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# A Story of Change: Adult Learners' Experiences of Questioning their Beliefs and Assumptions in a Graduate Course in Reflective Practice

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Megumu Doi Burress entitled "A Story of Change: Adult Learners' Experiences of Questioning their Beliefs and Assumptions in a Graduate Course in Reflective Practice." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology and Research.

John M. Peters, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Ralph G. Brockett, Clara Lee Brown, Mary F. Ziegler

Accepted for the Council:

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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A STORY OF CHANGE: ADULT LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF  
QUESTIONING THEIR BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS IN A  
GRADUATE COURSE IN REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Megumu Doi Burress  
May 2013

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## DEDICATION

For their grounding influence, unconditional love, and unfailing support,

this dissertation is dedicated to my family, especially:

my father, Toshihiko Doi

my mother, Atsuko Doi

my husband, Kevin Burress

and

my son, Leif Burress

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank those who helped me complete my Doctor of Philosophy degree in Educational Psychology and Research, Collaborative Learning. The completion of this project depended upon the participation and support of many people, especially those mentioned here.

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I would like to thank members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Ralph Brockett, Dr. Clara Brown, and Dr. Mary Ziegler, for mentoring, supporting, and challenging me throughout this research process and my graduate studies. I am deeply grateful for the role each of you has played in my development as a researcher.

I also want to express my deep gratitude to Dr. John Peters for mentoring, honoring, encouraging, challenging, and guiding me as I pursued this work and my doctoral studies. Participating in your program and relating with you have challenged me in new and, at times, unexpected directions and have changed my way of being in the world significantly. I am forever grateful to you for initiating and facilitating this life-changing experience for me.

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Lastly, mere words cannot express my gratitude to my family as you have inspired me to bring this dissertation and the accompanying degree to completion. I would like to offer a warm expression of appreciation to my grandparents for teaching me the importance of education encouraging me to never give up. My parents, you have also believed in me and my ability and provided constant love, support, and encouragement, and you have my sincere gratitude.

I would also like to express heartfelt appreciation to my husband, Kevin. You have strongly supported and advocated for me throughout this process, and I have been able to succeed in this endeavor by your loving self-sacrifice. I am humbled by your unconditional love and unwavering belief in me as a scholar and human being. I also express my immeasurable gratitude to our son, Leif, who came during my pursuit of this work and brightened up our lives

considerably. Now that I am finished with this project, I look forward to the life together that we have been waiting for so patiently.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of students in a graduate course on the topic of Reflective Practice (RP). A phenomenological method was utilized to frame interviews with eight students discussing challenges to their beliefs and assumptions that arose during the course.

Based on a thematic analysis of the interview data, three major figural themes and one ground theme emerged. The three figural themes indicated that participants experienced changes in their beliefs and assumptions about student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships and about similarities and differences among their own and others' belief systems, in addition to their own comfort with a highly interactive teaching and learning environment. For example, participants' initial beliefs about differences in student and teacher expertise, related authority, and early discomfort with the RP process gave way to beliefs about multiple expertise, equality, and increased comfort with dialoguing about personal and controversial topics. The ground theme indicated that time was a key factor in participants' experiences: that is, changes in their beliefs and assumptions occurred over time and appeared to extend past the end of the course although no attempt was made to investigate long-term outcomes of participants' experiences.

The findings suggest a need for further research on the sustainability of changes in beliefs and assumptions beyond the course experience, the possibility of replicating the results in other areas of study and in courses with more diverse demographics, and inquiry into how students' beliefs and assumptions change during shorter intervals of the teaching and learning process. In the area of practice, the findings suggest that instructors interested in gearing their pedagogy to student subject matter needs might also consider inquiring into the students' initial beliefs and



assumptions about teaching and learning, as well as how their own assumptions and beliefs frame their interactions with students.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

Perhaps, for most adult educators, the ultimate goal of education is to create positive influences on learners' lives. Some educators may work to achieve this goal by helping learners expand their fund of knowledge and repertoire of skills. Other educators may focus on helping learners develop awareness of their assumptions and gain frames of reference that are "more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2009).

Indeed, Mezirow (2000) claimed that fostering perspective transformation, or "liberating conditions for making more autonomous and informed choices and developing a sense of self-empowerment, is the cardinal goal of adult education" (p. 26). An autonomous choice is the one that individuals are "free to act and judge independently of external constraints on the basis of their own reasoned appraisal" (Siegel, 1988). In order to cope with the increasingly complicated demands of a postmodern society, it is important that individuals develop autonomy of thinking and understanding. That is, breaking the wall that previously restricted and distorted individuals' understanding of the world and their ability to act upon their values and perceptions. Kegan (2000) agreed that individuals change and develop through discovering not only *what* they know but also *how* they know it.

According to some adult education theorists (e.g., Kegan, 1994; Knowles, 1980; Mezirow, 2000), adult learners possess a great potential for this type of learning as it is only well into adulthood that individuals develop reflective judgment and become capable of critically reflecting on the assumptions of others as well as their own. As such, adult educators hold a key to enabling this process, particularly through fostering learners' critical reflection and making

explicit that which was uncritically accepted (Mezirow, 1997). Fostering an awareness in learners of their own assumptions or suppositions, and those of others, in reflecting upon the way learners respond to their lives can create significant contributions to the learners' subsequent life experiences.

The research site in this study, a graduate reflective practice (RP) classroom, was designed specifically to engage course participants in reflection on experiences and assumptions. In so doing, they learned to become more independent learners or practitioners who continuously engage in reflecting on various aspects of their lives, including professional and private. In this dissertation study, I addressed the experiences of these learners, specifically when they encountered challenges to or questions about their beliefs and assumptions as they engaged in reflection as part of their course participation. For the purpose of this study, *assumptions* are understood as “taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it that seem so obvious to us as not to need stating explicitly” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 2). They include our “common sense beliefs and self-evident rules of thumb that inform our thoughts and actions” (Brookfield, 1991, p. 177). A *belief* refers to an idea, conviction, or principle that is firmly held and valued by an individual. My hope is that knowledge of the course members' RP experiences will help adult educators and adult education researchers understand what happens when learners experience challenges to what they already know and how learners make sense of and respond to these experiences.

## **Background of the Study**

This research developed as a result of reflecting on my own experience of participating in the RP course and my study of transformative learning (TL) in my graduate program. As soon as



I encountered Mezirow's idea of TL in some adult education courses, I became engrossed by it. Yet, only a couple of years later did I truly understand his words. To my surprise, I had a transformative, life-changing experience – the one I would forever hold within – as I progressed through the program. Particularly significant in this process was the RP course in which I participated in 2007. In this course, ten members, the instructor included, and I worked together to become reflective practitioners by learning to critically reflect on our individual and group experiences through engaging in dialogue. In this process, I learned, perhaps for the first time, to slow down enough to truly listen to others and myself and to examine and suspend my own assumptions. In so doing, I was drawn to the 'edge' of myself in many ways. While turning the other way at times because I was afraid, I finally gained courage to jump and fly.

It was nearly the end of the semester when I realized that things were beginning to slowly change their appearance for me, revealing what had been concealed previously. It was as if the very nature of my way of being was being modified through my encounter and learning with the group. I was standing in a different light with a new sense of myself in relation to others and the world and was participating in my life in more meaningful ways. That is, RP had become an integral part of how I functioned in the world. The moments of our dialogue stayed with me and spanned out into places that I never could have imagined. This understanding that my entire RP experience was not just a process but was really about life made me realize the power of RP in our lives overall. This realization aroused my interest to understand the nature of this phenomenon for those who had similar experiences; that is, having their beliefs and assumptions challenged by participating in an RP course.

In addition to the significance of RP, my interest in this research topic also stems from my wish to help others develop awareness of their assumptions and gain more inclusive frames

of reference. With the help of my group members, I was able to reach beyond my world.

Working with undergraduate students as a Japanese teacher, I have often pondered how many of them are as fortunate as I to discover the door to their larger world and achieve full potential within their lifetime. What happens to them if the door is forever left closed? Slowly, I have nurtured in myself a desire to assist others, including my current and future students, in discovering and opening the door to new avenues of exploration. I became determined to achieve this goal both professionally and personally through my reciprocal relationships and interactions with all around me. Thus, I hope that this study will shed some light on how RP relates to challenges to beliefs within individuals and to explore implications for research and for adult education practitioners who work with their students in reflective environments.

### **Adult Learners**

This study specifically addresses the population of adult learners and their experiences of challenged assumptions in an educational context. Various authors offer different definitions of *adult* or *adult learner* in relation to adult education. For example, Knowles (1984) proposed four ways to define an adult: biological, legal, social, and psychological.

First, the *biological* definition: we become adult biologically when we reach the age at which we can reproduce – which at our latitude is early adolescence. Second, *legal* definition: we become adult legally when we reach the age at which law says we can vote, get a driver's license, marry without consent, and the like. Third, the *social* definition: we become adult socially when we start performing adult roles, such as the role of full-time worker, spouse, parent, voting citizen, and the like. Finally, the *psychological* definition: we become adult psychologically when we arrive at a self-

concept of being responsible for our own lives, of being self-directing. (p. 55, italics in original)

In contrast, Jarvis (1987) argued that adulthood relates more to a social status than a biological age as adulthood is achieved earlier in some countries than others in the world.

As for defining a *learner*, Cranton (1989) suggested that it is “any individual who engages in educational activities for the purposes of acquiring knowledge, skills, or values in any area” (p. 4). Merriam and Brockett (2007) indicated that the traditional definition of adult learners in a collegiate setting is any student at the age of 25 and over. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010a) provides empirical support for this claim, stating that some of the common elements of adult learners, or non-traditional students, are their age (25 years old and above at the start of their courses) and their part-time status. Given these descriptions, I define, for the purpose of this study, an *adult learner* as any individual who is 25 years old or older who is enrolled in the graduate RP course at a state university at the time of this study.

According to some adult educators, one major assumption underlying adult learning is the fundamental role of experience: adults “accumulate an increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning” (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). As adults live longer, they accumulate both a greater number and range of experiences, and these experiences serve as valuable resources for learning processes of adults. In examining the relationship between life experiences and learning, Dewey (1938) concurred, “all genuine education comes about through experience” (p. 13). Jarvis (1987) also asserted that learning begins with experience and involves transforming this experience into knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Another assumption underlying adult learning is the development of reflective capacity in adulthood. Indeed, TL and RP are uniquely adult experiences; TL is based on the assumption

that “adults have acquired a coherent body of experience – assumptions, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses – frames of reference that define their world” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). Frames of reference are generally acquired uncritically through socialization and acculturation processes individuals experience during their childhood. They are not developed and established until later in adulthood, thus the revision of these structures is only possible during this time and not before (Taylor, 2000). Mezirow (2000) claimed that adolescents may learn to critically reflect on others’ assumptions, but it is not until well into adulthood that individuals develop reflective judgment and are thus capable of critically reflecting on not only the assumptions of others, but also on their own.

According to some national reports, non-traditional adult learners have been growing in number in graduate school programs in the United States. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010a, 2010b) revealed that the number of master’s degrees conferred was 49% higher, and the number of doctoral degrees was 54% higher, in 2008-2009 than in 1998-1999. One can project that adult student enrollments will further increase 28% in master’s degrees and 45% in doctoral degrees by 2019-2020. If this projected enrollment continues, there may be more non-traditional adults in graduate level programs by 2019-2020 than ever before, which translates to over 9.3 million graduate students in colleges and universities across the United States. Despite their growing prominence in graduate school programs, non-traditional adult learners are often underrepresented in educational research (Broekemier, 2002). Although there are and will be more adult graduate students, there have been only a limited number of empirical studies on this demographic.

## Related Research

Most published works related to RP and TL focuses on concepts, descriptions of practices, and theory development. Only a relatively small number of studies have been conducted of RP as defined in this study; most were completed at the University of Tennessee, in the form of dissertation research. These studies include Gaskin (2007), Torres (2008), and Duncan (2009). Gaskin (2007) engaged a team of health care practitioners in RP through a model of dialogical interaction known as *levelising* (Peters & Ragland, 2009) to help them learn about RP as a quality improvement tool. Similarly, Torres (2008) investigated experiences of Appreciative Inquiry practitioners regarding their engagement in an eight-month asynchronous online dialogue, a more broadly collaborative learning practice. Overall, these authors were interested in understanding the impact of engaging in RP on their own and other study participants' practices. Building upon the works of Gaskin and Torres, Duncan (2009) further investigated how his executive coaching clients and he engaged in levelising.

Other related studies include Alderton (2000), Dillivan (2004), Crosse (2001), and Armstrong (1999). Alderton (2000) and Dillivan (2004) studied groups of graduate students who participated in the course titled *Dialogue* in which they engaged in RP. Alderton investigated the overall experiences of adult learners in a nontraditional classroom environment that incorporated dialogue as the primary mode of discourse for teaching and learning. In contrast, Dillivan more narrowly focused on exploring the process of knowledge construction as experienced by the course participants. Furthermore, the works of Crosse (2001) and Armstrong (1999) examined students' experiences in a version of the graduate RP course that I studied in the current research. However, the focus of these two studies was on exploring the group's overall meaning-making

process and the underlying processes of the course. Neither of these studies attempted to explore how individuals identified and dealt with challenges to their assumptions and beliefs.

Some other studies (e.g., Harvie, 2004; Weisberger, 1995) have examined the questioning of assumptions with reference to Mezirow's (1978) seminal theory of TL as addressed in Chapter II. Two dissertations (Fortunato, 1993; Ricci, 2000) investigated changes in adult students in undergraduate settings. Overall, these studies looked into the transformative nature of the students' learning process and how it influenced and was influenced by mitigating factors in the students' lives. More closely related to the focus of this study is Frye's (2007) phenomenological research, which addressed experiences of adult students who had encountered questions about and challenges to their previously held beliefs as a result of their learning in an undergraduate religion course. However, this study focused on undergraduates and a unique subject matter area, and its findings were analyzed and interpreted within the broad conceptual framework of adult learning and development. No reference was made to an RP course or the RP literature despite identifying the relationship between reflection and students' challenged beliefs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

What the aforementioned statistics and studies lack is a detailed investigation into the lived experiences of adult learners who have had their beliefs and assumptions challenged and questioned, specifically in an RP classroom setting. To my knowledge, no studies have thus far addressed this topic in the context of an RP classroom utilizing a blend of TL and RP as an interpretive framework. This dissertation was designed to fill this research need. In this study, I conducted a detailed investigation into the lived experiences of adult learners who have had their beliefs and assumptions challenged and questioned in an RP classroom setting. More

specifically, I explored the nature of experiences of adult learners who have encountered challenges to or questions about their beliefs and assumptions as they participate in a graduate-level RP course at a major university.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Based on the research problems described above, the purpose of this study is to arrive at some understanding of the experiences of adult learners who have encountered challenges to their beliefs and assumptions as they participate in a graduate-level course in RP.

### **Research Question**

Given the purpose of the study, my concern is to examine graduate students' experiences of questioning their beliefs and assumptions. More specifically, the study investigated this topic by asking the following question: What is the experience of adult learners who find their beliefs challenged or assumptions questioned – or both – in a graduate Reflective Practice (RP) course? My hope is that answers to this question, or knowledge of the study participants' RP experiences, will help adult educators and researchers understand what happens when learners experience challenges to what they already know and how learners make sense of and respond to these experiences.

### **Rationale for the Method of the Study**

To examine experiences of adult learners as they question their beliefs and assumptions in an academic context, this study utilized the existential phenomenological research design suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002). Influenced by Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty

(1958), this model is deeply immersed in the blending of the philosophy of existentialism and the methods of phenomenology. *Existentialism*, according to Thomas and Pollio (2002), is “a philosophy about who we are and how we may come to live an authentic life” (p. 9).

*Phenomenology* is a systematic investigation of the essence of experience or commonalities that stand out across experiential accounts of all participants. Thus, existential phenomenology centers on understanding individual experiences as experienced by him or her and describing the essence of these experiences.

Thomas and Pollio’s concept of existential phenomenology provided an appropriate model method for the study as it aligned with the study’s emphasis on the importance of individual experiences for conscious human beings and the understanding of the core meanings that emerge in rich descriptions of individual experiences from the first-person point of view. Conducting a qualitative study with an existential phenomenological design allows for the meaning of the lived experiences of study participants to emerge from the data and offers a detailed look into the complexity of these learners’ experiences. The method section provides more information about this existential phenomenology, including background and some principle concepts.

### **Significance of the Study**

Situated within my acknowledgement that my way of making sense of data is always partial and positional, I present two ways in which I believe this study can contribute to understanding how adult students experience challenges to their belief systems in a formal education setting. First, the literature on RP, adult learning theory, and adult development can be enhanced by improved understanding of what may happen when learners experience challenges



to their beliefs, as well as what epistemological and ontological changes and development, if at all, may take place as a result of the significant learning experiences. A rich description of the learners' experiences filled with their original voices can be particularly helpful for adult learning theorists in shedding light on the nature of significant learning in adulthood.

In addition, professors in higher education can benefit from this study by understanding how challenges to assumptions may take place and how learners may make sense of and respond to these experiences. This understanding has the potential to assist interested teachers in exploring ways to foster the questioning of what learners already know or their assumptions and in designing and implementing the positive experiences of the learners. The study's contribution can be extended to teaching practices across disciplines and learning environments as RP can be and has been incorporated in various fields of study and various learning environments, such as information technology (Merriam & Brockett, 2007), English literature (Gray, 2008), and blended face-to-face and online (Roberts, 2005).

Despite these ways in which the study can contribute to the emergent body of related literature and practice, I wish to move away from the idea that I alone can definitively identify that which is most fruitful within my work. Knowing that this study will offer only one of many possible explanations (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), I invite readers and my research participants to further evaluate the significance of my work.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Two primary aspects of this work potentially limit the claims I will make regarding the study's findings. One is that the scope of this study will be limited to adult graduate students enrolled in an educational setting of a land grant university in the southeastern part of the United

States. Due to this limited sample size, the study may not be able to take in account various aspects of challenges to beliefs and assumptions within other cultural, historical, and political contexts. Another limitation is that because of the phenomenological method employed, the study will focus on phenomenological generalizability or transferability, instead of on the generalizability, of the findings. This is discussed further in Chapter III.

### **Definitions of Important Concepts**

Below are definitions of important concepts utilized in the current study.

**Adult learner.** An individual whose age, social role, or self-perceptions define him or her as an adult, and who is engaged in some form of learning, either formal or informal (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). In the context of this study, *adult learner* refers to any student 25 years or older at the time of the study who is enrolled in the graduate RP course at a state university in the spring semester of 2012. The term is synonymous with *adult student* throughout this study.

**Adult student.** See *adult learner*.

**Assumptions.** Conclusions that involve “taken-for-granted beliefs about the world and our place within it that seem so obvious to us as not to need stating explicitly” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 2). They include our “common sense beliefs and self-evident rules of thumb that inform our thoughts and actions” (Brookfield, 1991, p. 177).

**Belief.** For the purpose of this study, a belief is understood as an idea, conviction, or principle that is firmly held and valued by an individual.

**Challenge.** In the context of this study, a challenge to or questioning of a belief occurs when learners encounter a situation that cannot be resolved through the application of their previous problem-solving strategies. Jarvis (1993) describes this experience a disjuncture, or the

gap between biography (all that learners are at a particular point in time) and experience (an incident that they are unprepared to handle) that gives birth to the questioning of assumptions.

**Collaborative learning (CL).** Members of a group engage in joint action in order to co-construct new knowledge and ways of going on together.

**Critical reflection.** A process of reflecting on the nature and consequences of individuals' actions, as well as the origins of those actions. This involves examining the justification for the beliefs and assumptions underlying individuals' knowing-in-action and modifying any distortions or inaccuracies.

**Existential phenomenology.** This refers to a form of phenomenology that approaches the question of being through the philosophical lens of existentialism and the hermeneutic method of interpretive phenomenology.

**Learning.** A meaning-making activity, involving "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5).

**Phenomenology.** "[The] rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear so that one might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience" (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989, p. 6). Phenomenology seeks to understand the central meaning, or the "essence," of experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals from the first-person point of view; it is seen as both a philosophy and a method of investigating the philosophy.

**Reflection.** The act of "intentional assessment" (Mezirow, 1995, p. 44).

**Reflective practice (RP).** Examining and learning from ones' own and others' experiences in the moment of experience as well as afterwards with the intent to improve aspects of one's situation.

**Reflective practice (RP) course.** A graduate course that helps participants become reflective practitioners in various aspects of their lives by engaging them in examining concepts of RP and critically reflecting on experiences and assumptions within a context of CL.

**Transformative learning (TL) theory.** This theory of adult education features the process of a change or development in one's taken-for-granted frames of reference.

### **Dissertation Synopsis**

This dissertation is presented in five chapters. Chapter I provided the introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research question, and rationale for the method of the study. The significance of the study, limitations, and definitions of important concepts were also included. Chapter II offers a review of the literature concerning TL and RP in adult education, examining definitions, theoretical viewpoints, and previous avenues of research. Chapter III describes the specifics of the qualitative research method, bracketing interview, data collection procedure, and data analysis. Chapter IV presents the findings from the participant interviews and data analysis. Finally, the dissertation closes with Chapter V, which provides a summary of the study, discussion of the findings, conclusions, and implications for further research and practice.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This chapter is a review and summary of the literature regarding the experience of questioning beliefs and assumptions within the formal adult education context. It highlights the two major areas that most closely relate to the topic of this study: transformative learning and reflective practice. The goal of this literature review is to gain insight into how the literature can inform a quest for understanding of the topic of this study.

### **Transformative Learning**

#### ***Defining Transformative Learning***

The importance of questioning beliefs and assumptions has been highlighted in the literature on adult learning and adult education. One of the most prominent and influential areas of the literature is based on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (TL), first introduced in 1978 and based on his seminal work on women returning to postsecondary study or the workplace after an extended time away. Since this time, the theory has inspired an impressive body of philosophical critique and empirical research and has established some fundamental assumptions about meaning-making unique to adulthood (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

According to Mezirow (2000), TL refers to:

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating,

open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 7-8)

O'Sullivan (2003) also offered another definition of TL:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (p. 327)

Although Mezirow (2000) claimed that all learning is change, these descriptions of TL indicate that not all learning is transformative. That is, learning in general is a meaning-making activity, involving “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5). This type of learning occurs frequently and involves something straightforward, such as extending the existing cognitive capacities by memorizing a set of facts or acquiring a new skill. In contrast, TL occurs infrequently and involves a change in meaning perspectives that have been acquired over a lifetime of an individual.

*Meaning perspective* is the original term used for one’s worldview, or “broad, generalized, orienting predispositions” and cluster of meaning schemes (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163). It may also be described as a frame of reference – the structure of assumptions and expectations, through which we filter and make sense of the world. Meaning perspective is indicated by a

habit of mind expressed as a point of view comprised of meaning schemes. *Meaning scheme* refers to “specific beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and value judgments” (p. 163). It may be difficult to identify due to its habitual nature, often occurring outside of our awareness.

An example of a changed meaning perspective was provided by Schlesinger (1983), who examined the process of change for Jewish women after returning to the workforce. One of the traditional Jewish women, Marcie, describes how her religious role was influenced by her return to work:

I am only realizing now that we all are wearing our own handcuffs. We don't realize, though that we also have the keys. . . . We impose our own prison walls. I only realized this recently, as I was preparing for Passover. I was fed up. To celebrate the holiday of freedom, I was really put in bondage. There had to be a better way. I looked for it, and only then did I find it. One day I just said I couldn't take it anymore. Boy was that a revelation. First of all that I could say it, and then that others listened. Why did I wait so long? I forgot that there were options. Now I exercise them. (p. 167)

The experience of changed meaning perspective can be contrasted with the following description indicating the revised meaning scheme of a Japanese high school student visiting Canada. The description comes from Whalley's study exploring the role of reflection in revising meaning structures when learning a different culture:

Reviewing my journals, I found that I wrote repeatedly on the same topic: individuality. . . . In Canada, individuality is more highly valued than in Japan. This is a big difference between the two countries. . . . The general opinion that Japanese are not self-assertive is not always true. Even though we live in the same culture, everyone has their own culture. I found that I attempted to tie every difference to individualism. Having such

preconception – difference is derived from individualism – is not good, I thought. Still it's true that I felt strong individualism in this society. (quoted in Taylor, 2000, pp. 293-294)

These two examples of meaning perspective and meaning scheme provide some insight into the differences between the two. On the whole, *meaning perspective* is more global, reflecting a more inclusive worldview, whereas *meaning scheme* is more specific, involving a particular belief.

According to Mezirow (2000), perspective transformation is most often triggered by a significant personal event, or what he calls a *disorienting dilemma*. A disorienting dilemma identified in his original study (1978) was caused by an acute internal and personal crisis – a major life transition – that cannot be resolved through the application of previous problem-solving strategies. The death of a significant other, a job change, or a serious illness exemplifies this experience. Some theorists have described this experience as *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1957), *disequilibrium* (Piaget, 1975), and *disjuncture* (Jarvis, 2006). Jarvis (1993) explained a disjuncture as the gap between one's biography (all that learners are at a particular point in time) and experience (an incident that they are unprepared to handle) that gives birth to the question of assumptions:

Individuals enter every experience with their own biography, that is with a stock of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and values gained as a result of previous experiences, and if that stock of knowledge and belief is sufficient then they enter a meaningful situation and are able to operate on the world in a nonlinear manner. But when that reservoir is insufficient then there is a disjuncture between the biography and the experience. It is the experience of disjuncture which stimulates the question – why? (p. 8)



Questioning assumptions is generally accompanied by internal disturbance and a feeling of unease within an individual as a result of experiencing a disjuncture (Jarvis, 2006). Some studies have found that the expression and recognition of this feeling is essential in engaging an individual in critical reflection and beginning new reality (Taylor, 2000).

Most studies exploring the process of perspective transformation have confirmed that a transformation is most often sparked by a disorienting dilemma or a significant life event (Taylor, 2000). Nevertheless, some studies have shown that the process of triggering a transformation is much more complex and multifaceted than originally understood. For example, Pope (1996) examined the impact of transformational experiences on ethnically diverse working-class women attending higher education and concluded that the triggering events for these women were “a gradual accumulation of energy . . . like an unfolding evolution rather than a response to a crisis” (p. 176). Furthermore, Clark (1993) explored the impact of context on the process of perspective transformations and found that “integrating circumstances” as well as a disorienting dilemma were vital for triggering transformations. By *integrating circumstances*, Clark meant “indefinite periods in which the persons consciously or unconsciously search for something which is missing in their life; when they find this missing piece, the transformation process is catalyzed” (pp. 117-118). Mezirow (1996) concurred that although perspective transformation may be a sudden, dramatic, and singular life experience involving a transformation of meaning perspectives, it can also be more a subtle, less profound, and long progressive process, taking place through an accumulation of changes in meaning schemes over time.

According to Mezirow (2000), the process of transformation when triggered by a disorienting dilemma often follows some variation of the following 11 phases:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination, often accompanied by feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships
10. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
11. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (p. 22)

This process of perspective transformation has generally been confirmed in some studies. However, the journey of a perspective transformation was originally described as a linear process, though not always in regard to its stages. Later studies have revealed that this process is indeed more individualistic, recursive, and evolving in nature (Taylor, 2000). Mezirow (2000) agreed that the process does not necessarily follow the exact sequence of phases as described or depend on successful completion of one stage contingent on the previous stages, but generally involves some variation of these phases.

As a result of experiencing these phases of a perspective transformation, individuals become critically aware of how and why [their] presuppositions have come to constrain the way [they] perceive, understand and feel about the world; of reformulating these assumptions

to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these understandings. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 14)

For Mezirow, a modified way of understanding the world and our places within it is manifested in some form of mental action as well as an actual change in behavior. That is, the decision to act on a reflective insight may result in reasoned affirmation of an existing pattern of action, or it may be implemented immediately or delayed until an appropriate time and situation arises, such as gaining requisite knowledge, skills, and emotional commitment. As Mezirow (2000) claimed, taking action on reflective insights often involves overcoming various constraints that may require new learning experiences.

However, studies are beginning to show that a change in perspective involves not only developing a revised frame of reference, but also acting on the new perspective. For example, Saavedra (1995) claimed that “action, acting upon redefinition’s of our perspectives, is the clearest indication of a transformation” (p. 373). Brookfield (2000) also asserted that critical reflection focuses on “making explicit and analyzing that which was previously implicit and uncritically accepted” (p. 131). Furthermore, Clark (1991) identified three dimensions central to a perspective transformation: psychological (changes in understanding of the self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioral (changes in lifestyle). In short, perspective transformation is both an epistemological process, involving a change in worldview, and an ontological process, bringing about a change in being in the world (Lange, 2004). Novak asserted, “Perspective transformation represents not only a total change in life perspective, but an actualization of that perspective. In other words, life is not *seen* from a new perspective, it is *lived* from that perspective” (quoted in Paprock, 1992, p. 197). Regardless of action as inherent in perspective transformation, an important part of transformation theory is that individuals

change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their beliefs and assumptions and consciously making and/or implementing informed and reflective plans that bring about new ways of constructing their worlds.

## **Critical Reflection**

At the heart of perspective transformation is critical reflection, or critical self-reflection, on the immediate experience, underlying beliefs and assumptions, and reflective discourse (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Mezirow (1990) observed that “by far the most significant learning experiences involve critical reflection – reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting” (p. 13). Today, critical reflection is widely acknowledged as the means to effect perspective transformation. Many authors have discussed critical reflection in relation to TL, particularly the topics of “critical thinking” and “reflective practice” (RP). Garrison (1991), for example, identified five stages of critical reflection as 1) identifying the problem, 2) defining the problem, 3) exploring ways to deal with it, 4) applying one of the strategies to the problem, and 5) integrating the new perspective.

Brookfield (1987) also proposed a model of critical thinking consisting of five commonly experienced phases, beginning with *triggering event*, referring to “some unexpected happening [that] prompts a sense of inner discomfort and perplexity” (p. 25). This is followed by *appraisal*, which includes some of Mezirow’s (2000) process of perspective transformation, such as self-examination of the situation and recognition of ones’ discomfort and others in similar situations. This phase leads learners to engage in *exploration* of alternative ways to explain or accommodate the experience that led to their discomfort in the first place. Learners then move on to

*developing alternative perspectives*, trying on their new roles or ways of thinking and doing and build confidence in the new perspectives. Finally, the learners *integrate* these new ways of thinking and being in the world into their current lives. Both Garrison's and Brookfield's models are congruent with Mezirow's process of transformative learning as described above.

According to Mezirow (1987), *critical reflection* is different from *reflection*: the former involves the nature and consequences of one's actions as well as related circumstances of their origins, whereas the latter is the act of "intentional assessment" (p. 44). The intentional assessment of assumptions involves "the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 104). It takes place on three levels: 1) *content*, examining the actual experience itself; 2) *process*, examining ways to deal with the experience, or problem-solving strategies; and 3) *premise*, examining long-held, socially constructed beliefs and assumptions about the experience (Mezirow, 1995). Central to premise reflection is critical reflection that takes place at the level of meaning perspectives, or taken-for-granted assumptions, and thus offers the opportunity for perspective transformation. Mezirow (1991) maintained that "premise reflection is the dynamic by which our belief systems – meaning perspectives – become transformed" (p. 111).

**Objective reframing and subjective reframing.** Mezirow refined his work on the three levels of critical reflection (1995) and presented two new aspects: objective reframing and subjective reframing. *Objective reframing* refers to critical analysis of the concepts, beliefs, feelings, or actions communicated to us and/or critical consideration of the assumptions about the ways problems have been defined. *Subjective reframing* is characterized as critical self-reflection on assumptions and emphasizes "critical analysis of the psychological or cultural assumptions that are the specific reasons for one's conceptual and psychological limitations, the

constitutive processes or conditions of formation of one's experience and beliefs" (Mezirow, 1998, p. 193). What differentiates between subjective reframing and objective reframing is that the former involves an examination of the basis of the assumption (i.e., premise reflection), whereas the latter involves an examination of the assumption itself (i.e., content and process reflection) (Mezirow, 1998). As such, it is subjective reframing, or becoming critically reflective of the premise and redefining it, that leads to a transformation of a meaning perspective or a frame of reference (Mezirow, 2009).

According to Mezirow (1998), subjective reframing includes one of the following forms of critical self-reflection on assumptions (Kitchenham, 2008):

- *Narrative*: Applying narrative critical reflection of assumptions to oneself.
- *Therapeutic*: Investigating one's problematic feelings and his/her related dispositions and consequences.
- *Epistemic*: Exploring not only the assumptions, but also the causes, the nature, and the consequences of one's frame of reference, in order to learn why one is predisposed to learn in a certain manner.
- *Systemic*: Examining taken-for-granted cultural influences, including organizational (e.g., workplace) and moral-ethical (e.g., social norms).

Many works have presented ideas closely resembling these forms of critical self-reflection on assumptions. One is Argyris and Schön's (1978) *single-loop learning* and *double-loop learning*: single-loop learning involves modifying actions based on the difference between expected outcomes and obtained ones; double-loop learning involves questioning values, assumptions, and standards that led to the actions in the first place. Single-loop learning may advance a person's or group's understanding of what works to solve a problem, but it does not

necessarily address the problem itself, particularly how it became a problem in the first place. Double-loop learning works at the level of the problem and what created it (Argyris and Schön's *governing variables*). For instance, a teacher may respond to poor student performance in class in terms of the teacher's assumption of a difference in expertise; that is, the teacher has expertise in subject matter knowledge that is superior to the students' relative lack of such knowledge. When students fail to perform, the teacher may make a correction in his or her pedagogy that results in a different technique for delivering subject matter content. This correction may be limited to tweaking a lecture by adding, for example, better organized Powerpoint slides. These sorts of adjustments may improve student responses to the lecture, and yet student performance may not improve significantly. This is an example of single-loop learning in that the teacher learns that technical changes in how he/she approaches a problem results in changes in outcomes. However, if the problem persists, another option is for the teacher to examine the way he/she frames the problem itself. For example, the teacher might think about students being expert in their own lives even though they may be subject matter novices. This reframes the earlier relationship between student and teacher. Looking through this new lens, the teacher may choose to engage students in ways that allow them to use their expertise to make meaning of the teacher's subject matter knowledge. The shift in the teacher's pedagogy may then be more dramatic than a mere tweaking of the teacher-centered techniques employed earlier. This is an example of double-loop learning; in this case, the teacher examined the governing variables of the problem: i.e., the underlying assumptions that the teacher had about differences in expertise and the roles that students and teachers play in the classroom.

RP involves both single-loop and double-loop learning; however, the emphasis is on the latter. That is, participants in an RP experience are encouraged to look behind their routine and

taken-for-granted actions and the assumptions and beliefs that drive them. In fact, participants are encouraged to examine the nature of how they learn and their being in relationship with others. Peters and Ragland (2009) described the RP process in terms of what they called *levelising*, or the four levels of reflection discussed above in this chapter. This focus on the epistemological and ontological foundations of thought and action is one area in which RP and Argyris and Schön's (1978) work ties to Mezirow's (1998) concept of perspective transformation.

Another concept that relates to Mezirow's (1998) epistemic critical self-reflection on assumptions is a constructive developmental approach to learning as represented by Kegan (2000). Kegan argued that transformation involves an epistemological change, subjecting the very form of our ways of knowing themselves to change: "We do not only form meaning, and we do not only change our meanings; we change the very form by which we are making our meanings. We change our epistemologies" (pp. 52-53). What constitutes the core of an epistemology is the relationship between the subject and the object in our knowing. The concept of *object* refers to that which "we can look at, take responsibility for, reflect upon, exercise control over, [and] integrate with some other way of knowing"; *subject* involves that which "we are run by, identified with, fused with, [and] at the effect of" (p. 53). What we *have* is thus object; what we *are* is subject. Our development is manifested in the process of *subject* becoming *object*.

Kegan was interested in how this subject-object relationship changes – taking what we were once *subject to* making it *object* – over the course of our lives. For example, during our post-adolescence years, our own needs, interests, and desires may drive our actions toward others, while others' needs, interests, and desires are external to our ways of being in the world.



As we mature, we develop a greater capacity to see our own needs, interests, and desires in terms of others' needs, interests, and desires. In short, what was *subject* (others' needs, etc.) becomes *object* to us (our incorporation of a way of seeing ourselves in relationship to others). This can lead to our different understandings of our own needs and how our ways of being toward others help to shape their needs. Thus, we adopt a different, more "mature," way of relating with others that in turn contributes to our further growth.

Kegan (2000) posited that what we see as object may be understood as the content of our knowing and the subject of our knowing is the underlying structure of our way of knowing the content. In other words, the *way* we know has a significant impact on *what* we know. The same can be said about our ontological viewpoints: i.e., our ways of being in the world help drive the way we understand the objects of our world, including other people, and vice-versa. Put another way, the way we approach the objects in our world helps shape our ways of being in the world.

Kegan's theory of the "subject-object" relationship has particular relevance to RP because one aim of RP is to help participants develop new ways of knowing in terms of how they relate to other people and the things of their worlds. In RP events, participants learn to see the roles that others play in shaping what they know and how they know it. Seeing the role of others in relationship to participants' understanding is akin to what happens at the *self-authoring mind* stage of Kegan's model of development. However, seeing how one's very way of knowing this is shaped by others' ways of knowing is an epistemological matter and thus relates to an even higher level of development, perhaps to what Kegan called the *self-transforming mind*. In this sense, the RP process may be seen as enabling participants' cognitive development. The question is, do participants' different levels of development coming into the RP experience affect their ability to engage in the process and thus move to even higher levels of development? This

question is beyond the scope of the present study; however, it is worthy of further investigation.

As for Mezirow's (1998) systemic critical self-reflection on assumptions, it is indeed represented by the focus of Freire's (1970) concept of conscientization. Freire described *conscientization* as consciousness-raising, that is, "the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality" (p. 27). Thus, learners become "aware of both the structures that oppress us in society and of the internal structures or myths that direct our behavior" (Scott, 1996, p.345). Although conscientization was always a political act for Freire, it can be seen as similar to Mezirow's systemic critical self-reflection on assumptions in that central to both learning processes are critical reflection on the origin and nature of individuals' submerged beliefs and assumptions through problem-posing and dialogue with others, as well as the transformation of these assumptions into a new perspective or level of consciousness.

Another concept closely corresponding to Mezirow's systemic critical self-reflection on assumptions is Brookfield's (2000) *ideology critique*, defined as "the process by which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices" (p. 128). Integral to ideology critique and systemic critical self-reflection on assumptions is the probing of sociocultural distortions, such as those pertaining to power relationships and hegemonic assumptions. Brookfield explained that hegemonic assumptions are

those that we believe represent commonsense wisdom and that we accept as being in our own best interests without realizing that these same assumptions actually work against us in the long term by serving the interests of those opposed to us. (pp. 137-138)

These assumptions, expressed as “our affective, unconscious relations with the world” by Eagleton (1991, p. 18), involve not only “our beliefs about social, political, and economic systemic systems, but [also] something that frames our moral reasoning, our interpersonal relationships, and our ways of knowing, experiencing, and judging what is real and true” (Brookfield, 2000, p. 130). Thus, for both Brookfield and Mezirow, individuals learn to relate with the world in more conscious ways as they engage in critical reflection, clarifying and questioning their structuring assumptions.

**Interrelationship between critical reflection and affective learning.** Most studies examining reflection in relation to transformative learning have focused on the level of critical – or premise – reflection (Taylor, 2000). The majority of these studies have corroborated Mezirow’s (2000) premise that critical reflection is significant to perspective transformation. However, some researchers have claimed that critical reflection is granted too much importance, thus overlooking the significance of affective learning, such as the role of emotions and feelings, in transformative experiences. For example, Gehrels (1984), who examined the meaning-making process of school principals from their experiences, revealed how feelings acted as the trigger for reflections, initiating the exploration of experiences and changes in meaning structures. Similarly, Sveinunggaard (1993) found that critical reflection commenced only after emotions had been validated and worked through. Neuman (1996) also found that “when current affect was incorporated into reflective learning, it often produced clues and insights for directing reflection’s focus toward the more fundamental or assumptive basis underlying meaning structures and perspectives” (p. 462); furthermore, transformations led to some “affective outcomes, such as greater appreciation for differences, tolerance for ambiguity, and feelings for courage, self-trust, and inner strength” (p. 463). These studies’ findings indicated that reflective

processes are more than rationally based – they are closely related to the affective dimension of knowing. In conducting the current research project, it was thus important that I attended to affective learning in relation to the reflection process.

**Perspective transformation without critical reflection.** Despite well-established understanding about the integral nature of the reflective process, some studies have raised questions about the necessity of critical reflection for perspective transformations to take place. These studies reported transformational experiences with no or little conscious critical reflection. For example, Taylor (1994) interviewed adults with experiences of living and working overseas, and McDonald (1997) examined how adults learn to become ethical vegans. Both of these studies showed that some of their participants experienced perspective transformations without being consciously aware of the learning process. Mezirow (1998) later suggested that transformations might occur through assimilative learning, by which he meant that when “our situation changes, and, beyond our scope of awareness, we make a tacit judgment to move toward a way of thinking or behaving that we deem more appropriate to our new situation” (p. 191). These understandings point to the importance in the present study of remaining open to the possibility of perspective transformation based on assimilation as well as critical reflection on assumptions.

### **Reflective Discourse**

In addition to critical reflection, another central element of Mezirow’s (2000) theory of transformative learning is reflective discourse, which hypothesized that the new meanings learners create as a result of perspective transformations are highly subjective, personal, and changeable. Learners thus must enter into a special form of dialogue, known as *discourse*, to

assess whether these new meanings are true or authentic. In the view of German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, discourse involves

an effort to set aside bias, prejudice, and personal concerns and to do our best to be open and objective in presenting and assessing reasons and reviewing the evidence and arguments for and against the problematic assertion to arrive at a consensus. (Mezirow, 1995, p. 53)

Consensus building is an ongoing process and emphasizes seeking common understanding and assessment of the justification of learners' interpretations or beliefs. The process involves suspending judgments, examining alternative perspectives, critically reflecting on assumptions, searching for synthesis, and reframing. Mezirow (2000) emphasized that discourse differs from a debate or an argument: it is active, informed constructive dialogue with others in order to better understand the meaning of experiences.

According to Mezirow (2000), ideal conditions for discourse require that participants engage in the process with the following (pp. 12-13):

- More accurate and complete information.
- Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception.
- Openness to alternative points of view: empathy and concern about how others think and feel.
- The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively.
- Greater awareness of the context of ideas and, more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own.
- An equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse.

- Willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment.

Mezirow identified a model of group discourse as the ideal graduate seminar in which learners engage in discourse with, among other things, respect for one's self and others, openness to diversity, active listening, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility for the constructive process. At the same time, Mezirow was well aware that these ideal conditions constitute a principle and are never fully realized in practice. Nevertheless, he suggested that learners can proceed in a critically self-reflective manner that aims toward more sensitive, respectful, open, non-dominating, and constructive communication.

There are many routes to truth, and Mezirow's (2000) reflective discourse is merely one of them. Nevertheless, when examined next to the RP process, reflective discourse significantly overlaps in terms of some conditions and not others. For instance, in both reflective discourse and RP, the goal is to promote mutual understanding; participants are free from coercion, open to alternative viewpoints, critically reflective, and have equal opportunity to participate. In addition, the two are more alike than different in terms of the meaning perspectives of individuals (and groups) that are subject to continuous change during an RP event. However, participants in RP are not necessarily pursuing "truth" as if there is only one version of it or with an assumption of rational objectivity. Another difference lies in the value RP assigns to group knowing, an aspect that is not prominent in Mezirow's (2000) model of TL. That is, in RP, not only do individuals learn, but the group also learns. The two interact in the way that the individual learns into and from the group, and the group learns more than and other than what individuals learn (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). RP is also a process built on a social

constructionist view (Gergen, 1999). Although Mezirow (1991) seemed to subscribe to the view that knowledge is socially constructed, his epistemology is founded primarily on the constructivist view that knowledge (and attitudes) are constructed in the heads of individual learners. The next section offers a detailed look at RP.

## **Reflective Practice**

### **Defining *Reflective Practice***

Schön (1983) first introduced the concept of RP in the book *The Reflective Practitioner*, defining it as “the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning.” However, origins of the ideas of RP can be traced back to Dewey (1933), particularly to his conceptualization of reflection and reflective thinking. His concept of *reflection* denotes thinking about practice, or turning a subject over in the mind to give it serious consideration. *Reflective thinking* refers to systematically inquiring into thought and action and is centered on the idea of “*active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought*” (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). Dewey’s ideas inspired many authors, including Schön, to explore the boundaries of reflective theory. The development of this theory focused on, among other things, the integration of theory and practice and the cyclical process of action and reflection. As a result, RP has become recognized in many teaching and learning contexts; there is a growing body of literature centering on experiential learning and contributing to the development and application of RP for various developmental practices.

The process of RP involves examining and learning from ones’ own and others’ experiences in the moment of experiencing as well as afterwards with the intent to improve

aspects of ones' situations or problems. It centers on the idea of life-long learning and is often incorporated as a way to promote independent learners or practitioners who continuously engage in reflection on situations in their professional and other lives. Integral to the process of RP can be summarized as follows:

- Action and reflection interrelate and interact with one another.
- Action and reflection are the catalysts for reflection and action, respectively.
- Practical knowledge is valued just as abstract theoretical or technical knowledge.
- The process of RP is cyclic and continuing for continued change and growth.
- Potential outcomes of the engagement in RP include new perspectives on experiences, changes in behavior, and commitments to action.

RP has been recognized as an important means of professional development in various areas (e.g., education and healthcare) and is most often associated with professional practice.

However, I emphasize that it can be applied to other types of learning situations, including private and social.

### ***Reflection-on-action and Reflection-in-action***

Building on the work of Dewey, Schön (1987) argued that professionals in their everyday practice face unique and complex situations that are unsolvable by technical and rational approaches alone and proposed a model of professional competence as professional artistry. This model involves an ongoing engagement in *reflection-on-action*, reflecting after acting, and *reflection-in-action*, reflecting in the moment of acting. Although practitioners tend to have a wide variety of orientations and approaches to RP, these two forms of reflection are recognized as the two basic elements central to the process across the approaches (Merriam & Caffarella,



1999). Schön claimed that engagement in these forms of reflection can help raise our *knowing-in-action*, or tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966), to a level of conscious awareness and examine the beliefs and assumptions underlying our knowing-in-action. Below is a brief description of each of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action in relation to other models and ideas.

In reflection-on-action, individuals revisit previous experiences, (re)examine these experiences, decide what they could do differently and how, and try out their decisions (the cycle is repeated). Various authors have proposed different models to carry out this reflective cycle. One of the most commonly employed in practice is Kolb's (1984) reflective model, or variations of this model (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In Kolb's model, learning begins with a concrete experience after it has already occurred, followed by an observation and reflection on this experience. During this phase, learners seek to gain a general understanding of the context of the experience and to form abstract concepts based on the reflection. The process then leads to a testing of the new understandings and concepts on a new situation. Osterman and Kottkamp (1993) incorporated Argyris and Schön's (1978) concepts of *espoused theory* (actions individuals plan or wish to take) and *theory-in-use* (actual actions taken) into their model of the reflective practice cycle. This incorporation helps practitioners learn about and act on the discrepancies between their espoused theories and their actual actions.

Boud, Koegh, and Walker (1985) proposed another model emphasizing reflection-on-action consisting of three stages: 1) returning to and replaying the experience, 2) attending to the feelings evoked during the experience, and 3) reexamining the experience. Of particular importance in this model is exploring feelings, particularly working through negative feelings and enhancing positive feelings. The last stage of the model involves

*association*, that is, relating of new data to that which is already known; *integration*, which is seeking relationships among the data; *validation*, to determine the authenticity of the ideas and feelings which have resulted; and *appropriation*, that is, making knowledge one's own. (p. 45-46)

Boud and Walker (1992) later re-presented their model, revised to include the totality of individuals' life experiences to acknowledge all that they bring into their learning situations, including their past experiences and current contexts. As compared to the earlier model, the revised one accounts for "the preparation the learner brings to the experience, the experience itself (during which the learner can both 'notice' and 'intervene'), and the two-way process of reflecting back and forward during and subsequent to the experience" (Tennant & Pogon, 1995, p. 161). Critical reflection, journal writing, and portfolio development are some of the approaches commonly undertaken in implementing reflection-on-action in various learning settings, such as education.

In contrast to reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action involves reflecting as individuals experience and experiencing as they reflect, simultaneously. This process is often described as "thinking on your feet," "keeping your wits about you," and "felt-knowing." Schön (1987) explained this process:

We think critically about the thinking that got us into this fix or this opportunity; and we may, in the process, restructure strategies of action, understanding of phenomena, or ways of framing problems. . . . Reflection gives rise to on-the-spot experiment. (p. 28)

The reflective route of Jarvis' (1987) model of the learning process represents this reflective cycle involving thinking about and monitoring individuals' practices as they are happening. This form of knowing, according to Schön, is generally triggered by surprises individuals encounter,

such as when they experience situations in which their old ways of thinking and doing no longer work. Jarvis (1987) shared this view that reflection commences when individuals experience the discrepancy between their biography and experience; the “inability to cope with the situation unthinkingly, instinctively, is at the heart of all learning” (p. 35). Schön maintained that reflection-in-action is often employed as a regular part of practice by experienced and competent professionals. However, some studies (e.g., Ferry & Ross-Gordon, 1998) have shown that the experience of professionals is not necessarily related to their incorporation of reflection-in-action in their practices.

Tremmel (1993) also advocated the importance of reflection-in-action in professional practice. Drawing upon the Zen Buddhist tradition of *mindfulness*, he argued that reflection can be best accomplished in the midst of practicing or experiencing. In Zen practice, being mindful means “to ‘return’ to mindful awareness of the present moment”; that is, to devote learners themselves to the present moment “with full awareness and concentration,” which differs from attending to the here and now in an analytical or evaluative manner (p. 443). Nuernberger (1994) further proposed four types of knowledge in our reflective life: *spiritual knowledge* (knowledge related to individuals’ souls or spirits), *intuitive knowledge* (knowledge they gain from their insights into potential consequences of their actions), *instinctual knowledge* (knowledge based on their subliminal perceptions), and *analytic or sensory knowledge* (knowledge they acquire through hearing, seeing, feeling, and tasting). In general, these authors concurred that reflection-in-action can lead practitioners to go beyond their usual patterns of thinking about and performing in their practices in order to create new and original patterns and perform as professional artistries.

Integral to Schön's (1987) concept of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action are *self-reflection* and *critical reflection*. *Self-reflection* refers to the process of raising both individuals' tacit knowing-in-action and the beliefs and assumptions underlying this knowing-in-action to a level of conscious awareness. Knowing-in-action is what guides individuals' actions and is generally embodied, or subconsciously or tacitly held, within them. In contrast, *critical reflection* refers to the process of examining the justification for the beliefs and assumptions underlying individuals' knowing-in-action and modifying any distortions or inaccuracies involved. Both self-reflection and critical reflection are integral to the process of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action.

This view of reflection parallels Brookfield's (1987) notion of critical thinking, which involves "recognizing the assumptions underlying our beliefs and behaviors. It means we can give justifications for our ideas and actions. More importantly, perhaps, it means we try to judge the rationality of these justifications" (p. 13). Once learners ensure – through engaging in self-reflection and critical reflection – that the knowledge they possess is rigorous and relevant, their knowing-in-action is transformed into *knowledge-in-action*, or so-called "practical theory" (Quakers, 1998; Schön, 1987). In short, RP represents this whole process of identifying, examining, modifying, and applying knowledge-in-action, a view that corresponds to Brookfield's (1987) notion of *theory-in-use* in the way that it guides learners' intuitively based activities, is contextually grounded in what works best and why it works, and involves a readiness to alter learners' practices according to their changing contexts.

## *Levelising*

Building upon Schön's concept of RP, Peters and Ragland (2009) provided a new dimension to RP, suggesting that it involves cycles of action and reflection they called *levelising*; in this recursive process, individuals "step back in a series of removes in order to see [themselves] engaging in action" and to understand their experiences or conversations from various levels of awareness (p. 80). The process involves both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) by individuals as well as the group with whom they are engaged in reflection. In Peters and Ragland's view, dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999) is employed as the primary mode to enter discourse and engage in levelising. That is, the group members work to be sensitive to what is happening in the moment of their interactions, develop shared meanings, and act in ways to nurture their new ways of being together, such as listening, reflecting, and valuing. Members of the group also mindfully attend to and cultivate what is being constructed individually and by the group as a whole.

According to Peters and Ragland (2009), in participating in dialogue, the group engages in four levels of levelising: 1) pre-reflective being, 2) reflective being, 3) framing, and 4) theorizing. The process begins with members' routine and largely unexamined ways of being. At this level, called *pre-reflective being*, members' attention is focused on the present moment (e.g., the topic at hand) and other members (e.g., their words and actions). Often as a result of a surprising occurrence or in response to a question from others, members move onto the second level – *reflective being* – in which they begin to be reflective of their thoughts and actions while also remaining in the primary situation upon which they are reflecting. Learners experience themselves both inside and outside of their awareness and reflect on their actions in the moment of acting and afterwards. The next level, referred to as *framing*, brings learners to another level

of awareness. They begin to experience themselves reflecting on shared utterances and see the conceptual framework influencing their perspectives. Finally, in the *theorizing* level, learners begin to “think about thinking, critically examine what others think, consider how [their] own and others’ theories shape [their] experience[s] of the world, and perhaps construct [their] own new theories” (Peters & Ragland, 2009, p. 80).

Although these levels may involve different levels of complexity, Peters and Ragland (2009) cautioned that they are not intended to be hierarchical or irreversible. Instead, the process represents a progression of stepping back or removal from the primary experience. This involves the distance members take from their primary experiences, or the degrees of *witness knowing* (being in the act of doing) and *aboutness knowing* (talking about the act of doing) (Shotter, 1993). In particular, the earlier the levels are, the greater degrees of witness knowing involved; the later the levels, the greater degrees of aboutness knowing. Learners traverse back and forth between all of the four levels at any time as they continue to cycle between acting and reflecting on occurrences and utterances that emerge about the content, process, and context of their learning experiences. The recursive process of levelising helps bring what was hidden in plain view to members’ awareness and engages them to examine it (Wittgenstein, 1953), which is to say, the individual and the group assumptions, beliefs, and habits of expectations and actions.

### **Reflective Practice in the Classroom Context**

Schön (1987) suggested that we can help others raise their tacit knowing-in-action to their conscious awareness by engaging them in observing and reflecting on their actions and making descriptions of the tacit knowing implicit in these actions. Similarly, Brookfield (1991) asserted that learners’ can be made aware of their assumptions by examining their descriptions of

their experiences as “learners’ general assumptions are embedded in, and can be inferred from, their specific descriptions of particular events” (pp. 179-180). He outlined a group process that can be incorporated to engage learners in critical self-reflection: “Learners are asked to produce richly detailed accounts of specific events and then move to collaborative, inductive analysis of general elements embedded in these particular descriptions” (p. 180). Assisting others in becoming reflective practitioners thus involves helping them understand what they already tacitly know by engaging them in taking self-reflective turns and exploring their actions and assumptions that underlie and create these actions. The insights gained through this process can lead to experimental courses of action and, ultimately, to improved practice.

In the RP classroom (research site), learners engage in a similar process of RP within the context of collaborative learning (CL) alongside more traditional methods, such as lecture. To offer an overview of this classroom context in which the engagement in RP is situated, I describe below Peters and Armstrong’s typology of teaching and learning, followed by Peters and Gray’s (2007) four elements of CL.

**A typology of teaching and learning.** Peters and Armstrong (1998) proposed a typology of teaching and learning in terms of purpose, flow of communication, relationship between students and teacher, and modes of discourse, among other pedagogical features. This typology consists of three types of teaching and learning: T-I, “teaching by transmission, learning by reception”; T-II, “teaching by transmission, learning by sharing”; and T-III, “collaborative learning” (CL) (pp. 78-79). In T-I, the primary focus is subject matter that reflects the experience of the teacher and related discipline-based content. The teacher is the primary source of information, and the focus is on individual learning. The flow of communication is

from teacher to student and sometimes from student to teacher. Direct instruction and lectures, sometimes accompanied by demonstration, drill, and repetition, are examples of T-I.

As in T-I, the emphasis in T-II is on individual learning. One difference is that the teacher is the primary, but not the only, source of information. Students may also serve as sources of information as they are given opportunities to make meaning of the subject matter in terms of their own experiences. The flow of communication is from teacher to student, student to student, and student to teacher. The most familiar form of Type II is the lecture-discussion format; various applications of cooperative learning or group work also fit this model. Many educators refer to this sharing aspect as a necessary aspect of cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993). Others often use the terms *cooperative learning* and *collaborative learning* synonymously, or refer to *collaborative learning* as having what Peters and Armstrong referred to as T-II features (Bruffee, 1999).

In T-III, or CL, the emphasis is on both individual and group learning. The teacher becomes a member of the group of learners and participates with student members as they focus on the joint construction of new knowledge. The flow of communication is from member to member, member to group, and group to member. The basis of their joint action is critical reflection on the members' present, past, and anticipated experiences, augmented by disciplinary content (Peters, Doi, & Taylor, 2010).

While no one type of teaching and learning is superior to another as each has its own place in the educator's pedagogy, T-I and T-II can never escape the hierarchical authority of traditional classrooms. To begin with, one purpose of these types of teaching and learning is to socialize students into a knowledge community that is consistent with the teacher's subject



matter expertise, philosophy, as well as the ways of knowing of members of his or her discipline.

For example, Bruffee (1999) claimed:

[The professor] has to discover ways to help those nonmembers [i.e., students] loosen their loyalty to some of the communities they are already members of – “divorce” themselves from those communities . . . and marry instead into the knowledge community that the professor represents. (p. 78)

While a teacher using T-II may attempt to involve students and their collective experiences in terms of their own ways of knowing, students are nevertheless expected to assimilate themselves into the community that the teacher represents.

Engaging in T-III or CL helps resolve this problem of hierarchical authority associated with T-I and T-II. By positioning both the teacher and students as members of a group or co-constructors of knowledge, CL grants the authority of knowledge and knowing to students as well as to the teacher. Participants are thus able to take advantage of their experiences, skills, talents, and relationships and to learn not only from others but also with their group as a whole. This process leaves room for members to create knowledge as they go along, knowledge that never before existed. In T-III, knowledge is in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction, occurring in the moment, in the context of ever-changing relationships among learners.

In the RP classroom, course participants engage in the process of RP in the context of CL, along with T-I, such as occasional short lectures by the instructor. The next section offers a more detailed description of CL and how class participants engage in RP within this unique learning environment.

**Four elements of CL.** Peters and Gray (2007) proposed that CL consists of four elements: 1) dialogical space, 2) cycles of action and reflection, 3) focus on construction, and 4) multiple ways of knowing. These elements are neither exclusive nor comprehensive in constituting CL. Instead, they interrelate and interact with one another and constitute important aspects of the teaching and learning process. Below is a brief description of each of these elements and how it is manifested within the RP classroom.

The first element, *dialogical space*, is “an environment where voices are heard and respected and shared meanings are created, a space where dialogue can occur” (Merrill, 2003). In the RP class, members work jointly to develop and maintain this space between and around them by actively engaging in dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999) on various topics related to RP. By *dialogue*, I mean that group members communicate verbally and nonverbally to create safe, open space that is trustworthy and respectful and that engages them in developing shared meanings. While language may be considered to be the primary tool for communication and meaning making (Buber, 1937), much is also learned from attending to nonverbal aspects of discursive interactions. Members work to nurture their new way of being with and for the group by practicing relational responsibility or acting in ways that foster dialogue: e.g., listening, reflecting, inquiring, valuing, and working jointly to understand themselves and others. This practice involves not only what members do, but also how they do it in their verbal and nonverbal exchanges.

Dialogue bears some resemblance to Mezirow’s (2000) discourse. For example, both processes involve openness, respect for others, active listening, reflection on and suspension of assumptions, and mutual responsibility for the constructive process. Despite this resemblance, dialogue differs from discourse in important ways, particularly as related to contexts and

emphasis. While discourse may be most often situated within the context of T-II (e.g., discussion), dialogue in the RP classroom takes place within CL, accompanied by other, more traditional, methods. Furthermore, discourse emphasizes consensus building, which involves searching for common understandings and assessment of the justification of learners' interpretations or beliefs. In contrast, the focus of dialogue is more on gaining better understandings about learners themselves and other members, as well as on facilitating critical reflection on experiences and assumptions at individual and collaborative levels.

Dialogical space created through the engagement in dialogue is developmental in nature; it is constantly formed and re-formed as members continue to act jointly within it. This constant formation of the space takes place on both internal and external levels of members' awareness (Peters & Gray, 2007) through dynamic interactions between the physical (e.g., formation of circle), social (e.g., relationship), psychological (e.g., respect), and (non)linguistic factors (e.g., metaphor and gesture) involved. Each of these factors inspires the process of dialogue while also imposing some restrictions. Understandings and meanings constructed through this process form the basis of members' joint effort to co-construct new knowledge about the content of their focus, process, and context of their learning. In short, a dynamic relationship exists between the knowledge constructed and the space in which it is constructed.

The second element *cycles of action and reflection* involves an ongoing dialogue between action and reflection. As the members participate in CL, they engage in the recursive process of levelising (Peters & Ragland, 2009) both individually and as a group. In levelising, members "step back in a series of removes in order to see [themselves] engaging in action" and to understand their experiences or conversations from various levels of awareness (Peters & Ragland, 2009, p. 80). This process involves both *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action*

(Schön, 1983) by individuals and the group, and consists of the four levels described above: 1) pre-reflective being, 2) reflective being, 3) framing, and 4) theorizing (Peters & Ragland, 2009). Members engage in these forms of reflection at various levels, exploring both individually and collectively the topic and context of their conversations as well as the movement of their thought and the process of thinking together.

The next element *focus on construction* is based on social constructionist thought that advocates the interpersonal nature of human existence and experiences; that is, our realities are derived from and sustained by our dynamic and ongoing social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Referring to *a relational self* and *a self-within relationship*, Gergen (1999) asserted that even what we often assume to be personal, such as thoughts and feelings, and unambiguous, such as gender, are formed within relationships. That is, all realities and values are not essential givens; rather, they take self-other relationships, or I-Thou encounters (Buber, 1937), to become what they are. In this view, knowledge is seen as a human construction and knowing is a social process, instead of a product of individual minds.

Drawing upon this social constructionist thought, the element of focus on construction emphasizes Bakhtin's (1981) middle of utterance and response. Referring to this middle as the gap or boundary, Shotter (1997) discussed the spontaneous, responsive, and dialogic activity that takes place at this place:

For it is in those gaps, in these momentary relational encounters, that everything of importance to us exerts its influence. These influences work in the gap or on the boundary between the ending of one utterance and the next that is a response to it. (p. 17)

Although it may appear that this gap or middle is limited to the rhetorical-responsive function of language, it concerns the space where meanings are generated – between self and other. Within

this space, cultures and histories that members inherit are brought together and formatively influence the process of their meaning making and knowledge construction. Kostogriz (2005) called this middle space the *thirdplace*, or the location of “creative ferment” (p. 197), claiming that the border between members opens space for constructions, provides them authorship of the constructions, and leads to unpredictable directions in their teaching and learning. CL thus brings to light this process and engages the group in attending to what is being co-constructed among individual members and within the group. In doing so, they become aware of the formative nature of knowledge and the reciprocal relationship between knowledge construction and each moment of their interactions.

Finally, engagement in CL integrates *multiple ways of knowing* that members bring to their learning space. These include experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical ways of knowing (Heron, 1996). Closely relating to propositional and practical ways of knowing are Ryle’s (1949) *knowing that* and *knowing how*, respectively. For instance, in CL, members engage in experiential knowing as they directly participate in dialogue and learn with others. They develop shared meanings to go on together, a process that involves presentational knowing, emerging from and grounded on experiential knowing. Members also participate in practical knowing, or knowing how, as they reflect on their experiences with various aspects of CL and describe these experiences propositionally or with knowing that.

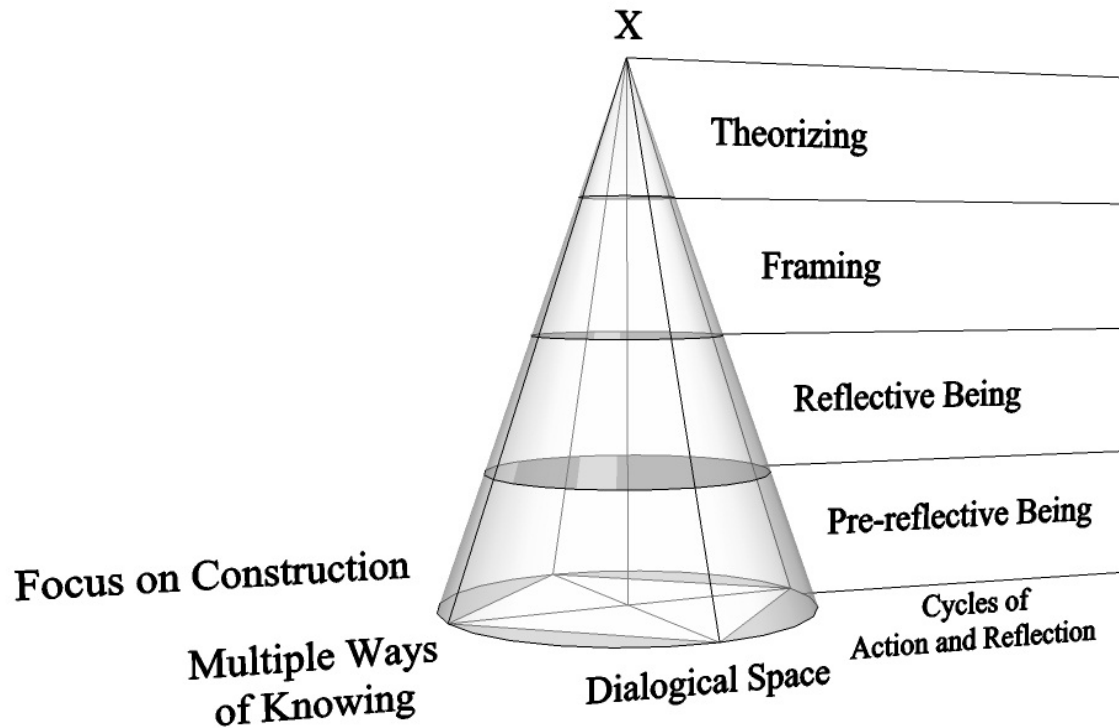
In addition to continuing to engage in these familiar ways of knowing, members also develop new ways of knowing in the process of CL. One example is what Shotter (1993) called *knowing from within*, or a *third kind of knowing*. He described this way of knowing as follows:

[It] floats around in an uncertain way within everyday conversational background to our more institutional and disciplinary lives . . . a kind of knowledge one has only from

within relationship with others . . . (and) it determines what at any one moment we anticipate or expect will happen next from within any situation we are in. (p. 1)

As Shotter claimed, this way of knowing is present in our everyday interactions, including T-I and T-II teaching and learning environments. However, it is typically tacitly interwoven, and thus it remains only as background of communication. On the other hand, CL emphasizes and makes explicit the inherence of knowing from within, which plays an important role in bridging and coordinating members' differences and discourses in order to maintain their connection to one another and go on together.

**Interrelation and interaction of the four elements.** Each of the four elements of CL interrelates and interacts with the others (Fig. 1). As members participate in dialogue, they traverse within the cone, making circular rotations in various directions, such as between left and right, and up and down, both individually and collectively. That is, members are engaged in levelising (Peters & Ragland, 2009), constantly moving back and forth between acting and reflecting on their actions at different levels of awareness: pre-reflective, reflective, framing, and theorizing. While engaging in levelising, members also work to develop a dialogical space by being sensitive to what is happening in the moment of their interactions, developing shared meanings, and acting in ways to nurture their new way of being together. Constructed among members as they levelise within this dialogical space is the Bakhtinian middle, or Peters and Armstrong's (1998) X, representing an integration of the content, process, and context of CL that are constructed from constant, reflected-upon actions of members in their CL experiences (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). Given the emergence of X, the group begins traversing in terms of X, acting into and from it. They are mindfully attending to and cultivating what is being



**Figure 1. Diagram of Collaborative Learning**

constructed between themselves and within the group.

In this process of traversing, members' original experiences are constantly revisited and restructured. Members' initial non-reflective, direct engagement with the incident or incidents is replaced multiple times through the relocation of themselves or removals from the actual experiences. This means that the verbal and written reflections of the experiences are not simply a duplication of what is experienced originally; they change their forms repeatedly and never remain the same. The engagement in CL thus helps learners construct new and alternate understandings and meanings of their original experiences. Members also learn to incorporate newly gained insights and skills into various aspects of their lives and to help others reflect on their own and others' experiences and assumptions. These gained insights and skills may be understood as effecting a change or development in members' awareness or, in a broad sense, a

perspective transformation. The process involves an epistemological process, involving changes in learners' worldviews, as well as an ontological process, bringing about changes in their being in the world.

### **Summary**

Chapter II contained a review of the relevant literature regarding transformative learning (TL) and reflective practice (RP). The review offered some insight into the experiences of adult learners who encounter challenges to or questions about their beliefs and assumptions while members of a graduate RP class. Overall, the TL literature has highlighted the importance of critical reflection on assumptions in perspective transformation and adult learning in general. The chapter also described various types and aspects of reflection, as well as the general processes and outcomes of TL experiences. RP literature has added a new dimension to our understanding of engaging in reflection by describing how the engagement in cycles of action and reflection, such as levelising, can help learners examine their beliefs and assumptions and contribute to improving their practices. The overlap in what writers such as Brookfield (1987; 1991; 2000) and Schön (1983; 1987) have written about reflection, Mezirow's (2000; 1996) concept of TL, and its antecedents is evident in this brief review of related literature. Finally, the chapter concluded with a description of the RP classroom. Chapter III addresses the qualitative method to be utilized for the study, in addition to the overall research design and process.



## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter provides a general background of phenomenological inquiry along and its principle concepts, and it examines a methodology based in existential hermeneutic phenomenology. The chapter also discusses the descriptive phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and the interpretive phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, as well as the existential hermeneutic phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. At this point, chapter discussion turns to the phenomenological methodology of Thomas and Pollio (2002) as a legitimate way to perform the present study. Following this is information related to the research site and participants, as well as the specific research procedures I followed to collect data and analyze them. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion of evaluation of phenomenological research, consistency, trustworthiness, and transferability, and how they are addressed in this study.

### **Research Design**

#### **Phenomenology**

In order to understand experiences of adult learners as their beliefs and assumptions are challenged, the study utilized a phenomenological research design. According to some authors (e.g., Creswell, 2007; Dowling, 2007), phenomenology is understood as both a philosophy and a qualitative research method. As a philosophy, it is “driven by fascination: being swept up in a spell of wonder, a fascination with meaning” (van Manen, 2007, p. 12). As a research method, it is “the rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear so that one might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience” (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989,

p. 6). It is “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). The concept of essence refers to the shared, lived experiences of a phenomenon across individuals, “patterns of meaning that are universal, unchanging over time, and absolute” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 9). The goal of phenomenological research is to understand the meaning that individuals make of their experiences by investigating how their internal worlds are seen and experienced by them. Grbich (2012) stated that this type of research “attempts to understand the hidden meanings and the essence of an experience together with how participants make sense of these” (p. 92).

### **Background and Principle Concepts**

The Danish philosopher, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855), is regarded as one of the fathers of existential philosophy, whose work is primarily concerned with how one lives as a single individual, focusing on concrete human reality and experience over general truths or objective understandings (Earnshaw, 2006). Kierkegaard is also known as being “at the origin of existential phenomenology,” indicating the relationship between existentialism and phenomenology (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 207). For example, his existentialist thought shares with Husserl’s phenomenology concepts of intentionality (mutual implications of an individual and the other) and intersubjectivity (interhuman relationship and interaction). These ideas are discussed later in this chapter.

In addition to some philosophical similarities between the two, existentialism adopted the phenomenological method as a systematic and rigorous way to perform its investigations. More specifically, the German philosopher and mathematician, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938),

developed methods of phenomenology to conduct inquiries into individuals' experiences. Husserl defined phenomenology as the systematic reflection on and scientific study of the essential structures of consciousness, by which he meant phenomena or one's conscious ideas of them, rather than natural objects or events. Opposing the positivist idea that natural science is the sole arbiter of truth, he believed that truth may be found in shared, lived experiences of individuals. For Husserl, one's consciousness is always directed toward the world, or an object (i.e., *intentionality*), thus the reality of the object is inextricably related to one's consciousness of it. As such, the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of one's experience. In this realm of experience lies the lived world or the *Lebenswelt*, which refers to the "world as lived by the person and not the hypothetical external entity separate from or independent from him or her" (Valle et al., 1989, p. 9).

In considering how one comes to knowledge of the truth, Husserl (2001) was primarily concerned with how phenomenology could address the core idea of returning "back to the things themselves" (p. 2). Thus, he strove to understand the structures, or essences, of consciousness by carefully describing individual experiences from the first-person point of view. The goal of Husserl's phenomenological investigation was the "rigorous and unbiased study of things *as they appear* so that one might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience" (Valle et al., 1989, p. 6, italics in original). Seminal to this process is the *epoché*, or *bracketing*, in which individuals set aside the taken-for-granted "natural attitude" of their daily lives as much as possible in order to best understand human experience on its own terms. Husserl (2001) emphasized the need for a reduction in order to achieve objectivity and know and describe the essence. Through this process, individuals may come to know the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), get back to the things themselves, and arrive at knowledge of the truth.

In contrast to Husserl's view that subjectivity can be bracketed out, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), claimed that complete objectivity cannot be achieved because individuals always come to the essential experience and awareness of being within the context of their being-in-the-world. That is, individuals and the world co-construct and are co-constructed by one another; their experiences can be thus only understood as situated in context. According to Heidegger, researchers cannot interpret their research without judgments as they are always a part of it. He proposed that truth, or the essential truth of being, (for him, the truth of what it means "to be") may be known through hermeneutical methodology and the interpretation of what it means "to be." An essential condition for interpretation is to engage in self-reflection: that is, practicing reflexivity and examining positionality in interpretation. Reflexivity involves "the process of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal deep connections between the writer and his or her subject" (Goodall, 2000, p. 137). As Merleau-Ponty (1958) pointed out, "Heidegger's 'being-in-the-world' appears only against the background of the phenomenological reduction" (p. xvi).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) expanded the works of these authors by bridging the discrepancy between Husserl's proposed objectivity and Heidegger's hermeneutic emphasis with Merleau-Ponty's existential hermeneutic phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty (1958) opposed Husserl's view, asserting that bracketing does not create objectivity because individuals are always situated within their being-in-the-world: "The most important lesson the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (p. xv). Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty still saw the value of the phenomenological method and the consistency between it and existentialist thought. He stated that the bracketing process helps researchers reflect on their

experiences and set aside their assumptions and paradigms in order to examine the phenomena under investigation.

Merleau-Ponty (1958) defined phenomenology as “[trying] to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian, or the sociologist may be able to provide” (p. vii). In order to describe human experience in its own terms, he identified *perception* as the primary means for providing insight into our direct experiences and relationships with events, objects, and phenomena of the world. As the phenomenological concept of perception represents the relationship and interaction between us and the world, he believed that it is very possible to understand one’s first-person world experience based on what he or she perceives and describes.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the relational nature of experiences, including perceptions, involves what he (and Husserl before him) called *intentionality*: our directedness, or the way we relate to the world. Thomas and Pollio (2002) described intentionality as follows:

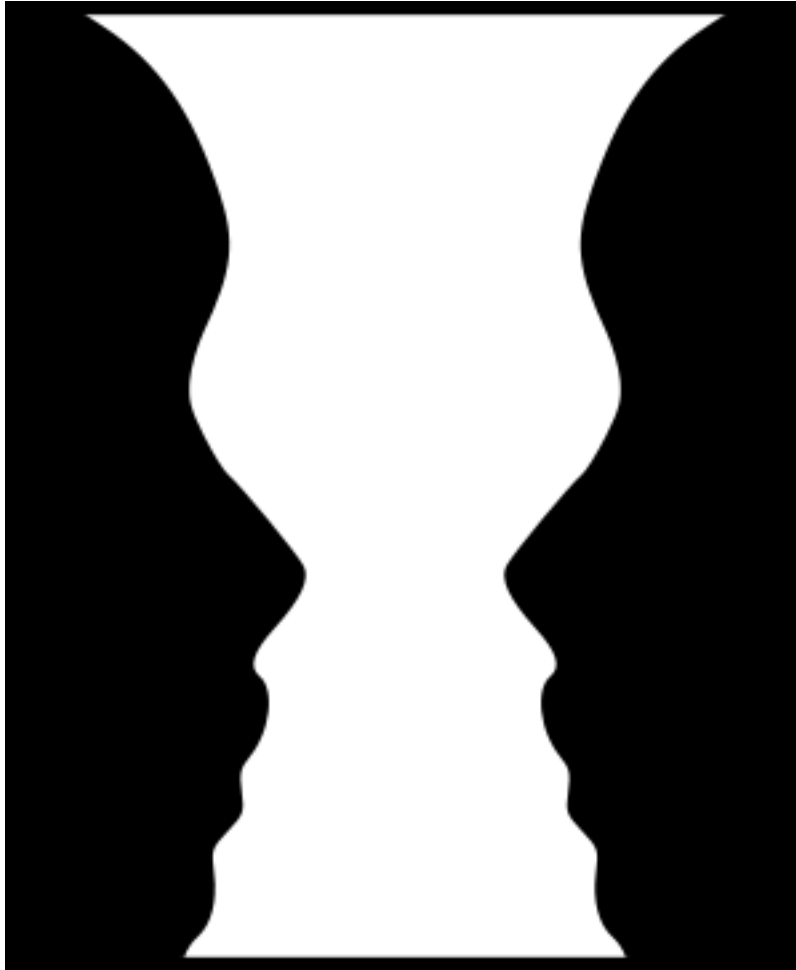
Like perception, human experience is continuously oriented toward a world it never possesses but toward which it is continuously directed. At the same time that intentionality directs us toward objects of experience, it also directs us toward the person for whom these objects are present. (p. 14)

This phenomenological concept of intentionality indicates that we do not simply receive some sorts of stimuli from the world or put our views out to the world. Indeed, what stands out for us reveals what is important in our experiences in the world; in other words, according to Thomas and Pollio (2002), “what I am aware of reveals what is meaningful to me” (p. 14).

That intentionality represents fundamental structures of our experiences further suggests the interconnectedness between us and the world, or our being-in-the-world. These ideas, the

interconnectedness of us with the world and our personal existence experienced as a “standing out,” are expressed in phenomenology as the concept of figure and ground. One of the most well-known perceptual demonstrations of the figure and ground organization is perhaps the faces-vase drawing of the Danish psychologist, Edgar Rubin (1921) (Fig. 2). When we focus on the white area of the drawing, a vase shows in the center; when we focus on the black area, two faces show on the sides. In the former situation, the white area is experienced as the standing out, or the *figure*; in contrast, the latter situation leads the same area to be the background of the figure, or the *ground*. What this suggests is that only one figure is experienced at a time, while the vase and faces are also dependent on one another as neither of them is seen without the other. These understandings directly apply to more general human experience: our experiences comprise of both their focal and contextual aspects.

According to Thomas and Pollio (2002), human experience consists of four existential grounds against which the experience becomes figural. They are world, others, body, and time, each of which is defined in the following way in existential phenomenology. First, as discussed above, there exists a fundamental connectedness between the being and the *world*. They are not separate or independent entities, but are always in the process of co-constructing one another. Furthermore, the world is a much more intimate and personal place for existential phenomenologists than the one we see in charts and maps – listings and locations of the places of the world. Indeed, a phenomenological geographer, Tuan (1977), discussed how different experiences and meanings are attached to our *lived space and place*, the space and place surrounding the human body. Second, we live in the world with *others* in the way Heidegger (1964) claimed that “the world is always the one that I share with other” (p. 155). Within this



**Figure 2: The Faces-Vase Drawing**

**Perceptual demonstration of the figure and ground organization**

Source: Rubin, E. (1921) *Visuell wahrgenommene figuren: Studien in psychologischer analyse*.  
Kobenhaven: Gyldendalske Boghandel.

being-in-the-world-with-others (Earnshaw, 2006), there exist various types of relationships, roles, and social orders in which we live. Within this world of others, our interactions take place, and we continue learning about ourselves and the world throughout our lives.

Next, *body* is understood as “body subject,” or the body of subjective experience, which contrasts sharply with “body object,” or the body of scientific medicine. This *lived body*, as Merleau-Ponty (1958) referred to it, represents the idea of our being-in-the world. That is to say, body is not separate from the mind or the world; instead, they are always in communion with one another. This being-in-the world or the lived body indicates the wholeness of the being and not a sum of parts constituting a whole. Finally, the phenomenological concept of *time* refers to the experience of our consciousness, or the *lived time*, as opposed to events that are external to us, or the *clock time*. Unlike the common conception of time – such as the future, past, and present – time in phenomenology is understood as having the three temporal components: the future, the essence of having been, and the now (Earnshaw, 2006). The notion of the future indicates the potential for being-in-the world. It is connected with the now of the being-in-the world, which is located in a continuum of having been and potential being. The notion of having been exists in the now of being along with the essence of potential being. In this view, the future, the essence of having been, and the now do not necessarily repeat or follow a linear path. Instead, they are situated within a continuum of time, connected, with no beginning or end. As such, we are always in processes of either ending or beginning our lives regardless of where we stand in life, including birth and death. In short, for each of the four grounds, the conclusions are the same: emphasizing the interconnectedness and wholeness of the living and non-living things in the world, and adopting the first-person perspective in order to view human experience.



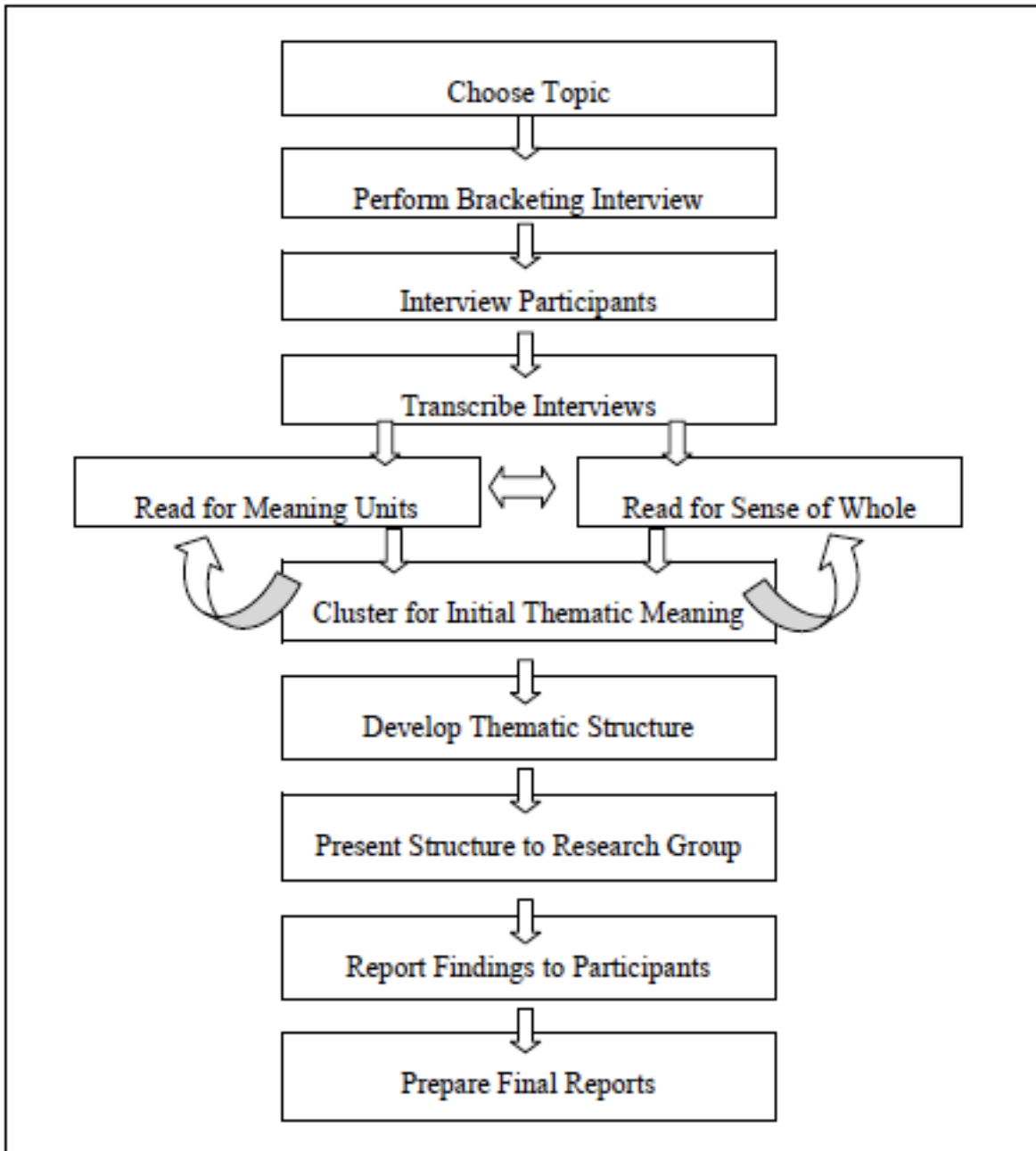
## **Research Procedure**

To examine the experiences of adult learners with questioning their beliefs and assumptions in an educational context, this study utilized the existential phenomenological research design suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002). A flow chart shows the specific procedure of phenomenological research that I followed for the study (Fig. 3). As shown in the chart, I began the research process by performing a bracketing interview (after deciding on the research topic), followed by collecting and analyzing data, and closed by preparing the final report.

### **Bracketing Interview**

The bracketing process is an essential component of Thomas and Pollio's phenomenological method: a researcher participates in bracketing interviews prior to collecting any data. The purpose of this interview was to help the researcher learn about her beliefs, values, assumptions, and biases concerning the nature and meaning of the topic under investigation so that she becomes aware of potential influences her values can have on her research process. As Barker (1992) stated, the researcher's paradigms can help her see things clearly when they conform to her presuppositions; they can also hinder her from seeing things when they differ from how she thinks they are supposed to be. What this view suggests is the importance of the bracketing process in conducting research.

I participated in a bracketing interview about the topic of my study before beginning any data collection. A fellow researcher who was experienced with phenomenological method conducted the interview in a small classroom on the campus of the University of Tennessee. The



**Figure 3. Phenomenological Research Process**

Source: Thomas, S. P., & Pollio, H. R. (2002). *Listening to patients: A phenomenological approach to nursing research and practice*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

process began with his request: “Tell me about a time when your beliefs and assumptions have been challenged in the reflective practice course.” This was then followed by the interviewer’s probing questions as he sought to better understand aspects of my challenging experience. We closed the interview by reflecting on my assumptions and presuppositions that might need to be bracketed during the process of my data collection and analysis. The interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded on a digital voice recorder for analysis.

Soon after the interview was completed, I transcribed it and took the interview transcripts to a meeting of the University of Tennessee’s Interpretive Research Group for further analysis and interpretation. Facilitated by two senior researchers who are well versed in existential hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy and the phenomenological method, this group is composed of approximately 10-15 fellow researchers who are university faculty, graduates, and graduate students across disciplines. The group generally meets on a weekly basis to assist data analysis of various research projects using a phenomenological method.

At the meeting regarding the data analysis of my bracketing interview, 11 members of the group were present. I first provided all attendees with transcripts of the interview. A volunteer attendee then read the interviewer’s questions and comments while another volunteer attendee read my responses. The rest of us listened while also following the transcripts. When the topic shifted in the interview, we stopped and analyzed each section, seeking out salient themes concerning my assumptions and preconceptions that might potentially influence my analysis of the data in subsequent interviews with the participants. Upon the completion of the analysis, I shared some of the assumptions, theories, and biases that surfaced in the interview transcripts and on which other members provided further feedback. Participation from all attendees was sought during this open discussion in addition to the written comments that they made on the

transcripts they returned to me at the end of the meeting. Since a complete reduction never exists, this process of analyzing the interview was not designed to free me from my biases and assumptions, but to bring them to my attention, or to “make transparent, overt and apparent the researcher’s personal values, background, and cultural suppositions . . . in an effort to minimize their impact on the phenomenon under investigation” (Gearing, 2004, p. 1445).

### **Positionality**

The process of existential phenomenology is designed to help the researcher to practice reflexivity and examine her positionality as related to the nature and meaning of the phenomena under investigation that she brings to her research situation. Reflexive bracketing requires that the researcher state her *positionality*, which is a way to locate the space in which she occupies as a researcher and through which she comes to engage in research (Merriam et al., 2001). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) state, “as qualitative researchers we are not separate from the study, with limited contact with our participants. Instead, we are firmly in all aspects of the research process and essential to it” (p. 61). Being aware of and interacting with the researcher’s own positionality helps her practice radical reflexivity (subjective self-awareness and awareness of self-awareness), which is essential to the integrity of qualitative research (Brown, 2006). What follows is a brief description of my positionality.

I came to this research as a 32-year-old, Asian female with a middle class background. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Linguistics and Master of Science degrees in Teacher Education, with a concentration in Foreign Language/ESL Education, and in Educational Psychology, with a concentration in Adult Education. Currently, I am pursuing my doctoral degree in Educational Psychology with a specialization in Collaborative Learning (CL). I have

also been teaching undergraduate Japanese language courses as a Graduate Teaching Associate at the University of Tennessee since 2002. Ontologically and epistemologically, I place myself in a constructivist paradigm. By this, I mean that I believe in multiple realities that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their particular vantage points. As such, the participants in this study and I engaged in mutually co-constructing the subjective reality that was under investigation (Hatch, 2002).

### **Analysis and Interpretation of the Bracketing Interview**

Examining the bracketing interview with the interviewer and other members of the research group helped clarify many of my experiences in the reflective practice (RP) course. In the interview, my story focused on how my participation in the course challenged my beliefs about the practice of teaching or my assumptions about what education is. Prior to the RP course, I viewed teaching and learning as something that occurs merely at an individual level and primarily through lecture (transferring knowledge from teacher to student) and group work (sharing knowledge with peers). This belief stemmed from my prior learning experience in formal classroom settings, particularly from elementary school through undergraduate school. However, a significant change took place in my view of teaching and learning as I participated in the RP course. For example, I came to understand that much learning can take place through engaging in dialogue with members of a group and this mode of discourse is a way of not only teaching and learning, but also of relating with others in the world.

In addition, although my RP experience differed markedly from any of my other course experiences, I did not respond to this new experience negatively, such as rejecting it. Instead, I found this experience to be a surprising and exciting to the extent that I had to make international

calls to talk to my family about my RP experience. Although this learning process was truly challenging for me, calling for me to push my own boundaries, I kept trying and, with the help and support of other members, I was able to extend myself and expand my potential in the end. Furthermore, as a Japanese teacher, I also came to view this type of teaching and learning, or relating with others, as something desirable for my students, and thus began incorporating it into my own teaching of the Japanese language and in relating with the students generally.

Analyzing the interview with the research group also helped illuminate some of the assumptions that I had about challenged beliefs and assumptions in an educational context. Some very important concepts were revealed to me as they could potentially influence the interview process with my study participants and the interpretation of the data. One assumption that I might bring to the research process was that participants brought the beliefs and assumptions that are important to them with them into the RP classroom. I also assumed that participating in the RP process would engage most, if not all, course participants in questioning these presuppositions, their prior experiences, and their ways of being in the world; this experience seemed as if it might serve as a turning point for some participants, meaning that it could potentially shift the grounds of experiences for them. I considered that nature of the course, designed specifically to help learners reflect on experiences and presumptions, could encourage them the questioning of assumptions and shifting of the ground.

Another strong assumption made evident in the interview was the importance that I placed on developing an awareness of individuals' assumptions and gaining frames of reference that are "more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2009). I particularly saw this importance from a teacher's point of view. That is, I considered it an educational goal for adult learners to engage in questioning their

presuppositions, breaking through any walls that previously restricted and distorted their understanding of the world, and acting on their own values and meanings. I had a strong affinity and respect for learners who strove to improve themselves by engaging with deep-level questions about their beliefs and challenging themselves to expand their potential.

I further assumed that adult educators hold the key to prompting and promoting this process, particularly through engaging them in RP and making explicit that which was uncritically accepted. This belief stemmed from the assertions of adult education theorists (e.g., Kegan, 1994; Knowles, 1980; Mezirow, 2000) that adult learners possess great potential for this type of learning as it is only well into adulthood that individuals develop reflective judgment and become capable of critically reflecting on their own assumptions as well as those of others. In reflecting on the way learners respond to their lives, I considered that fostering an awareness of learners' assumptions, both their own and those of others, can create significant contributions to the learners' subsequent life experiences. Given this understanding, I disregarded addressing any possible negative consequences or implications of the incorporation of RP for learners and their future experiences.

Participating in the bracketing interview and analyzing it with the research group offered me a great opportunity to examine some of the possible presuppositions that I might bring into the study process and how they might potentially interfere with the interviewing process and its subsequent interpretation. I was also made aware that bracketing is not a one-time event: it is indeed a dynamic, ongoing process in which the researcher engages in cycles of reflecting and maintaining open, non-judgmental attitudes throughout her research process so that she can best understand participants' experiences from their viewpoints. In an attempt to negotiate this complication, I worked to consistently engage in a cycle of reflecting and setting aside my

assumptions throughout my research process, while also acknowledging that it is impossible to completely remove my preconceptions. Furthermore, I also engaged in triangulation with the research group for data analysis and interpretation and solicited participant comments on the resultant themes and thematic structure.

## **Research Site**

The research site was a graduate course entitled *Reflective Practice in Education and Psychology*, offered by the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, at a land grant university in the United States in the Spring Semester of 2012. The course schedule consisted of one three-hour session per week for one semester, or 14 weeks, with nine graduate students and one instructor. The primary goal of this course was to help members become reflective practitioners in various aspects of their lives – such as professional, social, and personal. To achieve this goal, members explored concepts of RP and other related ideas, including types of teaching and learning and elements of CL. They also engaged in critical reflection on their individual and group experiences, both in and outside of the class, throughout the semester. This learning took place within a context that incorporated CL, along with other types of teaching and learning, such as lecture; within this learning context, dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999) was employed as the primary mode of discourse and reflection. Chapter II discusses more about this learning context and how class participants engage in RP in this environment in the section *RP in the classroom context*.

Course requirements included the following: 1) reading the course text and other assigned materials, 2) writing and posting on the course Blackboard site a one-page description of learning autobiography and a critical incident and presenting them in class, 3) writing and



posting on Blackboard a short reflection on each class and respond to others' reflections, and 4) writing and posting on Blackboard a 3-4 page reflective statement addressed to all other members of the course. These materials served as a way to continuously engage members in dialogue and critically reflect on experiences and assumptions. In particular, members participated in dialogue on various topics that relates to RP in both face-to-face and online environments. These topics were developed directly from learners' lived experiences (as shared in biographies, critical incidents, and other forms) and their experiences and understandings of the RP process as they participated in the RP course. All members, including the course instructor, engaged in RP as learners, constructors of new knowledge, and facilitators. Although the instructor served as the major facilitator of RP, other members also learned to take part in the process as facilitators by practicing this role with other members of the group. As the semester proceeded, members learned not only to incorporate newly gained insights and skills into various aspects of their lives, but also to help others reflect on their own and others' experiences and assumptions. Participating in this class thus engaged learners in a continuous cycle of action and reflection as a regular part of their practices and for the development of these practices.

## **Participants**

All members of the RP class were invited to participate in the study according to pre-selected criteria: 1) having experienced the phenomenon of challenged beliefs and assumptions as they participated in the RP class and 2) being willing and able to discuss this experience with me (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). On the next to final class meeting of the RP course, I visited the class for the purpose of recruiting volunteer participants for the study. The instructor introduced me to the class and left the classroom. After telling members of the class about myself, I

provided them with a brief overview of the study. I then told the students that they would have an opportunity after the course was over to voluntarily permit their interview and written responses to be included as data for the study. I assured them that their course grades would not be affected in any way by whether or not they volunteered for the study as my collection of volunteer participants' data would not commence until after final grades were turned in at the end of the semester. I then provided the students with the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) to help them learn more about the study and the information about participant involvement, including risks, benefits, and confidentiality. I also responded to the questions that students had about the study and their involvement in the study. Students were not asked to identify themselves as volunteer or non-volunteers at this time. Instead, I asked them to indicate their choice in a reply to a follow-up email that I would send to all class members after the instructor submitted grades for all students in the course. However, all of the students signed the Informed Consent Form at our class meeting.

A total of eight students from the RP course volunteered to participate in this study. Through email communication, each volunteer and I scheduled a meeting for an individual interview sometime after the instructor notified me that grades had been posted for the semester. All participants were 18 years of age or older at the time of study. Thomas and Pollio (2002) suggested that the number of participants range between six and twelve, depending on the number of volunteers who meet the criteria and when data saturation is established with redundancy in thematic structures. Saturation refers to the point at which additional and diverse cases are assessed and are found not to add any new insights to the thematic description of the experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). My relationship with the participants was strictly defined

as researcher and subject. No incentives or extra course credit were offered to the participants for their participation in this study.

**Participant risks.** This study presented no inherent risks of harm to its participants. However, to help ensure that participants' risks were no more than minimal, I took the following measures. First, volunteer participants were presented the Informed Consent Form and asked to sign it if they wished to take part in the study. Second, anyone might decline to participate in the study without fear of penalty of any kind; participants might also choose to terminate their participation in the study at any time without penalty. Third, participation or lack of participation in this study did not affect course performance or course grades of the participants and non-participants. To ensure that assessment of students, both participants and non-participants, was not influenced in any way, data were not collected until after final grades for the course had been submitted at the end of the semester. Fourth, pseudonyms were used to replace all names and any other identifiable information to preserve anonymity. Fifth, members of the Interpretive Research Group utilized for feedback on analysis were required to sign the Confidentiality Form. Electronic data were stored securely in a locked file on my password-protected computer. Printed data were kept in a locked cabinet in my locked office on campus. The signed Informed Consent Forms were placed in a sealed envelope and kept in a locked cabinet in the major professor's office on campus. The data were made available only to me and persons assisting with the study (e.g., the University of Tennessee's Interpretive Research Group) unless a participant specifically provided written permission to do otherwise. Finally, audio-recordings were destroyed immediately after they are transcribed. All other data sources, consisting of participants' documents, would be destroyed upon completion of the study. Informed Consent Forms would be stored for three years following the study.

## **Data Collection**

After receiving the approval of the Human Subjects Committee of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Tennessee to collect data on human subjects (Appendix B), I collected data from volunteer participants who met the two criteria described above. The source of the data consisted of individual, phenomenological interviews with the participants. My overall goal regarding data collection was to gather a variety of rich, descriptive accounts of the participants' experiences with their challenged beliefs and assumptions to subject to thematic analysis.

**Phenomenological interviews.** All interviews were conducted in a small meeting room on campus in the beginning of May, 2012, a few weeks after the course ended. I opened each interview with an icebreaker of phatic speech, such as "Tell me a little about yourself," and proceeded to the phenomenological procedure described by Thomas and Pollio (2002). In particular, I continued naturally to a key phenomenological question or request, such as "Tell me about a time when you had your beliefs and assumptions questioned or challenged as you participated in your RP class." This question was designed not to lead the participants to any particular directions, but to allow for a broad range of descriptive responses from them while also helping them focus on the topic of their experiences. This was then followed by some probing questions derived from the participants' own words rather than from a predetermined set of questions, to help further the understanding of their experiences.

At this point, I worked to engage in dialogue with the participants, assuming "a respectful position of vis-à-vis the real expert, the subject" (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 29). Instead of attempting to assert control over the direction of the interview, I approached the

process from the “humble stance of perpetual learner” (Thomas, 2005, p. 73). Overall, the goal of the interview was to understand the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants from their “first-person world” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 32). Finally, at the end of the interview, the participants were asked to fill out the Demographic Form (Appendix C) to help provide the contextual backgrounds of their experiential accounts.

All interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and lasted approximately 50 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes, depending on when the participants indicated that they had no further information to share. After the interviews were completed, I transcribed the audio-recordings into Microsoft Word documents for analysis. The recordings of volunteer participant interviews were destroyed immediately after transcription was completed. The transcripts will be destroyed when the dissertation study is completed.

### **Data Analysis**

Thomas and Pollio (2002) emphasized the group interpretive process to ensure rigor of phenomenological research methods, and I thus worked collaboratively with the University of Tennessee’s Phenomenological Research Interpretive Group for the analysis of data and the development and refinement of a thematic structure. The group is comprised of interdisciplinary faculty and students and has assisted numerous researchers with data analysis and with the methodology itself. Although not all group members may be experts in the phenomenon being studied, they are generally experienced at working with transcripts from an array of fields. As the primary researcher, I first worked through a sampling of transcripts with the research group to arrive at a thematic description of interviews, then continued independently interpreting the

remaining texts and developing a thematic structure, and finally returned to the group to present the initial structure and its supporting evidence for their feedback.

**Data analysis with the research group.** To ensure rigorous data analysis of the study's findings, I first met with the research group for their assistance with my analysis of the data. Before assisting with this research project, all members of the group were required to sign a pledge of confidentiality (Appendix D). After receiving the signed confidentiality form, I provided the group copies of interview transcripts (with all identifying information removed), and we proceeded to read the transcripts for meaning units that would ultimately serve as the basis for themes. This interpretation process was performed in a similar manner as the bracketing interview described above. I interacted little in the discussion during this group process, except for sometimes clarifying statements as requested by group members. Words, phrases, and paragraphs that appeared significant were highlighted and meaning units were identified by the group members. The marked transcripts were returned to me at the end of the research meetings. Of the eight total transcripts, three underwent full group analysis. Three transcripts were deemed sufficient by the group as the themes themselves were reviewed by them when they examined the thematic structure.

**Development of the thematic structure.** After working through a sampling of transcripts with the research group, I continued to read and interpret the remaining transcripts on my own in order to develop a thematic structure. More specifically, I implemented a thematic analysis technique suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002) and utilized in similar studies involving phenomenological data of lived experiences (e.g., Pollio et al., 1997). Interview transcripts were analyzed in a search for salient themes to the point of redundancy. van Manen (1990) described *themes* as an interpreter's experience "of focus, of meaning, of point" within

the unfolding narrative of the participants' accounts (p. 87). They are the "patterns of description that repetitively occur as important aspects of a participant's description of his/her experience" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 37). This approach relies less on quantification and more on the researcher's reflection on the words and the meanings of these words within the context of their utterances and the participants' narratives as a whole. Themes emerged primarily from three sources: 1) the participants' meanings; 2) the investigator's meanings; and 3) the intersubjective meanings shared by the participants, the investigator, and the various interpreters of the experiential accounts (Hein & Austin, 2001). In this study, members of the research group served as the various interpreters.

For the analysis of the data, I first carefully read each of the transcripts in its entirety several times to gain a sense of the whole interview. I then demarcated shifts in meaning and identified possible meaning units or descriptive codes within the transcript. This was done by reading aloud the transcribed interview and highlighting any possible areas of importance to the experience. I also searched for any key words and metaphors in the participant's account and wrote them next to the highlighted sections by using the comment function of the Microsoft Word to remember the essence of the paragraph. Next, I reflected on each meaning unit to derive insights from the original context and develop a thematic description of each participant's experience, using her actual words. As I was reflecting, I also made notes in the margins of the transcript to help me remember possible themes that might be emerging. I then collected representative quotes from each interview in a new Microsoft Word document, one document for each participant, and organized them according to subject areas. After going over the individual document many times, possible themes began to emerge from the transcribed interview, and

accordingly, the thematic description was revised and rearranged with appropriate quotations from the transcript.

The next step in the interpretive process involved a cross comparison of the interview data. Once all of the individual transcripts had been analyzed, I read across the transcripts and compared them to ascertain any recurring patterns or consistent themes between the interviews that described “experiential patterns exhibited in diverse situations” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 37). The data from the individual compilations, including representative quotations from the participants, were then collected and reorganized in another Microsoft Word document. After several weeks of analyzing, thinking, and relocating the meaning units in this document, four clear areas emerged that described the experience of challenged beliefs and assumptions. I then reflected on all of the collected quotes, searching for possible sub-themes within the global themes. Finally, I synthesized and distilled the thematic descriptions, using the specific words and phrases of one or more participants, to convey the essential meaning that defined each thematic description.

**Refinement of the thematic structure.** Upon the completion of my independent thematization of the data, I took a list of proposed global themes accompanied by specific textual support (e.g., quotes) to a research meeting. I presented four tentative themes to the research group: 1) not connected and connected, 2) uncomfortable and comfortable, 3) same and different, and 4) ingrained and new. The group examined these themes by considering, for instance, whether they offered a clear picture of human experience of the challenged beliefs and assumptions and whether they were supported by data from the individual interviews. The group also helped me decide on the most apt descriptive terms for each theme. We then examined interconnections between the global themes, and I made notes to describe salient relationships.



Finally, it was possible to identify a ground theme on which the major themes rested, and the various accounts were interpreted for what was implied as an essential condition for the experiences recounted to have taken place. Overall, the goal of the group meeting was to establish agreement between the group members and me as to various aspects of the findings and improve the original description that accounts for thematic possibilities in experiential accounts provided by the participants. After the group discussion, I reflected on the relationship between the themes and the ground and made the fourth theme *ingrained and new* as a part of the ground, instead of an individual theme. In addition, an account of the group's feedback was incorporated into preparing the final report of the study's findings.

The whole process of deriving a thematic structure from the participants' experiential narratives is summarized as follows:

1. *Immersion*: Read each transcript in its entirety multiple times to gain a sense of the whole.
2. *Situated structural description*: Demarcated shifts in meaning, or identified meaning units or areas of importance to the experience, within the transcript.
3. *Situated reflection*: Reflected on each of the meaning units to derive insights from its original context and developed a thematic description of each participant's experience, using her actual words.
4. *General structural description*: Read across the transcripts for recurring patterns or what they have in common.
5. *General thematic description*: Synthesized and distilled the general descriptions, using the words of the participants, to convey the essential meaning that defines each thematic description.

6. *Thematic interconnections*: Examined interconnections between each global theme and describe salient relationships.
7. *Analysis of the ground*: Identified a ground theme, a common meaning against which global themes emerge, and interpreted the various accounts for what is implied as an essential condition for the experiences recounted to have taken place.
8. *Checking structure against original interview records*: Checked the thematic descriptions and their supporting evidence against the original texts. (Modified Graves, 2006, p. 111)

I followed this procedure in analyzing all eight transcripts in search of salient themes. Saturation of the data for this study occurred approximately after the sixth interview conducted. Overall, the goal of this thematic analysis was to generate the essence, or invariant themes of, experience that surpass the variations presented in individual accounts.

**Participant feedback.** Upon the completion of this stage of data analysis, I prepared a summary of the study's findings and sent it to the participants through email to seek their feedback (Appendices E and F). In the email, the participants were asked to review the findings and share their responses as to whether or not the overall findings corresponded to their experiences. They were also encouraged to share any other feedback they might have about the findings. Accounts of the participants' responses were included in the final report of the study. My hope was that peer review (the collaborative process with the Interpretive Research Group) and member checking (the participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations) would serve as strategies to establish reliability and validity of the study's findings.

In short, the process of data collection, data analysis, and preparation of a final report was conducted as suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002, p. 45) (Fig. 3). The figure provides an

overview of the procedure for this phenomenological research. In addition, approval was obtained from IRB to renew the initial approval of this study after its expiration date (Appendix G).

### **Evaluation of Phenomenological Research**

In phenomenological research, the issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability are addressed in different ways derived from quantitative research and some of other qualitative research designs (Morrow, 2005). I describe below how these terms are understood in a phenomenological research paradigm – consistency, trustworthiness, and transferability – and how they were addressed in this study.

#### **Consistency**

In phenomenology, reliability is often measured according to standards of consistency. The issue of consistency refers to the extent to which findings are an accurate representation of the total population under study and are consistent over time. This means that the consistency of data is established when the study is reproduced in other contexts and yields similar findings in relation to the essence of the experience. Findings are also considered to be reliable when another individual is able to see and understand the recurring themes and the ground of the study developed by the researcher, regardless of whether or not this individual agrees with these findings. In this study, the issue of consistency were addressed in the following ways: 1) by analyzing the data until saturation of the data reached a higher level, or redundancy occurred within the data and 2) by seeking peer review through discussing with the Interpretive Research

Group the overall themes and ground of the experience that I initially developed from my data analysis.

### **Trustworthiness**

The validity of phenomenological research refers to the degree to which the study investigates what it was intended to investigate. To ensure validity, the method employed should be rigorous and appropriate to the research topic, and the findings should be plausible and illuminating (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The issue of validity also involves trustworthiness of the research findings. To address this issue of trustworthiness, I worked to ensure the fit between the thematic structure and its corroborating evidence and to stay as close as possible to the participants' accounts of their experiences. Member checking was also employed to solicit participants' views of the credibility of the study's findings and interpretations.

### **Transferability**

It is widely acknowledged that qualitative research cannot be generalized beyond the setting or group of people under investigation. However, with regard to phenomenology, this claim is contested. In discussing what they call *phenomenological generalizability*, Thomas and Pollio (2002) maintained that the "validity" of phenomenological research depends upon readers of research reports instead of solely upon purity of method. These authors claimed that "when and if a description rings true, each specific reader who derives insight from the results of a phenomenological study may be thought to extend its generalizability" (p. 42). In other words, generalizability in phenomenology is addressed by means of transferability, that is, when readers of a research report are able to apply the findings to other similar situations. To help readers in

the process of determining whether and how the findings may transfer to other contexts, I aimed to produce variations in data by obtaining different narratives, or saturation of the data. I also worked to supply thick, detailed and rich, descriptions of the research context, method, process, and findings.

Morrow (2005) proposed alternative criteria with which to evaluate phenomenological, more generally qualitative, research. Below are some of these criteria as summarized by (2006, p. 91), followed by the ways in which I addressed these criteria.

1. *Disclosure*: Does the author examine and disclose to readers about his/her personal, theoretical, and methodological orientations, values, and assumptions that could potentially affect the research, thus take the position of owning his/her perspective? – My positionality and bracketing interview helped illuminate some of my experiences, values, and assumptions as related to the study. This interview was analyzed with the assistance of the Interpretive Research Group, and results of this analysis were discussed in this chapter in *Analysis and Interpretation of the Bracketing Interview*.
2. *Situating the sample*: Is the group of participants adequately described and situated in terms of a brief autobiographical statement and the particular events they chose to discuss? – Demographic data of the participants (Appendix C) were collected at the end of the interview and used to provide the contextual background of their experiential accounts of their challenged beliefs and assumptions. A description of the background is offered in the section preceding discussion of the findings (*Participant Synopses*).
3. *Grounding in examples*: Are the findings grounded in examples that come directly from accounts provided by participants to support the researcher's interpretations? – Once the

thematic structure was developed, it was checked against the original texts to ensure consistency between them.

4. *Credibility checks*: Was the credibility of the research checked by presentation to an interpretive group or by returning to participants for the evaluation of tentative findings? – Member checking and peer review were sought after my initial analysis of the data in order to help establish the credibility of the findings.
5. *Coherence*: Not only the themes that emerged from the data, but are the relationships between these themes also described? Does the description of these relationships coherent and make sense to readers? – Once the global themes were developed, I examined, individually and with the research group, interconnections between these themes and described salient relationships in detail.
6. *Fairness*: Was the investigator fair in providing evidence from across the experiential accounts of participants, instead of focusing on a few accounts for evidence? – I ensured that the developed themes reflected the accounts of all participants and that these themes were supported by descriptions of multiple and different accounts.
7. *Dependability*: Are the findings dependable; i.e., was a systematic process described and followed during the investigative process? – I worked to provide a rich, thick description of the process to help establish the dependability of the findings.
8. *Triangulation*: Are the findings triangulated? In another word, how consistent and trustworthy are the analysis and interpretation of the data? – I engaged in trianguration with the research group for data analysis and interpretation and solicited participant comments on the developed themes and thematic structure.

## **Summary**

Chapter III included an overview of the research design method of the study. Phenomenology was addressed from a historical perspective to offer a background for this methodology. The chapter also contained the four attributes of phenomenology: world, others, body, and time. My hope was that the discussion of attributes would help readers gain greater understanding of the phenomenological method. The next section addressed the research procedure, including the bracketing interview, positionality, research site and participants, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter IV addresses the findings from the analysis of the interview data.

## **CHAPTER IV:**

### **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to further understand the lived experiences of adult students who have had their beliefs challenged or questioned in a graduate RP class. Eight adult students who were enrolled in the RP course as part of their master's and doctoral programs at a state university and who had experiences of challenged assumptions were interviewed about their experiences. As outlined in Chapter III, this study utilized the phenomenological method described by Thomas and Pollio (2002).

#### **Participant Synopses**

##### **Participant Overview**

All of the eight participants in this study had experienced challenges to their beliefs and assumptions as they participated in the RP course and were willing to share these experiences for this study. Demographically, the participants were a good representation of graduate students enrolled in the RP course over the years (Table 1). All of the participants were women, pursuing either a master's or doctoral degree in Educational Psychology and Counseling. The racial diversity of the participants was seven Caucasians and one African-American; this racial diversity of the participants is comparable to the racial breakdown of the student population of the university (83% Caucasian and 7% African-American). The participants had various educational interests, including business, computer science, counseling, and nursing. Their ages ranged from 23 to 62 years, with the mean of 38.



**Table 1. Participant Information**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Graduate Degree</b>	<b>Graduate Program</b>	<b>Current Occupation</b>
Annie	Female	27	Caucasian	M.S.	Adult Learning	Training specialist
Hallie	Female	62	African-American	M.S.	Adult Learning	Eligibility counselor
Jasmine	Female	45	Caucasian	M.S.	Adult Learning	Graduate research assistant
June	Female	33	Caucasian	Ph.D.	Adult Learning	Assistant professor, program director
Kate	Female	55	Caucasian	Ph.D.	Adult Learning	Construction worker
Kim	Female	31	Caucasian	Ph.D.	Adult Learning	Nurse educator
Trinity	Female	23	Caucasian	Ph.D.	Evaluation, Statistics, & Measurement	Graduate assistant
Victoria	Female	31	Caucasian	Ph.D.	Adult Learning	Reading instructor

To help readers understand better the study's findings, I provide below a synopsis for each participant to provide context of her lived experience in the RP course. Each synopsis contains a participant's general background, her overall experience with the RP course, and a short definition of what RP means to her. With each synopsis, a selection of quotes from the interview offers her perspective on the meaning of RP and her experience in the RP course. The names used below and throughout this study are pseudonyms and not the real names of the participants.

### **Participant 1: Annie**

As a 27-year-old Caucasian female, Annie was pursuing a Master of Science degree in Educational Psychology with an Adult Learning focus. She was single and had lived most of her life in the Tennessee area. In addition to studying, she worked as a training specialist for a software company, assisting educators at hospitals with learning an employee management

system. In her free time, she participated in sports activities and storytelling to children at church.

Annie claimed that she “literally knew nothing” about RP to her prior to the RP course. However, participating in the class with an open mind, she came to enjoy the course, especially the group with which she worked and the practicality of RP. She stated that the course especially helped her with asking back, listening more intently, and not losing the train of her thought.

After leaving the RP classroom, Annie expressed her understanding of RP as:

a different way of having conversations. . . . I think the starting point is caring about the person. . . and pay better attention to what he or she is saying. . . . Slowing down, listening intently, asking questions, listening for meaning, and watching for cues are what RP means to me.

## **Participant 2: Hallie**

Hallie was a 62-year-old African-American female, working toward her second master’s degree in Educational Psychology with a concentration on Adult Learning. She was originally from Illinois, divorced with four adult children, 20 grandchildren, and several great grandchildren. Her educational background was in Communication and Counseling, and she enjoyed sewing clothes and making crafts in her free time.

Hallie found the RP course to be “very interesting and very worthwhile,” while also different from what she had expected or had been accustomed to as a classroom practice. She believed that the classroom atmosphere with the candle helped create a calming and comfortable environment for the group to learn, even when the subject of a conversation was “intense.” Hallie described her understanding of RP as “an opportunity to think what you are gonna say,

say things that would be beneficial not only to yourself but to other people, and keep an open mind.”

### **Participant 3: Jasmine**

As a 45-year-old Caucasian female, Jasmine was pursuing her Master of Science degree in Educational Psychology with an Adult Learning focus. She had always lived in areas of Tennessee and was currently married with two daughters and three stepsons in their 20s. After working as an elementary school teacher for several years, she returned to school to be a part of the Adult Learning program.

Due to her unfamiliarity with the course content, Jasmine was very uncomfortable with the course during the first few weeks. However, she gradually became more comfortable about halfway through the semester after understanding that dialogue was not about “doing it right,” and when she gained confidence in herself and her capabilities. She believed that she learned a great deal about talking with others, asking back, and reflecting after acting. Jasmine states that RP is about

an awareness of my feelings and thoughts. And the other person or people I’m dialoging with, knowing where they are and taking the time to understand their thoughts and feelings. And sharing mine and reflecting back on that at later times.

### **Participant 4: June**

June was a 33-year-old Caucasian female, working on her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology with a focus on Adult Learning. She was born and raised in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and was married with two sons, four and eight years old, in addition to several pets. At the time

of her participation in the study, she worked as a program director and assistant professor of radiology and radiologic technology at a local community college.

June incorporated into her practice some of the strategies she had learned in RP, such as requesting others to say more about their earlier utterances. However, she continued to struggle to relate with her colleagues in a reflective manner due to the competitive nature of her discipline and their lack of training in RP. For June, RP involved “individuals coming together to reflect and create new knowledge.”

### **Participant 5: Kate**

Kate was a 53-year-old female, pursuing a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology with a concentration on Adult Learning. She was married with no children and worked as a part-time construction worker. She became a member of the program after studying in a College of Business Ph.D. program for two years. Upon the completion of her study, she planned to teach business courses at a college level to make a difference in the lives of young adults. She also hoped to get involved in organizational development in the business field in order to contribute to the sustainable future through helping business workers with their learning.

Overall, Kate found her experience with the RP course to be enjoyable and helpful, especially the practical aspect and the focus on the process. She described RP as

the key to making sense of the world around me. By reflecting, I can question assumptions I or others have, who else may have knowledge of X that can help me learn, why things happen the way they do, what can be done to improve a situation, how can I learn from events or others, [and whether or not] I even need to be doing X or is there a better thing to do. Reflecting together with others widens that circle of sense-making and

its power because others bring their knowledge and experience to the table. RP allows me a better understanding of my world and, with others, and it can contribute to the social construction of knowledge. RP is a better way of thinking that I can use alone or with others in all areas of my life.

### **Participant 6: Kim**

As a 31 year-old Caucasian female, Kim had recently begun working on her doctoral degree in Educational Psychology with an Adult Learning focus. She was married to a doctoral student and had no children. Kim joined the program after studying nursing and working as a nurse, specializing in the area of step-down telemetry cardiac for almost 11 years. Besides studying, Kim also taught Health Assessment and Medsearch Nursing in the Department of Nursing at a university. By studying in the adult learning program, she hoped to gain another perspective, different from the one she had developed in studying in nursing.

Kim stated that she “surprisingly enjoyed” the RP course despite the format that was different from what she was accustomed. She views RP as

slowing down. . . . It really is about coming in, talking for a little while, and really trying to slow down. RP to me really is that slowness – are you able to really listen and focus on what someone is trying to say? And then, trying to put your own perceptions or suspending those assumptions. . . . RP is about constantly thinking about what other people are saying, trying to clarify their statements, and really getting a chance to know someone else.

### **Participant 7: Trinity**

Trinity was a 23-year-old Caucasian female, working on her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology and Counseling with a concentration on Evaluation, Statistics, and Measurement. She was originally from Michigan and lived with her fiancé and a rescued dog. Her educational backgrounds were in psychology and philosophy, and she enjoyed learning new things in a variety of areas.

Trinity stated that the RP was one of her favorite graduate courses, describing it as “a place to go when I wished to have a break from everything else.” At the same time, she occasionally struggled with the course as it was hard to understand some concepts and know that she was making mistakes in the RP process. She viewed RP as

learning how to listen better, think as both a group and an individual as opposed to just as an individual, create a meaning that you wouldn't get in other places, and share something new.

### **Participant 8: Victoria**

Victoria was a 28-year-old Caucasian female, majoring in Educational Psychology with a focus on Adult Learning. She was single but involved in a committed relationship. Born in Canada, she moved to the U.S. when she was six years old. Her educational background was Reading and Language Arts for K-12 students. Her career background included working in publishing and teaching in high school and community college. At the time of the study, she was teaching reading and writing at a local community college and hoped to improve her practice through learning in the doctoral program and with her father, also a teacher and creativity specialist. In her free time, she read, practiced Yoga, and enjoyed hiking and biking.

The concept of RP was not unfamiliar to Victoria as she had participated in another course with a similar topic prior to enrolling in the RP course. However, she still struggled to differentiate RP from dialogue as they are interconnected closely. She employed a metaphor of Yoga to describe how RP is

very similar to Yoga in that you try to slow things down and be in the moment. . . and be very responsive to other people who are there. So it's about getting in touch with yourself and other people and trying to create a new understanding of each other and the topic of discussion.

### **Thematic Structure**

According to Thomas and Pollio (2002), themes are “patterns of description that repetitively recur as important aspects of a participant’s description of his/her experience” (p. 37). Upon the completion of the data analysis, three themes emerged: 1) being connected, 2) being alike, and 3) being comfortable. Each of these themes exists in a continuum of not connected and connected, different and alike, and uncomfortable and comfortable, respectively. It is important to note that the two aspects are not two separate and opposing experiences; participants’ experiences are thus found anywhere within the spectrum of these aspects.

The themes are described below and include the accounts of all members of the RP group, including Howard (instructor) and James (student), who did not participate in the study but was mentioned by participants in their interviews. In addition, in order to demonstrate the teacher-student dynamics that the participants experienced with the instructor of the RP course, both his first name (Howard) and last name (Phillips) are used as referred to by each participant.

## **Theme 1: Being Connected**

A very powerful theme that emerged from the ground of time for the participants was *being connected*: not connected (“I had trouble connecting”) and connected (“It became like a family dynamic”). There were two major sub-themes for the theme of not connected that stood out against this experience: 1) not connecting with group members and 2) not being able to have dialogical conversations. As for the theme of connected, it consisted of three major sub-themes: 1) making connections, 2) building relationships, and 3) engaging in dialogue.

### **“I had trouble connecting.” – not connected**

**Not connecting with group members.** Before participants first entered the RP classroom, they had already formed assumptions about not relating with other members of the group well. This experience was represented by Trinity’s description of the time when she first opened the classroom door. Realizing that she had little or no acquaintance with most of the members, she anticipated that she and other members might not be able to relate with them to work well as a group:

I saw a bunch of people I didn’t know in general, I didn’t know any of them in that class. Nobody I knew in my program or anything that’s close like. In terms of proximity, I hadn’t seen any of these people around. And I was like, “How can these people be similar to me? Is this gonna work? Is this gonna be a good dynamic?” Obviously, we were gonna have to talk a lot in this class. I didn’t know how it was gonna work out. Likewise, Annie shared her assumption about the possibility of group members having conflicts due to the nature of the RP course and her related experience in another course:



I assumed there would be confrontation amongst the students in class because we were supposed to be talking about deep things from our experiences and what we believe about certain things. . . .people are attached to their experiences and emotions flow with experiences.

Participants' assumptions also developed from their initial interactions with other members at the beginning of the semester. For instance, Kate recalled a time when Kim shared how her family had framed what she wished to have in her life. Recounting the difference in their backgrounds, Kate explained: "I didn't really connect with her exactly because her family is a lot more conservative than mine in a lot of ways." Furthermore, Victoria shared her initial impression of not being able to connect with experiences of the group members and how this perception led her to disconnect and shut down:

I think at the beginning of the term. . . sometimes the group started talking about marriage, children, or some sort of experience I hadn't had. I had trouble connecting because I didn't have those experiences. It disconnected me from the whole discussion, or the whole group. How am I going to connect with that because I don't have a daughter or even a niece to have a parallel experience [laughs]? So it made me shut down to a certain extent because I knew that I couldn't connect.

**Not being able to have dialogical conversations.** The theme of not-connected also represented participants' experiences of discourse that was not dialogue-oriented. Referring to the engagement in this type of discourse as "immature moments" and "not so good times," participants recalled the group's tendency to engage in a sharing of experiences and opinions and interview-like discourse rather than dialogue, especially at the beginning of the semester.

Victoria provided an instance of the group's engagement in a discussion: "We were just having

discourse about marriage and children like, ‘Oh yeah, me, too. I did whatever with my daughter.’” Trinity shared a similar experience of talking about the concept of relationship, “...we just kept talking, or swapping stories, as opposed to trying to talk about concepts, theories, framing, and things like that.”

Echoing these experiences, both June and Hallie described a time when the instructor shared his learning autobiography and how it turned into interviewing. June stated:

[Jarvis] did a learning autobiography once, and that was our fault, too, it became more of an interview than it was RP. . . .it was totally an interview [and] there wasn’t any RP. But we were so intrigued about his history that it was really hard to get away from him and bring it to the middle. X was on him the whole time because we were trying to get interesting stuff, so we never really dialogued. That would have been one opportunity all semester, and we blew it.

Likewise, Hallie observed:

Even when it was [Jarvis’] turn, we ended up interviewing him as opposed to dialoging with him because we were so interested in who he is. So he pointed that out; he was on the hot seat, and he was being interviewed. There was no dialogue going on, so he made it clear. When the next time came around, we still wanted know, so he said, “We are getting into an interview again. Let’s not do that. Let’s get into a dialogue.” It’s just hard to do that, especially when something is so interesting, you know? You wanna know about the person, then you really do get into a habit of interviewing him, asking a lot of questions, as opposed to pulling from what they’ve said to include everyone else.

Participants struggled to facilitate or engage in the process in the way that would lead the group to new levels of understanding and jointly construct new knowledge.

Reflecting on these “immature moments,” participants considered the factors that potentially contributed to the group’s failure to have dialogical conversations. Kim admitted her use of improper questions in the process: “I was not asking back or asking closed questions like, ‘Do you think this, this, or that? Yes or no?’” Echoing this experience, June commented: “I was asking the what-happened questions, instead of dialoging questions, because I was just so interested in the story.” For Annie, the problem was inadequately facilitating the process when she shared her learning autobiography and engaged the group in the RP process as the primary facilitator:

Instead of consciously thinking, “How can I take this to dialogue?”, I was just answering questions. . . . I should have realized that we were just talking about my story and we were not getting to a new place of learning and understanding about each other, which was our goal and what we hoped to do each week. . . .Dr. Phillips also conveyed to us that just swapping stories doesn’t necessarily lead to somewhere else and that’s why you have to dig deeper with the questions you are supposed to be asking. Unfortunately, I just didn’t know about these things at that time.

Other challenges for participants included not knowing how to progress in the process of discourse; in Trinity’s experience, this meant that

. . .there were times when I felt like a deer in headlights. Or, I just didn’t know what to do next like: “What do I say to keep the conversation going?”, or “What are some ways I can make sure that I say something back to you and it doesn’t get redundant?”

Annie concurred with Trinity: “I was like, ‘I should probably do something, but I don’t know what to do,’ so I just didn’t do anything at that point.” The group’s lack of engagement in

dialogue related closely to their experiences of challenged assumptions, described in the next section *Engaging in dialogue*.

**“It became like a family dynamic.” – connected**

According to participants, their assumptions of not-connected shifted over time through their actual experiences of being connected with other group members. As they learned to engage in dialogue as a group, they found similarities and connections with other members and built relationships with them over the course of the semester.

**Making connections.** First, participants shared their experiences of relating with one another better through finding similarities and making connections in the RP course. These experiences were summarized by Trinity:

When we shared our experiences, I thought we were very similar in ways that I wouldn't have thought before, and I realized that there were connections that we would have never known if we hadn't taken the class. There were some points when I didn't think that some people thought in a certain way. But when I expressed that thought, there was an agreement, or “Oh, I've thought that, too,” that I didn't expect much.

Echoing this, Kate told a story of her unanticipated connecting moment with James and some other members as they shared and dialogued on their similar experiences from the past:

I remember the week we talked about a critical incident for James. . . learning that his daughter was autistic. And there were me and several other people in the class that had similar experiences as him although not exactly the same. . . . And we could all connect in some way. . . I remember thinking in my head, “I had no idea this many people would identify with my story!”

Likewise, Victoria described her moment of connection with James when she found that they had parallel experiences regarding their families:

There was a connection that I thought [James] and I had through our parents in that it was more like go and find something that you want to do rather than stay in the small town, at home. I asked him about that, and he connected with me in that way because my critical incident was about my mom telling me to come to Oregon even though I was looking for a job both in New Jersey and here. I really wanted to be here, but she turned to me one day and said, “I don’t even know why you are looking in New Jersey. You should really just go to Oregon. If it doesn’t work out, you can come back.” . . .And James had a very similar experience with his family. On the surface, James and I don’t really have a lot in common in a lot of ways. I feel like he thought I was one of the people that he couldn’t connect to very much at least at the very beginning. But I think through some of those experiences we’d had with our family, we found that we had a lot more connections.

That was definitely an affirming moment that we had a connection.

In addition to experiences, participants also connected more with one another through finding resemblances among their perspectives and backgrounds. For instance, Kim described how she had built a connection with another student who had similar perspectives on relationships and belief systems:

I connected with this one student that had a divorce because she had the best analogy I could relate to. . . .my belief about relationship is that you have individual circles, and the part that overlaps slightly is where you have those commonalities and join things together, but you are still two separate spheres. And her belief was very similar to mine. So I guess that’s how I related to this one student because I felt more like her in terms of

the three circles where we have some overlapping in the relationship but we are still two separate people.

When I related to this other student that talked about the relationship with circles, she also shared with us that she had a strong sense of religion. So her belief system is probably more similar to mine than anyone else's in the class. I think that's why I would say that reinforced our connection because of our beliefs.

For Victoria, moments of connection came not only when she found connections with members, but also when she helped them make connections among themselves even when she was not involved directly in these connections. She described making these broader connections and what it meant to her:

When we were talking about relationships between ourselves and siblings. . . I feel like I managed to connect other people's stories in the way that was an aha moment for myself. . . . seeing parallels between their stories, I brought back to Hallie because I think she had brought up the idea of being generational a little bit. I said, "The part of my feeling is that a lot of my contemporaries want to feel as though they've really made that decision to themselves. That's not like this is what you are supposed to do: either I'm going to stay at home, or I'm gonna have a career, or I'm gonna have a career and then stay at home, but they've made that decision." Then, I brought that to June and asked, "Does that connect with what you are feeling?" She said, "Yeah," she thought so. She felt like [she and her sister] didn't have butting of heads because each of them really had made their decision with the full knowledge, and they didn't feel like they were forced into it. Being able to make connections like that even when I don't have that experience at all

was meaningful to me. I was able to come in and make a broader connection, made it be more of an aha connection [laughs] with somebody else for me.

Whether they were direct or indirect experiences, connections were almost always developed when the group members engaged in dialogue, sharing and relating their parallel experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds. The key to this moment of connection often resided in the questions that they asked in the process of dialogue. Victoria described her own and the group's experiences of seeking connections by utilizing questions when they shared their boat theories in order to elicit various ideas about relationships:

. . .we were asking each other questions like, "Well, is it who is rowing or who is steering the boat? Are you in the same boat? Do you take turns to steering the boat? How do you think of relationships and how do you want out of them?" And we were like, "Oh yeah, I think that way, too," or "No, oh well, the boat metaphor, this is I what I think." I think this is how we were trying to connect with each other.

Another aspect of dialogue that played an important role in helping participants build connections was when seeking clarification of what others said. For example, Jasmine stated that "it was only after [Hallie] clarifying, I could try to relate to her." Kim also described a time when she was finally able to connect with Annie once Annie clarified her view of what a relationship meant to her:

I asked [Annie], "Can you clarify why you said that?" . . . . As she was describing her story, what that relationship was like and what her goals were, [it] helped me understand her better. I mean, as this conversation continued, we learned more about the person's perspective. Then, I could relate more to her and what she was trying to say about that partnership versus that dependency. . . .it was about trying to clarify what she was saying

and saying out some of those assumptions, “Is this what I’m hearing that you are saying?”, and give them a chance to validate if those assumptions were correct or not. For Victoria, it was when she and the group engaged in levelising that she was able to create broader connections for other members:

. . .once we were used to dialoging more and managed to find more ways to bring it to that level, frame something or get to the theory level about it, then I was able to connect more even if I didn’t necessarily have that experience.

Similar perceptions are discussed in the section *Engaging in dialogue*.

**Building relationships.** Changes also occurred in participants’ assumptions about not-connected through building relationships with other group members. The following interview excerpts from various participants illustrates their experiences of connection:

*Hallie:* . . .we built a very good relationship with everyone, including those I didn’t know before.

*June:* So now, I think we have relationships that we can pick back up on over time because I know more about [the members] as not just classmates but also individuals.

*Kate:* Oh my goodness, I really feel very close to every single one of these people because we got to know each other better over a period of time.

*Kim:* I think we were able to form a good bond with all the people that were in the class. It seemed that we were getting closer, and eventually, it became like a family dynamic.

*Trinity:* We all cared what the other person thinks and how they experienced things.

*Victoria:* . . .the class really became a cohesive unit, and we really came to trust each other.



According to participants, trust was built as they continued talking and laughing with one another outside of the class throughout the semester. Kim stated, “We got to talk before the class and got to know each other. I think that really helped us form a good bond.” Likewise, June said:

. . .when we were laughing after class, or during a break, I think that was really important in terms of us a building friendship. You know, “Go take a break,” and we were laughing outside of the class, talking to each other, “What did you do this weekend?” “I did this and that,” “Don’t take that class,” and so forth. We are being peers together, having a good time. We were just chatting, but I think that really was important in building a relationship.

In addition to spending some time together beyond the RP classroom, engagement in dialogue also helped the group increase their connections. About a half of the participants commented that sharing and hearing personal stories were particularly helpful. For example, Hallie stated that “even with the people that I didn’t know before, we came to trust them, too, because we talked a lot about ourselves in the class, and many of us were saying things that were very personal.” In sharing and dialoging on their personal experiences, the members came to learn about one another and strengthen their relationships, as Kate described:

. . .just by sharing personal stories, you learn so much more about [other members], and that makes them not just some person that was in my class but people you actually know something about and have been through some things before. So I think that really helped us build a strong bond.

According to several participants, another aspect of the dialogue process that contributed to strengthening their bond was taking non-safe paths as a group. By a “non-safe path,” Victoria

meant a direction that the group could take in a conversation that involved controversial topics and might create a potentially volatile conversation. Recalling a time when they were able to dialogue deeply and respectfully on religious topics, Victoria maintained: “I was already pretty good friends with some people before we had religion dialogue, but I think that dialogue brought us closer together. It definitely took us to another level of trust.”

For Annie and a few other participants, finding similarities and connections was particularly helpful in growing their bonds: “. . . maybe that was another way that we created this cohesive unit – by having and finding these connections and similarities: ‘We are similar in these ways.’” Likewise, Kim and a couple other participants spoke about the importance of maintaining respectful attitudes towards one another in their relationship building:

I think the bond grew when we were respectful toward what each other had to say. I think that really helped. We talked about religion one time, and that could have been a sticky situation because my beliefs about God are very strong. . . . [But] I think everyone did so in a very respectful manner. I didn’t feel like someone was forcing something onto me, or vice versa. One of the other students said to me, “You know, I respect your opinion on that, but here is also my view of religion. I’m not necessarily a religious person, but I respect you and what your beliefs are.” There were a lot of statements like that, and I thought that helped build that bond.

**Engaging in dialogue.** Finally, the theme of connected also involved participants’ experiences of being able to have dialogical conversations in addition to other modes of discourse, especially towards the end of the semester. As described above, engagement in dialogue contributed to facilitating the process of questioning their beliefs and assumptions. The participants noted that what became particularly apparent about their engagement in the dialogue

process was the willingness of the members to be respectful, reflective, open, and clear. First, the group managed to dialogue in a respectful manner even when it seemed difficult. For example, Victoria said:

We were able to talk about things that could have potentially been big issues, but we managed to be really respectful and not push each other's buttons in a way that may not have worked in another group.

June echoed this experience:

[The members] never challenged me in a negative way. You know, in some other classes, it's sometimes like, "Well, I took a walk in three feet of snow," but neither one of them [in RP] tried to be like, "I'm better than you are," or "Hahahahaha, that was stupid." But we dialogued very, very respectfully.

Victoria maintained, "I was actually challenged by the fact that we were able to dialogue about that in a respectful manner."

Hallie described a specific instance that represented the group's deferential relationship when she and other group members managed to be respectful towards one another in spite of their differing belief systems. Some of the students in the class believed in God or a higher being, whereas others relied on other explanations for life's conditions and events. Hallie shared how well the dialogue went between these two groups, with each showing respect for the other and their differences:

...we allowed each other to be themselves and speak from our hearts even when we disagreed because we only disagreed from our perspectives. We saw it with our frames and say, "Well, I don't see it like that", but still remain civil. We had a good conversation of why I see it this way and why another person sees it another way. And it

was okay; there weren't any hurt feelings. We weren't threatening each other. Or, [we weren't] trying to be better than each other like: "I know better than you," or "My way is better than your way." It was an opportunity to see a dialogue between two groups that were different but we were allowed to be different and were okay with that. We respected each other and our differences.

Hallie also described another time when the members listened respectfully as one of the group members, James, shared a critical incident about his daughter's learning disability:

. . .we didn't make assumptions, saying, "You know, with a learning disability, you have to do such and such," dictating what should be done. But instead, we were respectful, allowing that person to just share and talk about what their experience was like and trying not to be judgmental. We weren't using any judgmental tones or trying to preach about what should be done.

One way that participants showed their respect was through their verbal behaviors – what they said and how they said it. Hallie described how respectful she and others were in general in the way that they spoke to one another during dialogue:

. . .the way we communicated was also very respectful. We would say something like, "Can you tell me more about that?" or "I hear you say this, and how does that relate to this over here?" If we didn't agree with something someone mentioned, we would say something like, "Well, I don't see it like that, but here is how I see it," as opposed to, "That's not right," "I don't believe you", or "My way is better", type of thing. . . . We allowed each other to share what our experience was like and tried to learn more about it.

Echoing this experience, Kim added that "even our tone of voice was respectful. We were using softer tone of voice; it wasn't harsh or very direct in how we responded." Victoria offered a

specific instance in which she used a verbally respectful manner while asking Kim to clarify her absence of agency:

I prefaced by saying, “I don’t want to offend you, but I’m not hearing you use any words that show where your agency is within this life plan, and I want to understand where this is coming from.” I knew that agency has a very positive connotation, so the fact of me saying to her that it sounds like you don’t have agency could sound very negative. But I wasn’t approaching that way. I just wanted to understand why she wasn’t using those kinds of words, and I wasn’t trying to say that was a bad thing. I was just interested and wanted to understand. So that’s what I was trying to say. I wanted us to analyze this in a respectful manner, without turning it into “You are wrong, or you are right” kind of situation.

The second element of engaging in dialogue that stood out to participants was their willingness to be reflective. Their process involved reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, occurring at both the collective level and the individual level. Jasmine described the experience of reflecting-in-action as a group, focusing on the process of RP:

We reflected on the process like, “How did we do on listening to and focusing on what someone has to say?” and “What part of the process can we improve?” We reflected on those things. We focused more on the process of RP. . . especially about asking effective questions and following X.

In contrast, Kim’s description illustrated the experience of individually reflecting-on-action. Prompted by articles about the RP process posted on the course website, she described her reflection process in the following way:

[In the articles] there were different situations about how one person had this opinion and it negatively affected the situation. Looking at myself, I could see that. It always made me think back of my students, my past experiences with them. Maybe I made too many assumptions with her, that one student that struggled that first semester and didn't make it because of her performance. What if I made too many harsh decisions? Maybe I could have been more open to that and try to explore it further. I also thought about conversations that I had with my co-workers, boss, and family. Were there times in those that I formed an opinion before we started and considered that to be right? I could identify my different interactions with others that yeah, you know, I formed an opinion and jumped into a conclusion.

Participants also found that their willingness to remain open was an important element in engagement in dialogue. For example, Victoria's expressed how determined she was to be open from the very beginning to help create a good environment for and with others in the class:

I was very determined to be as open as I could and participate as much as I could to try to make it a better experience for myself and everybody else. Jarvis also called on me to be more open and participate more. I think most of the resistance at the beginning was fear of some people being wrong, but I'd gotten rid of that fear myself, and I was no longer investing my self-worth in being completely right all the time. So I tried to be very open from the beginning and model how I thought dialogue should be and made a lot of first steps to help RP or dialogue happen.

I was willing to step out there and say something. If Jarvis would want to talk about how I said something or show me how it would have been better if I said something else, that was fine. I was no longer investing my self-worth in being completely right all the time.

And [I was] willing to be open with these people even though they were strangers because I felt like there was something that could happen with RP that I didn't get to experience last term, I saw glimpses of but we weren't able to get to. While I still was reticent to talk about really deeply held beliefs. . . I was much more open with talking about reasons for doing things that I did and decisions I'd made from the beginning.

According to several participants, demonstrating openness brought about a greater level of openness at the group level over the semester. Victoria described this process:

. . .we also had people who had had a little more experiences with, like myself, actually doing their autobiographies and be willing to be open. Jarvis was willing to be open, and slowly other people would jump on bandwagon and start opening up a little bit more. . . .other people were like, "Okay, [Victoria] is willing to talk about some of these more difficult issues," or "If you can help things, then I guess I can help, too." So as the semester progressed, people began to buy in and start talking more, and everyone talked a lot at the end.

Kim described how this increased level of openness among the members contributed to enhancing their engagement in dialogue as a group:

When Dr. Phillips talked about letting go of being right, I started to change, opened up to the process. I let go of having to have the right process, the right questions, the right method, and the right opinion. I think some other people in the class had a similar experience; they opened up, too, to the process. Then, I realized we were actually dialoguing better than before; we became more accepting of other people's perspectives or how they were framing the situation.

The last element of the group's engagement in the dialogue process that stood out to participants was their willingness to request and offer clarifications. Victoria revealed how they asked each other to clarify themselves in dialogue in order to better understand one another:

Even if something that was said was not put in the best way or it was a little off-putting for some reason, we would just ask again, "Well, I'm not sure exactly what you mean. Can you explain more?"

Indeed, Victoria recalled a time when she requested Kim to clarify the absence of agency in her speaking and Kim was willing to respond to this request:

I asked [Kim], "I'm not hearing you use any words that show where your agency is within this life plan, so I'm wondering where that comes from." I was guessing that it came from her religious background, and she said yeah, it is because she feels like God has plans for her, so she is following that plan. But she went there and explained it to clarify.

Furthermore, Kim reflected on her experience of requesting Annie to clarify her previous utterance, which helped Kim better understand Annie's perspective on dependency in relationship:

I asked [Annie] questions to clarify some of things she said, and she helped me understand that she wanted more of a partnership and the same goals to work towards, instead of creating dependence like overly needing him to take care of her or be in relationship with her. As the conversation continued, I understood her and her viewpoint and could see how my assumptions were disproven or clarified. Giving her a chance to clarify and saying out some of my own assumptions was helpful in navigating this process.



According to participants, there was a reciprocal relationship between engaging in dialogue and building relationships. As much as the engagement in dialogue helped the group build trust in one another, the relationships built during the course also facilitated the dialogue process. Annie described how her knowledge about other members enabled her to communicate with them more smoothly:

I think it was our relationship that made it possible because if somebody you don't know comes up and says, "Oh, this this this and that," you are like, "Who are you to tell me that?" But if you have a relationship with somebody and you've talked, learned about, and understand a little bit better, there is the background or history behind what they are saying. You are able to see that from their perspective without feeling defensive at all.

So just knowing the person we were talking to helped us have smoother dialogue.

Likewise, given their stronger bonds, the group grew comfortable dialoguing on controversial topics and sensitive issues. Victoria explained:

I think after we built our bonds as a class, we were much more willing to take that sensitive path, and I think that we did a few times talk about things that were more meaningful or potentially volatile discussions. I know after that, people were bringing up more personal and deeper stories, I think, than before. We talked fairly deeply about things, but now people are bringing up divorces and very particular things that happened to them.

At the beginning of the semester, participants assumed that they might have trouble relating well with other group members. However, as the semester progressed, this assumption underwent significant changes as a result of the group members actually experiencing connections with one another. In particular, participants came to understand that there were

indeed many more similarities and connections with other members than they had originally thought. In addition, the developed relationships were developed with one another. The key to enabling this shift in the assumption was engaging in dialogue and spending time together beyond the RP classroom. Interconnections identified among the themes in this section were *not connected, different, and uncomfortable*; as well as *connected, alike, and comfortable*.

## **Theme 2: Being Alike**

The second major theme to stand out against the ground of time was *being alike*, which had three sub-themes: 1) different – “That’s completely different from what I believe,” 2) alike – “We are all the same,” and 3) different and alike – “Howard was one of us until he stopped the music.”

### **“That’s completely different from what I believe.” – different**

In the RP course, members engaged in dialogue on various topics developed from their learning autobiographies and critical incidents. Kim described how her and another member’s views on the concept of relationship diverged:

. . .the way I viewed relationships was that I’m dependent on my spouse for some things, but I’m also independent, and I want my own choice. But the original student wanted both on the same page, doing the exact same thing and moving forward at the same time. So that’s where our opinions differed.

In order to share and discuss their different and unique perspectives, the group employed the analogy of boats. Boats represented different frames that the members utilized to describe what relationship meant to them. In dialoging on their boat metaphors, the group explored such topics

as whether the two people are rowing together or are in separate boats, and whether they are traveling in the same or different directions. Annie's metaphor emphasized the mutual dependence of the two individuals, which conflicted with some others' views:

I wanted to be in a relationship with someone who is in the same boat and paddling toward the same goal no matter if winds, waves, and all that stuff come. I just wanted to be together and be traveling together toward the same goal. But somebody else, they wanted a different view of independence and dependence as far as the percentage of those and what it looks like because somebody else was like, "I feel like it's okay that you have two different boats and not everything exactly together."

Kate was one of those individuals who had a different perspective from Annie. Her boat analogy focused on finding a balance between independence and interdependence:

Annie's idea of what a relationship should be like was different than mine because she thought that they should be in the boat together all the time, rowing together in the same direction. But I thought, "Well okay, maybe your relationship is the boat, and you each has a smaller boat." They will call it a tender ship in navy. It's the ship that keeps fuel, stocked with food, and all that stuff. But you each have that, and you are going out, but you come back and take care of the big boat.

Holding tightly to their beliefs about relationships, participants experienced challenges when they encountered views that differed from their own; this was represented by Kim's story:

I think this person's critical incident was challenging to me because it seemed like she was trying to identify herself through that relationship, trying to be so dependent on someone else to help her form what her identity should be. But to me, that's completely different from what I believe. I have a strong independence, and I don't need someone

else to validate that. The way it was being described was almost a sense of over dependency on that relationship to help her identify what her identity was. So I think it challenged me because I've always been very strong on that. That relationship is very important to me, but yet on the other hand, I don't need it to define who I am. I am independent in the fact that I can take care of myself, have my own goals, and have my own hobbies and interests that I don't need that other person to do all these things for me. . . . I thought that was the right way to be in a relationship because that's what my parents had taught me and that's how I'd always been in my relationships.

Despite her confidence in this belief, one day Kim reflected on her taken-for-granted belief in relation to a conversation she had had with the group, which she described as “challenging”:

one night, as I was driving back home after class, I started reflecting on some of the things we discussed in class. Then, I thought, “Am I really right? Why do I believe the way I believe?” That was a challenging moment.

Echoing Kim's experience, Annie described her own powerful challenging experience:

I thought, “Of course, why wouldn't you become on the same team, paddling the same boat?” But then, there were some people out there who wanted to be like, “Let's maintain a lot of independence”, and “Hey buddy, let's help each other out,” but not necessarily be in sync the whole time, going together. . . . [Hearing a different perspective from mine] made me think about my own perspective; it made me question what I'd always believed was right. . . .And that was a difficult and emotional experience because you lose certainty in what you had always thought was right. That's shocking.

Another challenging experience related to differences involving the design and process of the RP course and other courses in which participants had participated in the past. For example,

at the start of the semester, Amy believed that she was expected to adhere to the following classroom model: be a good student and let the professor teach. This belief was derived from her understanding, “Dr. Phillips is the expert and is on a different level from the rest of us, who should be listened to and respected and not be interrupted because he is a professor.” June also expressed a similar challenge to her belief by claiming, “This is my belief to keep order in the classroom; they are the authority figure. It’s their role.” Trinity’s explanation provided an account for these challenged assumptions: “You come in with the assumption that. . . the teacher is above you, and that’s the way it is because that’s the way it always is in all the classes.” Preoccupied with these strongly held beliefs, participants faced great difficulty when challenged by how differently the RP course was designed. This experience was illustrated in Kate’s words:

Oh my gosh. . . I just didn’t know what to think because it was just so different. [It was] different from what I knew [and] what I was used to. . . .So that’s how I started thinking about those things, [what I believed and what I was accustomed]. And it was just so hard.

### **“We are all the same.” – alike**

Although participants at the initial phase tended to focus on differences between themselves and other members, over time they came to understand that they were more alike than different. By this, they meant that no one was necessarily more or less knowledgeable about and skilled at engaging in RP. Instead, they were “all in this program and in this class together, learning and working through all together,” as Jasmine stated. Echoing this experience, Annie described how the members worked equally to learn about RP through trial-and-error, “. . . everybody else was making the same mistakes, too . . .everybody else was doing the same

thing. . . .we were all on the equal field. . . .nobody was doing it right.” These experiences were summarized by Trinity: “. . .everybody [was] learning – understanding new concepts, practicing the process, and getting coached. We were all learning, exploring, and experiencing together.”

Participants’ experiences of learning “on the equal field” related significantly to their level of comfort with themselves, the group, and the course overall. For example, Jasmine, who did not think that she was quite up to par with the rest of the group in the beginning, became more relaxed and opened up after learning that they were not, in fact, so different from her. Similarly, Annie and Trinity shared how the knowledge that they were not alone in struggling to learn to dialogue for RP helped them become progressively more comfortable with their skills and the RP process itself. This is discussed further in the section *Comfortable*.

### **“Howard was one of us until he stopped the music.” – different and alike**

Despite the line that participants initially drew between themselves and the instructor, they came to understand over time that he was indeed similar to, as well as different from, them. This new understanding stemmed from the unique role that the instructor played in conducting the RP course. According to participants, he made himself a part of the group while also being a teacher who was an expert in RP and a director of the group’s learning process. Jasmine’s description illustrated this perception:

. . .when we get off track, [Howard] would regroup, bring us back. He was for us to ask questions. If we needed any directions, he would provide that, also. And just making sure that we are staying on X and asking back. We knew that he was the teacher, and when we have questions, that’s where we go to. But yet, he was not like teachers I’ve

had in the past who would be at the front of the class or more or less leading the class.

We knew he was the teacher, the leader of the class, but yet he made himself one of us.

The instructor made himself a part of the group in several ways, one of which was by participating in the process as a co-facilitator, as Hallie stated:

We knew [Howard] was in charge because he sometimes stopped our conversations to go back, find where we were with X, and build from there. So he would keep us on track, but it was more like he was facilitating. And when he came to the point where he let us facilitate, he was a co-facilitator. . . . He just always felt like a part as opposed to an instructor. We knew he was the instructor, but it was different.

Another way that Howard became a member of the group was by engaging in the process as a co-learner, noted in Jasmine's description:

. . .this is the first class I've taken where everybody's sitting around the table, and Howard was obviously the instructor and who knew what was going on. And yet, everyone [including him] was just more or less sitting on the same level and learning in the same playing field. There were times he would instruct us in terms of him talking and sharing, teaching us about RP. But for the most part, it was learning with us through dialoging. And that was very unique, very different from what I knew about teachers and teaching.

In addition, Trinity discussed how Howard engaged in the process as a co-participant:

[Howard] participated in the same way [as us]. . . .he was always part of the group until he stopped the music, you know, "This is what you could have done here," or "Here are some options for you to do now," or things like that, which I guess is partially Type I. He was just a part of the group as opposed to away from the group even spatially. He was a

part of the conversation as opposed to like out here as an observer. And he would say what he thought, too. He would participate in that way. He would say what he saw was interesting, and he would ask questions. It wouldn't be just students. . . .it did change in me, my thought of Howard as a part of the group as opposed to an observer or something like that. And that's not a common experience in classroom settings.

Finally, June expressed how Howard created new knowledge with the group:

. . .we were creating new knowledge, and he was also creating new knowledge while learning from us, which was just different because you usually see the professor as the oracle of knowledge. And this was him sitting at a table, not one position above the others, just dialoging, which was completely different. I mean, he was still the teacher, but we were creating knowledge together through dialoging.

As commonly observed by participants, the instructor engaged in the process in multiple ways. He taught and facilitated the course as a teacher and an instructor, while also participating, learning, and creating new knowledge jointly with the student members. Consequently, participants acknowledged that he was both the same as and different from themselves. In addition to the various roles that the instructor played, the spatial distance that participants experienced with the instructor also represented the dynamic of their teacher-student relationship. For example, the instructor was described as “not like teachers I've had in the past who would be at the front of the class,” being “away from the group. . . spatially.” Instead, he was “sitting at a table [with the group], not one position above the others” and “learning in the same playing field.”

At the beginning of the semester, participants were concerned about differences between themselves and other members, both other students and the instructor. Given their firmly held



beliefs about the concept of relationship and the role of the teacher, they faced challenges to their assumptions when they encountered perspectives and experiences that differed from their own. However, they came to understand over time that they and other members actually shared many similarities and were indeed alike in the processes of learning, working, and experiencing together. The instructor of the RP course also came to be viewed by participants as similar to, while also different from, themselves. He participated, learned, and created new knowledge jointly with the student members, while also teaching and facilitating the course as a teacher. Suggested interconnections among the themes were *different, not connected, and uncomfortable*, as well as *alike, connected, and comfortable*.

### **Theme 3: Being Comfortable**

The third major theme that emerged from participant interviews was *being comfortable*: uncomfortable (“I was immensely uncomfortable”) and comfortable (“I could be myself”). The theme of uncomfortable had three sub-themes, all of which were concerned with the instances that participants felt uncomfortable in the course: 1) letting go of being right in RP, 2) dealing with differences, and 3) discussing controversial topics. The theme of comfortable comprised two sub-themes: 1) the progression of becoming more comfortable and 2) aspects of the course that contributed to the development of comfort.

#### **“I was immensely uncomfortable.” – uncomfortable**

Participants shared that they were fairly uncomfortable with many aspects of the RP course at the beginning of the semester. These uncomfortable experiences involved various

aspects of the course, primarily letting go of being right in RP, dealing with differences, and discussing controversial topics.

**Letting go of being right in RP.** First, assuming that there is a right way of engaging in RP, participants struggled to let go of the notion that there is a correct way of doing things. This experience was noted by Kim: “I had so much trouble with not having a right answer.” She added:

. . .the way I believed was that RP has a certain pattern that we have to follow in order for it to work. So the whole time, I was trying really hard to master that pattern, to get things right. That’s why I was immensely uncomfortable, upset almost, when Dr. Phillips talked about letting go of being right.

She also expressed how challenging it was for her to facilitate RP in the “correct” way:

How do you say things correctly in the moment? You don’t wanna just speak out without thinking it through first, you don’t wanna say everything that’s on your mind. You wanna be respectful to others and do well, so you don’t wanna say something stupid [laughs]. I think that’s why it was so challenging, worrying so much about doing things right. I was just so worried about doing things correctly.

In working to engage in RP “correctly,” participants felt apprehensive about making mistakes, as Trinity explained: “It was pretty scary [to engage in dialogue] because I didn’t wanna do something wrong in front of people I didn’t really know.” Kim also described her difficulty in coming to terms with criticisms that she received from the instructor about her participation in the process:

Howard would try to coach us. . . like, “Hold on, what did you just do? What could you have done that would have been better than what you did?” But it was like I was trying

to express something, but then I got stopped, and I was told I was doing something wrong. It was hard to take that criticism at first because I didn't wanna be wrong and look stupid in front of many people. It's like you start to realize yourself, remembering you were there and screwing up, and it's hard to take that criticism. So that was a struggle, trying to come to terms with that.

**Dealing with differences.** Next, participants identified uncomfortable moments when they encountered situations that differed from what they had anticipated. For example, June expressed her discomfort with the grading aspect of the RP course as it differed from that to which she was accustomed:

. . .we didn't have any tests, and I never wrote a research paper; it was all personal reflections. I mean, we wrote one-page critical incidents and learning autobiographies, but really they were just jumping-off point for our dialogues. From a grading standpoint, that was a little weird because there was none of "If you get this many points, you get an A; this many points, you get a B," which I was used to. So I was beginning to worry like, "Oh boy, what I'm gonna be graded on?"

. . .you just have to trust in the fact that you are doing well, and that's so different from my teaching or the way that I take other classes. Typically, you start going down the wrong road, and I'm like, "Oh, stop. Okay, what can we do to get you back on track?" But on this, I never got feedback during the semester. So honestly, I had no clue what my grade was gonna be until the day I logged in and looked at it because I didn't know what [the instructor] was grading us on. That was frustrating.

Participants also experienced discomfort when they encountered perspectives different from their own in the RP course. For example, Kim described how she was troubled by another student's view on dependency and relationship that conflicted with hers:

Immediately when [another student] talked about having to do everything as partners, I thought that was odd. I was bothered by that notion. This to me blurred the lines of independence because I would not want to lose myself by forming that type of relationship. I was thinking, "Why are you thinking that?" or "Why do you need someone else to validate who you are?"

Hallie had a similar response to a different view on relationship, though she regarded dependency highly, unlike Kim:

There was one young lady who said she was married but she is independent. The word, "independent", was strange to me in terms of being married because I always thought marriage to be interdependent where you two are together, working toward a common goal.

Jasmine's discomfort stemmed from her perceived lack of ability compared to other members, a perception that created discomfort for her at the beginning of the semester:

. . .in the beginning, I was like, "I don't get this. I can't do this." . . . I guess I was feeling I didn't belong there, feeling not up to par with the rest of the class. "Gosh, they belong here, and I don't," type of thing, you know? For my teaching, I always taught my students, "We are not at the same place. You are more or less completing with yourself and not your peers." But me being in the same place, I had to remind myself of that, and that was a challenge.

I was just uncomfortable like, “How much longer do I have in this class?,” you know? That type of thing. I didn’t think I was as deep of a thinker as other people in the class. So I was very uncomfortable with that for the first few weeks. And when I would have something that I would think relate, mine was always like story-telling. Some of the other people in the class had deep feelings and thoughts and were theory-based, so I was like, “Um, maybe I’m not doing this right.” I didn’t feel like I was quite there [laughs].

The findings presented in this section suggest a relationship between the themes *not connected*, *different*, and *uncomfortable*.

**Discussing controversial topics.** Finally, participants’ moments of discomfort also stemmed from discussing sensitive topics due to their assumption that it would not go well. Victoria shared how she and others were not comfortable enough to take “non-safe paths” at the start of the semester, despite the opportunities to do so:

I feel like every time you are engaging in dialogue, there are these kinds of forks, and maybe even more of it, just two forks or a bunch of forks. So you have this opportunity to choose if you wanna go down, and I feel like a lot of times, we would see, “Okay, somebody’s just mentioned about gay marriage. Do we take it down that path and start discussing it?” Or, do we go back to, “Well, tell me more about your story?” Or, “Let’s talk about this other piece.” And most of the time, we talked about that other piece rather than something that could potentially be deeply held belief that we didn’t necessarily want to examine in a group or that people could potentially really butt heads about. We were very good at reading other people in that way and keeping their conversation at a very surface level so we wouldn’t offend them. So we didn’t really ask them about their religion or their life because we didn’t want to, first of all, offend them, but also we

didn't want them to get mad at us, especially in the beginning when we didn't know these people, right? [Laughs.]

Accordingly, participants continued to avoid introducing sensitive topics until Victoria finally asked Kim about the absence of agency in her speaking in the mid-semester. As this was the first situation of this sort, Annie and others were not very comfortable with taking this path:

I could feel that the room kind of wonder [laughs] where this is gonna go, right? That's exactly what I was thinking because we all tended to shy away from talking about sensitive issues until then because of those experiences that we've had where we have a different belief system and it just doesn't go well.

Illustrating Annie's observation, June added what went on in her mind when Victoria initiated the discussion of religion:

I went [opening her eyes widely with her hands on the side of her face] in my chair because it is a sensitive topic. And immediately, I thought of the previous semester, and I was like, "Oh, boy." I was in a class previously where we tried to discuss a touchy subject, it was a seminar class last fall, but it did not go so well. We were trying to use RP in that class, it was about LGBT and getting jobs, and there were a lot of opinions. Instead of getting into RP and dialoging it, it transgressed into debating and argument. So when [Victoria] brought that up on that night, I was like, "Oh, no. . ."

### **"I could be myself." – comfortable**

**The progression of becoming more comfortable.** Despite their initial discomfort, participants became increasingly more comfortable with their overall course experiences as the semester progressed. The growing level of comfort was clarified by Jasmine, who stated: "I had

to work through that, but I got there. After that, I felt comfortable saying what I felt and knew that it was okay to be me with the class.” Likewise, Victoria said that participants “were able to create enough of an environment to share personal stories and talk about sensitive issues.”

The time it took for these participants to become comfortable varied; nevertheless, most of them noticed changes within and among themselves by the middle of the semester. For some participants, the development of comfort took place rapidly and noticeably; for others, it was a rather slow and subtle process. These experiences were illustrated in the statements of several participants, such as Annie; “. . .it felt very comfortable, especially toward the end of the semester, but I think I was already starting to feel comfortable about a halfway through the class. But it happened very quickly.” Victoria also described her experience:

. . .it didn’t happen immediately. I mean, it all happened over time, and it to me was somewhat a slow process. . . .I would say it probably took at least three weeks before we felt like we could really talk about things. I think that religion talk was about a halfway through the term maybe, and it went at least for me to this whole other level.

Despite the differences in the processes that participants went through, the levels of comfort increased for all eight of them as the semester progressed; they were most comfortable toward the end of the semester. Victoria shared her perspective of how things had changed for herself and others over the course of the semester in terms of increasing comfort:

. . .as we went through the semester, I think we saw that it was a safe place and no one was gonna freak out at us for anything [laughs]. . . .I saw us buy in and start talking more, but at the end of the term, every one of us talked a lot. . . . I was watching that progression of us starting to feel safe. . . [and] how the discussion changed to things that maybe weren’t as safe of a topic or being willing to share a little bit more.

Indeed, Kim stated, “I started [towards the end] bringing up more sensitive issues, things about my relationships with my family and God that I wouldn’t have felt comfortable talking about at the beginning.” Victoria described a similar experience of finding the entire group more comfortable in taking risks in dialogue:

we were much more willing to take that sensitive path, and I think that we did a few times talk about things that were more meaningful or potentially volatile discussions. . . .we were bringing up more personal and deeper stories, I think, than before. We talked fairly deeply about things, and we were bringing up divorces and very particular things that happened to us.

Furthermore, a few participants discussed how different their earlier classroom experiences could have been if they had felt the same level of comfort at the beginning as they did by the end of the term. Kim was one of these and described how she might have been able to open up herself and share more of her personal self:

. . .the very beginning of the term, there were some questions about relationships. I had mentioned something, and somebody asked back, and I said, “I’d rather not talk about it.” But by the end of the term, I now thought about it and think I would have gone there if they asked for it.

Likewise, Annie expressed how much more comfortable she might feel navigating the dialogue process herself rather than relying on the instructor as she did earlier in the semester:

Now I think I will be a little bit more comfortable saying, “Let’s spin this in a different direction and open it back to everybody else,” or “What do you think about that?”, as opposed to just going back to [the instructor] every single time.



This particular experience showed an interrelationship among the three themes: *connected*, *alike*, and *comfortable*.

**Contributing factors in the development of comfort.** According to participants, various aspects of the course contributed to the development of their sense of comfort: realizing that engagement in RP is not about correctness; understanding that they were “on the equal field”; and chatting and joking at the start of the class. First, several participants maintained that an experience that helped them become more comfortable with the course was the realization that there are no right or wrong answers in RP engagement. They came to this realization after conversations on related topics in the course and online because many students shared the same concern about trying to do things correctly and being fearful of making mistakes. Annie described it as follows:

. . .we spent quite a bit of time some nights, talking about how it was not about getting it right and there is no such thing as doing it right. I think that atmosphere really helped me and many other people become comfortable. It was something that I got me comfortable and say, “Hey, we are doing just fine, so let’s try and enjoy the process!”

Trinity, who found it difficult to deal with the instructor’s comments on her facilitation process, also came to understand that engagement in RP is not about correctness. She described her new understanding: “Oh man, I didn’t need to feel I was picked on or doing something wrong because it’s not about that. . . . I’m not doing something I should not be doing. It’s not about doing anything wrong. I finally understood that.” Given this understanding, Trinity became more comfortable engaging in the process and simply being in the moment to experience and learn with the group:

[Understanding that there is no correct way of doing RP] made it easier to dialogue, to learn, or to experience in a way because I'm not trying to prove myself in a way that a teacher wants me to. Generally, I'm putting on my best practice like, "If I didn't do this the exact way, then I'm gonna fail," that kind of thing. But it got me that comfort to just be able to experience, make mistakes, and learn from them.

What participants commonly identified as helpful in coming to this realization was instructor contribution. Jasmine acknowledged how the instructor helped her become more comfortable with herself when she was concerned about not doing as well as other members:

[Howard] spent 20 or 30 minutes in the beginning of the class one night and said, "This is where you are. Do what you are doing. There is no right or wrong way to do this." He also shared with us there is no one way for it to go: "This is okay, this is okay, and this is okay." So him pointing that out helped. . . . I think that was a turning point in me.

Participants also claimed that they became increasingly more comfortable as they came to realize that they were not alone in the process and that, instead, they were learning, experiencing, and working through all together. This experience was represented Jasmine, "I realized we were all the same [laughs]. So yeah, I became relaxed and opened up more." Similarly, Trinity noted that "everyone was learning and understanding new concepts. After realizing that, I became more comfortable with trying out new things and learning from my own mistakes." Annie also described how she learned not to worry about making mistakes in the RP process after understanding that the RP course was a place for the students to explore and learn together:

. . . everybody was comfortable with their own mistakes, including myself, because everybody else was making the same mistakes, and that was okay to do that. This was an appropriate venue to try something and maybe mess up but that was okay because

everybody else was doing the same thing. It was just comfortable because we were all on the equal field.

When participants employed such terms as “we” and “everyone” in sharing their experiences in the RP course, it included not only the students, but also the instructor. Hallie discussed how having him as a part of the group helped her become more relaxed:

It seemed like [Howard] was learning as we were learning. I mean, he was a part of the group, so I felt like, “Okay, we are all here to learn.” It wasn’t like we are the only learners in the classroom; he was there to learn as well. That’s how it made things calmer and more relaxing.

Finally, participants revealed that casually and briefly spending time together helped them become more comfortable with other group members. Jasmine was one of them, describing how important it was for her to have peer talk before the class began throughout the semester:

. . .through just getting there a few minutes before the RP class starts and talking like when we met today, you know, just a few minutes of chitchat and going into the class throughout the semester. . . I felt like I was getting to know [other members] and being more comfortable with them.

A few other participants also shared how the instructor occasionally opened up the first five minutes of the class by chatting, joking, and laughing together, instead of jumping right into the class. These participants found occasions like these helpful in becoming relaxed and prepared to engage with one another in a dialogical way. Trinity’s description below exemplifies this experience:

[Howard] said the strategy is get us to slow down from the rest of our lives and talk about whatever for a little while at the beginning of the class just to make us comfortable and get us ready to actually to talk to each other as opposed to just say, “Okay, you guys can start now.” . . .[And] it wasn’t just us talking; he shared stuff, too, funny stories, and personal stories. I think that really helped us get comfortable with each other.

Victoria echoed this experience:

[Howard] would always tell us about things he’s been working on, and it usually involved jokes in it so that it would get all of us laughing. I think all of us would also bring up silly things that happened to us during the day and talk about them at the beginning of the class. We laughed a lot in class, which I think helped to relax and get us into the mind space that we are all together again.

These participants’ descriptions show how powerful sharing about oneself, joking, and laughing were in helping participants relax and come together again after a week-long break from the last class.

Participants initially experienced discomfort with letting go of the notion of “doing it right” in RP, dealing with differences, and discussing sensitive topics due to assumptions that participants brought into the RP course. They assumed that there is a correct way of conducting RP; they hesitated to embrace beliefs different from their own and experiences different from their common practices and believed that discussing sensitive topics is not often feasible.

Despite this initial discomfort, participants became increasingly more comfortable with their overall course experiences. Indeed, they were able to share their thoughts and feelings and be themselves by the mid-point in the semester. They also learned to let go of “doing it right” in RP and take risks in dialogue. The interconnections among the major themes in this section were

identified as follows: *not connected* and *uncomfortable*, *different* and *uncomfortable*, *connected* and *comfortable*, and *alike* and *comfortable* (Fig. 4).

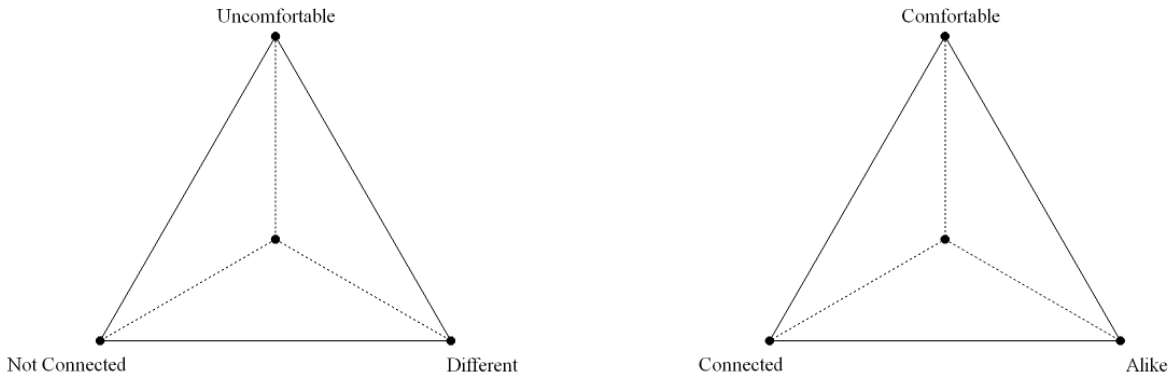
### **The Ground of the Experience**

As described in Chapter III, from a phenomenological viewpoint, the concept of the figure-ground relationship is vital to understanding the lived experience of an individual (Pollio et al., 1997; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In the overall gestalt of an experience, the ground exists in a reciprocal relationship with the figure. As such, the figure cannot be discussed without considering the ground, and vice versa. The ground of the experience in this study has been identified as time; this ground allows for the figural themes to stand out from it and in relation to it.

### **Time as the Ground – “It all happened over time.”**

Participants’ experiences of challenged assumptions stand out against a ground of time. Time is understood in terms of the lived time within the four attributes of existential phenomenology described in the previous chapter. This means that time is represented by the three temporal components – the essence of having been (pre-course), the now (during course), and the future (post-course) – all of which are interconnected and are situated within a continuum (Earnshaw, 2006) (Fig. 5). It is during this time that challenges to assumptions took place for the participants and which is the focus of this study.

Within the ground of time, participants experienced challenges to their taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions. That is, they entered the RP classroom with unexamined assumptions,

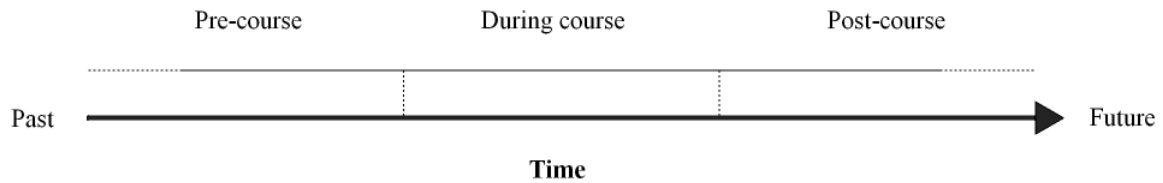


**Figure 4. Diagram of the Interrelationships among the Themes**

often developed from their experiences prior to the course. Challenges to assumptions took place as participants engaged in examining their assumptions, often for the first time, while participating in the course. Through this reflective process and in actual experience, their assumptions changed in the following ways by the end of the semester: from not connected to connected, different to alike, and uncomfortable to comfortable. Some of these changes were more significant than others and were projected for the future. The ground of time is thus divided into three categories: the essence of having been (pre-course), the now (during course), and the future (post-course).

### **The Essence of Having Been: Pre-course**

**The origin of assumptions.** Participants brought to and developed in the RP classroom a variety of unexamined assumptions, especially at the beginning of the semester. According to participants, these assumptions originated from beliefs and values that had been ingrained within



**Figure 5. Diagram of the Ground**

them through years of their formal schooling, upbringing, and career experiences. The significant influence of formal schooling on participants’ challenged assumptions was represented by Annie’s story. Frustrated with another student who, in her term, “interrupted” the instructor by speaking up, Annie said:

Honestly, the first class got to the point that annoyed me because I was like, “Shut up, just let [Dr. Phillips] talk. Let the professor do the professing.” I think this goes back to schooling that you obey the teacher and do what the teacher says.

Annie continued to describe the role of the teacher that she had adopted from her early education and how this conflicted with the design of the RP class. This difference created a difficulty for her:

“I’m the professor. Listen to my knowledge and try to learn something from it” – I had this kind of experience in most of my high school and undergrad. So even when the professor tries to be inclusive and include you in the learning process and experiences, it was just very difficult because I very much have respect for him and his role. He is an expert in his field, so he is to be respected and listened to. I don’t know if you can take away [this belief] because it’s so ingrained.

Likewise, coming from a structured educational background in science, June shared her hardship of becoming accustomed to T-III teaching and learning incorporated in the RP course:

I come from a science background, so there is always Type I, lecture and tests, and that's all I've known for many, many years. It was just the teacher providing knowledge to us, [and] we were writing down notes and regurgitating it for exams. . . .[so] it was really hard for me, of course, coming from I'm used to that, to get into the whole Type III teaching mode because that's not what I'd seen before and I'm used to stereotypical courses.

Trinity summarized the significant impact of ingrained formal schooling experiences on participants' challenged assumptions:

. . .it's definitely not culturally normed to think teachers are somebody just like you, learning with you, as opposed to teaching you. It's embedded in any sort of schooling from the time you are in kindergarten until whenever you are still going to school that they are the experts and the ones who give you grades. . . . So naturally, you come in with the assumption that. . . the teacher is above you, and that's the way it is because that's the way it always is in all the classes. . . .And it's not so strange that we struggle when this assumption was not met by our actual experience in class.

In addition to formal schooling, participants' assumptions also developed from their upbringing. This finding was exemplified by Annie's explanation that the way she was brought up at home influenced her respect for Howard:

I try to be very respectful of anyone who was older than me. I was just brought up that way. . . . I remember when my mom would tell me to respect elders: like when she left us with babysitters or when we were younger, she would tell us, "You have to respect



them and listen to them because they are authority over you.” So I guess it’s ingrained from the very young age that I am supposed to respect the person who is authority over me. And the teacher was an authority over me in my whole life.

Echoing this experience, Kim shared how her parents guided her beliefs in independence in relationships:

I have always been taught by my parents to maintain my independence and I should not rely on someone else to take care of me. I think that’s how I came to value independence in relationships greatly.

This goes back to my parents’ influence that I need to maintain my independence. . . . I feel that I need to know that I can take care of myself financially. My parents in the past have shared their experiences of knowing others who did not have this ability to care for themselves and had to depend on someone else, which limited their right to have a say in the choices made in a relationship.

Referring to critical incident in which Annie expressed her faith in dependency in relationships, Kim added, “Immediately when [Annie] talked about it, I thought that was odd to me because of the way I was raised. My parents influenced my beliefs about relationships, [and] I think that’s why it challenged me to see her viewpoint.” Kim added that she was troubled by having to refrain from her continual search for a “right” answer in the RP process as it conflicted with her religious background:

I grew up in a very religious family, so my beliefs about God are very strong. I think this view explains why I had so much trouble with not having a “right” answer. I mean, my beliefs in God create more of a conservative view of the world, meaning that my views

are more black and white rather than gray. I think that's why I needed a set blueprint or the right way to do things for the RP process.

In addition to schooling and upbringing, participants' assumptions also stemmed from their careers or how they were trained and practiced at their workplaces. For example, Victoria pointed out June's frequent use of the personal plural pronoun, "we", instead of "I", referring to herself and her son together, when sharing her stories. This comment prompted June to reflect on her experience of working at a trauma center in relation to the high priority she places on her family:

For close to five years, I performed x-rays in the trauma bay and witnessed many tragic losses of life, adults, children, and infants. And I learned that simple accidents could tear apart families without notice. I have often wondered how this experience has transformed or influenced my look on life, in particular my relationship with my family. . . . I tend to hold to the thought process that you can't take things or people with you as you go, so try to spend as much time with them as you can while they are here. After reflection, I think some of this way of thinking can be attributed to my working experience at the hospital.

Likewise, Kim examined the relationship between her practice as a nurse and her beliefs in a "set blueprint" for the RP process:

In nursing, there are always alterations, but usually most things are the process. There are certain steps you have to complete during the day, certain steps you have to follow to identify what's going on with that patient, and certain steps to do this and that. It is very much a process type of profession. And I've always thought this might relate to me

having to have the right way to do RP. I've always been step-oriented, right or wrong, black and white, about the process.

In addition to ingrained beliefs, participants' prior classroom experiences also led to their beliefs being challenged in the RP course. Annie shared her experience of not getting along with a class member in another course when she expressed her concern about possible conflicts amongst group members in the RP course:

I had no idea what was going on, and I kept wondering, "What did I say to offend this person?" I had a rough semester because of that. I think that's the reason I anticipated:

"Oh gosh, what if that happens with someone else for some reason?"

Victoria concurred with this experience, describing her unpleasant experience of trying not to "push the red button" of another student in a seminar course and how this experience influenced her entrance to the RP course. The seminar was offered in the semester preceding the RP course by the same instructor, who engaged group members in RP through dialogue as the primary mode of discourse. As Victoria described:

[In the seminar] there was always this overriding feeling of if something was said in a wrong way, one class member who tended to be very loud and opinionated is going to freak out. So it was a continual feeling of having to manage that personality throughout the semester. And things eventually went really bad, and we had a big blow-up towards the end [sigh]. So coming into RP, June and I were still worried that we might have this kind of stressful situation again for another semester.

Participating in the seminar with Victoria, June could not hide her shock when Victoria invited the group to engage in dialogue on religion in the RP class:

I went (opening her eyes widely with her hands on the side of her face) in my chair because it is a sensitive topic. And immediately, I thought of the previous semester, and I was like, “Oh, boy.” I was in a class previously where we tried to discuss a touchy subject, it was a seminar class last fall, but it did not go so well. We were trying to use RP in that class, it was about LGBT and getting jobs, and there were a lot of opinions. Instead of getting into RP and dialoging it, it transgressed into debating and argument. So when [Victoria] brought that up on that night, I was like, “Oh, no. . .”

### **The Now: During course**

**Assumptions changed.** As participants engaged in reflective processes, their taken-for-granted beliefs and original assumptions changed to various degrees. In some cases, participants increased their understanding and acceptance while still maintaining their original perspectives. This experience was represented by Kim’s description of the concept of relationship:

I am still maintaining my original viewpoint. But as we continued to talk about different types of relationships, hearing more of others’ input, and reflect on my own assumptions, I gained some understandings about my own perspective as well as other people’s from which I hadn’t necessarily even seen things before. Another thing I learned was that my perspective is just one of many perspectives and no perspectives are right or wrong.

Echoing this experience, Victoria shared similar changes in her beliefs about engaging people in dialogues on religion:

A part of the assumption is still there in that I wouldn’t necessarily want to jump right into talking about religious beliefs and how they affect their lives with random people. But it has changed in that I gained more understanding about religious people like what

they believe and why they believe it. I would also probably feel more comfortable engaging my religious friends in dialogue about their religious beliefs and how that affects their lives.

Likewise, Annie described how she accepted playing a larger role in her learning process, as encouraged by the instructor, while also holding onto her original beliefs about the teacher-student relationship:

I still identify with more traditional model about certain things about the role of the teacher and the student and their relationship. I mean, I won't say authority figure, but [Dr. Phillips] is still definitely the expert for me. I just don't see myself as equal because of his higher degree and his years of experience, all of which make us different people. But I came to be more accepting that Dr. Phillips values our experiences and voices, trying to be inclusive of us students. For example, when he was sharing his story and I was facilitating the group process, although it was turning into an interview, I didn't want to interrupt the professor because he is a professor. But now, I will be a little bit more comfortable with intervening the process as a facilitator, instead of going back to him every single time.

In other cases, participants gained new perspectives and paradigms with which view and understand their original experiences and underlying assumptions. For example, as described above, Annie originally believed that she was the only one who could identify with her experience; however, "After reflection, I came to realize that even though it is other people's experiences, we can still connect with them, learn from them, and better understand some things about our own experiences." Echoing this experience, June, who was unsure why she was excited about stories about herself and her son with the group, said:

I reflected on why I got so excited when sharing stories of my son and me doing activities together. And my personal feelings on that were because I am creating memories together with him, that excites me. We can get a hobby together, and we were doing something important and productive together, cultivating and growing them.

Similarly, Trinity discussed how she came to embrace what she initially thought was a “criticism” from the instructor as another way of approaching in the RP process:

Although it was a struggle to come to terms with the criticism, I came to realize that it was simply a different way of seeing and going about things, instead of us being wrong, and I was able to embrace it, eventually. It was a part of the process to learn from our experiences for next time and be productive.

For a few participants, their reflective processes brought about changes in their actions as well as their thinking. For example, Kim read articles that the instructor posted by on the course website about being right in the RP process, such as how dwelling on one’s strongly held beliefs can block opportunity to dialogue with others. She then described how reading articles posted on the course website and reflecting on her past interactions with others helped her let go of being right in the RP process and be more accepting of other views:

As I reflected on my conversations with my family, co-workers, and other people, I thought it was right that how me being so step-oriented and being right influenced or hurt the way I was able to dialogue with these people. I had this right opinion, and when they were talking to me, I was just shutting down and not listening to them because I thought I was right. . . . I think that was a critical moment in changing how I viewed RP and how I interacted with other people. I mean, after that, I put it away – being so certain about what I believe and what I think is right – and opened up to the process and became more

accepting about what other people said. So I think that whole reflection about being right really helped change things for me. This was a big shift.

According to participants, their beliefs and assumptions transformed to various degrees as a result of their actual experiences in the RP course and their engagement in reflections.

**Assumptions changed through experiencing.** Some changes that the participants experienced in their assumptions were brought about through their actual experiences in the RP course. For instance, at the beginning of the semester, participants struggled to see even the possibility of relating well with other group members. However, as the semester progressed, they managed to build relationships with one another, illustrated by the following excerpts:

It seemed that we were getting closer, and eventually, it became like a family dynamic.

We all cared what the other person thinks and how they experienced things. (Trinity)

. . .the class really became a cohesive unit, and we really came to trust each other.

(Victoria)

Through getting to know and building trust with other members, the participants' original assumptions shifted over time from not being connected to being connected.

Other changes that participants experienced through their actual experiences involved similarities between themselves and other members. Initially, participants showed great concerns about their differences, as noted by Trinity, who asked herself, "How can these people be similar to me?" However, as they learned and worked together in the RP course, participants came to gradually understand that they shared many more similarities than they had originally imagined and that they were indeed "all the same." That is, ". . .everybody [was] learning – understanding new concepts, practicing the process, and getting coached. We were all learning, exploring, and experiencing together," according to Trinity.

As well as student members, the instructor of the RP course also came to be viewed by participants as similar to, while also different from, them. Indeed, he participated, learned, and created new knowledge jointly with the student members, while also teaching and facilitating the course as a teacher. This change was illustrated by Trinity, who described how Howard engaged in the process as a co-participant:

[Howard] participated in the same way [as us]. . . .he was always part of the group until he stopped the music, you know, “This is what you could have done here,” or “Here are some options for you to do now,” or things like that, which I guess is partially Type I. He was just a part of the group as opposed to away from the group even spatially. He was a part of the conversation as opposed to like out here as an observer. And he would say what he thought, too. He would participate in that way. He would say what he saw was interesting, and he would ask questions. It wouldn’t be just students. . . .it did change in me, my thought of Howard as a part of the group as opposed to an observer or something like that.

**Assumptions changed through reflecting.** Participants experienced challenges to their assumptions when they were prompted to examine, often for the first time, the unexamined assumptions that they brought to and developed in the RP classroom. Indeed, it was often through this experience that participants came to be aware of their taken-for-granted beliefs and their assumptions on which they had never stopped to reflect before. This experience was exemplified by Hallie, who reflected on her experience of taking a course in welding about 10 years earlier when prompted by another member’s response to Hallie’s critical incidents:

[Another student] said I was empowered by that incident when I took it just out of curiosity because it was a class all for women. She was like, “Why did you take it?”, so I



said, “Just because it was offered.” No big thing, I just wanted to take it. But she said, “That’s so empowering.” When I left the class, I had to think about her using the word, “empowerment” because I had never thought about the empowering aspect of it, you know, that it gave me a certain amount of power to say, “I can weld.” What she said triggered me to start thinking about something I had never stopped to think before, all of a sudden.

June recalled a similar experience of being challenged when Kim drew attention to the fact that she was continuously speaking in terms of collectives, e.g., she and her son together, when she shared her critical incident:

[Kim] asked me, “Why are you using the word, ‘we’, instead of ‘I’?” I couldn’t answer right there. I sat there and went, “I don’t know. That’s a good question [laughs]. I have to get back to you on that one because I’ve never thought about that.” So I asked myself, ‘Why am I doing all this?’ But I was like, ‘I don’t know. I just do it. Why am I doing all this?’” . . . My initial response was spending some time together, but I was like, “It’s gotta be more than that.” That’s where I had to reflect afterwards: “Why am I doing that besides spending time together? There’s gotta be something more there.”

Likewise, Kate shared an experience in which she began questioning the way her brother, Patrick, responded to his son’s diagnosis of neurofibromatosis as triggered by hearing James’s response to his daughter’s diagnosis of autism. While James was willing to learn about his daughter’s condition and take the action necessary to help her, Patrick was in complete denial, “trying to sweep [it] under the rug,” in Kate’s terms. She described how learning about James’s experience led her to examine Patrick’s response for the first time:

Well, when I heard [James's] reaction to his daughter's diagnosis. . . it triggered me to think about the other reaction, which was my brother's. I wanted to understand why some parents wouldn't want to help their children [because] I would assume if you are a parent, you would want to know what's going on with your child so that you know what you can do about it to help. But my brother wasn't like that at all, so his reaction was puzzling to me. That's how I started thinking about his reaction. Dialogue on James's critical incident made me think about what I had never thought about before.

As described by these participants, their experiences of engaging in reflective processes were sudden and unexpected events prompted by participating in dialogue in the course.

**Questioning assumptions as challenges.** According to several participants, the questioning of their beliefs and assumptions were challenging moments for them. This experience was represented by Kim's reflection on her belief about the concept of relationship, prompted by her encounter with an alternative view:

. . .one night, as I was driving back home after class, I started reflecting on some of the things we discussed in class. Then, I thought, "Am I really right? Why do I believe the way I believe?" That was a challenging moment.

On a similar note, Annie shared her reflective process when she was introduced to a perspective different from hers about dependency and independency in relationship:

[Encountering with a perspective different from mine] made me think about my own perspective; it made me question what I'd always believed was right. . . .And that was a difficult and emotional experience because you lose certainty in what you had always thought was right. That's shocking.

Likewise, Kate expressed how hard it was for her to become used to the RP course when she found out how differently it was designed from her previous courses:

Oh my gosh. . . I just didn't know what to think because it was just so different. [It was] different from what I knew [and] what I was used to. . . .So that's how I started thinking about those things, [what I believed and what I was accustomed]. And it was just so hard!

**Questioning assumptions as “Aha! moments.”** In contrast to these challenging experiences, participants also referred to the process of examining their original beliefs and assumptions and gaining new perspectives as “aha moments,” consisting of surprise, excitement, and enlightenment. June described her experience of encountering a surprise and excitement when Kim prompted June to reflect on her bond with her family:

When [Kim] asked me that question, I was surprised like, “Wow!”, . . .especially because it was unexpected. Until then, I had never thought about that, so I wasn't prepared to answer her question. But [Kim's question] made me excited; I was thinking, “Woo, that's something new. I don't have an answer for it because it never occurred to me before or no one has ever asked me that before. Ahh, I need to think about that some more. That's how I started reflecting on my experience and assumptions.

Hallie also shared her experience of an “aha moment” when prompted by another member of the RP group to engage in a reflection on the empowering aspect of participating in a welding course. She employed the metaphor of “a whole new world” to convey her sense of discovery, of a new frame through which to view and understand her original experience:

My brain went, “Wow, boy!”, because I was thinking this way, and this new gate opened all of a sudden. So I looked in and got off there, and I went, “Woow!” There was a

whole new world on the other side of the gate. There, I found a new frame and I began looking at my experience through that new frame. And I was there, very excited. . . . It was like, “Oh boy, look at this!”, or “Wow, I’ve never thought like that!”.

Being excited about their new encounters, the participants continued to carefully examine their original experiences and underlying assumptions. As they pursued further understandings through engaging in reflective processes, they eventually reached moments of enlightenment, such as that described by Kim:

Then, there was this moment of enlightenment, “Aha!” [laughs]. It’s about realization, or experiencing the moment that brings to light. So when I reflected, for example, on different interactions that I’d had with different people in the past, it brought into focus the fact that I tended to form my opinions too quickly. Then, when this happened, I was like, “Aha!” – I finally came to realize that I was making these mistakes, having to be right all the time.

Kate summed up these processes of an “aha moment” by employing the metaphor of a universe consisting of various planets:

. . .it was like, if you are in the universe, I’m living in my own little planet. And suddenly, someone said something that caused me to look over here. And I went, “Oh, wow!”, because I saw another planet. That’s another place to go and explore. So if the universe is infinite, then all these things I never thought about in a certain way, all these other planets out there, another world to explore because I never looked at it like that before. . . .It just puts things in a whole new light, and it opens up a new area for exploration. And that’s a really exciting, eye-opening experience because you get to have a completely new experience.

## **The Future: Post-course**

Some of the changes that occurred in their beliefs and assumptions were retained by participants even after the semester was over. For instance, at the beginning of the term, Annie was uncomfortable with “interrupting the professor” in facilitating the process of RP because of the ingrained respect that she had for teachers. However, as the semester proceeded, she became progressively more comfortable having him as another group member. Her explanation reveals that she still maintained this perspective at the time of the interview:

Now I think I will be a little bit more comfortable saying, “Let’s spin this in a different direction and open it back to everybody else,” or “What do you think about that?”, as opposed to just going back to [the instructor] every single time.

Likewise, Kim shared in her interview how she would be more willing to take risks in engaging in RP now than she was at the start of the course:

. . .the very beginning of the term, there were some questions about relationships. I had mentioned something, and somebody asked back, and I said, “I’d rather not talk about it.” But by the end of the term, I now thought about it and think I would have gone there if they asked for it.

In addition, participants speculated that some of the changes they experienced in and through the RP course would continue in the future. This was represented by Kate’s statement about the relationships that she and other members had developed over the course of the semester: “So now, I think we have relationships that we can pick back up on over time because I know more about [other members] as not just classmates but also individuals.” Furthermore, Trinity described her way of being as having been altered by participating in the course: “My

experience in class made me different as an individual.” By this, Trinity meant that her modified way of understanding the world resides within her and stands to impact not only her interaction with herself, but with all around, wherever she goes.

### **Summary: Time as the Ground**

In the phenomenological approach proposed by Thomas and Pollio (2002), an individual’s perception of a phenomenon stands out against a ground of the experience. For the present study, time – pre-course, during course, and post-course – served as a ground of the experience of challenged assumptions. Participants brought and developed their unexamined assumptions about the RP course that they had developed from years of their schooling, upbringing, and career experiences. As participants engaged in the RP course and reexamined their original beliefs, they gained new understandings and perspectives about their original experiences and underlying assumptions. These changes involved connection (connected to connected), similarity (different to alike), and comfort (uncomfortable to comfortable). Some of these changes lasted after the semester was over and were projected to continue in the future.

### **The Overall Structure of Challenged Beliefs and Assumptions**

Interconnections between the ground and the themes are represented in *Diagram of the Thematic Structure 1* (Fig 6). First, the three themes stand out against the ground of time. Second, this three-dimensional diagram shows that each theme is interrelated with the remaining themes as represented by the connected lines in the triangle. For example, participants felt uncomfortable when they were not well connected with other members and encountered beliefs



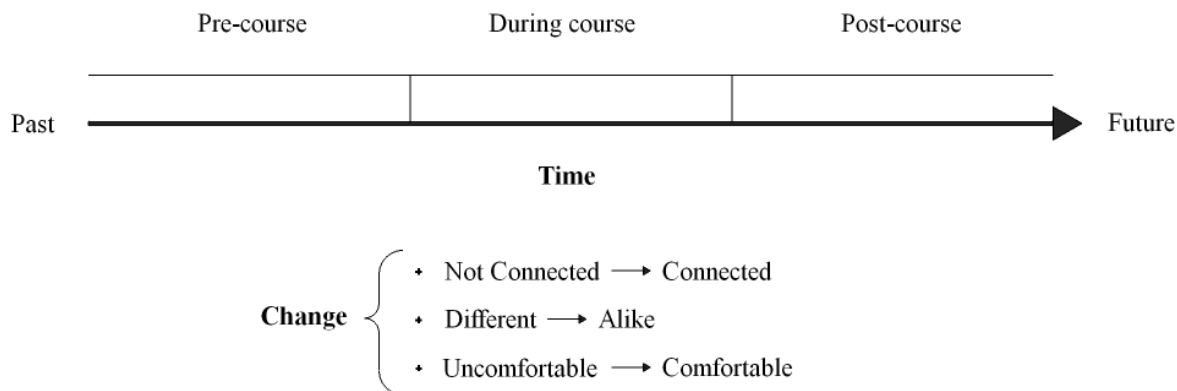
**Figure 6. Diagram of the Thematic Structure 1**

and values that differed from their own. Participants grew more comfortable as they became more aware of similarities among themselves and managed to build friendships and trust with one another. Third, the two aspects of each theme exist in a continuum, instead of as two separate and opposing experiences. As such, participants' experiences of challenged assumptions stand in any place between these two ends. The continuum also represents the changes that participants experienced (in terms of connection, similarity, and comfort) as they participated in the RP course over the semester. Another way of understanding the interrelationship between the ground and the themes is shown in *Diagram of the Thematic Structure 2* (Fig. 7).

### **Participant Feedback to the Overall Structure**

Phenomenology is a study of the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by the participants. The previous sections presented participants' experiences of challenged and changed beliefs and assumptions as shared in the interviews. As stated in Chapter III, acquiring feedback from the participants is an important part of a phenomenological study to ensure that the thematic structure corresponds to their experiences. Therefore, I contacted each of the eight participants through email about their responses to the ground and the themes of the experience (Appendix E). After a week of no response, I sent each participant another email to request her feedback on the summary of the findings (Appendix F). Of the eight participants, four responded within three weeks with positive and supportive feedback regarding the overall structure of the experience. The following are comments from these participants and illustrate their clear connections to the findings:





**Figure 7. Diagram of the Thematic Structure 2**

*Kate:* You have interesting findings, and I feel that my responses to you were represented.

*Trinity:* I think it was a good summary of the shared experience.

*Kim:* I have reviewed your themes on our RP experience and I feel you have captured our experience and my own experience very well.

*Jasmine:* I was surprised when reading your summary. It seemed as if you were writing this specifically about my experience. . . . It seems as if you were able to identify all of the feeling I had during the course, and it's comforting to know that I wasn't way off base with the rest of the students!

The overall feedback provided in response to the findings for the findings resonated with the participants and helped to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data.

## **Summary**

Chapter IV presented a brief participant synopsis of each adult learner and an in-depth analysis of the participant interviews. The analysis of the interview data provided the ground of the experience as time, consisting of the essence of having been (pre-course), the now (during course), and the future (post-course). From the ground of time, the thematic structure of the experience stood out to become three major themes: 1) being connected, 2) being alike, and 3) being comfortable. The three themes are interrelated, with each directly affecting another. In addition, each of the themes is comprised of sub-themes that directly involve the personal experience of the theme.

Upon the completion of the data analysis and the development of the thematic structure, I contacted the participants through email to seek their feedback for the analysis. Four participants responded with positive and supportive feedback and comments. This feedback was discussed in the last section of this chapter. As the next step, Chapter V provides my interpretation of the findings and discusses the thematic structure in relation to existing literature and research. Conclusions and implications for research and practice are also presented.

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter summarizes the study and describes its findings. It also discusses how these findings relate to literature and closes with conclusions and implications regarding research and practice.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of adult graduate students who had had their beliefs challenged or questioned in a RP course. The phenomenological method developed by Thomas and Pollio (2002) was utilized to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of challenged assumptions from the participants' perspective. Eight female adult students from the RP class voluntarily participated in this study. One student (male) declined to participate. Participants ranged in age between twenty-three and sixty-two years of age and were enrolled in Master's or Ph.D. degree programs in Educational Psychology and Research at the time of the interview.

Participants were interviewed about their challenged assumptions in the RP course. I began the interview with a key phenomenological question or request: such as, "Tell me about a time when you had your beliefs and assumptions questioned or challenged as you participated in your RP class." The interviews were open-ended, working with probing questions derived from the responses of the participants during the course of the interviews, instead of a set of predetermined questions.

From the thematic analysis of the interview data, one ground theme and three figural themes emerged. Participants' experiences of challenged assumptions stand out against a ground of *time*, which is represented by the three temporal components: the essence of having been (pre-course), the now (during course), and the future (post-course). The figural themes are: 1) *being connected*, 2) *being alike*, and 3) *being comfortable*. With respect to the first figural theme, *being connected*, participants were initially concerned that they would not relate or work well with other members. Despite these initial concerns, participants managed to build relationships with other group members and create a cohesive and productive group over time. Learning to engage in dialogue jointly with the group was helpful in this process.

With respect to the theme *being alike*, participants were more aware of differences, between themselves and other members for instance, at the initial phase of their experiences. These differences created challenges to assumptions for participants, engaging them in reflecting critically on their experiences and assumptions, some of them for the very first time. Nevertheless, as time passed, they became more aware of similarities, while also learning to open up to alternative views and embrace them to different degrees.

With respect to the theme *being comfortable*, participants' experiences of challenged assumptions were initially accompanied by feelings of discomfort. However, despite their initial discomfort, participants became increasingly more comfortable as they participated in the RP course over the course of the semester.

Participants appeared to retain their changed beliefs after the semester was over, at least for the few weeks that lapsed between the end of semester and the interviews. Although there was no indication during the interviews that participants might not retain their beliefs for a longer period of time, no further attempt was made to follow up on this possibility.

The three figural themes also appeared to be interrelated; further examination indicated that the themes on each end of a thematic continuum were interactive, suggesting additional and more complex interactions among the themes as a group. In other words, aspects of the themes *not connected*, *different*, and *uncomfortable* were interrelated, as were the *connected*, *alike*, and *comfortable* aspects. For example, participants felt uncomfortable when they were not connected with other members and when they encountered beliefs and experiences different from what they were accustomed. Participants grew more comfortable as they managed to connect and learned that they shared many similarities and that they had things in common in terms of their processes of learning, working, and experiencing in the RP course.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The study addressed the research question: *What is the experience of adult learners whose beliefs were challenged and assumptions were questioned in a graduate RP course?* The findings showed that the learners' experience could be best described as *changing and evolving over time*. Participants began the semester not connecting with other group members, being challenged by experiences and beliefs different from what their own, and experiencing discomfort when faced with the possibility of letting go of some strongly held beliefs. By the end of the term, these initial negative experiences shifted, some significantly – almost to the opposite point – and others to some point within the spectrum. In particular, participants built relationships with other members, learned to embrace similarities as well as differences in beliefs and experiences, and grew comfortable with their uncertainties. These changes occurred as a result of learning within the context of CL as well as other types of teaching and learning, particularly lecture and coaching from the instructor.

## **Changes Resulting from Challenged Assumptions and Beliefs**

At the initial stage of their RP processes, participants experienced struggles and discomfort to various degrees, especially when asked to engage with other participants in dialogue. Similar observations are found in several related studies. For example, in her study of adult learners in a David Bohm seminar, Cayer (1996) documented difficulties that learners encountered while engaging in dialogue. Cayer observed that these difficulties developed from participants' limited knowledge of dialogue and their inability to successfully engage with others in the key features of dialogue, such as suspending their assumptions in order to understand what others are saying. Dillivan's (2004) participants had similar experiences: they expressed disappointment and frustration due to their perceived inability to sustain dialogical conversations in a course whose contents focused primarily on dialogue. Their inability to sustain a dialogical teaching and learning environment negatively affected the process of joint knowledge construction. Likewise, while studying the same course, Alderton (2000) also found participants' frustration to be a pervasive part of the dialogue process. Sources of frustration included lack of engagement by some group members and the group's overall slow progress in learning how to dialogue effectively. The findings of these four studies were similar in terms of participants' frustration with process. However, the experiences reported by participants in the related studies persisted through the entire period of their engagement in courses or workshops, whereas these experiences occurred only in the initial phase of the course and changed over time for participants in the current study.

Other researchers who studied similar versions of the RP course also reported that participants' experiences changed and evolved during the course. Armstrong (1999) observed

that participants experienced confusion and frustration at the beginning of the semester; however, their frustration levels generally waned as time passed. Learners were initially concerned that they did not know what they were doing and whether or not they were doing it correctly. Nevertheless, as participants learned that RP represents a new way of learning, they were able to adjust and productively experience the process, thus decreasing their frustrations. Crosse (2001), who also examined an earlier version of the RP course, concluded that RP was a developmental process. More specifically, engagement in RP fostered new ways of meaning-making on the part of participants. In addition, they increased their awareness, developed interpersonal relationships, and fostered skills for effective communication over the course of the semester.

The factor of time was also a key theme in several studies in the closely related area of collaborative learning (Peters, Hammon, & Gray, 2009). For example, Tisue (1999) reported that time was a factor in how members of a family-owned business experienced collaborative learning and many features of the RP process. They experienced some positive changes in their relationships as they learned to work and learn collaboratively, but these changes occurred over several months of engaging in dialogue. Initially, they saw their meetings as a source of internal conflict and were apprehensive about participating in these collaborative meetings. However, as the time passed, they learned to let go of the outside distractions and actively participate in dialogue during the meetings.

### **Accounting for Changes**

The question is, what accounts for changes in participants' engagement in RP over time? In other words, how did learners deal with their "crises" in a way that allowed them to move

forward in the process? According to Brookfield (1994), at the beginning of a critically reflective learning process, learners “attempt to make sense of the apparent chaos through which they are passing. There is a hermeneutic quest to create and ascribe meaning to this chaos as a way of reducing feelings of dissonance, discomfort and alienation” (p. 213). Developing a sense of community served as a means of coping with chaos for participants in Brookfield’s study. This sense of community provided participants a safe haven in which they confirmed that they were not alone in the process and through which they worked to make sense of the changes that they were experiencing. McNamee and Gergen (1999) concurred that positive relationships between group members are the primary importance in the process of dialogue as it helps create common meanings for the group. Nevertheless, not all adult learning theorists agreed that ideal conditions of discourse lead to meaning-making. For example, Newman (2012) contended that what Mezirow (2000) considered essential preconditions for free full participation in discourse, including trust, are not attainable. Dillivan (2004) and Alderton (2000) also reported that participants in the course on dialogue that they studied failed to form a community in the sense described by Brookfield or positive relationships described by McNamee and Gergen.

However, although Armstrong (1999) and Crosse (2001) did not focus on community building per se, Armstrong did report that the development of positive relationships among participants helped account for their increasing understanding and engagement in the RP process. Participants in the present study also reported that building relationships contributed significantly to growing comfortable with the RP course. Trust was built gradually among the participants throughout the semester as they continued to talk and laugh with one another both in and outside of the classroom. Their engagement in dialogue, such as sharing personal stories, discussing controversial issues, and finding similarities and connections among themselves, was helpful in



bringing the participants and other group members closer. As participants consistently learned and worked in this supportive environment, they also came to realize that they were not alone in their learning processes. Indeed, it was a collective journey as much as an individual one. Thus, in keeping with studies such as Brookfield, Armstrong, and Crosse, as well as with McNamee and Gergen's views, participants' relationships and sense of collective endeavor served as a means to cope with and overcome the difficulty and discomfort that they experienced at the initial phase of the RP course.

The subject-object relationship manifested in Kegan's (1994) five stages of development also helps account for how participants changed and evolved over the course of the semester. Of all the stages, I only discuss here the last three that concern adulthood and are, thus, relevant to the participants' experiences in this study. At the third level, which Kegan called *socialized mind*, individual identity is tied to living in relationships with others in roles determined by their local culture. That is, individuals are subject to the beliefs and values of others and are, thus, less likely to question these beliefs. At the fourth level, *self-authorizing mind*, individuals learn to take a step back from their environments and view their social systems as objects, critically examining their cultures. They are able to separate the beliefs of others from their own in order to form their own systems of making sense of their worlds. In other words, an individual's identity is independent from his or her environment; individuals become subject to their own ideology. The fifth level, *self-transforming mind*, allows individuals to step back from the act of self-authoring and see it as object. From this perspective, they are able to examine and compare multiple ideologies simultaneously. Individuals are able to accept the contradictions between competing belief systems and are thus subject to the dialectic between systems of thought. Accepting the incompleteness of wholeness is also learned at this level.

Kegan's (2000) concept of the subject-object relationship in the stages of development was represented in participants' experiences prior to, during, and after their participation in the RP course. For instance, participants began the course with unexamined beliefs and assumptions, many of which stemmed from how they had been socialized in their home environments, as well as their school and work settings. In terms of Kegan's theory, the participants were "subject to" these earlier influences; however, as they engaged in RP, they learned to step back and critically examine their experiences, beliefs, and underlying systems. Participants also carefully examined other perspectives and paradigms and were, as a result, able to let go of some of their original beliefs while also acquiring new perspectives with which to view and understand various aspects of their worlds, including their relationships with others and the RP process. In some cases, participants' perspectives and paradigms shifted significantly; in other cases, changes were relatively minor, such as participants' original beliefs residing with new perspectives. It is arguable, therefore, that participants moved from a *subject to* perspective to one of holding these former influences as *object* (Kegan, 1994).

Closely relating to Kegan's subject-object relationship, Isaacs (1993) also offered a perspective on how changes might have occurred in the participants' experiences with challenged assumptions. In mapping the evolution of dialogue, Isaacs discussed how learners evolve through various phases of dialogue as they manage and resolve different kinds of crises that they might encounter in the process. For example, in the first phase of dialogue, which he called *instability of the container*, learners have difficulty in opening up to other perspectives and opportunities as they are holding tightly on to the perspectives and paradigms that they bring with them. Once they learn to loosen the "grip of certainty" about various views, including their own, and explored their differences, they can resolve the crisis and evolve to the second phase.

In this phase, which Isaacs referred to as *instability in the container*, learners encounter the second crisis if they do not suspend their assumptions during the process of dialogue. This experience often creates confusion and frustration among participants. However, according to Isaacs, this crisis can be managed if participants inquire into and listen to both others and themselves; they can then move to the third phase.

At the third phase, *inquiry in the container*, learners begin to inquire together as a group. They learn to explore others' views and come to realize how their own and others' habitual ways of thinking and interacting have limited them in terms of being able to communicate effectively with one another. As these old ways are freed up, conversations begin to flow in a new way, and new insights can emerge. Finally, at the fourth phase, *creativity in the container*, a new level of awareness opens, and learners become aware of common meanings that they construct jointly. Referring to this phase as *metalogue*, Isaacs (1993) stated that learners become more aware of the subtle relationship between their exchange (e.g., process and content) and its meaning. He further describes it as follows:

This kind of exchange entails learning to think and speak together for the creation of breakthrough levels of thought, and to know the aesthetic beauty of shared speech. Such loosening of rigid thought patterns frees energy that now permits new levels of intelligence and creativity in the container. (p. 38)

While Isaacs' evolution of dialogue involves aspects of Kegan's stages of development, Isaacs' model adds the collective element, especially to the last two phases.

Participants in the current study shared a similar evolution of dialogue during their experiences of facing and dealing with challenges. Consistent with the first phase of Isaacs' model, the participants were initially troubled and disturbed when encountering beliefs and

experiences that differed from their own and those with which they were familiar. For instance, unique aspects of the RP course, such as having the instructor and the student occupy “on an equal field,” created internal conflicts within some participants. They overcame this crisis by learning to loosen their strongly held beliefs and embracing the possibility that they also were experts in their own lives and that everyone can benefit from different areas of expertise, including the instructor’s knowledge of the process. With regard to the second phase, participants struggled to let go of the notion of “doing it right” while engaging in the RP process because they assumed that there was only one correct way of conducting RP. They constantly sought out the “correct” way and felt apprehensive about making mistakes and receiving negative feedback from the instructor. Nevertheless, the participants eventually managed to gain insights into alternative ways of engaging in and facilitating the RP process, all of which could be “correct.”

Moving onto the last two phases, over time the participants began to inquire collectively as a group. Learning to view their interactions in new ways, they came to realize how not listening to or not being open to other views prevented them from communicating with other people in dialogical and productive ways in various settings. In addition, as the participants learned to explore and relate to each other’s views, they became more aware of common meanings, including similarities, that they created and shared among themselves. Finally, the participants learned to view their interactions in terms of process, content, and context and to create their own, unique ways of relating and interacting with one another.

In keeping with Isaacs’ model, participants in the current study tended to experience multiple crises simultaneously, though one crisis or another appeared to be more salient than others at the time of their experience. In addition, participants sometimes passed back and forth

through different phases of dialogue, instead of progressing from the first phase to the next in a fixed sequence. However, unlike Isaacs might have predicted, they were evolving towards creating a series of increasingly more conscious environments of inquiry, both individually and as the group.

Another accounting of the changes participants experienced might be found in theories of transformative learning (TL). More specifically, the majority of the changes that the participants underwent can be understood as meaning-making activities. Mezirow (2000) described these changes as involving “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (p. 5). The present study revealed several instances of meaning making, particularly in terms of participants’ specific assumptions (e.g., assumptions about teacher and student roles). Still, a few other changes seemed to involve what Mezirow refers to as TL. The latter experience is more global, reflecting a more inclusive view. In this study, participants’ perspective transformations tended to bring about changes in not only thinking but also in terms of actions. For example, the participants not only changed their assumptions about how they should relate to an instructor, but they also engaged the instructor differently over time.

Whether or not the participants’ experiences involved TL, changes might have been triggered by what Jarvis (1993) referred to as a *disjuncture*, or the gap between one’s biography and experience. According to Jarvis (2006), this is the moment “when time stops” (p. 6). Illustrating this moment, June described her experience of a “pause” when she was “caught off guard” by another member’s question that she was unprepared to answer. Disjuncture often occurred when participants encountered beliefs and experiences that differed from their own or from that to which they were accustomed. For instance, holding tightly to her beliefs about relationships,

Annie experienced a “brief stop” as she reflected on different perspectives shared by other members.

These experiences of a “pause” or a “brief stop” at the disjuncture relate to what Kostogriz (2005) called the *thirdplace*, or the location of “creative ferment” (p. 197) in a dialogical experience. For several participants in this study, moments of pause during their interactions with others sometimes prompted them to examine their actions and underlying assumptions. It is important to note that “others” involved in participants’ experiences included not only other members of the course, but also authors of materials that the participants read during the semester. For example, Kim described how reading articles about the RP process prompted her to reflect on and question how she interacted with her family and co-workers in terms of her need to be certain and her poor listening habits. The engagement with others thus played a major role in prompting participants to engage in the examination of their taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions.

This finding closely relates to Shotter’s (1997) and other authors’ (e.g., Gergen, Schrader, & Gergen, 2009) contention that our ‘inner’ lives are only realized in terms of the dialogical relations that are momentary, responsive, and developmental. Peters and Ragland (2009) also stressed the importance of engagement with others in the process of examining assumptions. In their discussion of *levelising*, they maintained that the shift from *pre-reflective being* to *reflective being* often takes place as a result of “an unexpected or surprising occurrence, or in response to a prompt from others” (p. 80). This is similar to what Shotter called a *striking moment* during person-to-person interaction and to Mezirow’s (2009) *disorienting dilemma*.

According to Buber (1937), dialogue is the route to entering into an I-thou relationship with others. The notion of dialogue is also central to Mezirow’s (1991) more contemporary

theory of transformative learning, which he saw as a means for facilitating critical self-reflection and learning. Mezirow suggested that critical self-reflection is essentially a social process, especially when done in a group context, and he found a connection between his concept of dialogue and perspective transformation:

A perspective is transformed by the resolution of a dilemma through exposure to alternative perspectives and participation in critical discourse with others to verify one's new reality. Transformative learning is not a private affair involving information processing; it is interactive and inter-subjective from start to finish. (p. 364)

These ideas of various theorists suggest the importance of the experience at the disjuncture in terms of how participants deal with challenged assumptions. Corresponding to Mezirow's (2000) and Gehrels' (1984) ideas, triggering events led this study's participants to engage in various degrees of self-examination. They often described their difficult and disturbing experiences at length, and their questioning of assumptions was often accompanied by feelings of unease. These experiences were manifested by such expressions as, "It was a struggle," "I was bothered," "I was just so worried," "That was frustrating," "We started getting all anxious," and "I was immensely uncomfortable, upset almost." Such findings are consistent with what Jarvis (1993, 2006) and Taylor (2000) would have anticipated in their ideas about adult learning. However, unlike what Mezirow might have predicted, participants in the current study did not express feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame. In addition, unlike Jarvis' and Taylor's observations, emotional responses these participants shared were not limited to difficult and disturbing ones. A few reported their experiences with the process of examining assumptions in far more positive terms, such as a surprise, excitement, and enlightenment. These findings do, however, correspond to Taylor's (2000) contention that "the journey of

transformation is more individualistic, fluid, and recursive than originally thought” (p. 292), as well as other research findings that have revealed a significant relationship between reflective processes and the affective dimension of knowing (e.g., Gehrels, 1984; Neuman, 1996; Sveinunggaard, 1993). Such phases as working through emotions and feelings appeared to have had more significant influence than others on the participants’ experiences of challenged assumptions.

Also consistent with what some adult education researchers (e.g., Brookfield, 2000; Clark, 1991; Saavedra, 1995) found in other studies, these participants’ modified ways of understanding the world were manifested in actual changes in their behaviors as well as changes in the way they thought. These findings corroborate Lange’s (2004) conclusion that perspective transformation is both an epistemological process, involving a change in worldview, and an ontological process, bringing about a change in being in the world. The participants showed changes in their ways of thinking and acting, in addition to their ways of being, in relating with others and the world.

In addition, the changes seemed to represent the nine aspects of what Newman (2012) designated to be *good learning*: changes took place within and among participants in instrumental, communicative, affective, interpretive, essential, critical, political, passionate, and moral terms. For instance, the participants gained the skills necessary to engage in and facilitate the RP process (instrumental), while also learning to relate with other members in dialogical manners (communicative). Participants also became aware of their taken-for-granted beliefs and biases as they engaged in RP (political) and coped with struggles that they experienced at the initial phase (passionate).



## **An Overall Philosophical Perspective**

This study's findings showed that participants experienced changes in their beliefs and assumptions over time and that several factors may have accounted for their experiences with change. It has been helpful to examine the specifics of the study and related other research and theory. However, it also helps to form a broad perspective of how the participants' experience might be understood. With this in mind, I turn to the ideas that have stood the test of time, as well as some ideas of the same researchers and theorists whose work has already been introduced in this chapter.

**Continuity and interaction.** Two aspects that stand out about participants' experiences of challenged and changed assumptions are continuity of experience and interaction of experience as outlined by Dewey (1938). Relating to the interpretivist perspective in the temporal nature of lived experience (i.e., lived experience is viewed as continuous), Dewey described the principle of continuity of experience:

Every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences. For it is a somewhat different person that enters into them. . . .From this point of view, the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after. (p. 35)

Dewey's principle of continuity closely resembles Boud's (1994) concept of an individual's personal foundation of experience, which he explained as follows:

Learners bring with them any event their personal foundation of experience. This is a way of describing the influence of all their previous experiences on them now. We all

bring our embodied life history with us on every occasion and this will profoundly affect our perceptions of what does and does not count as important, it acts to sensitize us to some features of our world and blind us to others and it shapes the intent we have which guides our priorities. Normally our personal foundation of experience is not readily accessible to us and can only be inferred with difficulty from our actions and our intent.

(p. 50)

That is, we are sensitive to and are affected by experience. We learn from every experience we have had in life, and those that are accumulated within are carried on to influence the nature of our future experiences. This view suggests that our experiences are not separate, isolated events; they are interconnected as unbroken and consistent existence and function, with each blending into the other, on a continuum. Both Dewey's continuity of experience and Boud's foundational view thus involves not only the longitudinal impact of past experiences, but also the historical rootedness of human consciousness.

With regard to Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction of experience, he suggested that experience is not something that goes on inside an individual in isolation from external forces in the world:

[The principle of interaction] assigns equal rights to both factors in experience – objective and internal conditions. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a situation. . . .The statement that individuals live in a world means, in the concrete, that they live in a series of situations. And when it is said that they live in these situations. . . [it] means, once more, that interaction is going on between an individual and objects and other persons. The conception of situation and of interaction are inseparable from each

other. An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment. (p. 42-43)

It is important to note that the principles of continuity and interaction are not separate from one another. Dewey (1983) further noted that “continuity and interaction in their active union with each other provide the measure of the educative significance and value of an experience” (p. 44-45).

Echoing this view, the interpretivist paradigm (e.g., Pollio et al., 1997; Valle et al., 1989) represented a monistic perspective, emphasizing individual and world as together co-constituting their lived experience of reality. In this understanding, experience is not a sequence of internal sets of events, such as mind, and the knower and the known are not separate entities. Instead, they are parts of a whole; the individual as “subject” and world as “object” exist in interaction with one another. The concept of intentionality in existential phenomenology illustrates the notion of how individual and world are interdependent and co-constitute our experiences of reality (Gergen, 1999; Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

The view that our life is a continuous stream of lived experiences that interacts with the world was exhibited in the present study in complicated ways. More specifically, the participants’ experiences of their developed, challenged, and changed assumptions were constituted as the participants interacted with what Boud (1994) called the “*learning milieu* – i.e., the social, psychological, and material environment in which the participants were situated” (p. 50). This learning milieu included the history and culture of the members, the dynamics of the group, and the design and process of the RP course. For instance, participants’ experiences of schooling, upbringing, and career influenced the development of the assumptions that they brought into the RP course. Coming from T-I and T-II educational background experiences,

several participants shared their difficulties of adjusting to T-III teaching and learning reflected in the RP course. The participants also revealed how they had come to value independence in relationships as a result of having been taught by their parents to maintain their independence since their childhood. Practicing and being trained at workplaces that emphasized step-oriented approaches also seemed to cause participants to form the habit of seeking guidelines for the RP process.

**Co-construction of experience.** The discussion of continuity and interaction of experience reflects a constructionist perspective: i.e., experience is a human construction and experiencing is a social process. In their widely read book *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1967) asserted that our experiences are derived from and sustained by our dynamic and ongoing social interactions. Advocating this view, Gergen, Schrader, and Gergen (2009) maintained that the world gains its significance through our relationships and communication. In other words, our experiences are not essential givens; instead, they are constructed in the process of dialogic relationships and interactions with the world. The “world” includes all aspects of the environment in which we are situated, such as social, cultural, historical, and political environments.

In the current study, the participants’ experiences were constructed at the intersection of themselves and their worlds, such as other course members, the group as a whole, the RP course structure and process, and the lives they lived before, during, and after the course. This is consistent with Boud’s (1994) view of a reflective learning experience that

it is the learner’s engagement with the milieu which constitutes the particular learning experience. Learners create a learning milieu through their presence and interaction with it. Through noticing, intervening, and reflection-in-action, they steer themselves through

the milieu in accordance with their intents and what is available for them to use in this process. (p. 51)

As suggested in Bakhtin's notion of *polyvocal*, the participants' inherited ways of being were brought together to this meeting point and formatively influenced the co-construction of their experiences of challenged assumptions. In this space, which Kostogriz called the *thirdplace* (2005), meanings were generated and the participants were afforded authorship in constructing their experiences through interacting with their environments. Kostogriz cautioned that this boundary experience does not suggest a loss of individuality for the participants; instead, it inspires their articulation of new meanings and construction of experiences and understandings.

In this process, the participants and the environment where they were situated served as sets of dynamic living systems, both actively engaging with and intervening in the events of which they were a part. Indeed, the individual's experience and the group's experience corresponded to one another with each facilitating the other. For instance, the participants began to relate with one another as the group learned to jointly engage in dialogue. In turn, as they became closer to one another, the group as a whole began sharing their personal stories and taking risks in dialogue, such as discussing controversial issues, more than they had earlier in the semester.

Nevertheless, at the same time, the participants' experiences were limited by their learning environments, and vice versa. That is, both the participants and the environments interacted in a way that set limits to the construction of their experiences and further development of the environment. For example, participants in a group with more cultural diversity and/or a course incorporating other ways of teaching and learning would be expected to differ in terms of outcomes. In turn, participants with different knowledge, experiences, and

talents could have affected the formation of a different environment and reached different outcomes as well.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Research and Practice**

In this study, the participants began the RP course with an array of their taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions, some deeply embedded within their ways of being. The development of these assumptions was largely influenced by their experiences of schooling, upbringing, and career. Challenges to assumptions took place as participants initially encountered the conflicting beliefs and experiences expressed by others in the early stage of the RP course. However, they learned over time to overcome most of their feelings of disconnectedness, differences, and discomfort. They changed their ways of thinking and acting, as well as their ways of being in the world. These experiences of challenged and changed assumptions were both positive (e.g., enlightening) and negative (e.g., disturbing) in nature. These experiences were strongly influenced by their dynamic interactions with their learning milieu (Boud, 1994). The learning milieu included the history and culture of each member, the dynamics of the group, and the design and process of the RP course.

This study was limited to one small group of students in one graduate course at one university; thus, no attempt is made to generalize to other adult learning environments. However, when the findings are coupled with the key theories and outcomes of other related studies, some conclusions and implications can be drawn. With this in mind, I offer the following conclusions and implications for readers' considerations.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the study's findings is that students' ways of thinking can be changed in formal teaching and learning environments that are specifically

designed to challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs. This conclusion was reached by researchers in the two most closely related studies (Armstrong, 1999; Crosse, 2001), even though the studies of a less directly related but relevant course in dialogue (Alderton, 2000; Dillivan, 2004) did not show positive changes in participants' beliefs and assumptions over time. The mixture of findings illustrates how more research on the related RP process is needed.

In addition, participants in the present study expressed their changes in ways that major related theories of adult learning might not have predicted. For example, while participants responded to triggering events in largely emotional terms, they did not express feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame, and their responses were not limited to difficult and disturbing events in the way that Mezirow's theory of transformative learning might have predicted. That is, a disorienting dilemma does not have to be a negative experience as some recent works (e.g., Taylor, Jarvis) have pointed out. This finding has implications for further research on adult learning in general. For instance, the role that striking moments and such triggers as conflict and disjuncture in experience play in initially prompting learning experiences is widely acknowledged. Less well understood is how initially negative experiences can be transformed into more positive outcomes and how initially positive experiences can also lead to even more positive (or negative) outcomes.

A second conclusion is that time is a key factor in how participants experienced RP. This was the case in the Alderton's (2000) and Crosse's (2001) studies, as well as in some other related studies in collaborative learning (Peters et al., 2009). Knowing that participants' taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions likely resulted from learning experiences developed over a lifetime, it is arguable that any changes in the beliefs and assumptions would not occur in a relatively short period of time, such as in a semester. However, as it turned out, the participants

in the present study and in the most closely related studies (Armstrong, 1999; Crosse, 2001) did in fact experience changes in some areas of their beliefs and assumptions in a semester-length course. It appears that related theories (e.g., Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2000) and philosophical views (e.g., Boud, 1994; Dewey, 1938; Gergen, 1999) have offered some helpful ways to conceptualize why assumptions and beliefs grounded in long learning traditions can actually change over time. However, more research is needed to understand how the process of RP leads to change – or not – within participants over a course of time.

This conclusion also has practical implications for how we design and facilitate various forms of educational activities, especially those that purport to challenge learners' ways of thinking and being in their personal, social, or professional lives and how we hold ourselves and learners accountable for these changes. Some important questions remain; for example, can we justify offering adult learners short-term educational activities, such as one-day workshops, on topics that require long-term critical reflections on their meaning perspectives and how they make sense of their worlds?

A third conclusion is that relationships – connections to other participants – played an important role in participants' changes. The relationships that students and instructor built with one another were a hindrance and a help to their learning experience. For some participants, their assumptions about the proper way to relate to an instructor and other participants were at first a barrier to their willingness to make their assumptions and beliefs known to the whole group. At the same time, their relationship and sense of collective endeavor served as a means to cope with and overcome the difficulty and discomfort that they experienced at the initial phase of the RP course. Indeed, acknowledging these beliefs and assumptions in a challenging, yet



constructive, environment helped lead the participants and others to alter the ways they thought about these relationships in the classroom.

Related literature (e.g., Gergen, 1999; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Brockett, 2007) can shed light on the role of relationships in learning in general having focused on the advantages of building positive relationships in a teaching and learning environment. Nevertheless, we know more about how to build a relational learning climate than we do about the way adult learners think about relationships in formal teaching and learning environments. How the learners' beliefs are manifest and perhaps changed is an ongoing topic of interest for theorists in the area of transformative learning, and it is here that additional research is needed. In the world of practice, adult educators may benefit from attending to the kinds of beliefs and assumptions about relationships that participants bring to the formal teaching and learning environment and how these might present barriers to learning from and with others. Even though the focus of the RP course was on the process of learning as a topic and most other adult education programs focus on more content-based topics, relationships are a part of all teaching and learning situations and, therefore, need to be of interest to adult education practitioners.

A fourth and final conclusion is that some improvements and specific other implications flow from the methodology of the current study. They are as follows:

- How interviewees interpret questions asked by the interviewer. Participants in this study tended to omit, intentionally or forgetfully, descriptions of their cognitive processes that might have taken place at the disjuncture. Instead, they focused on outcomes of their challenges to assumptions. Why? As I reflected, my initial thought was that their shifting processes were rather subtle and gradual, something that was commonly expressed by several participants. However, this theory diminished soon after I

participated in the phenomenological research meeting in which other members and I examined another interview transcript that a member conducted for her dissertation research. Within her transcript, there was a part where she asked the participant a question, derived not from the participant's words, but from the interviewer's own interest. After a moment of silence, the participant continued talking but had only a little to share about what was being asked. We (the group) then stepped back and considered, "What happened here?" Upon reflection, we came to understand that the question was simply not important to the participant. As we discussed this occurrence as a group and I reflected on my study's findings in relation to this particular interview, I began to suspect that the participants in the present study might not have recalled the thought process that led to the outcomes of their challenged assumptions because they were more interested in some questions than in others. This example points out how critical it is for researchers who perform interviews to develop the most relevant and rigorous questions possible. Current practices in phenomenological research can serve as examples of how repeated exposure of questions to peers who serve as constructive critics can lead to quality questions. This includes bracketing interviews and constantly refined questioning procedures. Finally, examples of other researchers' interviewing experiences, such as the one described above, can especially benefit new researchers.

- The site for the current study was a RP course. It would be beneficial to conduct a similar study with students in other courses that present challenges to beliefs as much as the RP course. For instance, philosophy courses often engage students in addressing their basic worldview by questioning the fundamental nature of truth, reality, and existence. What are the students' experiences of challenged assumptions like in these courses?

What occurred in the process of questioning their assumptions? How do their experiences relate to those of the RP participants?

- In the current study, the participants shared similar backgrounds, such as ethnicity. This reflected the population of the students in the RP course. Nevertheless, it would be helpful to conduct a similar study with more culturally diverse groups to compare and contrast lived experiences of challenged assumptions for adult learners. How do their cultures influence the ways in which they experience challenged assumptions?
- The present study was based on participants' retrospective account of their course experiences. It might be interesting to investigate how the changes evolved in the moment of experience, or during the course, and what specifically triggered significant changes in participants' relationships. This might be achieved by interviewing study participants at a mid-point, instead of the end of, the semester and/or having them record weekly reflections on their experiences of RP. What similarities and differences are found between their experiences examined in retrospect and in the moment? How are these differences created, and what do they indicate?
- A longitudinal study of the challenged assumptions could be very beneficial to RP research and adult education in general. What influences do these experiences have on adult learners in the long term? If any changes were experienced by learners as a result of questioning their assumptions, did they retain these changes after the course was over?

In closing, this research developed from my own experience of challenged assumptions in an RP course several years ago, an experience that was a turning point not only in my academic endeavor, but also in the way I viewed the world and related with all around me. By conducting this study, I desired to better understand the nature of this experience as both a

learner and a teacher who wishes to provide this sort of learning environment for others. As such, I had spent countless hours, listening to the participants, reflecting critically on their words and stories, and working to make sense of them all together. However, as I was preparing this final report, I felt as if I had only just begun to understand the phenomenon of questioning assumptions. My journey of understanding this phenomenon thus goes beyond the present study and will continue into the future. It is my sincere hope that this work contributes in some small way to fitting together the pieces of a puzzle to reveal more of the complex whole of the challenged assumptions. I invite readers of this dissertation to join this continuing, collective endeavor.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A: Informed Consent Form**

### **Adult Learners' Experiences of Questioning their Beliefs and Assumptions in a Graduate Course in Reflective Practice**

**Office of Research Compliance Services  
University of Tennessee**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to participate in a doctoral dissertation research study. The purpose of this study is to understand experiences of adult learners who have encountered challenges to their beliefs and assumptions as they participate in a graduate-level course in Reflective Practice (RP). Knowledge of your RP experience will help the researcher understand what happens when learners experience challenges to what they already know and how learners make sense of and respond to these experiences.

#### **INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will engage in an individual interview in which you will be asked to share your experience about challenged beliefs and assumptions in the RP class. The interview will be recorded on a digital voice recorder and last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. After the interview is completed, the audio-recording will be transcribed into by the researcher for analysis.

In addition to the interview, the researcher will also obtain from the instructor of your RP course printed copies of the documents you posted on Blackboard as part of your course requirements. These documents include your weekly reflections: written descriptions of your RP class experience and other related experiences you posted on Blackboard. Dialogue developed through your reflections and responses of other participants to these reflections will be also collected. Another part of document data is the reflective statement you posted at the end of the semester as you reflected on and described your learning experience in the course. Names of non-volunteer participants and any other identifiable information found in your postings will be removed by the course instructor to protect privacy of the non-participants.

Sometime after the interview is over and the documents are received, the researcher will send you a summary of the findings through email to seek your feedback. In the email, you will be asked to review the findings and share within a couple weeks any responses you may have as to whether or not the overall findings resonated with your experiences, and how. An account of your feedback will be incorporated into the final report of the study.

\_\_\_\_\_ Participant's initials, page one

## Appendix A: Informed Consent Form (Cont.)

### RISKS

This study presents no inherent risks of harm to its participants. However, to help ensure that your risk is no more than minimal, the following measures will be taken. First, you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time without penalty. Second, participation or termination of participation in this study will not affect your course participation or course grades. Next, all names or any other identifiable information within the data will be replaced with pseudonyms for the purpose of transcribing your interview, analyzing the data, and reporting findings. More protection measures are discussed below, under *Confidentiality*.

### BENEFITS

You may benefit from participation in this study as you will have an opportunity to reflect on your experience with the RP class when responding to interview questions. Your response may help illuminate aspects of your experience you have not considered before. Although the finding cannot be generalized, a description of your experience may also benefit other adult learners who have had similar experiences, as well as researchers and practitioners of RP and adult education in general. Summaries of the dissertation resulting from this research will be shared with you upon your request.

### CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept confidential. No identifying personal reference will be made in oral or written reports of this research that can link you to the study. Pseudonyms will be used to replace your name and any other identifiable information in your interview and documents to preserve anonymity. Only the researcher will know your identity and the pseudonym assigned to you. The data will be made available only to the researcher and persons assisting with the study, such as University of Tennessee's Interpretive Research Group, unless you specifically provide written permission to do otherwise. In this case, these people will be required to sign the Confidentiality Form. Electronic data will be stored securely in a locked file on the researcher's password-protected computer. Printed data will be kept in a locked cabinet in her locked office at SS435-1, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996. The audio-recording of your interview will be destroyed immediately after it is transcribed. All other data sources, consisting of your documents, will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

\_\_\_\_\_ Participant's initials, page two

**Appendix A: Informed Consent Form (Cont.)**

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study), you may contact the researcher, Megumu Doi, at (865)621-9416 or [meg24@utk.edu](mailto:meg24@utk.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact University of Tennessee Research Compliance Services of the Office of Research at (865) 974-3466.

**PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be destroyed.

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**CONSENT**

**I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.**

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approved Letter



Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research  
1534 White Avenue  
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529  
Phone: 865.974.3466  
865.974.7400

February 7, 2012

IRB#: 8750 B

TITLE: Adult learners' experiences of questioning their beliefs, assumptions, and frames in a graduate course in Reflective Practice

Doi, Megumu  
Educational Psychology & Counseling  
6315 Kingston Pike, Apt. #1611  
Knoxville, TN 37919

Peters, John  
Educational Psychology & Counseling  
519 Bailey Education Complex  
Campus - 3452

Your project listed above has been reviewed and granted IRB approval under expedited review.

This approval is for a period ending one year from the date of this letter. Please make timely submission of renewal or prompt notification of project termination (see item #3 below).

Responsibilities of the investigator during the conduct of this project include the following:

1. To obtain prior approval from the Committee before instituting any changes in the project.
2. If signed consent forms are being obtained from subjects, they must be stored for at least three years following completion of the project
3. To submit a Form D to report changes in the project or to report termination at 12-month or less intervals.

The Committee wishes you every success in your research endeavor. This office will send you a renewal notice (Form R) on the anniversary of your approval date.

Sincerely,



Brenda Lawson  
Compliances

Enclosure

## Appendix C: Demographic Data Form

*Adult Learners' Experiences of Questioning their Beliefs and Assumptions in a Graduate Course in Reflective Practice*

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- Name: \_\_\_\_\_
- Email: \_\_\_\_\_
- Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
- Age: \_\_\_\_\_
- Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_
- Graduate Program: \_\_\_\_\_
- Graduate Degree: \_\_\_\_\_
- Current Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_
- Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix D: Interpretive Research Group Member Pledge of Confidentiality**

**Adult Learners' Experiences of Questioning their Beliefs and Assumptions in a Graduate Course in Reflective Practice**

**Office of Research Compliance Services  
University of Tennessee**

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As an interpretive research group member assisting with this research project, I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews. Although real names and other identifying data have been changed or removed to protect privacy of study participants and non-participants, I realize that the information from these transcripts has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project in good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidential agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information on these transcripts with anyone except the primary researcher of this project and other members of this research group. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interpretive Research Group Member

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Primary Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix E: Participant Feedback Email**

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your participation in a research study about graduate students' experiences with questioning their beliefs and assumptions in the Reflective Practice course. At the time of your interview in Spring of 2012, you agreed to be contacted through email about the findings of the study. I have attached to this email a summary of the findings for you to review. The findings include the themes and the ground of the phenomenological study on challenged assumptions. Please read this summary and let me know whether or not this overall thematic structure corresponds to your experience by February 16. Please also share any other feedback you may have to the findings. As your feedback is an important part of the study, I would like to ensure that it be incorporated into the final report.

I appreciate your continued participation in this study, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you,  
Megumu Doi

## **Appendix E: Participant Feedback Email (Cont.)**

### **Attachment: A Summary of the Study's Findings**

The purpose of this dissertation study was to understand the lived experience of adult graduate students who had had their beliefs challenged or questioned in the RP course. To gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of challenged assumptions from an adult learner's perspective, the phenomenological method developed by Thomas and Pollio (2002) was utilized. Eight female adult students from the RP class voluntarily participated in this study. They ranged in age between twenty-three and sixty-two years of age and were enrolled in Master's or Ph.D. degree programs in Educational Psychology and Counseling at the time of the interview.

Participants were interviewed about their experiences with challenged assumptions in the RP course. I began the interview with the following key phenomenological question or request: such as "Tell me about a time when you had your beliefs and assumptions questioned or challenged as you participated in your RP class." The interviews were open-ended, with probing questions derived from the language of the participants during the course of the interviews, instead of a predetermined set of questions.

From the thematic analysis of the interview data, one ground and three major themes emerged as described by each participant. Participants' experiences of challenged assumptions stand out against a ground of time, which is represented by the three temporal components: the essence of having been (pre-course), the now (during course), and the future (post-course). Within the ground of time, participants experienced challenges to taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions. That is, they entered the RP course with their unexamined assumptions, which developed from their prior experiences, such as schooling, upbringing, and professional. As participants engaged in experiential and reflective processes in the RP course, they gained new perspectives and paradigms to view and understand their original experiences and underlying assumptions in different ways by the time the semester was over.

For participants, their challenged assumptions represent the three major themes that stands out against the ground of time. These themes are as follows: 1) not connected and connected, 2) different and same, and 3) uncomfortable and comfortable. First, participants were initially concerned about not connecting with other members or having good dynamics as a group to work well jointly. Despite these initial concerns, participants managed to build relationships with other group members and create a cohesive and productive group over time.

Second, participants experienced challenges to their assumptions when they were prompted through interacting with others to examine their experiences and underlying assumptions, often for the first time. One common instance of these experiences was when the participants' encountered with beliefs and experiences that differed from their own or what they were accustomed. For example, it was believed by several participants that teachers generally existed on a different field from students as they are the experts of the field who represent authority. However, the RP course was designed differently. At first, this difference in

## Appendix E: Participant Feedback Email (Cont.)

experience created disequilibrium within the participants, shaking their grounds. Nevertheless, as time passed, they learned to open up to alternative views and embrace them to different degrees. The instructor came to be viewed as the same as, while also different from, participants. He taught and facilitated the class as a teacher while also participating, learning, and creating new knowledge jointly with the student members.

Third, participants' experiences of challenged assumptions, e.g., involving the correctness of the RP process and the unfeasibility of discussing controversial issues, were often accompanied by feelings of discomfort. That is, participants firmly believed that there are right and wrong ways of conducting RP. As a result, they struggled to let go of "doing it right" and felt apprehensive about making mistakes in the RP process. Also assumed was that discussing controversial matters, such as religion-related, is not easily achieved. As such, participants were uncomfortable with taking "non-safe paths" in the dialogue process at the start of the semester. Despite their initial discomfort, participants became increasingly more comfortable as the semester progressed with letting go of their strongly held beliefs in RP and taking risks in dialogue.

Some of the changes that participants underwent in their beliefs and experiences were retained even after the semester was over and were projected to continue for the future. In addition, interconnections were identified among major themes: *different, uncomfortable, and not connected*; and *same, comfortable, and connected*. For example, participants felt uncomfortable when they were not connected with other members and when they encountered experiences different from what they were believed and accustomed. Participants grew more comfortable as they managed to connect and learned that they shared many similarities and they were together in their processes of learning, working, and experiencing in the RP course.

## **Appendix F: Follow-up Email to Participants**

Dear Participant,

A week ago, I sent you an email with a summary of the findings from my study of adult learners who have experienced challenges to their beliefs and assumptions in a graduate RP course. I hope you have had a chance to review the attached document that summarizes the basic thematic structure of what study participants shared about their experiences. I am interested in learning what you think about this structure. Please let me know how you think this summary compares with your own experience and any other responses you may have about it. I am working to finish the written report of the study by the middle of March, so a response at your earliest convenience would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you again taking part in this project.

Megumu Doi

## Appendix G: IRB Approved Renewal Letter



Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research  
1534 White Ave.  
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529  
Phone: 865-974-7387  
Fax: 865-974-7400

Date: February 21, 2013

To: Doi, Megumu  
Educational Psychology & Counseling  
6315 Kingston Pike, Apt. #1611  
Knoxville, TN 37919

From: Brenda Lawson  
Compliances

Subject: Annual Review and Progress Report:  
Project Involving Research with Human Subjects

IRB-APPROVED RENEWAL                      IRB #: 8750B

Project: Adult learners' experiences of questioning their beliefs, assumptions, and frames in a graduate course in Reflective Practice

Initial Approval Date: 02/07/2012

Last IRB Approval Date: 02/21/2013

Approval Expires: 02/07/2014

In response to our request regarding annual review and a progress report of the above protocol, you indicated that the study is still active and that there have been no changes with regard to the use of human subjects in this project since the last date of review. Therefore, the Institutional Review Board has approved the protocol until **February, 2014**, which coincides with the anniversary month of your initial approval date.

If there should be any modifications in the project before the date of next annual review, please submit them, utilizing a Form D, to the Compliances Office immediately for review. Requests for your next annual review will be sent to you approximately one month prior to the expiration date.

## VITA

Megumu Doi Burress was born and grew up in Ehime, Japan. Her studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, began in the fall of 1999. In 2001, she received her Bachelor of Arts degree, Summa Cum Laude, with a major in linguistics, accompanied by a minor in English. In 2004, she completed her first Master's degree with a concentration in ESL and foreign language education and earned teaching credentials in K-12 ESL education in Tennessee. She completed her second Master's degree with a concentration in adult education in 2008 and earned a certificate in Qualitative Methods in Education in 2011.

Megumu is currently employed at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and teaches and learns with and from undergraduate students in Japanese language courses. She received the Chancellor's Extraordinary Graduate Student Teaching Award at the university in spring of 2013. Upon acceptance of this dissertation, she will have graduated with Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Psychology and Research from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 2013.