfortable” to explore content in their own way. Study findings suggest that discomfort is not necessary for TL to occur

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when students build relationships and learn in a safe and open classroom climate and that such an environment supported spontaneous application of course content to student lives.

Keywords

phenomenology, classroom environment, existentialism, transformative learning, teaching and learning, learner-centered teaching, cognitive learning, noncognitive learning, lived experience

I'm in the subject, I'm a part of it . . . I'm helping to create it, and it's helping to create me . . .

Sonia

This quote reflects the lived experience of learning in a graduate seminar selected for a phenomenological case study in which we explored student perceptions of learning they considered to be transformative. We focused on the existential dimension of learning: “processes of human being and becoming” (Willis, 2012, p. 212). Willis contrasts his existential approach to learning with the traditional perspective in which “learning is considered to occur when information and skills are taken into the learner’s repertoire” (p. 214).

Research seeking to understand the existential experience of learners extends etic educational research that emphasizes measurement of outcomes, prediction of performance, or analysis of participant responses to researcher-led inquiry. An existential phenomenological approach to research can reveal overlooked aspects of learning and expand our understanding of what stands out for learners within a classroom climate that fosters transformative learning.

While thoughtful teachers in higher education strive to help their students master course content, for many, a further goal is to help them transcend it—to help them go beyond transfer of content skills and knowledge—to a transformative understanding of the world and their place within it. Such understanding enables creative enlargement and application of the course content. This transformation is manifest in students *realizing* the relevance of course content in their personal and professional lives—in an aesthetic sense of gratification that imparts confidence in one’s understanding or insight—an intuitive sense of its truth and worth.

The field of adult education has led the way in an effort to unify various ideas about this kind of teaching and learning—known as transformative learning—into an emerging framework that includes both understanding learning and guiding teaching in higher education (Taylor, Cranton, & Associates, 2012). In the present study, we analyzed experiences reported by students participating in an advanced graduate course in which they documented experiences that stood out for them as well as changes in their personal and professional lives. One participant, Lois,

described how her experience of learning went beyond the traditional acquisition of new knowledge: “I felt like a learner rather than a student.”

The importance of phenomenological research, which traditionally focuses on meaning, has become more obvious in recent years (van Manen, 2014). Phenomenology allows us to capture rich descriptions of first-person experience that can reveal both rational thoughts and intuitions and emotions. As Phillips (1996) stated, “. . . conscious, rational human behavior is *meaningful*, and an explanation of it will involve giving an account (*an interpretation*) of that meaning” (p. 1017). Although Phillips went on to say that meaningful behavior is usually based on reasoned motives, recent evidence strongly indicates that motives and learning are often guided by underlying, intuitive beliefs (Haidt, 2012; Marano, 2004). Increasing evidence from many fields indicates that intuition, which shares significant mental resources with conscious cognition (Van Overwalle & Vandekerckhove, 2013), is a major factor in learning and yet is often neglected.

In the growing body of literature about transformative learning, research has focused primarily on two important areas: “as an outcome of critical thinking (Freire, 1972a, 1972b; Mezirow, 1978, 1991) and as enriched by nonrational thinking (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Cranton, 2006; Dirks, 2000, 2001)” (Willis, 2012, p. 212). But Willis discussed the need for research in a third area, what Phillips (1996) termed the *prima facie* of research focused on human *beings*: the lifeworld meaning of transformative learning to individuals. As our participants reflected on their experiences, this transformative learning experience evoked a change in being, such that “I’m helping to create [the subject], and it’s helping to create me . . .” (Sonia).

Background and Method

This study is part of a larger case study project with the goal of looking afresh at teaching and learning in higher education—to better understand existential aspects of learning for participants as well as determine practices that may foster transformative learning. We selected a graduate seminar taken primarily as an elective course by graduate students who, according to anecdotal reports, enrolled because they were told it would change their lives. Additionally, we wanted to study the teaching of an instructor who, like most college instructors, did not base his teaching on research in the field of education. We wanted to explore the fluidity of what Jarvis (1998) called “practical theory” in action and eschew theoretical analysis of teaching and learning until we more fully understood the lived experience of teaching and learning.

There were 21 students in the class who ranged in age from 30 to 55. They were primarily doctoral students and all were attending a large southeastern university. They were working on various degrees, mostly in the fields of education, sports psychology, counseling, and psychology. Most students had considerable professional work experience.

The topic of the course was existential phenomenology with an emphasis on Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (2007) and other related readings.

At the time of the study, the instructor had taught the course for more than 30 years. During these years, he developed and refined a phenomenological approach to teaching.

Class sessions were held weekly during a 3-hr block of time. Classroom activities included lectures; exercises; demonstrations; personal stories; discussions; explorations of research findings; interviews; reflections on music, art, and figurative speech; and etymologies of course-related vocabulary. The instructor and students shared insights, alternative perspectives, and humor. Students were strongly encouraged to come to class prepared to discuss assigned readings but did not receive grades based on instructor evaluation of their performance. Instead, they were told they would receive an “A” and that it was up to them to determine to what extent they would participate. Although this was considered a controversial approach to grading at the university, the instructor never received negative feedback within his department nor was there a university policy prohibiting this form of grading, which was also used by a small minority of other instructors on campus.

A separate study utilizing transcripts and field notes focused on the instructor’s planning of class sessions (Franklin, 2013) and resulted in a clear description of his positionality as an instructor as well as his pedagogical approach. The instructor prepared by reviewing the assigned readings, planning a flexible sequence of activities (open to spontaneous change during class), and honing carefully worded questions that would facilitate several goals:

1. to have students join with him in conversation centered on relationships amongst instructor, students, course content, and the experience of the world;
2. to create an atmosphere of excitement, playfulness, and openness for serendipity by trusting the flow of conversation, particularly when it led in an unanticipated direction that resonated with students;
3. to engage students in experiencing particular aspects of the content that might “launch a world” by making concepts much more meaningful and applicable—by sharing personal stories (of one or more students, the instructor, or another perhaps famous person) and by undertaking activities that encouraged students to dwell within these experiences in the present space of the classroom; and
4. to collaborate with classmates as learners so that everyone could share personal reflections (at any stage of puzzlement or understanding) on the course content and/or various perspectives held within the field.

In one class session, for example, the instructor guided participants in an analysis of a poem by Mark Strand titled, “Keeping Things Whole.” He asked for a volunteer to read the poem aloud. As with other artifacts presented for discussion, he began with the open-ended question, “What stands out to you about this poem?” Students shared various perspectives and the instructor gave time and space for many comments. He kept the topic of human experience of the body central with responses of

three kinds: (a) “joining” questions, in which he asked from a position of genuine curiosity; (b) clarification questions, to draw more reaction from students; and (c) connections to his experience and knowledge in relation to the analysis of metaphor and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception. In the end, 16 of the 19 students present had shared a perspective or insight regarding the poem and its relation to other course content or their personal lives.

This study employed a phenomenological methodology developed at The University of Tennessee (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). All students were invited to participate in individual interviews at the conclusion of the course; eight volunteered. They were asked to “Tell me what it was like to be a learner in this class.” Interviews lasted on average 45 min. The only other questions or comments from the interviewer were to seek clarification of something shared by the participant and/or to encourage the participant to describe events that stood out—rather than offer explanations. In doing so, the interviewer strived to avoid leading the participant to describe something the participant had not initiated within the description.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) to determine the thematic structure of each participant’s descriptions and then across participants. Our method of analysis involved discovery of both the figural (predominant) and the ground (contextual) elements of the students’ experiences in the class. The researchers challenged each other to set aside their assumptions in order to more objectively determine themes. Only themes supported by the actual words of participants were used. Trustworthiness of the results was determined by corroborative interpretations of an interdisciplinary research group who provided formative feedback.

In this article, we present our findings concerning the existential experience of our student participants. First, however, we discuss literature related to various aspects of transformative learning that we then compare to our findings. Finally, we discuss implications for teaching and learning in higher education.

Review of Literature

Transformative learning, as readers of this journal are well aware, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding learning and guiding teaching (Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Taylor et al., 2012). The body of literature in transformative learning includes numerous disciplines and approaches such as works in depth psychology (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Cranton, 2006; Dirx, 2001), critical theory and critical reflection (S. D. Brookfield, 2005; Freire, 1972b; Liimatainen, Poskiparta, Karhila, & Sjögren, 2001), epistemological change (Kegan, 2000), ontological change (Lange, 2004), as well as a focus on learner-centered teaching (Doyle, 2011; Weimer, 2013). To complement transformative learning’s canon, we also draw on ideas and research pertaining to classroom climate (Holley & Steiner, 2005; Mayo, 2010) and philosophy of education from Boler (1999) and Thayer-Bacon (2010).

Transformative learning theory scholars have carefully studied the role of relationships in adult education (Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 1997, 2007; Taylor et al., 2012). Taylor (2007) noted, “It is through trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve mutual and consensual understanding” (p. 179). In his review, he noted that nonhierarchical relationships and learner autonomy were the basis of transformational relationships. Taylor discussed the need for more research regarding a number of aspects of transformative learning that our study addresses: a greater understanding of the student’s role, responsibility and willingness to engage in transformative learning, the peripheral experience of other students, and aspects of a transformative relationship amongst class participants.

Taylor, Cranton, and Associates (2012) discussed how transformative learning has grown and the number of scholars in disciplines outside adult education has added to our understanding of what especially constitutes transformative, as opposed to other kinds of learning. While some scholars (such as S. D. Brookfield, 2000) discussed the need to limit the term to descriptions of “a fundamental change at a very basic level” (p. 10), others (such as Newman, 2011) suggested, “teaching for transformation is simply good teaching” (p. 11). We contend that teaching for transformation is more than good teaching because it focuses on helping students to transcend mastery of course content and find deep, personal meaning in their learning experiences and lives through realization.

In her text on learner-centered teaching practices, Weimer (2013) described ontological, transformative changes in the way she teaches and her students reported their transformative learning experiences. She criticized the lack of a coherent framework of learner-centered strategies for use in higher education: “If [learning-centered teaching] remains an unorganized, eclectic collection of strategies, its ability to significantly change instructional practice will be limited” (Weimer, 2012, p. 442). Interestingly, Weimer did not identify transformative learning as providing the framework she called for. Ettling (2012) agreed that more research is needed to determine whether learner-centered practices are a necessary aspect of transformative learning, even though she acknowledged that Cranton (2006) and Mezirow and Associates (2000) discussed their central role.

In contrast to Weimer, Doyle (2011) based his text on learner-centered teaching primarily on cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and biological research. His application of this research reflected more traditional practices of helping students connect course content to prior learning, enhance memory and retrieval, encourage reflection, and learn from a primary emphasis on explaining course content—by a teacher or students themselves. As such, Doyle emphasized almost exclusively what Willis (2012) called the essentialist viewpoint with a goal to further cognitive structural, epistemological changes—what students know and understand—without attention to the existential, more holistic perspective with a goal of ontological changes—what students come to be.

Blumberg (2009), who built upon Weimer’s (2002) text, recommended an incremental approach to help instructors in higher education change their courses from a

focus on traditional content and teaching to a focus on student learning. They described five dimensions of a learner-centered approach including (a) student understanding of the organization and application of course content, (b) the role of the instructor beyond delivery, (c) student responsibility for active learning, (d) purpose and process of evaluation, and (e) balance of power between instructor and students. Some but not all of Weimer's dimensions are discussed in various forms in the literature on transformative learning. Other learner-centered teaching practices influenced primarily by educational psychology or neuroscience and biology seldom included a more holistic, integrated perspective, although they clearly supported ideas about critical reflection, which according to Taylor (2007) is the most studied aspect of transformative learning. Classroom climate is another focus of transformative learning.

In adult education and transformative learning theory, the ideal classroom climate is one that is "safe." Galbraith (1989), an important scholar in the advancement of adult education, suggested that adult educators be friendly and challenging without being threatening or condescending (p. 12). Mezirow (1978) emphasized the importance of a supportive "social climate" where student failures involved "minimum risk" (p. 107). In a rare look at what students mean when they say a class is safe or unsafe, Holley and Steiner (2005) found that not being judged or belittled for what they say was of primary concern to graduates and undergraduates in a social work program. Instructors in safe classrooms were also described as supportive and caring.

But many have criticized the idea of classroom safety as a refuge from critical thinking and a barrier to transformative learning (Boostrom, 1998; Mayo, 2010). Boler (1999) suggested that the only way to have truly transformative learning is to subscribe to a "pedagogy of discomfort," a process of "becoming" in which participants collectively examine structures and identity in ways that delay the rush to assimilate or accommodate new knowledge. Boler recommended that each participant in a course "learn to inhabit a morally ambiguous self" (p. 182). Redmond (2010) investigated a case in which a student of hers was made into a class pariah. Uncomfortable (or in this case, hostile) interactions, upon interrogation, lead from emotional engagement to transformative learning.

But Boler's suggestions have led to resentment as well as transformative learning. Macdonald (2013) studied the pedagogy of discomfort in an anthropology course. Her students expressed great emotional difficulties in their learning experiences. She encountered resistance from some students yet others recounted deep changes in how they saw themselves, their actions, and the world around them. Many of her students faced their emotional investment in the way they viewed the history of South Africa and acknowledged the narrowness of their understanding before the class.

Walton (2010), in a study of a classroom climate that seemed to combine safety and discomfort, found students experienced similar changes in perspective when challenged to engage in respectful dialogue (as opposed to debate) regarding

problematic course material, such as, socioeconomic differences. For example, he noted that students' "normative, privileged descriptions of class structure" (p. 164) became more nuanced and complex. Unlike Macdonald, Walton stressed the importance of student–student relationships and civility.

In another example, Langan, Sheese, and Davidson (2009) studied a course that explicitly focused on a learning environment influenced by the ideas of pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) and relational knowing (Thayer-Bacon, 2010). Professors and tutoring assistants emphasized civility and power sharing with students, as they studied controversial topics such as power structures, sex workers, and privilege. They found that the relationships formed in small group work were resilient enough to ensure that even hostile discussions could function educationally without endangering student participation.

In Ní Raghallaigh and Cunniffe's (2013) study of a course in which participants learned social work interviewing skills, students "repeatedly commented on the classroom atmosphere and the positive impact this had on their participation and engagement" (p. 100). Students felt they were in an "unthreatening" and "relaxed environment" (p. 101) and were comfortable opening up and participating. In Zeeman and Lotriet's (2013) study of a Greek classics drama course, students reported great satisfaction with the unique and novel learning experience in which they "had to do research [them]selves and learn how to apply the research" (p. 187).

These two courses were designed in such a way that participation was integrated into the daily activities of the course. The activities and balance of power within these courses fell under what Taylor (2007) referred to as "one of the most powerful tools to foster transformative learning" because they "provide[d] students with learning experiences that [were] direct, personally engaging and stimulate[d] reflection upon experience" (p. 182).

Interestingly, few of these studies involved student feelings about course grades. Pollio and Beck (2000) found that both students and professors were more focused on grades than they would like to be, and this constrained their desires to focus on learning based on intrinsic motivations. Each group, the professors and the students, blamed the other for the undesirable focus on letter grades over learning.

Tuan's (1977) conclusion that "space is freedom" and "place is security" can be helpful in conceptualizing the continuum of comfort and discomfort in classroom climate. We know from decades of research on motivation that "controlling environments have been shown consistently to reduce people's interest in whatever they are doing, even when they are doing things that would be highly motivating in other contexts" (Singham, 2007, pp. 54–55, as cited by Weimer, 2013, p. 90).

This review of the literature supports the promise of transformative learning occurring within college classrooms. While research on transformative learning is comprehensive and cuts across numerous fields and perspectives, most findings help us understand as much about what we do not know as what we do know. This is especially true when it comes to understanding the existential nature of transformative learning that explores a whole-learner perspective rather than viewing learning

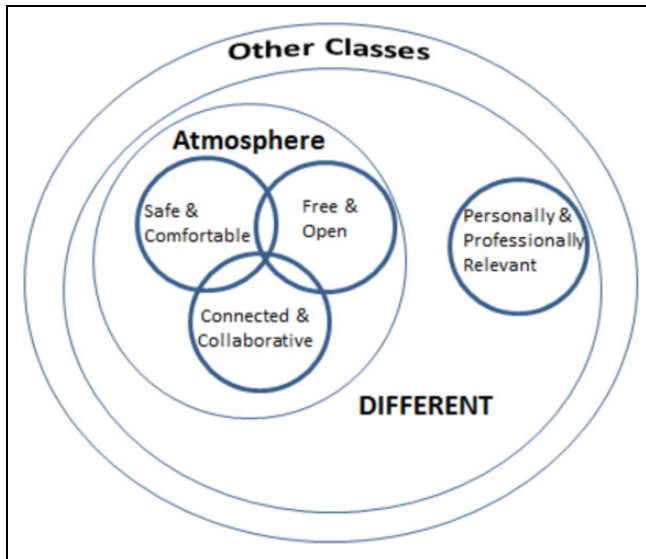


Figure 1. The phenomenological structure of the experience of participants in a graduate seminar.

as knowledge and skill acquisition focused solely on cognitive reflection and perspective building. We need more studies in order to better understand what transformative learning actually means to students through their unencumbered voices. With this additional lens, we can make better decisions about how to foster transformative learning.

Results

All participants described their experiences in the course as unique among the many other courses they had taken. They shared a common experience in relation to three themes, one with three subthemes. Using the words of the participants as much as possible, we developed an overall structure of themes expressed in figure-ground terms as represented in Figure 1, the phenomenological structure of the experience of participants in the graduate seminar.

Within the context, or ground, of other college classes, participants perceived the experience of this course as *different* (Theme 1) in ways that were *personally and professionally relevant* (Theme 2) and in *atmosphere* (Theme 3) which had three subthemes: *free and open* (Subtheme 3.1), *connected and collaborative* (Subtheme 3.2), and *safe and comfortable* (Subtheme 3.3). As Figure 1 illustrates, within the context of other classes, *different* encompasses both Themes 2 and 3. The three subthemes of *atmosphere* (Theme 3) stood out at the same level as Theme 2, *personally and professionally relevant*. Below we discuss these themes and

subthemes and provide quotes from participants' interviews that support our interpretation.

Context: Other Classes

From a gestalt figure/ground perspective, themes representing what stands out within an experience come from some common ground in which a person exists. Our participants described their experiences from the context of other university courses. They clearly and consistently described their experience of this course as standing out because it was different in many ways from the many other courses they had experienced before.

Theme 1: Different

All participants implied or directly stated that this course was different from others. Sonia spoke directly to the theme:

It was a lot different than I thought it was going to be I think that what I would say is that I feel more a part of the experience than sitting outside of it, which unfortunately a lot of educational experiences are like that now.

To understand what our participants meant by different, the central theme in Figure 1, we turn to the other themes. Theme 2 described participants' perceptions of the unique application of course content to their personal and professional lives. Theme 3 and its subthemes described an unusual classroom atmosphere full of laughter, excitement, and congeniality.

Theme 2: Personal and Professional Relevance

This theme reflected participants' spontaneous application of course content to their own lives. They referred to current use or plans to use what they had learned in class—even though the instructor did not overtly request they do so. The central concerns of this theme dealt with issues of personal change, interpersonal relationships, and professional roles. This theme also concerned the application of what was learned in class to issues that transcend the classroom environment and deal with many of the major issues that were of present concern in the participants' personal lives. Lois, an educator, put it best when she noted, "it has given me a different way to look at the world." She then went on to point out the following feelings about the class:

I'm relating differently to my students now because of [the course] and factoring perspectives that I never would have factored in before. I think it made me more critically aware of really listening to what my students were saying I would follow up with questions and relate to them in a different way than before. It is hard for me not

to talk and I found myself forcing myself to ask a question and stop and really listen to what they were saying and when I did, I really feel that has made a huge difference.

Thomas also stressed professional growth:

I have learned a lot in how to talk with patients . . . like listening to patients and not sitting behind a patient all the time. Coming from a psychoanalytic background a lot of listening takes place behind the patient . . . but really valuing first-person experience has been one way I have learned and I think that points to my experience and learning in this class . . . [phenomenology] is such a broad approach to understanding people.

Finally, Alexander noted, “What stood out to me the most about this class would be in terms of what a learning environment could be like and what I would like, as a young professor, my education environment to look like.”

Students did not state that personal and professional relevance was missing from their experiences in other courses, but they did imply that the level of relevance of course content was perhaps more profound in this seminar. Many experts define change in one’s life as an essential feature of transformative learning. Classroom atmosphere is often cited as important in fostering transformative learning. And this latter theme and its subthemes were described most thoroughly by our participants.

Theme 3: Atmosphere

The major characteristic of this collection of observations and comments by the participants concerned the atmosphere of good will as well as excitement and humor that permeated all 15 sessions of the class. One of the few direct descriptions of the role of humor in the classroom was made by Kari Ann:

I do think that humor can be an excellent tool for getting people to recognize . . . our own shortcomings or kind of silliness of some things that we do as human beings to one another or the way we think about things, and to be able to laugh at it is a way to kind of maybe transcend it or get it somewhere where you can work with and access and do something with it. I really appreciate it wasn’t just me being a class clown but you know that the feeling in the class in general is that it’s okay for us to joke around or be light hearted even though we’re dealing with kind of heavy stuff.

Our participants described three aspects of classroom atmosphere that stood out for them. These aspects resulted in three subthemes as discussed below.

Subtheme 1: Free and open. Lois summarized this subtheme in the following terms: “I didn’t feel like a student, I felt like a learner.” Other participants also addressed specific aspects of the classroom like feelings of equality. Students also reported that the lack of formal instructor evaluation was “freeing.” The following quotes provide a detailed description of Subtheme 1 (free and open), its relationship to Subthemes

2 and 3 (safe and comfortable and connected and collaborative), and to the appearance of excitement and laughter in the course.

By surrounding the environment with this ability to bring out ideas, not just from the person in charge but from all the people involved in the class was a huge learning experience . . . I didn't feel like a student, I felt like a learner. In this class, [the instructor] would start a conversation . . . but the real learning came later on the basis of collaboration among all participants in the class . . . The experience of intellectual stimulation is really in my mind . . . It's like a bursting forth of new ideas or a synthesis of something I may have only had a partial understanding of before, but something that was brought to class stimulated yet another idea . . . I could literally feel my brain functioning. It was alive! (laughing). (Lois)

James said the class was, "very, very open . . . you come in the first day and [the instructor] says, 'Ok, there's [*sic*] no assignments, no tests, I'm just going to expect you to do the reading and participate.' That's something I really appreciate . . . [and] helps me learn."

Equating freedom with an antecedent experience of openness provides an interesting way of thinking about the origins of this relationship in both linguistic and experiential terms. A different aspect of classroom behavior that might be thought to arise from quasi-biological considerations is that of competition. However, our participants described the classroom climate as noncompetitive or safe and comfortable, the next subtheme.

Subtheme 2: Safe and comfortable. This subtheme concerned issues of safety and comfort. Participants remarked on intimate stories shared in the course, confidence in understanding "opaque" readings, and freedom from judgment. As Lisa said, "[There was] this beautiful core group of people . . . that think deeper and put themselves out there . . . and flounder and mess around and get messy and it's ok. It's good. It's all good." Kari Ann and Sonia were sensitive to the "survival of the academically fittest" atmosphere in most college courses and noted the absence of competition in the course under study. Kari Ann stated:

It wasn't a competition of who can be the cleverest one in the class or who can outdo one another . . . No one was ever shot down or chastised for [going off topic]. It was okay to express those feelings on the topic and then come back to where we were headed that class.

Sonia partially echoed what Kari Ann said, "This class gives you an opportunity to express yourself without feeling like you're competing for things . . . I'm not fighting for a grade or trying to prove that I know more than you do . . . I'm just trying to understand it better."

Another element of safety and comfort concerned reaction to the telling of intimate stories, when to be understanding of embarrassing situations that were shared

and, finally, to achieve a balance between contributing to class dialogue in contrast to only listening to what others said. Some of these major defining attributes of safe and comfortable are contained in excerpts from James and Kari Ann. James made the following observations:

Even in the genuineness of [other students'] questions . . . or their own stories they would bring, or personal examples, which I don't think you can do in a lot of classes . . . you can see them be fully engaged in this story and still learning and still wanting to learn and you know not just education but personally. And considering it a safe enough place to do that.

In discussing an approach to difficult textual material, Kari Ann noted:

First you read something that's really dense and you feel really confused and then you come to class and you do hands-on activities and things start to make a light bulb go on for what you read and "Oh, that is what they were talking about and where they were coming from," and then taking that with me to go read the next potentially very opaque reading That was the process I saw happening.

Participants expressed some of the feelings of noncompetitiveness in another term, collaboration, which we present next.

Subtheme 3: Connected and collaborative. The third subtheme of classroom atmosphere concerned experiences of connection and how such feelings make collaboration a natural way of dealing with complex issues. It was expressed in terms of "engagement" with other members of the class as well as with course content. Some participants reported being surprised by the closeness they felt for other members of the class: This experience was "personal and real." Participants also reported that they came to depend on each other and were disappointed when someone was out. George said, "When people would miss class, I missed out on them . . . I was drawn to these intelligent people . . . probably much sharper than I am, some of them, and yet I felt free to share and I didn't feel judged, but connected."

Other comments concerning this subtheme speak to authenticity in the classroom climate. James noted that the class members were:

A very genuine group, a very engaged group so that it may be helpful for me to say 'Okay, I don't understand this' . . . I knew once I went to class it's going to make sense . . . I think coming from a humanistic perspective and really engaging with people and asking . . . a lot of open-ended questions, and really caring about how they understood what is going on, to see the genuineness behind that and the actual listening and . . . learning in that way.

Kari Ann talked about an emotional connection to course content:

There were times when I think [the instructor] may have been hoping we would go in a certain direction and we just all got caught up in telling our stories about something and

we really just connected . . . emotionally on some topic and so we were talking about it and getting away from you know poor Merleau-Ponty who, for a time seemed left behind . . . it was very collaborative feeling with everyone listening to one another and validating what people were saying.

George was surprised by what happened in the course:

One of the things I got from the class the most . . . was the connection . . . I haven't had a single other graduate experience like that because I think we are so used to going in and taking notes and then leaving . . . a couple people I sat next to, the one lady in particular, she and I got pretty close. We see each other on campus and say hello and it just made me feel appreciated . . .

Summary

We can represent the participants' experience in the course as a narrative summary using first-person language taken from words spoken by students in various interviews. It is intended to be read as though all participants were speaking in one voice:

I experienced this class as different (theme 1) from the way in which I experienced other classes (context). In this course, I found that what I learned was relevant to me personally and professionally (theme 2). I experienced the classroom atmosphere (theme 3) to be comfortable, freeing, open and safe (subthemes 3.1 and 3.3). I also felt a new set of connections (subtheme 3.2) with what I was learning and with my peers. These connections helped me to learn with them in a different and more collaborative (subtheme 3.2) mode. During class time there was a great deal of laughter and excitement that seemed related to the interpersonal connections that were developing among the students.

Discussion and Conclusions

The seminar that was the focus of this study was selected as an exemplar of transformative learning in higher education. Student participants perceived themselves to be free of traditional constraints to engage deeply and existentially with course content. They described their experience of the course in terms of transformative learning—of “a different way to look at the world.” They spoke of openness to new ways of knowing and perceiving and how these perspectives affected their personal and professional lives. Thomas, for example, a student working towards licensure as a therapist, said he changed his approach to therapy based on application of course content.

For many years, there were consistent anecdotal reports that students who took this course with this instructor experienced existential changes. Our participants described similar transformative learning. Although interviewed individually, analysis revealed a common essence of the experience across participants. They

described their experience in the context of other university courses in two distinctive ways, both of which they noted as different: (a) a light-hearted atmosphere that was free and open, safe and comfortable, as well as connected and collaborative and also (b) the relevance of course content to both their personal and professional lives. Like all themes and subthemes in phenomenological research, these are best thought of as carved out of the total structural meaning of an event or phenomenon. Perhaps the most important finding was that, based on interviews, the students all experienced the learning environment created by this instructor as substantially different—with much more freedom to connect—in comparison with the environment experienced in other courses. The most striking quality of the class was the ease with which connections could be made between the students, instructor, and the course content.

Although the students described qualities of their experience that foster transformative learning, they rarely attributed them directly to the course instructor. But according to much of the literature on learner-centered teaching and other instructional approaches that foster transformative learning, these qualities depend upon the type of facilitation the instructor provides (Doyle, 2011; Randolph, 2006; Weimer, 2013). This instructor could be considered one that “led from behind” (Hill, 2010; Lao-Tsu, 1891)—where the mark of excellent facilitation is that the facilitator seems to disappear and the participants wholly “own” their actions.

The instructor gave students freedom from certain typical course features like grades and asked only that students come to class having read the assigned texts. His only “enforcement mechanism” was social pressure: “These are your colleagues,” he said. The instructor encouraged students to share passages and thoughts they had in mind about the readings. For example, the instructor often asked students, “What stands out to you in this reading?” He followed student interests, elaborated on what they shared, and only then led them into a focus on key aspects of course content. Often, the instructor shared stories about himself or others that illustrated some aspect of course content. The only feedback provided to students was through his elaboration of their contributions to the discussion.

This instructor’s approach was humanistic in that it included qualities of some learner-centered practices recommended in the literature (Weimer, 2013). But for the instructor and the students, it was more important that his approach was existential in nature, integrating affect and rationality rather than simply helping students acquire knowledge (Willis, 2012). It differed from much of the literature on teaching in higher education, which focuses primarily on teaching techniques that describe activities and projects that can further student learning of course content typically focused on design of instructional activities, projects, and assessment of performance (e.g., Blumberg, 2009; S. Brookfield, 2013; Doyle, 2011).

The instructor shifted the focus from being strictly on content to a balance between explorations of course content and reflection on related, personal experiences of all class participants. This was facilitated by a classroom climate which students perceived as safe and comfortable, free and open, collaborative and connected—enabling the utilization of personal dilemmas to connect emotionally and

rationally to the course content. The responsibility for learning was shared between students and instructor. Self-assessment, although not required, was frequent and facilitated the instructor's goal of guiding students to deeper understandings through emphasis on description more than explanation. It is interesting to note that students did not focus in their postcourse interviews on their engagement in critical thinking, an aspect of transformational learning practices most frequently cited in the literature (Taylor, 2007), although one interviewee referred to her classmates as "people that think deeper" and most interviewees commented on the difficulty of the readings in phenomenological philosophy. What particularly stood out in this study was the importance of classroom climate and relationships.

Classroom Climate

Classroom climate can be perceived as freeing or constraining. Freedom for our participants was related to the removal of typical classroom constraints. They expressed very limited discomfort, something Macdonald (2013) found in her research led to emotional difficulties and resistance along with critical self-reflection. Students did not focus on grades or their undesirable effects (Pollio & Beck, 2000). Students appeared highly motivated to learn based on their high attendance and engagement in class sessions, which confirms the body of research that indicates the effect of freedom within the environment on motivation and interest (Singham, 2007).

Researchers present during class sessions reported that students remained on-task virtually throughout. Although the instructor spoke more often than the students, there was seldom hesitancy for students to join the conversation. Students appreciated the instructor's frequent use of humor. They responded with laughter and made humorous comments of their own. The students appeared comfortable in sharing thoughts about course content of which they were not completely confident even when aware they risked indicating their lack of understanding. These research results, taken in consideration with our research observers' field notes, confirm other research that found students were more able to open up and participate in an engaged manner when the classroom environment was unthreatening and relaxed (Ní Raghallaigh & Cunniffe, 2013).

We expected the instructor's expertise in facilitating an atmosphere of this nature and his vast knowledge of course content would consistently stand out for student participants. Surprisingly, however, the students we interviewed did not focus on the course design provided by their instructor and only gave limited attention to the instructor's facilitation of classroom atmosphere. Instead, they focused much more on the classroom climate that facilitated their collaboration and connectedness to course content and to each other.

Relationships

When our student participants described a classroom atmosphere that was free and open, safe and comfortable, as well as collaborative and connected, they were

referring at least in part to their relationships within this environment. This finding confirms other studies that indicate the importance of positive relationships in fostering transformative learning. Indeed, as early as 1997, Taylor's review of literature demonstrated the importance of trust, friendship, and support if transformative learning is to occur. More recent research continues to support this need. Studies conducted by Langan et al. (2009) and Walton (2010) found that when participants treated each other with respect, the students were more open to changing their perspectives on controversial topics.

This study reveals additional findings about relationships. Students described reciprocity, such as instructor humor leading to their willingness to be lighthearted and other students' sharing of personal experiences often leading to their feeling free and open, safe and comfortable, as well as collaborative and connected. They described how other students' comments in class helped them understand content more fully. And, the students spoke of the importance of others' being present in the class and that they were missed when absent. Finally, students discussed the excitement they felt in the course: As one student remarked on a class session, it was her "happy time."

Our participants reported that when other students and the instructor shared personal experiences, they felt empathy for the others and opened themselves to more freely considering alternative perspectives. Only one student reported feeling discomfort when others shared highly personal experiences: He questioned whether such intimacy should be shared in a higher education setting. But none of the participants described relationships as "difficult" (Mayo, 2010). Together with others, they developed a better understanding of themselves; they engaged in an existential experience. Although course content presented alternative ideas about how humans experience the world, no student participant described coercion or imposition, a key feature of Boler's (1999) "pedagogy of discomfort," and a not uncommon technique used in teaching for change (Ettling, 2012).

These participants *realized* the content of the existential phenomenology course in their lives: They became phenomenologists. Students reported changes in terms of a new openness to "little things," listening carefully to family, students, and clients, and bracketing in order to see everyday experiences in their unity and fullness. Dirckx (2001) says that trauma is unnecessary for transformative learning, and Willis (2012) invites students to be vulnerable. In this course, an open atmosphere was reflected in students being open and curious to engage together the new ideas from the course. In a course apparently not deemed useful by the university—for certificates, badges, and requirements—students were there by their own choice and found use and relevance in a way more profound than usual.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study are evident. Although students described qualities of a transformative learning experience, the study does not establish cause and effect

relationships. Because students were not required to formally produce evidence of their learning, we cannot present any measure of outcomes regarding mastery of course content. Instead, the study relies upon self-reports based on retrospective memories of experiences that may have occurred weeks or months earlier. Although some scholars have discussed this as a limitation, Ihde (1986) explains that all perceptions are retrospective and may provide a better understanding of the life-world than those perceived *during* an experience.

Another contextual limitation is the maturity and intrinsic motivation of the students. The course of study was not a requirement and attracted experienced graduate students. It would be fair to ask if younger students in a required course would respond in a comparable way.

Conclusion

This study enriches our understanding of the phenomenological aspects of transformative learning called for by leaders in the field (Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). These aspects include a greater understanding of the student's role, responsibility and willingness to engage with the professor, each other, and ultimately with their personal views, each connected to the other and changing together as a result of their interdependence. The transformative quality of student experiences *emerged* from the circumstances enabled by the instructor and was *enabled* by the connections students found between the course content and their total experience. This study provides an opportunity to compare students' experiences of transformative learning in higher education settings that do not involve traditional features of courses like projects, papers, and tests.

Perhaps most importantly, this study illustrates the value of exploring the existential dimension of transformative learning. It allowed us to focus on students' emotional and rational perceptions, something brain research clearly shows as essential in understanding human beings (Damasio, 1994). The esoteric nature of a graduate seminar on phenomenology suggests the need for a high level of skill in critical reflection. And yet, findings of this study reveal that the lived experience for these students involved a more holistic rather than analytic engagement. It involved the ontological aspects beyond cognitive reflection, as participants sought to expand perspectives and build relations: a process that was life changing. As Willis (2012) states, "From this perspective the learning experience is viewed not so much in its structure (a change in perspective) but more in its overall experience (a change in 'being,' becoming different)" (p. 213).

In accord with Taylor and Cranton (2012), we believe this study meets an important need: "to explore ways to help learners develop emotional awareness as they engage in transformative learning" (p. 567). A phenomenological approach to teaching and learning facilitates the individual's unique connections between intuition and the traditional rationality of the classroom. In other words, transformative learning must acknowledge and respect the "reasons of the heart" and make them allies

of traditional rational reasoning, thus underscoring the fundamentally integrative nature of our undertaking and resonating with Blaise Pascal's (1670/1909) famous observation, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."

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