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A Narrative Case Study Examining the Influences of Peer-led Team Learning on Student Critical Thinking Skill Acquisition and Deeper Process Content Knowledge in a Midsize Texas University Humanities and Social Sciences Program

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A Narrative Case Study Examining the Influences of Peer-led Team Learning on Student
Critical Thinking Skill Acquisition and Deeper Process Content Knowledge in a Midsize
Texas University Humanities and Social Sciences Program

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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in
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by

Daniel E. Pratt

B.A. Sam Houston State University, 2007

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation will examine the efficacy of peer-led team learning (PLTL) in a humanities and social sciences program, at a midsize Texas university. It will be conducted exclusively within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS), and the academic subjects to be evaluated include English, history, and philosophy. Its primary function is to disclose whether or not PLTL facilitates in student participants improvement in critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge. Of primary interest in this qualitative, narrative case study is deducing how breakout sessions – supplementary meetings led by student participants, in the absence of instructors, designed to enhance classroom instruction – aid in concept synthesis and retention. Of equal importance is evaluating how the implementation of a PLTL instructional framework cultivates in its participants the acuity necessary to demonstrate that positive learning outcomes are occurring, or have the potential to occur; thereafter, collected data, in the form of participant and instructor narratives derived from questionnaires, interviews, researcher observations, writing samples, and essay-based examinations will support or refute whether improvement in critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge is evident in student participants.

Keywords: Peer-led Team Learning (PLTL), Critical Thinking Skill Acquisition, Deeper Process Content Knowledge, Positive Learning Outcomes, Humanities and Social Sciences, Qualitative, Narrative, Case Study

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

<u>Introduction</u>

Whereas peer-led team learning (PLTL) is not a new instructional technique in post-secondary education, it is relatively so in the humanities and social sciences. Its incorporation therein may be viewed as an attempt to accommodate the increasingly collaborative nature of 21st century university classrooms (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013, p. 15). While PLTL remains largely associated with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, particularly the sciences, there is evidence to support its usefulness elsewhere (Jyotsna, 2016, p. 8). Such is what this dissertation aimed to discover.

Dissimilarly to more established pedagogy, PLTL, as a supplement to traditional instruction within the humanities and social sciences, has not been examined in much depth, either theoretically or in practicum. This is changing, as its emergence as a legitimate instructional approach is becoming increasingly evident. Ejiwale (2014) summarizes that empirical studies involving STEM-specific PLTL, while also comparatively limited, offer clear insights into its potential for expansion into other academic disciplines (p. 35). The goal hereafter is to validate this supposition, with evidence supporting its instructional authenticity.

One of the theories behind the emergence of PLTL as pedagogy is the necessity to parallel traditional instruction with contemporary instructional trends. Among these trends is an increased emphasis on collaborative instruction (Brown & Harris, 2016, p. 380). While lecture-based teaching is by no means dead in modern classrooms, its

prominence appears to be waning (Felder & Brent, 2016, p. 59). The unfortunate

assumption is that collaboration as a method of instruction is less rigorous than its more

conventional counterparts --- that students teaching students as opposed to teachers

teaching students constitutes "lazy teaching." While this assumption may hold true in

some contexts, authentic peer-led teaching and learning is meant to *accompany* rigorous

classroom instruction rather than *replace* it (Muller, Shacham, & Hercovitz, 2017, p. 5).

Such is the basis for PLTL as pedagogy. If administered as a complement to, rather than a

replacement of, conventional instruction, PLTL has the potential to facilitate positive

learning outcomes and, by association, conceivably remediate deficits in critical thinking

skill acquisition in student participants (Krienke & Hendrickson, 2017, p. 2).

PLTL is generally acknowledged as an instructional technique designed to

augment instruction; however, it has another very clear aim: to stimulate interest in

subject matter (p. 3). Subjects such as English, history, and philosophy are most

worthwhile, when they capture the student's interest. Suspension of disbelief encourages

them to travel to times and places that are perhaps unfamiliar to them. The cause and

effect of this might be the realization that one's contemporary worldview is in some ways

similar to, and in others different from, individuals from preceding eras. To understand

this fairly simple notion – its actions and consequences – one might, at minimum,

acknowledge the narratives of persons, places, things, ideas, and events from different

cultures; thereafter, the hope is that informed judgments become more likely, those

predicated on evidence rather than conjecture. Achieving this objective is attainable

within a traditional classroom structure – one which employs conventional teaching

methods – but emerging evidence suggests that when student groups are given the

opportunity to synthesize classroom instruction in a non-classroom environment, the above increases in likeliness (Colbeck et al, 2000, p. 61). Enter PLTL. Krienke explains that semi-structured, instructorless breakout sessions offer student participants the freedom to process content, explore ideas as well as generate new ones, and debate points of contention, without fear of impediment (personal communication, March 12, 2017).

In summary, transmitting information and ideas within the walls of a classroom requires considerable effort from both students and instructors; beyond the classroom, students are frequently tasked with channeling that effort into positive, measureable learning outcomes and, concomitantly, demonstrating that critical thinking skill acquisition is evident. To achieve the above, individuals should be encouraged to think outside the proverbial box. PLTL provides this opportunity. And because it does facilitate original thought and encourage intellectual freedom, it is growing in esteem and prominence, as a subject of scholarly research (Vaughan & Reutebuch, 2016).

Research Questions

The research questions for this dissertation concentrate on how PLTL sessions, as executed in lower division undergraduate humanities and social science courses, improve critical thinking skill acquisition and foster deeper process learning in participants. More directly:

1. How do PLTL sessions influence (1) short-term classroom performance, (2) receptiveness toward course-specific subject matter, and (3) willingness to participate in similarly structured course offerings in future studies?

2. What do evaluative devices employed in structured and semi-structured humanities and social sciences classrooms and peer-led team learning sessions

divulge about critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content

knowledge learning in student participants?

Design and Overview of Study

"The case study method is best applied when research addresses descriptive or explanatory questions and aims to produce a first-hand understanding of people and events." (p. 3)

Robert Yin (2014)

This dissertation is structured as a qualitative, narrative case study, using

phenomenological and practical action research paradigms, and its aim is to move toward

answering, as completely as possible, the presented research questions. Two freshman

and two sophomore students, as well as two tenured professors, will serve as cases for

this study. All but one student participant is new to the program in the Spring semester of

2017, with the returning member a program participant from the Fall semester of 2016.

Four participants are female and two male; two are American-Black (A-B), two

European-White (E-W), one American-White (A-W), and one American-Hispanic (A-H).

Participants range in age from 20 to 80-years-old.

Participating faculty – representatives from the English and philosophy

departments – are veterans of the program, its chief instructor the coauthor of the current

curriculum and English course textbook, and the program's director; participating peer-

led team learning session coordinators, who are not central in the narrative of this study,

provide instructional support in the primary classroom and assist the director in

coordinating PLTL sessions.

The data collected during this study consisted of student artifacts such as writing samples and essay examinations, which was accompanied by classroom and PLTL session observations and completed participant questionnaires and interviews. Data was analyzed by the researcher congruent with the above, with the final presentation a thorough qualitative narrative detailing the experiences of program participants.

Definition of Terms

1. Peer-led Team Learning (PLTL): Peer-Led Team Learning is an instructional method employing small-group peer learning methodologies, to enhance primary instruction (Kalaian & Kasim, 2017, p. 3). It is utilized academic environments ranging from primary schools to post-graduate degree programs such as medicine, law, business, and education (p. 3). PLTL groups typically consist of 6-8 students who work together to solve problems and are facilitated by a Peer Leader (p. 4).

2. Critical Thinking Skill Acquisition: Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action (Scriven & Paul, 2015, p. 6).

3. Deeper Process Content Knowledge: According to Weimer (2012), "[Deeper process content knowledge] requires more than memorization, reciting, or regurgitating what really isn't understood and can't be applied. The essence of deep learning is understanding—true knowing" (p. 294).

<u>Summary</u>

Chapter I offers explicit justification for incorporating peer-led team learning sessions, as a supplement to traditional classroom instruction, in a university humanities and social sciences program. The presented research questions aim to lead the researcher toward understanding whether or not this instructional technique assists student participants in critical thinking skill acquisition and, concurrently, achieving deeper process content knowledge.

Also supplied in Chapter I is a discussion of the qualitative, narrative case study techniques to be employed in this dissertation study. The proceeding chapters will discuss the conceptual framework of the above, along with information detailing the research methodologies to be employed throughout.

CHAPTER TWO:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

<u>Review of Literature</u>

The underpinnings of peer-led team learning (PLTL), and its development as an instructional tool in undergraduate humanities and social sciences classrooms, will be scrutinized throughout this study. Chapter two is designed to assess these underpinnings, and to investigate the events, policies, practices, and procedures that have aided its growth in popularity among university administrators, instructors, and students; however, this is not possible, without examining the following seminal studies and the correlative scholarship each has influenced.

The primary function of this study is to examine carefully evidence revealing potential inadequacies in student learning outcomes, particularly as such relate to critical thinking skill acquisition and deep process content knowledge. These outcomes might conceivably justify the necessity for alternative pedagogical methods in this form of instruction --- e.g. PLTL as a viable supplement to traditional humanities and social sciences instruction. Literature detailing the use and efficacy of PLTL in humanities and social sciences courses is essentially nonexistent, so this chapter - and indeed this study - will rely on exemplars evident in other scholastic disciplines – the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects chief among them. In building upon these exemplars, the final aim of this dissertation project is to determine the pedagogical value of PLTL in this specific setting. This shall be realized via a narrative summation,

which will either support or refute its usefulness in facilitating critical thinking skill

acquisition and deeper process content knowledge in student participants.

Definitions of Critical Thinking as Life Skill

"Critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathically…[Critical thinkers] use the intellectual tools that critical thinking offers – concepts and principles that enable them to analyze, assess, and improve thinking. They work diligently to develop the intellectual virtues of intellectual integrity, intellectual humility, intellectual civility, intellectual empathy, intellectual sense of justice and confidence in reason. They [do not] fall prey to mistakes in reasoning, human irrationality, prejudices, biases, distortions, uncritically accepted social rules and taboos, self-interest, and vested interest. They embody the Socratic principle: The unexamined life is not worth living, because they realize that many unexamined lives together result in an uncritical, unjust, dangerous world." (p. 1)

Linda Elder (2007)

The definition of critical thinking as life skill is indeed abstract in nature;

however, and as will be examined in subsequence, an established standard of what it

actually entails – its fundamental meaning – may become more lucid. To Mulnix (2012),

it is based chiefly on one's purview of the world, which is shaped from a uniquely

individualized epistemological foundation (p. 466). Consumption of the world leads

hypothetically to the development of perceptions, which are thereafter incorporated into

an ever-developing body of personal knowledge. The process of acquisition differs from

person to person, but the assumption is that prior knowledge – knowledge that is based on

lived experiences and becomes more sophisticated as a result of these experiences –

encourages one to think rationally, logically, and prudently (Siemens, 2014, p. 5). Ideally,

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movement toward the ability to think critically is achieved, as the knower learns to interact with, and extrapolate meaning from, the world in which he lives.

Wisdom (2015) expresses agreement with the above, by noting that critical thinking, "…is that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem - in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them" (p. 12). Elder & Paul (2014) elucidate these points further, by detailing what they deem necessary to develop as a well-cultivated critical thinker:

- [The critical thinker] raises vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely;
- gathers and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively and come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
- thinks open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences;
- and communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems. (p. 10)

In conclusion, the authors reason that "Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking. It presupposes assent to rigorous standards of excellence and mindful command of their use. It entails effective communication and problem solving abilities and a commitment to overcome our native egocentrism and

socio-centrism" (p. 22). This is precisely what peer-led team learning seeks to achieve –

what this dissertation seeks to elucidate as viable in post-secondary education. PLTL

permits the learner/knower occasion to discover self-direction and enhance self-

discipline. Once established and refined, the aim then is to become acutely aware of one's

thoughts – their meanings and potential consequences – which theoretically leads toward

the ability for self-corrective thinking (Bandura, 1977, p. 205); thereafter, the

presumption is that specific intellectual standards are established, and more effective

peer-to-peer communication, among other communicative standards, will begin to occur.

The potential end result is an enhanced ability to address the positive and negative

characteristics inherent in ourselves, our communities, and in the world in which we live

(p. 207).

To ensure that potential learning outcomes resulting from PLTL breakout sessions

remain explicit to student participants, it is the responsibility of the humanities and social

sciences program referenced throughout this dissertation study to create environments in

which student participants are encouraged to engage in a productive, civil, and content-

relevant dialogue. Instructors and PLTL coordinators might best achieve this end by

making clear that constructive sessions are those which result in the exchange of relevant,

diverse ideas --- those unencumbered by the generally limiting guidelines of a traditional

classroom. How the above is realized, if indeed it is, will be discussed in subsequent

chapters.

Critical Thinking as Facilitated by Program Faculty and Session Coordinators

"Education is good just so far as it produces well-developed critical faculty . . . A teacher
of any subject, who insists on accuracy and a rational control of all processes and

methods, and who holds everything open to unlimited verification and revision, is cultivating that method as a habit in the pupils. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded . . . They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence . . . They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens." (p. 632)

William Graham Sumner (1906)

A primary function of a program such as that described throughout this study is to offer undergraduate students opportunities to enroll in courses taught by distinguished members of the university faculty -- faculty achieving rank and status as a result of excellence in teaching, research, and service to the university community. It is assumed that such opportunities might lead to more meaningful academic interactions, which, in turn, might facilitate more positive learning outcomes (Mitten & Ross, 2016, p. 10). Among said outcomes, as Sumner articulates, is cultivating "good citizens," those whose contributions to the communities in which they live and work encourage productive social behaviors and foster mindfulness of the needs and customs of others (Reichert, 2017, p. 92). This is an immense responsibility, one this researcher has observed as assuming precedent for those tasked with both classroom and management-level program administration. To assist them in meeting this responsibility more effectively, each has adopted, in whole or part, many of the higher order thinking objectives, as set forth by Nosich (2014). These include:

- Assessing students' skills and abilities in analyzing, synthesizing, applying, and evaluating information.

- Concentrating on thinking skills that can be employed with maximum flexibility, in a wide variety of subjects, situations, contexts, and educational levels.

- Making clear the inter-connectedness of our knowledge and abilities, and why expertise in one area cannot be divorced either from findings in other areas or from a sensitivity to the need for interdisciplinary integration.

- Assessing those versatile and fundamental skills that are essential to being a responsible, decision-making member of society.

- Accounting for the integration of communication skills, problem-solving, and critical thinking, and assessing all of them without compromising essential features of any of them.

- Respecting cultural diversity by focusing on the common skills, abilities, and traits useful in all cultures.

- Testing for thinking that is empowering and that, when incorporated into instruction, promotes the active engagement of students in constructing their own knowledge and understanding.

- Concentrating on assessing the fundamental cognitive structures of communication, for example: with reading and listening, the ability to create an accurate interpretation, assess the author's or speaker's purpose, accurately identify the question-at-issue or problem being discussed, accurately identify basic concepts at the heart of what is said or written, see significant implications of the advocated position, identify, understand, and evaluate the assumptions underlying someone's position, recognize evidence, argument, inference (or]their lack) in oral and written presentations, reasonably assess the credibility of an

author or speaker, accurately grasp the point of view of the author or speaker, and

empathetically reason within the point of view of the author or speaker. (p. 108)

The preceding has proven vital to governing a program that challenges students to

address the myriad concerns that affect their daily lives. This is not to imply that such is

achieved in all program participants, or that all program faculty adhere strictly to the

above-listed objectives; however, it does provide a general overview of how, and why,

such a program was devised, with special attention paid to the roles administering faculty

play in cultivating engaged, deep process, critical thinkers.

The complement to the foregoing is the peer-led team learning addendum, which

is the cornerstone of this dissertation project. Faculty participation in this aspect of the

program is purposely limited; more plainly, faculty members do not assume a direct role

in the administration of PLTL sessions, as such is the responsibility of enrolled student

participants and compensated session coordinators (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2014, p.

99). The latter is comprised of former program enrollees, which includes students from

multiple academic disciplines within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

With lesser frequency, graduate teaching assistants, from multiple College departments,

assume session coordinator responsibilities.

As with administering faculty, the function of session coordinators is to encourage

the development of the higher order thinking objectives itemized previously. The caveat,

though, is that dissimilar to the role of classroom faculty in traditional classroom

meetings, session coordinators typically refrain from participating in the discourse in

PLTL sessions; rather, they are primarily responsible for assuring that session topics are

delivered and clear, in accordance with faculty directives, and that civility is practiced amongst session participants (Repice et al., 2016, p. 560). This permits student participants to guide the conversation, without impediment from an individual they may perceive as one of authority. In PLTL sessions the participants are the authorities, which affords them the autonomy to explore selected topics through lenses of personal experience (Stigmar, 2016, p. 128).

Establishing a Historical Foundation: Selected Works from Dr. Ernest Boyer and Their Connection to Contemporary Peer-led Team Learning

"Today the learning climate for most colleges and schools is one of competition. Students compete for grades, withhold information from one another to "get ahead," to maintain their competitive advantage, and on many campuses there is widespread cheating. Our most consequential human problems will be resolved, not through competition, but collaboration. And what we need in education is a learning climate in which students work together. In such an atmosphere, truth emerges as authentic insights are conscientiously exchanged." (Ede & Lunsford, 1991, p. 103)

Ernest Boyer (unknown)

Ernest L. Boyer began his work in education in the 1950s and continued in the profession, until his death in 1995 (Ream & Braxton, 2015, p. 10). During this time, he served as chancellor of the State University of New York (1970 – 1977) and United States Commissioner of Education (1977 – 1979) (p. 12). According to Webb (1998), it was following his public service, and during his tenure as president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1981 to 1995/his death), that his most influential works were written (p. 117). For this study, the researcher will extrapolate from the following influential works the ideologies and methodologies germane to the development of this dissertation study:

- *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (1987)

- "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities" (1998)

In focusing on these particular works, the aim is to illuminate how conclusions expressed in each have influenced: 1) the emergence (or perhaps reemergence) of student-led, student-centric instruction; 2) university faculty structures focused on teaching versus research; and 3) how the two combined have facilitated the exploration of alternative teaching strategies such as peer-led team learning, on college and university campuses.

Boyer's Perspectives on College & University Undergraduate Student Experiences in 20th Century Classrooms

In many of his writings, Boyer offered immediate, clear, and concise itemization of the concerns he wished to address. In *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (1987), he devised the "Eight Points of Tension," each of which he concluded must be resolved by college and university administrators, to facilitate more positive learning outcomes in undergraduate student populations (Haworth & Conrad, 1995, p. 182). These "Points" include:

- the gap between school and higher education

- the confusion over goals

- the conflicting claims of general and special education

- the tension over teaching and research

- the quality of campus life

- the governance of the college

- the measuring of critical thinking outcomes

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- the disturbing distance between the campus and the larger world (Boyer, 1987, p. 2)

The above will be addressed, in a variety of forms, throughout this study; however, for the review of literature, special treatment will be given to bullet points four, five, seven, and eight.

The presumption now, as it was when this book was written 30-years ago, is that faculty scholarship supersedes classroom teaching because it aids in promoting the "intellectual depth and scholastic ethos of a college or university" (de Almeida, 2016, p. 179). Boyer (1987) argued that while research is, and should be, an integral component of an institution's operating model, quality teaching may have a more immediate and positive impact on student learning outcomes and campus experiences (Boyer, 1987, p. 8). The conclusion, then, was that teaching should take precedent on college and university campuses, if said institutions are truly intent on cultivating well-rounded, productive, critically thinking individuals (p. 10). To this researcher, such is accurate but oversimplified; thus, further reflection is necessary, in order to demonstrate a logical path to this conclusion.

Bullet points five, seven, and eight seem contingent on the successful resolution of the concerns raised in the preceding, with special emphasis placed on number four. Hypothetically speaking, if "tension over teaching and research" is either eased, or eliminated altogether, teachers might once again be permitted to teach, unencumbered by certain administrative mandates. This may produce more collaborative teacher/student environments, which may result in the establishment of more productive mentor/mentee relationships. Such relationships may improve the quality of academic campus life for

students who might have felt disenfranchised by a strained and/or ambivalent professoriate (Boyer, 1990, p. 7); thereafter, those same students may choose to re-assimilate intellectually into their respective campus cultures (p. 9). Better satisfaction with campus life/culture may generate more favorable dispositions in students, which may stimulate more engaging learning opportunities. More engaging learning opportunities may facilitate improvements in learning outcomes, with critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process knowledge perchance represented among these improvements. If the aforementioned is indeed achieved, the hope is that "the distance between the campus and the larger world" might shrink, resulting in university graduates being better prepared to become good citizens. Such was the endgame of Boyer and the Carnegie Foundation; however, based on the necessity to reproduce *College* in the form of "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities", there was still much work to be done.

Reimagining the College and University Experience for Undergraduate Students:

Boyer's Suggestions for More Functional Campuses

Separate from The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching was the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, which published yet another seminal report, "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities" in 1998, three years after Boyer's death (Boyer, 1998, p. 3). As had *College*, over ten years prior, this work made clear, "…academe should grant scholarship of teaching higher status relative to the scholarship of discovery," adding that "…not every professor needs to excel in every facet of scholarship during every year" (p. 23). To summarize Guiner (2016), the former and

latter made lucid that American undergraduate education, especially at the nation's top

research universities, was in a state of disrepair (p. 38). Such prompted recommendations

for improving undergraduate course offerings, with each referencing concerns thought to

be an impediment to critical thinking skill acquisition and deep process content synthesis

(Boyer, 1998, p. 5). The prevailing suppositions were that university authorities:

- placed too little emphasis on quality teaching

- permitted a faculty culture that denigrated teaching as an art

- provided inordinate rewards for research activity

- made little effort to place students in meaningful contact with the most
  accomplished faculty

- enlisted graduate teaching assistants and adjunct faculty to teach far too many
  undergraduate classes

- resisted efforts to address these problems (p. 5)

Resulting from these suppositions was an additional list, coined by the Commission as an

"Academic Bill of Rights," which supplied ten recommendations for "radical

reconstruction of undergraduate research universities in the United States" (p. 12) These

recommendations sought to:

- make research-based learning the standard

- construct an inquiry-based freshman year

- build on the freshman foundation

- remove barriers to interdisciplinary education

- link communication skills and coursework

- use information technology creatively

- culminate with a Capstone experience

- educate graduate students as apprentice teachers

- change faculty reward systems

- cultivate a sense of community (p. 12 – 13)

Feisel (1998) believed that if implemented and executed faithfully by the institutions at which they were targeted, the listed suggestions might improve the undergraduate outcome, which is to produce young men and women who are prepared and disposed for critical thinking, original research, and creative problem solving (p. 102).

Connecting the Dots

A purpose for referencing Boyer's seminal works for this study was to establish an approximately 30-year historical framework chronicling educator efforts to revolutionize curricular and instructional principles and practices at undergraduate colleges and universities; however, the larger purpose was to isolate how and why these efforts led to the development of a program that adheres to these principles and practices almost exclusively. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to draw concluding parallels between the philosophies articulated by Boyer and associates and the practices executed by the herein referenced program.

In referring back to the bullet points itemized throughout this section, the connections between theory and application will become clear. To begin, the "Eight Points of Tension" express pointed concerns with how faculty research demands often interfere with effective teaching practices, creating instructional environments unfocused on positive student learning outcomes. Among the solutions to rectifying this concern include deemphasizing faculty scholarship, insofar as such inhibits high-quality

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classroom instruction. The referenced program functions in this manner, as participating faculty are afforded the opportunity to focus almost exclusively on instructional interaction with students. Disclosure of study findings in subsequent chapters will reveal that the above has improved in many program participants the quality of their campus experiences. These experiences have facilitated more positive learning outcomes, which have generated work samples indicating an improvement in critical thinking skill acquisition and deep process content knowledge. Since this is not a longitudinal study, it is yet to be determined if such will result in minimizing what Boyer perceived as a disconnect between college and university campuses and the real world. Future studies will be conducted to determine the validity of this assertion.

To continue, the next bulleted list addressed college and university authorities directly, making clear once more that academic infrastructures heavily favoring scholarship over teaching may negatively impact the undergraduate student outcome. The program examined for this dissertation study operates in antithesis to the listed shortcomings. For instance, much emphasis is placed on quality teaching, in all subject areas included in the program. It is embraced as an art, and faculty achieving excellence in the classroom are recognized for their contributions to their students and to the university, at large. Much effort is made to place students in meaningful contact with the most accomplished faculty, with multiple faculty members having earned university-wide and college-specific awards in teaching, research, and service. Graduate teaching assistants are not employed as classroom instructors but as assistants to tenured and tenure track faculty. Their primary responsibilities are to aid in preparing teaching materials for classroom sessions and evaluate completed work; with lesser frequency,

they will serve as PLTL session coordinators. Each of these examples demonstrates that university authorities at this particular university have worked to address concerns perceived as affecting the quality of education for attending students.

Finally, it is necessary to examine how Boyer's suggestions for improving college and university student outcomes have been woven into governing structure of the program examined for this dissertation study, with special attention paid to selections from his Academic Bill of Rights. The first bullet point suggests that research-based instruction should be prioritized in most undergraduate classrooms, but especially in freshman-level courses -- e.g. the freshman foundation, as highlighted in bullet point three. The program accomplishes this objective, as all coursework is research intensive and requires the examination of primary/original texts, secondary source material, and other inquiry-based investigative methods. Making these requirements mandatory has cleared a path for deeper reflection into the assigned topics, with an intended corollary being the emergence of interdisciplinary approaches to multi-subject inquiry. For example, and as will be revealed further in subsequent chapters, students undertaking assignments in one academic discipline will become aware that characteristics of that discipline are relatable to those evident in another -- multiple others, usually. The resulting removal of barriers impeding interdisciplinary study creates opportunities for refining critical thinking skills and enhancing deep process content knowledge; thereafter, the realizations generated from these discoveries are related among program participants, both in classroom and PLTL communities, with the end result a definitive link between the assigned coursework and the communication skills Boyer surmised as imperative to a more meaningful undergraduate experience.

The Evidence: Supporting the Necessity for Alternative Instructional Strategies in Contemporary College and University Classrooms

"Society has long cherished the ability to think beyond the ordinary. In a world where knowledge is revered and innovation equals progress, those able to bring forth greater insight and understanding are destined to make their mark and blaze a trail to greater enlightenment." (p. 18)

Samuel Greengard (2009)

Scholars have revisited the basic question of undergraduate educational experience in America for several decades now, with liberal citation of the primary works referenced throughout this chapter (Charles, 2017, pg. 7). In many of the works reviewed for this study, the assumption is that little has changed since influential studies such as those produced by Boyer and associates were published. According to Charles (2017), the situation has either stagnated, or is continuing to deteriorate (p. 8). To support or refute such presuppositions, scholars like Tremblay, Lalancette, & Roseveare (2012) have applied sociological and academic testing mechanisms to illustrate pitfalls in undergraduate education not only in the United States, but also worldwide (p. 230). Their conclusions, as referenced in subsequence, were generated by the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) examination, as administered by the Organisation of Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD), of which the United States, and 35 other countries, is an active member. According to Vandamme (2015), AHELO is meant to:

> [Provide] data to governments, institutions and students themselves on what
> students at the end of their first (bachelor level) degrees know and are able
> to do. Such data can serve multiple purposes:

- They allow governments to evaluate the quality of their tertiary educated human capital among the higher educated cohorts against the international standards.

- They enable institutions to compare and benchmark the learning outcomes of their students against international standards in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

- They empower students to weigh their learned skills against the distribution of learning outcomes in their own institution and country and against international standards.

To summarize, AHELO is not designed to capture the strength of memorized information but rather to measure capacity for independent, creative, and critical thought as well as the ability to solve problems effectively (Shahjahan & Torres, 2013, p. 616).

The OECD (2012) sampled over 20,000 students, in over 200 four-year colleges and universities. Students were tested as incoming freshman and then again at the end of two years of full-time coursework. The above sampling elucidated that between 40% and 50% of students showed no substantial growth in critical thinking skills during this time (Ewell, 2012, p. 37). Subsequent OECD (2013, 2015) studies revealed that the same students showed no appreciable growth as juniors, seniors, or even as post-graduates (p. 38). According to Thibodeaux et al. (2017), there are specific reasons for this phenomenon, with emphasis on the fact that students in the 21st century spend appreciably less time in traditional classroom environments and even less of that time studying, when outside of them; additionally, more and more non-academic time is being dedicated to in-person and digital socialization, campus and community extracurriculars,

and part and full-time employment (p. 18). In spite of this realization, a conclusion among some scholars is that factors impeding critical thinking skill acquisition in contemporary student populations are multitudinous but ostensibly solvable (Huber & Kuncel, 2016, p. 440). The issue, then, is achieving this aim in a manner that yields evidence of broader skill acquisition and content synthesis.

From each of the referenced studies, along with their accompanying rejoinders, there is the suggestion that a path to improving critical thinking skill acquisition and deep process learning within undergraduate communities indeed exists; however, certain extant factors must be acknowledged (Romiszowski, 2016, p. 184). Chief among these is that instructional methods, and the results generated from them, will vary from institution to institution (p. 184). After taking into consideration such dynamics as demographics and history of instruction, curricular adaptations might become necessary (Park & Datnow, 2017, p. 290). For this study, such adaptations have included requiring individuals to read and write with more frequency, as suggested by Antonini (2017) as compulsory to enhancing critical thinking skill outcomes (Personal communication, March 14, 2017). This instructional technique has proven for this researcher to affect substantive change in a wide population of students. Additional curricular and instructional methods sampled during this study have included assigning supplementary readings, creating course requirements obliging participation in individual reading and/or writing center conferences, and designating class time to related activities. Each has yielded positive learning outcomes in a significant population of student: e.g. improvements in writing skills and improved results on subjective examinations.

Peer-led Team Learning and Higher Education in America: A Conclusion Leading to a Solution

"Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) is a (…) model of teaching and learning that originated in a chemistry course at the City College of New York in 1991. [In PLTL] students…meet in groups to engage in problem solving and discussion of course material. The PLTL model has been adapted to many institutions nationwide across all STEM disciplines, and research has demonstrated that PLTL improves student learning." (Gosser, 2011, p. 6)

David Gosser (2011)

While Gosser's sentiments do not address the fact that peer-led team learning has branched out of the STEM fields and into other areas of the academy, it does make clear that it is nearing its third decade of use in college and university classrooms, as a supplement to traditional classroom instruction. During this time, PLTL has blossomed in response to the debate over the quality of undergraduate learning outcomes at America's colleges and universities (Micari & Pazos, 2014, p. 253). As the perceived erosion of critical thinking skill acquisition has again become a point of contention among scholars tasked with evaluating the efficacy of contemporary educational practices, the legitimacy of PLTL as pedagogy has reemerged, in lockstep (Wade, 2016, p. 368).

Evidence suggests that the American system of higher education is not doing a sufficient enough job of cultivating in undergraduate students the critical thinking skills and deep process content knowledge necessary to transition successfully from the academy to the workforce (Lazerson, 2010, p. 175). Lazerson (2010) notes:

"Higher education's values and reward system does not require administrators or professors to take more than minimal responsibility for student learning and

student development. Enlarging the importance of teaching and expecting

improved learning from students was in fact an opportunity to revise higher

education's system of values." (p. 179)

It is from this basic premise that alternative instructional mechanisms have emerged

within the academy during the 21st century (Arum & Roska, 2011, p. 38). Much of this

unfortunate trend can be correlated directly to the perceived dearth in critical thinking

skill acquisition and deep process content knowledge in undergraduate student

populations (p. 40). As Cavdar & Doe (2012) relate, this appears especially true in

college and university subdivisions which rely, in large part, on expository writing and

essay examinations to elucidate student concept awareness: Departments of English,

History, Philosophy, Sociology, and Political Science referenced with frequency (p. 302).

Perhaps the only thing more troubling than these conclusions is the protracted awareness

of them, and the lack of meaningful action in response to them (Strydom, 2016. P. 494).

To develop this point further, and to identify more effectively the breadth and

depth of the problem, Valenzuela, Nieto, & Saiz (2011) explain that institutions of higher

learning are themselves contributing to the decline in critical thinking skill acquisition in

undergraduate student populations, by not facilitating sufficient opportunities for

collaboration among students and faculty as well as among students and their peers (p.

830). Magi & Beerkens (2016) express similarly, while also surmising that too many

American universities place too little emphasis on classroom teaching, instead relying on

loosely structured in-class group work and out-of-classroom assignments, as substitutions

for class time formerly reserved for lecture (p. 250). While the former and latter may

offer occasion for assemblage, it is unclear whether either provides the structure

necessary to facilitate a targeted learning outcome (p. 251). The question, then, is can loosely structured classroom or unstructured out-of-classroom collaborative meetings create sufficient enough opportunity for students to explore the assigned subject matter critically and in a manner leading toward concept synthesis? McLachlan et al. (2017) are skeptical, supposing that an increasingly significant population of university underclassmen benefit from clearly defined academic and social boundaries (p. 238). PLTL sessions provide these clearly defined boundaries, while also permitting students the autonomy to operate freely within them – the Montessori concept of freedom within limits (Schmidt & Schmidt, 2009, p. 184).

Stepping out of the classroom and into the boardroom, Mills (2012) notes that many colleges and universities have shifted administrative focus away from student learning outcomes and toward such bureaucratic matters as increasing enrollment numbers, year-to-year student retention, and graduation rates, all of which, he concludes, deter initiatives for improving classroom environments for the very students administrators seek to retain (p. 6); in tandem, other nonacademic trends include administrators, alumni association members, boosters, and donor corporations placing verbal and monetary emphasis on specific campus activities, with men's athletics (especially football and basketball) unambiguously prioritized (Sperber, 2011, p. 154). According to Scott (2015), revenue generated by these activities is reinvested into the college or university, which thereafter facilitates more positive academic experiences for all students (p. 1); however, there is some question as to the legitimacy of this assertion. Cheslock & Knight (2016) believe such presumptions are superfluous and are firm in contending that large-scale campus activities, while indeed major sources of revenue at

larger colleges and universities, actually produce campus subcultures in which academics are of secondary concern – those which fail to cultivate effectively an ethos of academic excellence (p. 427). According to Bok (2009), students engaging more in campus rather than classroom activities may not achieve the same undergraduate outcome as those who operate in antithesis (p. 132). Longitudinal studies such as those being conducted by Rettig & Hu (2016) aim to move toward sustaining or rebutting analogous hypotheses (p. 430).

PLTL, among other pedagogical innovations, was born out of a recognized necessity for colleges and universities to produce more beneficial undergraduate student learning outcomes (Gosser, 2011, p. 6). And while evidence suggests outcome improvements in specific content areas, namely the STEM subjects, much less evaluation has been conducted to determine if the same is apparent beyond these content areas (Adams, 2012, p. 2). Why is this? The reviewed literature suggests that classroom matters often receive less administrative treatment than those related to other operational concerns. The perception, then, is that instruction suffers, which ultimately produces an unsatisfactory undergraduate outcome; more than perception, though, is that large-scale, international testing results, such as those examined earlier in this chapter, appear to validate this conclusion. According to Levy & Polnariev (2016), among the most effective methods to mitigate this type of concern is to refocus administrative attention on encouraging and overseeing the development of curricular and instructional models that engage students and provide better opportunity for a more meaningful post-secondary experience (p. 6).

Summary

"Of all the innovations and interventions employed to date, none has created more impact and interest and laid the foundation for an academic culture shift than Peer-Led Team Learning." (Chesney, 2011, p. 8)

Thomas D. Chesney

The books, book chapters, journal articles, conference proceedings, quotes, and personal communications referenced for this review of literature are meant to explicate how critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge are interconnected with undergraduate student learning outcomes and the evolution of curricular and instructional models, such as peer-led team learning, designed to improve them. To move toward demonstrating this more plainly, the first obligation was to provide multiple definitions of what scholars regard as critical thinking. Fundamental in doing so was to correlate how undergraduate student populations were failing to cultivate this important life skill, while on campus. From this premise, the roles and responsibilities of those tasked with facilitating critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge on college and university campuses were explored, with supporting exemplars provided.

The most substantial section of this review explored multiple aspects of foundational scholarship and its influences on campus policy and practice, most pointedly as such relates to creating positive undergraduate learning outcomes in critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge; moreover, it supplies guiding principles for the creation and implementation of programs that employ alternative curricular and instructional models, such as that discussed in subsequence. Since

collaborative learning is prioritized in the referenced scholarship, the connection to peer-led team learning, critical thinking skill acquisition, and deeper process content knowledge is a natural one. Further supporting paradigms demonstrated how specific theories espoused in the literature have evolved into practice. The most prominent of these theories were constructivism, as espoused by Dewey, Piaget and their contemporaries, and behaviorism, as defined predominately by Skinner and Watson. A more in-depth discussion regarding the preceding will be presented in Chapter Four of this study.

To continue, the review of literature references large-scale, comprehensive studies, conducted by international research bodies, which support an institutional obligation for colleges and universities to examine curricula and instruction related to critical thinking skill acquisition and deep process content knowledge. As with the other scholarship in this review, the findings from these mixed methods studies indicate the need to explore alternative instructional methodologies, with peer-led team learning repeatedly referenced.

The final section establishes the origins of peer-led team learning and explains where, why, and how it is employed within the academy. It also demonstrates how the priorities of many college and university administrations are often focused on nonacademic matters, which potentially affects the faithful execution of curricular and instructional models designed to benefit the largest number of undergraduate students. The conclusion is that a re-prioritization of these matters may lead to more effective instruction, which may then result in more positive critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge outcomes.

CHAPTER THREE:

CURRICULUM DECONSTRUCTION

Curriculum Deconstruction: Peer-led Team Learning as Pedagogy in a Midsize University Humanities and Social Sciences Program

Those of us involved in the creation and implementation of the peer-led team learning program examined for this study agreed that deemphasizing rote memorization, skill-and-drill instruction, and objective testing and focusing on cultivating in students the capacity to think deeply and critically was necessary. To achieve this, we not only had to be creative with our instructional approaches, but also to understand that applying past and present exemplars as guides for our own case study would ultimately assist the program to become a viable educational alternative on our campus.

Educational politics in the state of Texas helped to bring about the curricular and instructional changes in the humanities and social sciences, at the university in which this study has been undertaken. During the 2010s, a flagship university in Texas conducted an informal study examining the role of Western Civilization, in the liberal arts and humanities, as opposed to a broader, world-based curriculum. Toward the end of the decade, the issue made it to the Texas state legislature, where a proposal to mandate a Western-based curriculum in its College of Humanities was rejected. Thereafter, administrators, faculty, and this researcher revisited the idea, with the result the beginnings of the herein referenced program. The program concept was designed to focus on pedagogical approaches that fostered civic engagement and learning among undergraduate student populations. In sum, the purpose was to, as Rousseau envisioned,

create for students "…a civilized condition that would optimize self-reliance, compassion, [and] civic duty, love for nature, and connection to God" (Noddings, 1998, p. 15). With the latter two items of less importance to the program and its philosophies, the previous three were of significant importance in the development process.

The mission was to formulate different schemes for enhancing engagement and critical thinking outcomes for students in our college, whether they intended to major in a humanities and social sciences subject or would continue their studies elsewhere on campus – Boyer's (1998) notion of removing barriers to interdisciplinary education (pp. 12 - 13). We reasoned that a curricular program designed to address civic participation should begin with an emphasis on ethics, in the broadest sense of the term. In general, the sentiments of Sankaran and Bui (2003) summarize the scope of our philosophy:

> One of the goals of educators is to graduate students who would act ethically once they join their intended professions. They should be the kinds of professionals who will recognize and report unethical acts rather than look the other way. We would like our graduates to acquire a strong sense of right and wrong. (p. 14)

We suspected that curriculum driven by concerns for student engagement and ethical consciousness would naturally promote critical thinking habits and agreed that such a program could include a focus on Western Civilization and traditions, while also not excluding the philosophies, practices, and perspectives of other cultures.

The program proposal combined trends and established practices in literature instruction with peer learning techniques, the latter a common practice in the STEM fields (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 3). First, program administrators proposed that participant courses would employ peer-led team learning, which would create an explicit awareness

among students that the requisite skills for group learning were themselves important outcomes of the course (Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, and Johnson, 2005, p. 92). Next, program courses would seek to cultivate peer teaching assistants who could work from within a current course, or return as veterans of a previous course, to lead active small groups (Snyder and Wiles, 2015, p. 2). Finally, program participants would study traditional, canonical texts, while making equal time for supplementary sources, to empower other voices. The above would then meld with a strong emphasis on peer-led learning, and on teaching techniques for faculty, which promote critical thinking skills and increased reflection among students (Felder & Brent, 2007, 60).

While the investigation of great works in the Western tradition remained important to the program concept, the broader focus was to emphasize student personal intellectual development, intellectual freedom, critical thinking skills, new classroom experiences, and peer-led learning sessions. From this premise, the program might evolve into one not attuned exclusively to Westernness but to the exploration of adjacent ideologies – to deviate, when appropriate to the discussion, from the "Euro-American tradition" and "broaden the canon and make it more multicultural" (Joseph et al., 2000, 65). In sum, the aim was to change the classroom – its structure and content delivery methods – to encourage students to embrace new ideas and to cultivate a more reflective intellectual life.

With the basic plan in place, program administrators solicited faculty participation, with members of the departments of English and History the first to step forward. After initial collaborative meetings among faculty in the two departments, issues of course content and instructional approach emerged. Faculty in English engaged in

debate about canonicity and tradition in the curriculum, while those in history were more interested in instructional methodologies rather than curriculum content. Regardless of this disagreement, which was satisfied as a result of meaningful, peer-to-peer deliberation, all concerned agreed that peer-led learning should be a primary component of the program. The question, then, became whether or not to designate portions of weekly class time in the regular faculty-led classes to accommodate this new instructional tool. The final decision was to do just this.

Peer-Led discussion groups were envisioned as small, breakout sessions from the regular full class meetings, the latter taking place on a Monday, Wednesday, and Friday schedule. Every two weeks over the course of a given term, students would gather in small groups rather than attend the faculty-led class. The groups were selected at random, by numbering off students from the general class roster – ones with ones, twos with twos, and so forth. The objective was to construct groups of roughly ten participants each -- those small enough to promote as much "familiarity, cohesion, and interaction as possible" (Chesney, 2011, p. 6). Krienke (2017) surmised groups larger than 10 as likely too large to ensure full participation (personal communication, March 14, 2017).

The purpose now was to delineate what peer-led team learning groups were meant to achieve. According to de Castro (2012), they should be designed to enhance retention of classroom content and permit students to address this content more deeply and critically (personal communication, 2012). To facilitate this, PLTL sessions would be guided initially by question sets prepared by classroom faculty, which would create a sense of structure for participating students. As sessions evolved, questions and answers generated by the original question sets may prompt additional lines of questioning within

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the broader topic. Of note, and of much importance, is that classroom faculty is wholly absent from sessions, and session coordinators (mentioned subsequently in this deconstruction) are discouraged from interfering in student dialogue. The initial objective is to encourage students to complete the basic discussion agenda set forth by the faculty member, with the final, and most significant, one to guide them toward extending the discussion beyond the established agenda; thereafter, students might develop the aptitude necessary to identify interrelated, multidisciplinary topics, which they may then discuss, debate, and disseminate amongst their peers and in groups extending beyond the PLTL session. The relevant skill generated from this format might include a burgeoning ability to brainstorm, both individually and as a collective, and thus identify topics for further consideration.

Our conception of the growth of PLTL sessions over the course of a semester (and beyond) seemed to align well with that expressed by Quitadamo et al. (2009), who view its progression as, "…characterized by a cohort-based social learning structure whereby trained undergraduates, or "peer leaders," guide less experienced or less willing peers toward conceptual understanding…" (36). Per my experiences, the ascent of unofficial peer leaders, and then official ones, fostered environments geared toward student-to-student and student-to-group engagement – environments built around inclusivity. While not always central in the discussion, they commanded an academic and social presence, which often helped to guide interaction amongst their classmates in a positive direction. Byproducts of this included mindfulness of civility, adherence to the assigned topic, and complete participant engagement. For me, observing this phenomenon in action helped to at least partially denounce the notion that students approaching academic topics in (what

might be perceived as) an unstructured environment are incapable of approaching this freedom appropriately (Boud, 2012, p. 91). In the four semesters I directed this portion of the program, which included time in and out of peer-led team learning sessions, I did not experience this issue. Thus, a tentative summation might be that university students are not as ill-equipped, either intellectually or socially, to participate in this form of curriculum and instruction.

In agreement with many of the paradigms examined prior to the establishment of this program, we concurred that PLTL groups must have clear linkage with the content and flow of the overall course and must be influenced, at least in part, by the principal instructor (Gaffney, 2000, p. 41). We also concluded that our PLTL groups would be created with a democratic intent, for the sake of encouraging student intellectual and social autonomy (p. 44). This communal learning approach would employ a paid session coordinator, for quality control only. That is, session coordinators – originally graduate research and teaching assistants and later undergraduate veterans of the earliest program sections – played minimal roles in session proceedings. Their roles included: 1) Recording attendance; 2) delivering to student participants topic question sets, as dictated by the classroom instructor; 3) redirecting conversations that either diverted off topic, or became uncivil; and 4) providing for the classroom instructor a session summary. Referring to point three, redirection was deemed necessary only in the expressed instances; otherwise, groups were to remain student/peer driven, as guiding, interfering with, or restricting student interaction would likely encumber the democratic intent of the sessions, and of the program, at large.

Integrating PLTL sessions into program course offerings required that all participating academic departments agree to a Monday, Wednesday, Friday scheduling format. From this format, two Fridays a month would be used to implement the PLTL addendum. In its original iteration sessions were split into two groups of 10-12 students, which we deemed sufficient but not ideal. As intended, though, the meetings were held with only the moderator present and in absence of the principal instructor. Instructors provided the discussion topics, which connected themes and concepts examined in the program's classroom component. To provide context, the first topic of discussion centered on Sophocles' *Antigone*, with the initial question set aimed at exploring themes such as political versus human rights, divine law versus the law of governments, morality versus immorality, suffering, revenge, and consequence of action. The conversation was strictly textual for roughly the first ten-minutes of the session, but for approximately the remaining 50, students began to associate the above themes with their own lives. My first impression after observing this was that although such concerns were presented and discussed in the lecture portion of the class, students seemed more willing to open up about them, in a refreshingly honest way, when permitted to explore them among their peers, in an intimate, non-traditional setting. Thus, the program was initially achieving the aim we had envisaged for it.

Contextualizing the Curriculum: Theory into Practice

The primary curriculum theory influencing much of this study was the Progressive Education Movement, as viewed through a Deweyan lens. According to Westbrook (1991):

[Progressive Education] has been used to describe ideas and practices that aim to make schools more effective agencies of a democratic society…Progressive educators share the conviction that democracy means active participation by all citizens in social, political and economic decisions that will affect their lives. The education of engaged citizens…involves two essential elements: (1) Respect for diversity, meaning that each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and (2) the development of critical, socially engaged intelligence, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good. (p. 22)

Westbrook's narrative offers a lucid summation of the specific reasons the peer-led team learning program observed throughout this study was created. Democracy is the key term referenced above, but, as certain Dewey-influenced literature suggests, it is what the term envelopes that emerges as most significant to the curricular and instructional makeup of programs relying on collaboration, to encourage positive learning outcomes (Roberts, 1998, p. 112).

In following a linear sequence, which might assist individuals interested in designing and implementing a program similar to the one examined herein, it is important to understand that while subject matter is in many ways different from academic department to academic department, overlapping themes will be consistently evident, especially in departments housed in the same university division; more pointedly, topics referenced in a literature course such as morality, ethical consciousness, and personal values will likely emerge in history, English, and philosophy courses, simultaneously. In

environments in which Progressive Education guides curriculum and instruction, student participants are afforded the freedom to explore these topics – their associated themes, philosophies, and practices – widely, critically, deeply, and, in the instance of this program, and others influenced by Deweyan doctrine, collaboratively (Beane, 2016, p. 14). Deviation from this curriculum theory might impede this freedom, which might then result in less productive learning outcomes for student participants (Nieto, 2017, p. 6).

Once the democratic intent of the program is established, it is imperative that program developers focus on the interdisciplinary nature of both the traditional classroom content and the peer-led team learning addendum (Soerensen, 2017, p. 4). A supposition of this researcher is that PLTL might be effective, in a single discipline study – e.g. history by itself or philosophy by itself; however, its function in the program studied for this dissertation was to intersect content, elucidate related themes, strengthen content synthesis across disciplines, and permit students to discover how the content is relevant to their own lives (Soder, 1996, p. 83). To move toward achieving this, program administrators, along with faculty from the individual departments, had to collaborate, to ensure these important connections were made from course to course and, in subsequence, in the PLTL sessions.

The finer points of the program were espoused above in Westbrook's précis. Foremost, a key principal of curriculum and instruction in a Deweyan-type program is, "Respect for diversity, [wherein] each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity" (Westbrook, 1991, p. 22). The peer-led team learning element in the referenced program sought to put into practice a curricular and instructional model that embraced this theory wholly; that is,

administrators understood, before drafting the program concept, that the university had evolved, and was continuing to evolve, into a more multicultural community. This, among other extant factors, reinforced the necessity to cultivate academic environments that embraced the unique personal and cultural backgrounds of its growing student body – something Dewey might have encouraged. Once these environments were created, the theory was that the abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identities of program participants would not only be explored, but also embraced (p. 22). This has been widely evident, throughout the program's history, and has assisted in building its positive reputation campus-wide.

When referencing the desired outcomes of peer-led team learning programs, Westbrook's conclusion that "…the development of critical, socially engaged intelligence…enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good" is precisely the same conclusion program administrators reached (p. 22). This dissertation study has focused heavily on critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge, and the above summation melds seamlessly with these cognitive processes. The objective of this program – of most programs influenced by Deweyan pragmatism – is to encourage students to examine classroom content, as well as the world in which they live, more critically – in a manner that engages the content in a more sophisticated, deeper process way. In theory, doing this, particularly in a collaborative manner, might cultivate environments in which the proverbial common good is achieved. This is by no means a perfect formula, or one that influences the intellectual and social behaviors of all

individuals; however, learning outcomes generated by the examined program seem to imply that such is useful for a significant population of student participant.

To conclude, Dewey's theory of Progressive Education has surfaced throughout this study; moreover, it has surfaced, and been implemented faithfully, by the peer-led team learning program discussed in this dissertation. The curricular and instructional foundations of this program encourage student and content diversity, which include diversity of ideas, backgrounds, morals, ethics, values, and traditions. From this diversity emerges conversation, and from intelligent, critical, deeper process cultural and content awareness emerges understanding. The hope is that understanding facilitates harmony, and that harmony contributes to a common good.

Philosophical Perspectives on Collaborative and Cooperative Learning

Ensuing discussions about the exact methods for changing the classroom experience focused on the promise of peer-led learning techniques. Vygotsky's theory of collaborative learning suggests that social environments provide opportunities to observe higher levels of cognition among student populations, as they actively engage in the proceedings (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 4). Bruner (1996) might concur with this supposition, explaining that, "Collaborative discussion provides peers with the opportunity to scaffold learning" (15). Program administrators considered and presented similar research, when approaching the university about building a community-based program, one they hoped would effectively engage incoming freshman students.

There are many educational, epistemological, and curricular theories that surface in the above discussion, each of which bears some significance in the development of this

program. Dewey or von Glasersfeld or Vygotsky may, to some degree, consider a program such as this to be a constructivist or pragmatist experiment, as collaboration, experimentation, experience, and application are basic tenets of these theories; others, such as Skinner or Bandura, may view it as less constructivist - though some elements of it may still exist - and more behaviorist in nature. That is, they may see the ultimate purpose of the program as an avenue to "condition" participants to think and behave (morally and ethically, in this case) a certain way, both inside and outside of the academy. In order for this to occur it seems reasonable to conclude that some form of conditioning must be present. While the application of each to this particular experiment may seem a bit farfetched, it is difficult not to see evidence of their presence not only in the ideologies that preceded and assisted the development of the program, but also in its administration. Student narratives examined for this dissertation study will hopefully support that such theories and practices are evident in this program.

Epistemologically, it is always difficult to determine what one knows, and/or what s/he is capable of knowing. But for the sake of developing this program, and to take the minimal leap-of-faith necessary to assume that incoming freshman students had at least a basic familiarity with the subjects addressed therein, we had to create a curricular foundation upon which said individuals would be intellectually challenged, but not overly frustrated with the rigor of the process. As such, much time and research went into evaluating incoming students. We conducted interviews, reviewed high school transcripts, and performed various other processes, all of which were designed to determine what these students "knew" and what they were capable of "knowing." While these particular methods of judgment may seem artificial on the surface, we felt it

necessary to gauge the types of participants with whom we would be working, as the program launched in the fall of 2010; furthermore, it was imperative that when the program officially became a part of the university curriculum, it worked to meet the intellectual and social needs of its participants – that it cultivated in them, from the foundation of knowledge they had already acquired from primary and secondary schooling, and through lived experiences, a critical awareness of themselves and of the subjects they study both in and beyond the classroom.

Finally, much of how the curriculum was devised and implemented has been answered above; however, and as was mentioned prior, competing ideologies at times impeded the process of consensus over how the program would be administered. Doll (2000) summarizes such a dilemma fairly accurately by expressing:

What exchanges occur between beings in the classroom are complicated conversations, called *curriculum*, the root of which is *flux*. And the way into the flux involves imagination, what writers concern themselves with best. (p. 11)

This is exactly the curricular impasse we faced time and again. There was this emerging inability to engage in complex conversations, wherein our perceptions of the purposes of education – how it is conducted and what results should be evident – had grown stagnant and unimaginative. The English side of the equation held firm that a more traditional, lecture-based approach to teaching would most benefit these students; conversely, the History side opposed this model, in favor of facilitation and small group discussion. The point the former seemed to be missing was that this entire program was an experiment, meant to explore varying instructional techniques, while the latter failed to surmise that a very important part of the program, the peer-led team learning element (the facilitation

and small group discussion element), was already firmly in place. Eventually, all parties agreed to conduct their classrooms as they deemed most appropriate for their students, all the while understanding that the peer-led team learning addendum would be operated within consistent and predictable parameters.

The Pragmatics of the Program Curriculum: Putting the Pieces Together

As the preceding paragraph referenced at its conclusion, in order to administer effectively the curriculum designed and implemented for the peer-led team learning program discussed in this dissertation, it was important that all participating faculty understood and embraced the program concept, and were willing to execute it reliably. This required consistent communication, which was achieved via weekly meetings, phone calls, emails, and from feedback provided by PLTL session coordinators. Such communication yielded a variety of results. Foremost among these results was the opportunity for each faculty member to understand how the content being taught in their individual course was connected to that being taught in the other program sections. For example, if the English instructor was teaching a work of literature in which a prominent theme was morality, the history or philosophy instructor could relate this theme to the subjects they were teaching concurrently. Other results included creating collaborative, cross-curricular assignments. An assignment structure utilized frequently in the program involved the history or philosophy professor requesting the English professor assign writing prompts addressing topics in their courses. The individual instructor graded the final product, but portions of the English course were dedicated to executing the various writing processes: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Such was one of the primary functions of the English program, in general, so instructors agreed that it

made the most sense to devise assignments (especially writing assignments) that were collaborative in nature.

To achieve the above, at least in part, syllabi had to be coordinated across the various departments. As an example, faculty had to agree on a certain number of essay assignments to assign across the program for the semester. This created consistency and predictability in assignment making, which facilitated further the opportunity to assimilate humanities and social sciences subject matter. Beyond the writing assignments, though, amalgamating content created better opportunities for more in-depth discussion in the PLTL sessions; that is, students were already making content connections in the traditional classroom, which thereafter translated into more meaningful conversations among student participants and facilitated additional opportunities for critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge. Professors worked diligently to model appropriate academic interaction in the traditional classroom, as doing so was meant to encourage the same in the PLTL sessions.

Readings were selected by individual faculty members and were specific to their own courses; however, certain thematic elements were evident across most of these works. For instance, morality and ethics could be discussed in a work of literature in the English course, a historical event in the history course, or a theory in the philosophy course. To be more specific, a student participant could read and study Machiavelli in any of the three program courses and do so through multiple academic, social, political, religious, moral, and ethical lenses. The same is true of Thoreau, Freud, Socrates, and the many other philosophers, poets, playwrights, and essayists studied by participants while enrolled in the program.

<u>**Sample Syllabus (English): A Reference for Potential Program Administrators**</u>

The following is a sample syllabus written specifically for use in this dissertation. The information contained therein parallels that of the program examined throughout this study. All information has been reviewed and carefully member checked, by administrative participants, and approved for use in this project.

<u>Overview</u>

What is the "Classical Curriculum," and how does it represent the moral and ethical questions of ancient and contemporary Western civilizations? To answer these important questions, one must first define the term "Classical" as a guideline to understanding the principles and beliefs that for centuries have characterized European and American thought. By doing this, one shall increase his awareness of the social, political, and religious concerns distinctive to Western cultivation and how certain ideas and superlatives are evident throughout history. This shall be achieved by examining the literature, philosophy, history, and art that delineate Western society from other important cultures.

<u>Classicism/The Classical Tradition</u>

Though you will learn the ideologies and practices of Western civilization as you attend program courses, the purpose of this section is to offer a general overview of Classicism and its relevance to contemporary studies. Classicism is a school of thought that originated in ancient Greece and Rome and examines the literature, language, philosophy, history, and art of Mediterranean antiquity. The above deconstruction is best defined as a study in the "Humanities," which is more appropriately classified as the staples of Western intellectualism during the above period. In its basic form, Classicism

is characterized as "belonging to the highest class of citizen" and connotes intellectual superiority, authority, and perfection. That is, the study of the humanities was reserved for those who were educated in the moral, ethical, and philosophical mantras of the Greco Roman world. Men such as Plato, Aristotle, Homer, and Sophocles, among others, cultivated the intellectual landscape of this era; the standards and practices set forth by these great men became models for subsequent civilizations and are still appropriate contemporarily. For example, one can identify the tenets of Classicism in the works of Dante, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Milton, Crane, and Faulkner. In the works of each, the social, political, and spiritual framework of the individual and his society is presented to the reader for analysis. Thus, a student of these works must ask himself the following questions: What challenges does the represented society face? Do these challenges stem from the overreaches of government and its leaders? Are they rooted in the practices of the church or deities? Are they reflective of domestic or familial upheaval? By reading and analyzing the works of antiquity and those composed within the Classical Tradition, the student shall understand that the struggles s/he faces in modern society have been pervasive throughout Western civilization. Hence, the purpose of studying Classicism is to gain an awareness of self-identity, to recognize how past societies have addressed and overcome social, political, and religious hardship, and to apply the lessons of history to becoming a morally and ethically conscientious citizen. Such lessons – as you will see throughout your studies in the program – are imperative to the revitalization of the principles of American democracy and of our place in the world as a moral and ethical exemplum.

Course Description: The Theme of Man and the State

One of the problems which has troubled mankind since the beginning of human civilization has been the problem of individual liberty; the problem of the personal will to freedom in its conflicts with the restrictions of social taboos and the laws of government. Since man has always found it necessary to live in social groups, and since he found it impossible to live safely and fruitfully in such groups without the aid of laws, restrictions, and standards, he has always searched for a society or state that gives him both order and sufficient liberty. A state that can give complete order, justice, and protection, and can at the same time allow for individual liberty and free exercise of the individual conscience has never been achieved. Even in America the price of dissent may be social ostracism or a prison sentence.

This course is designed to encourage a productive discussion over the loss of core personal integrity through a reinvigoration of the values of Western civilization. Furthermore, it will demonstrate that politicians, public figures, academics, and the general public have endured throughout history the same dilemmas that we as Americans bear today. As undergraduate students, you have the opportunity to gain awareness, insight, and knowledge through an innovative experience that is designed to address the questions that have been asked in one form or another in ancient Greece and Rome, and in every generation from that time to the present. The questions are general and overlapping, and any tentative answers to one question will begin to answer the others. Certainly there is no one answer to any of the questions; our main concern is with the answers which may be suggested in the literature that we are to read – and with the actual posing of the questions in the various works.

Aims and Outcomes

Freshman and sophomore English courses are core requirements because learning to write effective research papers is an essential part of a university education. By the end of these courses, you will be able to write at a level that signifies that you are ready for academic research writing. You will know how to develop a thoughtful and logical argument, and continue to demonstrate that you have a command of the conventions of written English. Your instructor will emphasize the importance of university-level reading and demonstrate the relationship between the reading and writing process, using a variety of texts such as fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, and examples of professional writing across disciplines.

The primary subject of this English course is writing. Specifically, the course provides the skills needed to write a college-level essay. You should be able to compose – in or out of class – essays that exhibit clear and adequate development of a single thesis, a discernable and effective order, and a command of the conventions of written English appropriate at the college-level. Additionally, you will learn to employ the three appeals of argument in your writing: logos, ethos, and pathos. This method of composition encourages: clarity, purpose, and credibility (ethos); the use of factual information and rationale (logos); and an understanding of emotional appeal to a target audience (pathos).

Second, you will receive semester long instruction in how to minimize grammatical and mechanical mistakes through reviews of grammar and grammatical terminology, specifically as these relate to the writing process. Drill, practice, and testing will provide you sufficient instruction in the fundamentals of Standard American English (SAE). This objective aims for skill in recognizing duplication and disorganization in

sentence construction; identifying sentence fragments and run-on sentences; identifying standard subject-verb agreement; identifying placement of modifiers, parallel structure, and use of negatives in sentence formation; and recognizing imprecise and inappropriate word choice, such as profanity, colloquialisms, and shorthand – e.g. text message language. A further objective strives for skill in the standard use of verb forms and pronouns; the standard formation and use of adverbs, adjectives, comparatives, superlatives, and plural and possessive forms of nouns; and recognizing standard punctuation, such as commas, colons, semicolons, and end marks.

Third, you will learn how to write clear, concise, logical sentences, paragraphs, and compositions. This objective incorporates elements of composition that recognizes purpose and audience, unity, focus, development, and effective organization. The English course is intended to improve student-writing skills through the study, and writing, of essays representing several rhetorical types. It emphasizes the importance of reading and demonstrates the relationship between the reading and writing process. This objective is achieved through the content-based approach of reading poetry, drama, essays, and novels.

Course Objectives

Through a sequence of writings, readings, and workshop assignments, students will learn to:

1. Understand the persuasive nature of language,

2. Respond appropriately to different rhetorical situations and constraints,

3. Strengthen their composing process in order to produce academic essays and other texts,

4. Further strengthen their analytical reading and critical thinking skills,

5. Understand the connection between abundant reading and effective writing,

6. Strengthen their argumentative skills,

7. Strengthen their ability to conduct research in order to enable them to perform well in their discipline-specific sophomore and upper-level courses,

8. Integrate and document the ideas of others across disciplines in a confident and competent manner, using various citation methods (MLA, APA, CSE, etc.),

9. Become fluent in their use of MLA as a citation method,

10. Strengthen their oral presentation skills,

11. Understand the register requirements of academic contexts and be able to demonstrate this understanding by the use of conventions and standard American English (SAE) grammar and appropriate mechanics across various genres and writing and speech situations.

Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL)

The PLTL is designed to allow you the opportunity to discuss and debate the contents of your courses. That is, it offers the occasion to present insights, facts, and opinions regarding the historical and contemporary applications of Western intellectualism and provides a chance for academically stimulating conversation. It is your responsibility to attend and participate in PLTL sessions. Failure to meet attendance and participation requirements during the semester will result in a reduction of your overall average.

Assignments and Grading

1. <u>Reading Quizzes</u>: Reading quizzes will be given regularly throughout the semester and may be announced or unannounced. Each will cover the readings assigned in class. They will be evaluated individually as a daily grade and collectively as a major grade.

2. <u>Journal Assignments</u>: You will be required to compose a minimum of five (5) journal entries during the semester. With this assignment, you are to write two (2) pages discussing a piece of literature or text, as assigned by your instructor. The literature or text to be discussed may include: magazine articles, current events available in a newspaper or on a website, textbook sections, or short stories. The purpose of these exercises is to promote out-of-class reading and writing and to offer practice in these areas. Journal assignments will be assigned in the Friday PLTL sessions and collected in the traditional classroom. They will be evaluated individually as a daily grade and collectively as a major grade.

3. <u>Major Writing Assignments</u>: Two major writing assignments/compositions are expected in all English coursework. These assignments will range in length and subject.

4. <u>In-class Essay Examinations</u>: There will be three (3) essay examinations during each program semester. Each will test your ability to analyze and interpret the literature discussed in class.

5. <u>Research Paper</u>: The requirements and expectations for this assignment will evolve throughout the course.

6. <u>Oral Presentation</u>: The requirements and expectations for this assignment will evolve throughout the course.

7. <u>Final Examination</u>: A comprehensive final examination will be given during the scheduled final period at the end of the semester.

8. <u>PLTL Participation</u>: PLTL attendance and participation will comprise a significant portion of your final grade.

<u>Grade Distribution Breakdown</u>

100 – 90% = A, 89 – 80% = B, 79 – 70% = C, 69 – 60% = D, 59% and below = F

Summary and Conclusion

In referring back to courses taken as a doctoral student, I recall visiting, and revisiting, the questions, "What are the goals of education, or schooling, for the individual?" and "What is the ultimate benefit for society if all individuals were educated in this culture of curriculum?" While the answers to these questions may differ from participant to participant, or from examiner to examiner, the general consensus is that the goal of education and schooling for the individual in this particular context was to enhance critical thinking skills and to cultivate an environment wherein deeper process learning might occur. Indications from this study suggest that traditional learning settings, accompanied by peer-led, lesser-regimented structures, move toward achieving this goal. Feedback and continued participation reveals that a large percentage of participants found the curriculum, and the structure of the curriculum, beneficial to their short and long-term academic goals. This dissertation will further determine whether or not this is a trend or an anomaly. This is not to imply that all individuals would thrive in this culture of curriculum; however, it does seem to promote a sense of inquiry and individuality often lacking in the "general" curriculum. Furthermore, it allows students from all different backgrounds to debate issues that, outside of such a structure, are not as readily discussed. This is not only positive for developing student social skills, but also an important life skill for young men and women who, in the not too distant future, will

be entering the professions. Thus, and as the above hopefully elucidates, curricula with peer-led learning addendums can have immediate and future positive effects on one's ability to think and behave critically, in and beyond the university.

CHAPTER FOUR:

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Research Methodology – Narrative Case Study with Partial Application of
Phenomenological and Practical Action Research Paradigms**

For this case study, I will employ phenomenological, practical action, and to a significant degree, narrative research paradigms, to collect, analyze, validate, and present data. The rationale for conducting and presenting my research within these qualitative boundaries is to present to my reader the unique experiences of the individuals who participated in this dissertation project; moreover, the above research standards align most effectively with the overall intent of this project, which is to elucidate whether pedagogical practices such as peer-led team learning are useful in guiding undergraduate students toward positive learning outcomes in critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge.

As a research paradigm, phenomenology "aims to describe, understand and interpret the meanings of experiences of human life [and] focuses on research questions such as what it is like to experience a particular situation" (Bloor and Wood, 2006, p. 6). Research for this project has centered almost exclusively on chronicling human experiences. Subsequent chapters will include phenomenological reflections detailing how these experiences shaped targeted learning outcomes, with heed paid to critical thinking skill acquisition and deep process content knowledge; conjointly, student perceptions will be related to the reader, as a means of determining whether the program has improved student dispositions toward this type of study.

In transition, Schmuck (2006) defines action research as "a way for people within an organization to study their own situations individually and collectively, try new practices, evaluate those innovations, adjust, and try again" (p. 8). This is precisely what the referenced program sought to achieve, at inception, and what it seeks to achieve, at present. During initial development, faculty, staff, and this researcher were encouraged to reflect on established instructional policies and practices and to consider updating them, if such was deemed necessary. The final determination was that this indeed was necessary, which facilitated the development of modified course curricula and the implementation of alternative methods of instruction – peer-led team learning central to this program. While the latter was not an instructional innovation, in a broader sense, it has proven to be so within humanities and social sciences courses, at the university in which this study was conducted. Because of the newness of the program and lack of experience among member faculty and administrators, curriculum and instruction were continuously modified, with a constant eye toward achieving maximum instructional efficacy. These adjustments still occur, with frequency, and will likely continue, in perpetuity.

Finally, the narrative research methodology is of much significance to the development and presentation of this dissertation study. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2015) define narrative research as, "The description of the lives of individuals, the collection of individuals' stories of their experiences, and a discussion of the meaning of those experiences" (p. 3); furthermore, they describe its purpose as the opportunity "…to increase understanding of central issues related to teaching and learning through the

telling and retelling of participants' stories" (p. 3). Within this paradigm, I will focus

primarily on the following types of narrative inquiry:

- Personal Accounts

- Personal Documents

- Personal Narratives

- Documents of Life

- Life Writing

- Narrative Interviews (p. 8)

From the above, I will utilize the narrative data collection techniques of restorying, oral

history, story telling, and autobiographical writing, to communicate participant

narratives, with specific focus on restorying (p. 15). Restorying is described as, "The

process in which the researcher gathers stories; analyzes them for key elements of the

story such as time, place, or plot; and rewrites the story to place it in a chronological

sequence" (p. 17). These stories will be produced from structured and unstructured

interviews – to be recorded, transcribed, analyzed, triangulated, and member checked

before use – and a variety of written artifacts such as questionnaire answer forms,

personal/first person essays, and course related writing samples. Ideally, presenting my

research findings employing this method of inquiry, along with the accompanying

methods referenced in precedent, will allow me to provide a comprehensive, meaningful,

and scholastic accounting of student participant experiences in this program.

Purpose of the Study

The above shall be used to explore the research topic within its real-life context, most explicitly when it, and the manner in which it is broadly understood, is not lucid. It requires the evaluation of multiple sources of evidence, with such needing to conjoin with the presented research questions.

The findings of this study shall be presented from multiple perspectives, with the focal point being undergraduate participants studying subjects within the humanities and social sciences at a midsize university. To join them will be all other participants: professors, graduate assistants, and other stakeholders. The former will reveal how PLTL as pedagogy influences learning outcomes, with critical thinking skill acquisition the spotlighted concern; the latter will reveal how incorporating PLTL into the traditional classroom structure influences teaching, learning, and attitudes toward subject matter.

This case study will be written in narrative form and is focused on providing its audience with the information necessary to facilitate understanding of the topic being studied. The result of a comprehensive narrative articulating the experiences of student participants, in classrooms employing PLTL as pedagogy, will rely heavily upon precise data collection, and how said data is interpreted and presented to its readers.

Research Design

This qualitative case study, which will make use of phenomenological, practical action, and narrative research methodologies as guiding principles, will be markedly interpretive in nature, with data interpretation and dissemination imperative to its larger purpose (Dillaway, Lysack, & Luborsky, 2017, p. 228). In referencing interpretation as correlative to this work, it is compulsory to substantiate its functions in qualitative research, in general. As Creswell (2014) explains:

[…] Data analysis involves making an interpretation […] of the findings or results. These […] could be the researchers personal interpretation couched in the understanding that the inquirer brings to the study from a personal culture, history, and experiences. It could also be meaning derived from a comparison of the findings with information gleaned from the literature or theories. In this way, the author suggests that the findings confirm past information or diverge from it. It can also suggest new questions that need to be asked --- questions raised by the data and analysis that the inquirer had not foreseen earlier in the study. (p. 200)

Denzin and Lincoln (2017) expand upon this notion by surmising:

Research in which interpretation is required is characterized as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

The expectation is that by conducting my research within these methodological frameworks, I will make evident that PLTL is a functional pedagogical model, one which facilitates positive learning outcomes in undergraduate student learners participating in humanities and social sciences courses. The primary objective, thereafter, is to elucidate

how critical thinking skill acquisition, along with deep process content knowledge, develops as a result of the above.

In summary, qualitative research grants the researcher occasion to evaluate participants from a human rather than mechanical perspective, which, in a perfect world, results in a richer and more pleasant experience for all involved (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 67). It can also be problematic, not because of its structural complexity and rigor as a research method, but rather of the pressures it imposes on the researcher to maintain a sense of objectivity during the course of a study (Thomas, 2017, p. 31). This potential burden aside, from qualitative data materializes identifiable patterns in that being observed (p. 31). Naturally, some of these patterns are lucid, whereas others are ambiguous. From this information, though, arises the necessity to either "stay the course," or modify it, with the goal of answering more precisely the original research questions (Wilson, 2017, p. 25). As the study moves forth, focus will return frequently to the above. The purpose of this is to facilitate measurable progress in the research; moreover, it assists the researcher in circumventing casual (or poor) research practices such as topic irrelevance, erroneous data collection practices, poor interpretation of data, and bias (Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014, p. 184).

Research Participants

Freshman and sophomore students, as well as tenured professors, will serve as participants in this study. The freshman students are new to the program, whereas a percentage of sophomore students are second-semester participants. Of the latter, none serve as PLTL session leaders.

In general the participant pool is diverse, as Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, Christian, Jewish, straight, LGBT, and students with special needs are represented. Each brings to the program an array of life stories, from the areas in which they were born and raised to socioeconomic status to academic background. None of the participants knew one another prior to entering the program.

<u>Conceptual Framework</u>

"In the process of social interaction in learning, students can develop some necessary assistant learning skills as a by-product of cooperative effort. These skills, which include synthesis, analysis, argument, delegation, and deliberation, can be developed in conjunction with the cognitive aims of academic tasks. Moreover, if students participate in cooperative learning activities, they will be responsible, not only for their own learning, but also for others' learning." (Tran, 2013, p. 107)

Three major educational theorist have influenced the conceptual framework for this study: Vygotsky, Dewey, and Piaget, all who, in various forms, espouse collaborative learning and social engagement as vital to cognitive development, the cultivation of problem solving and critical thinking skills, and the development of a productive citizenry (Behizadeh, 2014, p. 127; Tampio, 2017, p. 37). Vygotsky surmised, "Learners construct knowledge socially, based on their current or past knowledge, through social interaction rather than by observing it objectively" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 35; Tran, 2013, p. 106). Tran (2013) punctuates this supposition by stating:

> If reciprocal interaction exists in the learning environment, the two factors of
> affinity and support among participants in the learning process will make

students feel that they are an important part of this learning environment. In traditional classes, these conditions rarely exist because there is little reciprocal interaction between students. Vygotsky's notion creates a solid basis for modern trends in the practice of teaching and learning. This theory emphasizes reciprocal interaction in learning; therefore, it makes the learning environment more natural and interactive (p. 106).

A primary objective of the PLTL program examined for this study is to encourage student self-confidence. A potential byproduct of this is the emergence of more productive peer-to-peer interaction, which may produce what Tran envisages as a "more natural and interactive" learning environment (p. 106).

For the purpose of supporting Vygotsky's theory on collaborative learning, it is relevant to examine preceding theoretical stances, such as those espoused by Dewey. Sharan, Sharan, and Tan (2013) relate:

> Dewey's vision of education…[seeks] to develop thinking and decision-making skills in the process of inquiry, to provide students with opportunities for finding creative solutions to real life problems, to nurture cooperation and mutual help, and to enlist the use of appropriate technology, all of which are vital to society today…" (p. 366).

To elucidate this theory further, members of the John Dewey Project (2002) at the University of Vermont explain:

> The education of engaged citizens…involves two essential elements: 1) Respect for diversity, meaning that each individual should be recognized for

his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and 2)

the development of critical, socially engaged intelligence, which enables

individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their

community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good. (Tollefson &

Osborn, 2007, p. 3)

The above clarifies another of the primary purposes of this program: to foster creativity in

problem solving, which includes both acute independent thought and cooperative

engagement. Each requires mindfulness of the similarities and differences inherent in

humanity and a willingness to acknowledge them. Dewey himself might agree that this

approach has the potential to aid in the development of the critical thinking skills needed

to facilitate productive social intercourse. The end result might be, as Tollefson and

Osborne (2007) espouse, a move toward achieving a common good (p. 3).

To conclude, Piaget, similarly to his contemporaries, identified collaborative

learning as essential to the development of certain cognitive skills, with critical thinking

and deep process content knowledge among them. To again reference Tran (2013),

Piaget:

…emphasizes the involvement and participation of learners in the learning

and thinking process. In the learning process, learners construct and

reconstruct knowledge by themselves. [He] claims that an active discovery-

learning environment should be encouraged to provide students with opportunities

for assimilation and accommodation. This means that learners will appropriate the

new knowledge and then assimilate it to their existing knowledge. (p. 106)

When the referenced program was in development, one of the goals set forth by administrators was to acquire a general sense of what student participants knew and did not know, prior to entering the program. Achieving this in totality is impossible, but the consensus was that having a content knowledge baseline would allow for the development of a more meaningful curricular and instructional model. It is from the assumption of what this baseline might reveal that the idea of PLTL emerged. More pointedly, administrators envisaged that weaving individual knowledge and lived experiences into the fabric of the program might result in a more comprehensive and meaningful experience for all participants. The objective, then, was to demonstrate to students how the knowledge and experiences of others might be relevant to their own, which might assist in cultivating the critical thinking skills and deeper process content knowledge this program was designed to augment.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection began in January of 2017 and concluded in May of 2017, one full semester of university study. All data shall be collected with written permission from each participant and in compliance with The University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards, along with those of the host university. Each university employs similar, consistent guidelines in reference to examining human subjects within structured and semi-structured environments. For example, both necessitate reasonable assurance that the privacy and wellbeing of each participant is faithfully maintained. Throughout the multiple processes undertaken to accomplish this, the burden to prove the necessary processes and procedures are in place is mine to bear. It is only after I have met this burden that permission shall be granted by the reviewing boards. Among the primary

methods of accomplishing this is to supply documentation evidencing that well conceived

protocols can, and likely will, produce the above effect. Examples of such documentation

shall be provided in the appendices of this document.

This dissertation utilized multiple data sources, which was organized according to

relevance. Initial data will emerge from participant interviews, with the length of the

preceding to be determined at a later time. Interview data will be triangulated as such: A)

Participant artifacts, with writing assignments a primary focus; B) field-based

observations and subsequent notes; C) professor interviews, syllabi from each

participating classroom (and from each subject), and recorded classroom sessions; and D)

any other supporting materials determined to be relevant to this study.

To expand on portions of the above, interaction with the student and teacher

participants will be both structured and unstructured. The former is more rigid and less

personal, whereas the latter is more conversational, which may create a more authentic

account of a participant's views of the study. That is, conversational, semi-structured

interviews may solicit more honest discussion, by establishing the participant as an equal

partner in the dialogue. This permits them to articulate personal feelings, thus presenting

to readers a more pragmatic account of a participant's role in the project.

Interviews will be recorded and information extrapolated using appropriate

software; thereafter, it will be submitted to the participants for examination and member

checking. Member checking will function to either support or refute the authenticity of

collected data, and will supply materials for additional scrutiny and triangulation.

Note taking is a standard practice during interviews, and such will be so for this

study. The purpose of the above will be multifarious, but of primary concern is

generating researcher reflection points, which might stimulate further inquiry into the posed research questions.

At this juncture, all interviews will be held on the campus referenced throughout this study; however, every effort will be made to accommodate participants whose schedules differ from that of the researcher.

As is so with interviews, observations should be perform meticulously, with careful thought given to the wellbeing of study participants. The researcher must, by and large, remain a passive observer in the proceedings; that is, no purposeful interface between the two distinct parties should occur in the "laboratory" environment. With this said, the observer will remain approachable and professional, before the project begins, while it is in progress, and following its completion.

The gathering of artifacts is generally viewed as a less invasive technique of securing data. It is a very important portion of the data collection process, as it shall provide evidence either substantiating or refuting previously collected data; or, at very minimum, it will helped to elucidate it, whether such is in favor of, or antithetical to, the preceding.

Interview protocols, observations, and artifact collection permit the researcher the opportunity to consider further the posed research questions; additionally, they help to substantiate or rebut the concerns presented in the review of literature and to assist in the data extrapolation process.

Data Analysis

The following from Huberman, Miles, and Saldana (2013) outlines the processes typically undertaken by qualitative researchers, when gathering and analyzing data:

1. coding (organization)

2. policing (detecting bias and preventing tangents)

3. dictating field notes (as opposed to verbatim recordings)

4. connoisseurship (researcher knowledge of issues and context of the site)

5. progressive focusing and funneling (winnowing data and investigative technique as study progresses)

6. interim site summaries (narrative reviews of research progress)

7. memoing (formal noting and sharing of emerging issues)

8. outlining (standardized writing formats) (p. 76)

The above are quite common in larger, broader scale studies; however, similar methods will be employed for this study, with the aim of achieving similar results from a single researcher, dissertation length project.

After assessing each of the collected data sources – interviews, notes, and participant artifacts – such will be coded manually and initial meaning will be produced. Analysis will become apparent from identifying emerging paradigms; thereafter, comparisons and contrasts will be utilized, to establish theoretical explanations for their existence.

For the intention of producing data that is authentic and trustworthy, triangulation will be used to link the data collection and analysis processes. As mentioned previously, member checking assists in achieving this end, as it either legitimizes or debunks the observations and interpretations of the researcher. All participants will be afforded as many occasions as necessary to evaluate collected data, and to provide additional insights, as necessary.

Autobiographical Disclosure

My interest in this project has manifested from my experiences as a graduate teaching assistant, public and private school teacher, doctoral student, and school administrator. The curiosity that led to my interest in conducting this study was facilitated by my desire to introduce to students alternatives to the educational policies and practices to which they perhaps had grown accustomed in primary and secondary school. I recall my own shortcomings as a junior high and high school student and have often wondered if an approach such as PLTL might have mitigated some of them. Of course, this will never be known, but I am looking forward to the opportunity to observe how it will influence those whose educational circumstances may have been similar to my own.

A primary concern is that conflicts of interest may arise between a researcher, his participants, and certain scholarly obligations. There is the potential for such in this instance, as two of my research participants are personal acquaintances and will be under my supervision during this study. I mention this because it is my obligation as a researcher to assure my readers that collected data, and all discoveries gleaned from it, will in no way be affected by these personal relationships.

In transition, my study of PLTL as pedagogy in humanities and social sciences courses has in multiple forms precipitated this current study. The first of these began in August of 2010, and each iteration since, of which there have been several, has yielded what seems to be a fresher, more focused perspective on the topic. Several reasons for this are evident, but primary among them is that as I have acquired a more sophisticated grasp of the processes and procedures inherent to qualitative research, the overall process

has improved; thus, the natural conclusion is to expect that more reliable and usable information has been collected and may be used to support or refute the presented research questions.

In continuously reflecting on my position in this study, I see myself certainly as a researcher, but equally, and more specifically, as an interpreter. Stake's (1995) perspective of qualitative case study researcher as interpreter seems most prudent, as he presupposes, "The case researcher recognizes and substantiates new meanings. Whoever is a researcher has recognized a problem, puzzlement, and studies it, hoping to connect it better with known things. Finding new connections, the researcher finds ways to make them comprehensible to others" (p. 97).

From my interpretations, it is my expectation that I will demonstrate in a clear, concise manner the effectiveness of peer-led team learning in facilitating critical thinking skill acquisition in students attending courses in the humanities and social sciences at the referenced university. Should I succeed here, it stands to reason that future students might benefit from this discovery.

To conclude, identifying the mutually supporting nature of the tasks executed by the researcher and study participants, it is reasonable to conclude that both represent a particular environment or community. Therefore, the performance of moral and ethical research, along with moral and ethical participation, is paramount. It is critical that all involved approach the study with the explicit consideration for research principals, by regarding all aspects of the process with equal deference.

<u>Study Timeline</u>

The study is designed to begin in the Spring of 2017, following approval from the major professor and committee, along with consent from the appropriate IRB bodies. Interviews, observations, and artifact collection have already been arranged with identified participants, though the above cannot begin officially until all protocols are satisfied; once they are, the study shall proceed. The initial goal is to organize and analyze preliminary data during the above semester; the ultimate goal is to use the summer months of 2017, to fully deconstruct and present collected data in dissertation form. The hope is that final review and the defense will take place in August of 2017.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this dissertation is that most student participants have not had the opportunity to study in this type of environment during previous educational experiences. They are mostly young students who are adjusting to very new and very different life circumstances, which may inhibit their abilities to participate wholly in this form of instruction. The supposition is that it will not – that it will actually facilitate an easier transition from the high school to college classroom – but this is obviously undeterminable, until the study is complete.

The mission of all involved in this study is to create lessons that are meaningful and, as affirmed throughout this proposal, create environments which encourage critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge. Even with satisfactory lesson construction, teacher participants may adopt, in whole or part, instruction and classroom structure that differ from those suggested by the researcher. More specifically, they may prefer to adhere to their own lesson plans, professional obligations, and beliefs

about classroom learning. This is fine, as it will provide yet another opportunity for the researcher to evaluate how external factors influence PLTL as pedagogy in undergraduate humanities and social sciences classrooms.

<u>Delimitations</u>

The researcher identifies the following delimitations of this dissertation study:

- Data presented in this study was collected from a single university located in East Texas.

- Because of the need to finish this study in a reasonably short period of time, it was conducted over the course of one semester rather than over several. The hope is to conduct a separate longitudinal study, upon completion of this project.

<u>Summary</u>

This chapter details the theories, practices, and procedures that have shaped this study. To begin, it will incorporate multiple qualitative research paradigms, for the purpose of revealing how human subjects interact with, and glean meaning from, a clearly defined academic structure. The study, as a whole, burgeoned from conceptual frameworks in which collaborative learning is theorized to facilitate positive learning outcomes not only in student populations, but also in human populations, in general. Among these positive outcomes is the potential development of more acute critical thinking skills and deeper process content knowledge. Data collected and analyzed will either support or refute these developments, but only insofar as such relates to this study directly. Further research will need to be undertaken in order to determine its efficacy on a larger scale.

STUDY FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this research was to observe whether peer-led team learning sessions as addenda to humanities and social sciences coursework at a midsize Texas university facilitated positive learning outcomes in student participants, with explicit focus on critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge. Though largely a narrative case study, phenomenological and practical action research paradigms were referenced during this process. The justification for employing these methodologies was to generate, as comprehensively as possible, student and faculty-centric narratives detailing how peer-led team learning as a supplement to traditional classroom instruction influenced student academic and social experiences; moreover, and more significantly, such were meant to elucidate whether the abovementioned learning outcomes were achieved, partially achieved, or not achieved. To determine this, students and participating faculty completed questionnaires, participated in structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews, and partook in multiple sessions in which I was a passive observer. At the midterm and end of the Spring 2017 semester, student writing samples, which were both personal and academic in nature, were examined, to ascertain whether the herein referenced learning outcomes were evident, and to gather student impressions of peer-led team learning as a pedagogical approach in this clearly defined setting. This chapter conveys the results generated by these multiple research tools.

Questionnaires: Their Design and Function

To begin the study, I generated three different questionnaires: freshman participant, sophomore participant, and faculty participant forms. The former had 24 questions, the following 25, and the latter 20, and each was meant to establish a baseline detailing group perceptions of peer-led team learning, critical thinking, deeper process content knowledge, and topics related to the university, university classroom, and learning outcomes. Once I received completed questionnaire sets from participant groups, I began parsing and grouping the collected data into subsets, in order to identify specific trends and patterns. For example, all participants were asked, "What do you envision as the primary components of peer-led team learning?" Answers ranged from "I don't know" to "It involves group work" to "It allows students the chance to interact with one another on a level transcending mere socialization…" This created an opportunity for cursory triangulation, which, according to Creswell (2014), is " A method used in qualitative research that involves cross-checking multiple data sources and collection procedures to evaluate the extent to which all evidence converges" (p. 201). Further triangulation was ultimately necessary, as multiple data collecting methods were used for this study.

Since questionnaires produced more data than was effectively usable for a study of this breadth and scope, I randomly selected seven completed forms from each of the larger participant groups: N = 20x3 (60). I then associated responses with respondents, which created more focused groupings: N = 7x3 (21). In making reference again to breadth and scope, I must make clear that subsequent interview narratives will include detailed accountings from two of the seven participants in each of the aforementioned

grouping: N = 2x3 (6). This will hopefully explicate the broader nature of this study, in a way that avoids saturating the reader with redundant or superfluous information.

The six study participants from whom the subsequent narratives were engendered brought to this study unique personal backgrounds and perspectives on the processes and purposes of post-secondary education. In reference to the former, one was American-White, two were American-Black, one American-Hispanic, and two European-White. One identified sexually as LGBT, whereas the others identified as heterosexual. Three identified as Christian, one Jewish, and two as areligious. Each of the four student participants majored in different academic disciplines: two in the humanities and social sciences – English and philosophy – and two outside of it – criminal justice and business administration, respectively. The two faculty participants are at different ends of their careers, with one just beginning hers, and the other nearing the conclusion of his. Table 1 will provide further details on study participants.

Referring to participant perspectives on the forms and functions of post-secondary education, such is imbedded throughout the succeeding narratives. Much of this is focused on the topics related to the research questions presented in this study, but as might be expected within the narrative research paradigm, examination of specific questions in both structured and unstructured interviews can lead to the generation and answering of others.

Participant Data

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Class/Position	Major/Department
David	80	A-W	Male	PhD, Full Professor/Admin.	English Faculty
Natalia	40	E-W	Female	PhD, Associate Professor/Admin.	History Faculty
Deja	25	A-B	Female	Sophomore	Criminal Justice
Cate	20	A-B	Female	Freshman	Philosophy
Zoe	20	A-H	Female	Sophomore	English
Gunter	30	E-W	Male	Freshman	Business Administration

KEY:

The names listed above are fictitious, and all ages have been rounded up or down, to ensure additional privacy. Genders, class/position, and major/department are accurate and have been shared, with written consent from participants.

A-B = American-Black

A-H = American-Hispanic

A-W = American-White

E-W = European-White

Note: I spoke with each participant individually to determine if they were more comfortable with me using specific cultural identifiers, and each indicated the above coding was acceptable.

Participant Interviews

Interviews for this study were conducted and recorded on multiple occasions and in multiple ways. The first of them, held in January 2017, included three semi-structured focus groups, with all groups containing seven participants (N = 21). Session one lasted 72 minutes, session two 54, and session three 63. In each, I asked prepared questions regarding peer-led team learning, critical thinking skill acquisition, and deeper process content knowledge, and then opened the floor for group members to discuss these topics. All participants were given opportunities to speak, and all chose to do so, at various times during the proceedings. Their responses were documented with an electronic recording device as well as a digital video camera; I also handwrote and typed observation notes. All sessions were held on the campus in which this study was conducted.

The second round of interviews, held in February 2017, was conducted as researcher-to-participant, with the questioning method structured. I asked participants a set of prepared questions, many of them identical to those on the questionnaire forms, and requested they answer them honestly and to the best of their ability. My initial aim was to interview all members of the previously referenced participant groups, but with sessions ranging from 45 to 90 minutes in length, this became prohibitively time consuming; as such, I decided to interview approximately half the members of each focus group, which resulted in ten completed sessions.

I conducted three more interview sessions during the course of the Spring 2017 semester. The first came in March, a week before Spring Break, the second in April, toward the close of the semester, and the last the week of final exams in May. As in the

February sessions, those in March and May were conducted as researcher-to-participant; however, instead of a structured line of questioning, I used both semi-structured and unstructured formats. This included asking open-ended questions, in which I became an active participant in what typically resembled a Socratic dialogue, or no questioning at all, in which the participant and I simply discussed peer-led team learning, critical thinking skill acquisition, deeper process content knowledge, and/or her/his coursework. The April sessions returned to a focus group format and were conducted identically to those in January. With the exception of the preceding, which returned to a total of 21 group members, the number of researcher-to-participant interviewees remained ten for the duration of the research period.

Excluding the opening moments of the first interview session in January, participants were eager to share their opinions about, perceptions of, and experiences in the program; on multiple other occasions, they broached topics unrelated to the program, which indicated to me a level of comfort with the proceedings. My hope is that the former and latter yielded more genuine participant responses and, in subsequence, more authentic concluding narratives.

For the initial interviews, I did not provide participants with questionnaire forms, until the sessions began. My goal was to solicit responses that had not been prepared in advance; thereafter, I either supplied questions generated specifically for the session, or asked questions corresponding with the dialogue in progress. Per my experiences, sessions that were semi or unstructured had a more natural feel to them, meaning participants seemed to appreciate equal partnership in the conversation.

Transcription proved to be an arduous and time-consuming process, though it was absolutely necessary for constructing a more comprehensive overview of participant thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and learning outcomes. I recollected much of the above from memory, but as I listened to, re-listened to, and then manually transcribed participant narratives, their content became richer and more meaningful to me. My initial goal was to use a software program for transcription, but I concluded that doing so might limit the scope and impact of the narratives, which may ultimately limit the scope and impact of this study. I am confident that undertaking this onerous task has expanded my understanding of how the pedagogical approaches employed in this program, and the learning outcomes generated as a result of them, have influenced (in the short term) the academic lives of both student and faculty participants.

The final processes undertaken prior to constructing the following narratives included coding and decoding collected data, which, like transcription, required many hours of evaluating, reevaluating, parsing, and then grouping key words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and other relevant information. Performing this task allowed me to identify rhetorical and other pertinent data patterns, which included initial participant perceptions of peer-led team learning, experiences related to participation in PLTL and traditional classroom settings, and critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge outcomes generated as a result of enrollment in the program. From these subsets, I was able to begin extrapolating clearer, more focused meaning from the deconstructed data, which created the opportunity to evaluate whether this study had successfully addressed the research questions posed in chapter one. The narratives presented hereafter will elucidate the results of these myriad qualitative processes.

<u>Origins, Evolution, Recollections, and Conclusions: Restoried Interview, Survey,</u>

<u>Questionnaire, and Written Data from David and Natalia</u>

Though referenced periodically in multiple sections of this study, there has not

been sufficient occasion to reflect on the ideologies and extensive planning that went into

creating this program. The following section, as generated from multiple interview

sessions with David and Natalia, will consist of narrative reflections on the program's

origins and evolution. It contains exact quotes and supporting dialogue extrapolated from

coded interview material, the latter on which I have employed restorying techniques to

create a more coherent, flowing, and chronological discussion. All dialogue has been

member checked and approved for use.

Commencing with faculty narratives might offer a seamless transition into those

of student participants, the latter of which have emerged as a result of the program

philosophies and practices devised and executed by the former. I believe it important for

the reader to develop a cursory understanding of how and why such a program was

imagined as potentially functional at the university in which this study was conducted;

from this understanding, s/he may begin to appreciate how this concept has emerged on

campus as a viable alternative to more traditional pedagogical practices in humanities and

social sciences courses.

<u>Origins</u>

As the program was being developed in 2010 and 2011, participant

administrators, myself included, felt strongly that the moral, ethical, and critical thinking

practices of foundational world civilizations must be rediscovered in order to preserve the

core principles of an increasingly interconnected global community. As David recalled, "We constructed the program to offer students interested in a liberal arts or social sciences education the opportunity to explore the world deeply and critically." To further this point, he reflected, "We also constructed it to facilitate an interdisciplinary, cross curricular, collaborative academic experience, with a principal focus on reviving the essential ideas and values inherent in pioneering civilizations." Natalia supported David's comments, by stating, "The theory was that by encouraging the evaluation, analysis, and cooperative discussion of the works of great thinkers – including political figures, philosophers, poets, playwrights, novelists, essayists, dissidents, etc. – student participants should start to understand how central values and ideals have been applied throughout world history along with how these values and ideals are germane in modernity." The concluding supposition was that students might eventually appreciate that critical thinking and deeper process content knowledge were central to the evolution of core ideals and values in societies across the globe – that each is still vital to this evolution.

David continued the discussion by highlighting the need to explain to student participants the decline of values, morals, and ethics in societies worldwide. To him, "It was our explicit duty to illustrate to them that such woes were not exclusive to America and its citizenry, [and that] solutions to these concerns were often discovered as a result of logical, rational, and critical thought, as well as a deep awareness of their causes." Natalia expanded on this point, when noting, "To us, great literary works often reflect these concerns – the problems intrinsic in all of humanity – and we concluded that many of these works accurately chronicle the individual who is in conflict with the established

order in which he lives." Among the works cited by interviewees as having engaged students well beyond the written text were Sophocles' *Antigone,* Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and an eclectic collection of philosophical treatises, historical documents such as the *Constitution, Bill of Rights,* and *Declaration of Independence*, and modern, post-modern, and contemporary works. David concluded this part of the conversation, by quoting, "In the words of Socrates, one must "Employ his time in improving himself through other men's writings." Collected data and multiple observations throughout the Spring 2017 semester support the fact that the writings of others are unquestionably a focal point of this program.

With this concept in mind, the program text, which David and I completed and published before the first class was held in the Spring semester of 2010, contained, as David shares, "carefully selected works of literature, each of which was intended to encourage productive discussions over the values and traditions of preeminent civilizations, with the Western world initially of primary focus." As was common in these discussions, Natalia supported David's reflections with reflections of her own. In this instance, she recalls, "[The program] was devised to make crystal clear that politicians, public figures, academics, and the general public have endured throughout history the same dilemmas that Americans endure today. I endured them in Croatia [her homeland], and people throughout the world endure them, as well. This has always been and will always be." From their comments, and per my own recollections of its earliest

days, I surmised that a significant aim of the program was to allow participant students

the opportunity to gain awareness, insight, and knowledge through an academic

experience designed to address the questions that have been asked, in one form or

another, from antiquity to the present. To David, "Questions [related to human

experience] are general and overlapping, and any tentative answer to one will hopefully

begin to answer others." Questioning and moving toward answering were pervasive not

only in the PLTL sessions, but also in the traditional classroom environment.

In its infancy, the program consisted of a consortium of classes offered by the

College of Humanities and Social Sciences at the university in which this study was

conducted. David remembers that founding courses, similarly to those offered now, were

"designed to address critically the moral and ethical dilemmas pervasive in all of

humanity." He expanded on this idea, by saying, "…rethinking and reinvigorating the

core principles and values of both antiquity and the early modern world [will help

students] gain a better understanding and appreciation for the foundations of global

intellectualism." From the preceding, Natalia reflects that, "Courses in departments

across the College were designed to do exactly as David mentioned. In the bigger picture,

they were also created to serve other purposes: to promote pedagogy, research and

scholarship, and discussion and dissemination and practice of the core ethical principles

promulgated in the writings we study in the program." This portion of the conversation

led to an interesting exchange, in which both participants retreated to the classroom's

whiteboard and began to map out the core principles of the program. The bullet points

referenced hereafter were produced, as a result. Note that the following contains the

central ideas discussed amongst the group, which I have expanded here to create a more thorough description. All information has been member checked and approved for use:

- Pedagogy – Program courses are designed to incorporate elements into the university curriculum that are designed to build core values and ethics in university students. These elements will utilize the enduring ideas and traditions of the great books as the beginning point. For example, students will study the ideas of Plato, Homer, and Shakespeare - among others - to historicize the ideas of antiquity, and to discover how interpretations of moral and ethical behavior pertain to contemporary society; furthermore, the study of these works is designed to extend beyond the mere presentation and repetition of such interpretations, by incorporating pedagogical strategies, such as peer-led team learning (PLTL), that will encourage profound understanding and assimilation of ideals into the student's core belief systems and behaviors.

- Research & Scholarship – Along with faculty and graduate assistants from multiple disciplines, students enrolled in program courses will be encouraged to perform research and produce scholarship in areas concerning moral, ethical, and personal values. This facet of the program serves to promote interdisciplinary collaborations from across the university community. For example, students majoring in English will have the opportunity to work in partnership with faculty and students from history, philosophy, and other disciplines within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

- Discussion & Dissemination – Discussion and dissemination shall be achieved in two ways: Foremost, students enrolled in program courses will receive high-

quality instruction from tenured or tenure-track faculty. Classes will be lecture-based, though interaction and feedback during class is very much encouraged. Students will be evaluated by completing writing prompts, reading quizzes, major examinations, and a term essay.

- Peer-led Team Learning - In addition to the traditional lecture-based course, students enrolled in program courses will attend peer-led team learning sessions. PLTL sessions will consist of six to eight students and will meet weekly to discuss the modern applications of course subject matter. The PLTL sessions will offer students an active learning experience and create opportunities for participants to assume leadership roles in their courses.

Both David and Natalia confirmed that the outlined principles have changed very little in the eight years the program has been in operation. For instance, Natalia notes that, "We have strayed very little from the great books approach to teaching literature, composition, rhetoric, history, thinking, and etc. It works and always has." David mostly agreed, but qualified one remark: "We know that it works for a good number of our students and can cite evidence of its use throughout history; however, we cannot say with certainty that is the most effective instructional approach for all students." Natalia and David settled on this point, and the first interview session came to a conclusion.

Evolution

The preceding narrative details the principle philosophical and instructional ideologies that govern the program examined for this dissertation. This one shall focus on highlighting how certain aspects of the program have evolved, to facilitate more positive

critical thinking skill acquisition and deep process content knowledge outcomes in student participants. My first question to David and Natalia was, "How do you achieve this?" to which David replied enthusiastically, "Teach and require more writing!" In support of this point, Natalia responded, "While little has changed regarding the program's central aim and supporting pedagogical approaches, we have made minor instructional tweaks over the past few years. Among them was making course offerings more writing intensive." To develop this point further, David shared that, "The original program offerings were stand alone courses, created for the purposes outlined in our initial conversation: to evaluate human values and ideals, get students to think critically about them, correlate human concerns with primary texts, and so forth. Current courses, though still unique in content and approach, have incorporated some of the same requirements found in traditional freshman composition and rhetoric courses. Foremost among these is a more robust writing requirement." Observations, along with data collected throughout this study, corroborate that writing is a major component of this program.

At this point in the conversation, David handed me an unfinished course syllabus, which he was in the process of completing for future course offerings. A significant portion of the course description section spotlighted writing instruction and the outcomes it was designed to yield in program participants. It is summarized, as follows:

[Program Course I] focuses on the study of writing skills in English, emphasizing more complex methods in the writing process than conventional [University Course I] offerings. The course prepares students to write advanced essays and research papers, which reflect the conventions of academic writing.

Students will learn to develop and support arguments effectively, with required and appropriate documentation. [Program Course I] is designed to deepen the students' understanding of how reading, writing, and knowledge acquisition operate concurrently in academic contexts. The emphasis is on critical thinking and problem solving. Through invention (brainstorming, drafting, and revision), students will identify research topics, problems, and concerns of a local and global nature. They will learn to follow and support a coherent line of argument, and they will learn to transition ideas logically and persuasively.

It is from this premise that the conversation evolved further, to strengthen the argument that writing, critical thinking, and deeper process content knowledge are interrelated. According to Natalia, "Learning to write developed, organized, and technically proficient research papers is among the various ways university students demonstrate content synthesis is occurring. It's among our primary evaluative tools." David agreed and added, "Effective oral expression is also necessary, which is why we encourage dialogue in the classroom and focus so heavily on peer-led team learning outside of it."

Of the interview sessions conducted with David and Natalia, this was the briefest; however, each participant offered further perspectives on why they believed requiring additional writing in program courses might result in more positive learning outcomes. Natalia surmised, "Effective, logical, and critical written arguments demonstrate that the student has command of the conventions of English. Not just written English, but of all facets of the language. Whether right or wrong, individuals who possess this skill are generally taken more seriously. A common conception is that effective communicators are more educated than those who defer to colloquialism in place of convention." David

agreed with this and added, "That's a major priority in this program: To teach students to express themselves in a more polished and thoughtful manner. Writing is a powerful way to do this. This does not diminish the importance of oral expression, as in my opinion it is of equal importance. In either instance, though, if one intends to make an argument, make it pointedly and in a way that supports fact and reason; otherwise, it will either fall on deaf ears, or be dismissed by those who are better informed – or who give the appearance of being better informed!" These sentiments punctuated a conversation highlighting the overall function of the program, which is to cultivate in student participants the ability to make connections between course content and the world in which they live. The targeted learning outcome is to produce in students a more sophisticated understanding of how each component influences the ability to think deeply and critically.

<u>Recollections</u>

Discussing and deconstructing the core principles of the program, along with enumerating how they, and subsequent instructional amendments, have shaped it, led seamlessly into the final interview session of the semester, which correlated most directly with the research questions presented for this study: Does peer-led team learning as an addendum to traditional classroom instruction in humanities and social sciences courses facilitates in student participants positive learning outcomes related to critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge? Without hesitation, both replied in the affirmative. David held the floor first and explained, "Since the program began, I have taught many students who came to college with little understanding of the world in which they live. The world to them was the world from which they came, and everything outside of it didn't exist, didn't matter, or was wrong. One example that sticks out to me

to this day was that of Susie Student. She came from a small, deep East Texas town, where people worked twelve or more hours a day on farms, ranches, or in industry professions, watched Fox News when they weren't working, and attended church six days a week. This was the life she knew, and nothing on its periphery mattered." It was clear at this point in the conversation that David valued the opportunity to communicate how this student's experience in the program was meaningful to him.

As the narrative continued, David revealed, "When Susie came to college as a nineteen-year-old, she soon realized that her worldview was severely underdeveloped. Whereas all of her high school classmates were Caucasian, Christian, and red-blooded American, she now had classes with people of different races, religions, and countries of origin; with people who spoke little English or whose hygiene practices were unfamiliar to her; with 40 or 50-year-old first time college students, military veterans, gays and lesbians, and former gang members. She was in shock, which nearly caused her to quit school the week after she arrived on campus. It took some time for her fears and insecurities to abate, but they ultimately did. I'm proud to say that, by her own admission, this is in large part due to our program." Once more it was obvious that David was enjoying this occasion to reflect on one of the program's success stories.

David recollected further, "Whereas several of her courses were held in auditoriums with 100 other students, ours were held in seminar classrooms with twelve or fifteen. She got to know here peers and they her; she got to know us and us her. This gave her a sense of social comfort, which she needed. Which all freshman students need, really. What was still missing, though, was a sense of confidence in her academic abilities." It was at this point Natalia interjected and said, "So many of my students have

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come to me over the years and expressed doubt in their capacity to do college work. [A percentage of these] have been passed through school systems that didn't teach them anything, so they are convinced that they don't know anything. This is ludicrous! They think college work is going to be too difficult for them and that they aren't smart enough to handle it. I've always viewed it as my job to correct them on this." David agreed wholeheartedly and then resumed his narrative.

"Susie started to build confidence in her academic abilities, when we began studying *Antigone*. Like other students, she identified with how the decisions we make as individuals and groups have consequences, some positive and others, as in Antigone's case, profoundly negative. She also enjoyed studying the Greek gods and divine law, which she managed to associate with her God as well as her spiritual, moral, ethical, and core beliefs. The topic is obviously much bigger than these themes, but the point is this particular work helped her realized that expressing her ideas in class was not only acceptable, but also encouraged. Encouraged by her peers, other instructors, and me. What ended up being so special was that the PLTL sessions offered further encouragement, which is what we envisioned as one of their primary functions. Unlike in many of the courses she attended in high school, or in any of the courses for which she'd enrolled during her short time as a university student, she was given the opportunity to discuss academic content, and its meaning to her on a personal level, without fear of being judged – judged by her peers or the individuals responsible for evaluating her coursework. This was extremely important! Important for a lot of students, really, because it gave them the freedom to incorporate their unique worldviews into the topics we handled across the program. The upshot for Susie, as well as many of her peers, was

the manifestation of deeper process, well-rounded understandings of the "new world" she'd discovered, which included the developing ability to approach a wider variety of topics through more focused academic and sociocultural lenses. The examples of this happening are too many to spell out in this conversation, but a few of them include: Catalina Classmate, who was raised in a Mexican border town by parents who recently immigrated to the United States, or Freddy Football, who came from a housing project in south Dallas and whose mother is incarcerated, or Rebecca Rich-Kidd, who grew up in a 5000 square foot house and had never struggled for anything, were no longer inconsequential or intimidating to her; rather, they were people – people from different backgrounds whose unique life experiences were helping her to broaden her worldview. In my estimation this is the definition of critical thinking skill acquisition – the ability to address subjects that may be unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or seemingly inconsequential in a deep, objective, rational, and logical way, unimpeded by excessive emotion. Susie developed the ability to do all of these things, as have many other participant students over the course of the program." David related to me after our session ended that Susie Student graduated from the university, cum laude, and is now a middle school teacher at a district located in one of the Dallas/Fort Worth mid-cities.

When David concluded his narrative, Natalia began hers. She recalled, "As with David, there have been so many students over the years who've entered the program with a particular worldview and left it with a different one, or many different ones. One I recall vividly, though, is Michael Military. Michael was an early-thirties-aged veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, who'd only been discharged from the Army for a short time – maybe a year or so. He had tattoos all over his body, rode a motorcycle, and

smoked like an old car. Not exactly what we'd imagined as a typical program student. Anyhow, he'd actually come to the program by accident. His advisor misregistered him, and by the time he came to us, all of the traditional sections [of freshman philosophy] were full. So, it was either drop the course and try again next semester, or stay in it and see what happens. He chose to stay, which initially made all of our lives a bit difficult!" With a cheeky smile, David nodded in agreement.

Natalia continued, "The first few weeks with Michael were challenging for me as a professor and for other student participants. He made known on multiple occasions that he felt out of place in the classroom, the primary reasons being his and age veteran status. I could see why each might influence his purview of his circumstances, but there were occasions where his obvious disdain for them became a bit much. He was definitely the oldest student in the class, and his "peers", as he used to air quote, were not his contemporaries. This, accompanied by the fact that his classmates had neither served their country, nor intended to do so in the capacity he had, seemed to anger him. He believed, in an ocular way, that both afforded him the right to interact with people differently – aggressively, indignantly, and arrogantly. This was unacceptable. On numerous occasions, I had to pull him aside to address these behaviors, which made me feel uncomfortable, for multiple reasons. Foremost, his physical presence was intimidating, so I wasn't terribly comfortable being alone with him, especially when the conversation had the potential to be an unpleasant one; but more than this, I never felt it a part of my job description to tell someone who to be or how to act. I believe in individuality, freedom of expression, and passion – characteristics our program strongly encourages. Attempting to shape someone's persona to conform to certain arbitrary

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standards violates all of these. With this noted, acts of incivility require immediate and decisive intervention, and there were several occasions where Michael became uncivil, and I had to intervene." The discomfort in Natalia's comportment was palpable, at this point, but soon changed, as she reflected on how Michael eventually became a valuable member of the program community.

After the first few weeks of classes, the PLTL sessions began. Natalia remembered, "The PLTL sessions were a turning point for Michael and for the manner in which he interacted with his classmates. In the initial session, Michael brought with him the same dispositions referenced earlier in this conversation; however, for the first time in the semester, several of his "peers" built up enough courage to ask him why he felt the need to interact with them the way he did. As might be expected, this initially made him more indignant; after being pressed on the matter, though, he began to answer their questions, and his tone, as well as theirs, began to change."

Natalia continued, "Michael revealed to his classmates that he did feel uncomfortable with the significant gap in age between him and them. The primary reason for this, he explained, was he didn't feel they could equivocate their life experiences with his. His primary line of reasoning was they hadn't lived in the real world long enough to do so. Chris, a student from Nigeria, asked Michael to explain what he meant by life experiences and the real world, so he did. His explanation referenced basic adult responsibilities like finding employment and paying bills, to more involved ones such as military service and raising a family. In reply, Chris asked if Michael knew what it was like to live in a third-world country, immigrate to a foreign country, and then live as an impoverished minority in his new homeland. Of course, Michael knew nothing of this life

and was forced to acknowledge such. Thereafter, Jessica asked Michael if he knew what it was like to be raped as a pre-teenager and to deal with the physical and emotional turmoil such had inflicted. Michael conceded that he didn't know what this was like, either, but reminded Jessica that his military service had exposed him to many instances of physical and emotional trauma." Jessica acquiesced to his point, and the conversation moved forward.

Before the session concluded, "Michael and his classmates started down a path toward a shared consciousness – a breakthrough moment! The burgeoning realization was that purposeful dialogue can help to elucidate shared emotions – happiness, sadness, joy, suffering, and so forth – whether these emotions stemmed from similar experiences, or very different ones. Michael began to realize this – that while the volume of his experiences was likely greater, certain aspects of many of them, regardless of their nature, were not entirely different from those experienced by his much younger peers. PLTL was working; it was a miracle!" The group had a good laugh at the sheer enthusiasm of her last comment, and then Natalia proceeded to finish her narrative.

After his first semester, "Michael took every other program course we'd allow him to take," Natalia chuckled. She continued, "He became really interested in Machiavelli and Thoreau because he was interested in understanding how men and women throughout history had employed certain behaviors and principles to achieve social, political, and religious objectives. In reference to the former, he particularly identified with chapters twelve through fourteen of *The Prince*, which discussed the forms and functions of state military forces; to the latter, he agreed strongly with a primary supposition in *Civil Disobedience*, which stated that governments are incapable

of managing the lives of their citizens and are thus unjust. Justice became an important theme to him, and he enjoyed discussing it, in all its forms, during both classroom and PLTL sessions. He enjoyed being in the program, in general, because he began to understand that age and experience do not have to interfere with productive dialogue. As we discussed in our first interview, a primary purpose of this program is to link content with experiences, and from this linkage to facilitate collaborative dialogues, in which individual experiences become shared ones. The function of this is to open one's mind to the minds of those with differing backgrounds, experiences, and worldviews. Like with Susie, Michael allowed himself to take this leap of faith, and as a result, he left the university better able to appreciate the diversity of the world in which we live. Similarly to David's previous comments, I feel this is the definition of critical thinking – making intellectual allowances, in order to foster a holistic understanding of the people, places, things, and ideas with which we interact every day. It truly is a beautiful thing!" Both Natalia and David thanked me for the opportunity to recall a couple of the many occasions that have made their involvement in the program worthwhile. It was now time to conclude the conversation, by identifying whether or not the student experiences they shared, and others similar to them, engendered in student participants the ability to think more deeply and critically about the subjects examined throughout this program.

Conclusions

To begin the concluding portion of the final interview, I retreated to the classroom's whiteboard and wrote on it the research questions asked in chapter one of this study. From them, David and Natalia shared with me their perceptions related to them. Natalia held the floor first and began, "I have observed in a large percentage of

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student participants for several years now how PLTL sessions improve short-term classroom performance. This is evident in several of the areas we evaluate as professors: writing, reading comprehension, and participation. With writing, I don't always see drastic improvement in style, mechanics, or grammar, but I do usually see an improvement in thought process, meaning that once perfunctory or incomplete analysis of subject matter has evolved to reflect an emerging scholasticism. This suggests evidence of comprehension, which also suggests that critical thinking skill acquisition and a move toward deeper process content knowledge is occurring. Further illustration of this is how students articulate their thoughts in classroom and PLTL discussions. Whereas many begin the program offering simplistic answers to complicated questions, well-considered ones tend to emerge in their place. Not in all cases or in all students, but the trend is indeed a positive one. Again, this suggests the presence – or budding presence – of more sophisticated critical thinking abilities and richer content synthesis. I attribute this, in part, to what I refer to as the enjoyment factor. Student participants generally take pleasure in attending program courses because they know they can discuss content freely and in a manner aligned with their own personal ideologies and experiences. This makes the subject matter real to them, which, per my many years as a student and instructor, is not always so, in more traditional courses. This makes them more receptive to whatever it is we're studying, regardless of how tedious it may be. An example to which I always refer is when we study Freud or Kant. Both write in dense, complicated prose, and the subject matter is not always interesting to all students; however, it never fails that the vast majority of them identify in the literature at least one concept or theory that applies to their own lives. Again, this makes the content real to them, which, in turn, makes it more

meaningful. The final result is that they learn to approach their studies, as well as many aspects of their lives, in ways suggesting that critical thinking processes and access of rooted content knowledge is occurring." Natalia concluded by emphasizing that she believes the program encourages and facilitates each of these important intellectual outcomes, in a significant number of program participants.

David had only one minor disagreement with Natalia's narrative, which was, "I have noticed in many of my students short and long-term improvements in writing style, mechanics, and proper grammatical usage. The possible reason for these improvements is that while English and philosophy courses require a similar number of writing assignments, more time is devoted in the English courses to correcting them. I can't say exactly why these exercises do not translate into better writing practices in other courses, but an obvious goal of the English Department, and of this program, is to ensure this takes place. The only other reason I can glean as to why this may not occur is grading criteria. If content is more important than style, content-heavy works will receive higher marks than those in which style is emphasized. The same is obviously true in reverse. If style and content are given equal weight, both seem to improve. This has been my experience in teaching English for over 40-years." David also joked that English professors have the reputation for evaluating student writings particularly harshly, so he believes this could be a factor, as well.

To conclude, David refocused his attention on my research questions, and, like Natalia, provided answers indicating that program content and peer-led team learning implemented together yield positive critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge outcomes in student participants. He believed, "improvement in short-

term classroom performance usually corresponded with the first PLTL session. This has been the case for as long as the program has been in operation. It, and all sessions, thereafter, has a tendency to achieve one of the program's intended aims, which is to examine a wide variety of academic subject matter, and to catalyze a more acute critical thinking and content awareness. The structured course, as you put it, is designed for initial content delivery and formal discussion, and the semi-structured PLTL session centers on informal discussion, and is designed to encourage further content exploration, extrapolation, and synthesis. The evaluative devices we use to determine, at least superficially, whether this is happening are writing samples, including out-of-class essays and essay exams, as well as reading quizzes; the primary evaluative device for us, though, is conversation. I get a more comprehensive idea of what a student really knows when I have the opportunity to see and hear her or him discuss it - to profess it to me, as I would to them in the formal classroom. Not all students are good writers or test takers, and we have to consider this. We also understand we must use these evaluative measures to determine whether certain learning objectives are being met; however, as I just implied, the eyes and mouth and hands convey a knowledge that an essay or exam cannot, and it is for this reason that classroom and peer-led instruction have become the backbone of this program."

Emerging Themes – The Professors

The following information was generated from various data streams, which include interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and written communications. I have restoried them here, to create a sense of linearity for my reader. All information has been reviewed, carefully member checked, and approved for use in this dissertation project.

- Innovation Matters: The program observed for this study was developed because of the perceived need to explore alternative methods of instruction in humanities and social sciences coursework at the university in which this study was conducted. The primary curricular innovation implemented at the beginning of the program, and which has persisted throughout its existence, was peer-led team learning. According to data collected from David, "This program would not have evolved the way it has, if we had not implemented the PLTL program. It is what initially draws student participants into the program, but it's also what encourages them to enroll in future courses. It gives them a voice in the proceedings, which many have never had before. It makes them feel like adults – intelligent adults whose thoughts, opinions, and personal histories matter. It builds a sense of community and encourages lines of thinking that traditional lecture courses simply can't."

Additional data collected from Natalia corroborates David's sentiments. As she related, "The peer-led team learning addendum has been a fantastic instructional tool for this program. I've seen students who were completely disinterested in the subject matter coming into the program fall in love with it, for the simple reason that they were given the opportunity to explore content differently. Despite competition amongst students, I've actually noticed that they would rather work collaboratively to find solutions to common problems, share their lived experiences, and feel as if they are at least a small part of something bigger. Peer-led team learning achieves this, on a small scale. Where this is

magnified is when students go out into the real world and are able to transition these experiences into their daily lives."

- Teachers Matter: While this theme is more student-centric in nature, I was interested to know how professors viewed the idea of tenured or tenure-track faculty teaching lower-division coursework. According to Natalia, "It is important that junior and senior faculty teach freshman and sophomore-level courses. In philosophy, we are losing more and more majors to the trade side of the university (business and criminal justice) so offering courses that are intellectually enriching to potential majors is actually a recruiting tool for us. I've heard stories of students changing majors because of poor experiences with adjunct faculty or graduate teaching assistants. That's not to say the same can't happen with a full-time faculty member, but in general, we are better trained in the subject matter and have more experience teaching it. In my opinion this is usually – *usually* – evident in the classroom."

David's summation was similar to Natalia's, as he concluded, "For those who are on the fence about whether or not to become majors, instructors can make all the difference in the world. It's important to note, though, that many students enrolled in freshman English courses are in them to meet one of the university's core degree requirements. We know and embrace this; however, there are occasions where undeclared students who have CLEPped out of this requirement [taken a College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Test] take these courses because they are considering becoming majors. To demonstrate that our program is a good fit for them, we must deliver course content in a way that speaks to them

in a positive way. If we don't, we lose them to other programs, and our department loses majors. So yes, who teaches lower-division courses absolutely matters!"

- Information Matters: As will be discussed in the student section of this chapter, the manner in which program information is presented to potential students in the university's course enrollment system is of utmost importance. David noted, "An incomplete or overly-complicated blurb [in the university's enrollment system] can steer students away from the program. When the program started, we listed in the English course description, for example, that we offered freshmen students the opportunity to study Shakespeare. Well, most freshmen students are terrified of Shakespeare, so while we thought that offering these opportunities was a good thing, many incoming students didn't; as such, program enrollment wasn't growing as we'd hoped. When we started focusing on the peer-led aspect of the program, enrollment improved dramatically. We still lose a few students each semester after the first or second class day because our syllabi articulate that we'll be working with, and through, some pretty difficult subject matter. But, getting students in the door and then having the opportunity to explain to them the various aspects of the program has helped us to build a healthy cohort."

Natalia concluded by saying, "The information provided in the enrollment system has made all the difference in program recruitment. A lot of times students will read the provided information and then reach out to a faculty member for additional information. This is good because it gives us the chance to give them a clearer idea of what they can expect as a program participant. As David said, the

volume of work and difficulty of course content deters some students, but this might be good, as well. We want student participants who will benefit from, and enjoy, a program such as this one. Students dropping courses at the beginning of the semester affects how we organize PLTL session groups, so the fewer the changes the better for us."

- <u>Content Matters</u>: The program discussed herein is heavily content based, which is one of the primary factors differentiating it from standard freshman course offerings. Natalia reflected, "A chief concern of the program was to introduce more rigorous content to courses that were sometimes light on content. By light on content I mean they were focused specifically on writing rather than on writing and primary source reading and instruction. Even now [in 2017] the typical freshman offering in my department [philosophy], while sufficient for foundational instruction, is structured as what one might consider a survey course. Technically speaking, program courses still fall under the survey umbrella, but students examine content more deeply, write about it academically rather than in summary form, and seem, by and large, more capable of approaching advanced content more critically and deeply, in subsequent coursework. None of this seems possible, without focusing on more sophisticated subject matter and instructional methodologies."

David concluded, as well, that, "Without advanced content, there is no program. Yes, we could've experimented with PLTL in standard course offerings, to determine its usefulness, but that wasn't our point. We wanted to find out how PLTL helped students to process and synthesize more

difficult content. We also wanted to find out if synthesis produced a deeper awareness of how content is relevant to the individual, beyond the classroom or university. A standard curriculum course in English is still not entirely content based; it's skills based, meaning its primary purpose is to help students become competent academic writers. Our program is structured likewise to help its participants achieve this goal; however, it seeks to achieve this goal via the examination of more rigorous content and writing instruction rather than just handbook-related composition and rhetoric."

- <u>Structure Matters</u>: According to David, "The structure of this program is what has made it successful. It is not necessarily new in the academy, but it is in the liberal arts. We weren't sure, when devising the program, if utilizing this type of structure would produce the student learning outcomes we'd envisioned because unlike in the STEM fields, the subject matter we discuss has a tendency to incite emotional responses; thus, it was unclear whether or not allowing students to discuss this content, without instructor supervision, was a smart idea. We decided to run with it, though, and have been quite pleased with the learning outcomes it has produced. Students actually have a tendency to flourish in this environment, as they do not feel the sense of restriction sometime present in the traditional classroom. They exchange ideas, agree with one another, disagree with one another, often times vehemently, but leave each PLTL or classroom session with a better understanding of the subject matter; more importantly, they leave each with a better understanding of how the content relates to them on a personal level. A traditional classroom structure can produce some of these results, but it's the

combination of this structure and the PLTL addendum that really seems to

solidify these learning outcomes."

Natalia agreed and stated, "The PLTL component is what has made this

program so appealing to a sizeable population of undergraduate student, over the

past eight years. Without it, there is no program! Students are typically drawn to

its collaborative nature, but they reenroll in because of how this helps them

to become better learners. They are given the opportunity, every week, to debrief

with their peers about the contents of their courses. What other programs offer

this opportunity? Some students create study groups and debrief that way, but

our program has that built into its structure. I hadn't thought about it this   way

before, but what we're doing is essentially creating study groups for people who

may or may not otherwise do so. It's a requirement here, but the students love it.

They love that their study groups are held during class time, which means they

don't have to arrange them on their own. What's interesting is that many still do!"

- Outcomes Matter: Both professors agreed, once more, that the student learning
  outcome is the most important part of this program. Natalia explained, "If the
  student doesn't learn something while in the program, why stick with it? Many
  stick with it because they learn something, but I think more than this, they stick
  with it because they learn in ways that exceed the intellectual expectations they
  have for themselves. They become better able to address topics that at one time
  seemed unapproachable and then do so much more deeply and critically. This
  does not mean they understand things completely – as no one does – or wish to
  study them beyond the current course; however, it helps them realize they have

the potential to examine content, of all kinds, in a scholastic manner. This creates confidence, which carries over into the subjects they wish to understand more completely and beyond whatever course they're taking at the time."

David added to this point when he explained, "Grades are important, too. They're not important to me as a professor, but good grades on a transcript make students feel good about themselves and give them the assurance they need to push forward with their studies. They create a sense of expectation; good students do everything they can, thereafter, to live up to, or exceed, those expectations. I've seen our program inspire this confidence in many of our participants, to the point that I consider it one of the outcomes I expect to see with new, and future, enrollees."

A Clearly Defined Beginning, Middle, and End: Restoried Interview, Survey, Questionnaire, and Written Data from Cate, Deja, Zoe, and Gunter

Spending hours at a time interviewing program faculty and administrators for this study was not only enjoyable, but also produced considerable narrative data regarding the time, effort, and dedication required to establish and then cultivate this unique cohort of courses. Embedded in this data were clear and fervent expressions revealing that its primary aim is to employ curricular and instructional innovations that create student-centric learning environments. The results of this have generally been positive, which is reflected, on a small scale, in the preceding narrative. The purpose now is to expand this narrative to include those of program participants – to extract from them if, and how, the program has impacted their classroom performance, influenced their receptiveness of

subject matter, and shaped their dispositions toward alternative pedagogical strategies such as peer-led team learning. From their narratives, along with evaluative devices such as personal and academic writing and classroom and PLTL session observations, my objective is to demonstrate that improvements in student critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge are evident.

In the Beginning

For the concluding discussion of the results generated by the questionnaire, interview, observation, and artifact data collected for this study, I will focus on the narratives of four program participants: two women and two men; two sophomores and the other two freshman. Each case was chosen randomly from a larger pool of cases, and as with the preceding narrative section, all data was collected, coded, decoded, triangulated, and member checked for authenticity, before use in this study; additionally, the resulting narratives were generated using the technique of restorying, with the purpose of creating content linearity and a more coherent accounting of the narratives, as a whole.

The function of questionnaires and the initial interviews was to acquire a baseline understanding of how students defined critical thinking and critical thinking skill acquisition, deeper process content knowledge, and of how they perceived the forms and functions of peer-led team learning. Among the questions I asked were:

- What is your understanding of critical thinking as a life skill?
- What is your understanding of deeper process content knowledge?
- What do you envision as the primary component(s) of peer-led team learning?

- How might peer-led team learning improve or hinder critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge?

The answers varied significantly from student to student, but certain patterns did emerge; for example, many students believed that critical thinking was necessary for making informed and intelligent decisions; some agreed that understanding and being capable of accessing and applying content is important, especially in the university setting; and most espoused that peer-led, collaborative learning might be of benefit to them and their peers. The manner in which these answers were articulated also varied from student to student, which is why the proceeding will 1) introduce each student participant as an individual case, and 2) meld the cases together to create a unified narrative. The final aim is to form a linear dialogue highlighting the similarities and differences in student perceptions of the program prior to enrollment.

Deja

The first case I selected for discussion is that of Deja. Deja is female, 25-years-old, American Black, a sophomore, and is studying Forensic Science in the Department of Criminal Justice at the university in which this study was conducted. She is a veteran of the program, having completed coursework in the Fall semester of 2016, and enrolled in three of the program courses for the Spring semester of 2017: English, History, and Philosophy. According to her, "Having the opportunity to continue in the program has been really good for me. I learned a lot in the three courses I took last semester and am excited to take others." In referring back to the previous semester, I asked Deja to provide more information about her perceptions of the program, prior to enrolling in it. I asked,

"After meeting with your advisor and reviewing the catalog of courses before enrolling in the Fall semester, what about this cohort of courses appealed to you?" She replied, "I really liked the idea of getting to work in groups. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, from the blurb in the course registration program, but I did a lot of group work in high school and always found it beneficial." At this point, I asked her to explain some of the opportunities for collaboration she had experienced in high school, and she indicated there had been many, recalling further that this was especially true in her science courses. As she explained, "We were always working in groups in biology my junior year and chemistry my senior year. We did experiments together, studied textbook chapters together, and collaborated on projects together. I don't recall much lecture in either of those courses, and when we did have them, they were to introduce a new chapter in the textbook. Not much more." I asked her if this bothered her, and she indicated that it both did and did not. She said, "Yes because I enjoy learning from people who know the subject matter better than I do – usually the teachers (she said with a smile) – and no because I like working with my classmates. There are some days that a lecture just isn't beneficial." The conclusion from the initial data collected in Deja's interview was that the group work element of the program examined for this study influenced her decision to enroll in program courses. What had yet to be determined, though, was whether the coursework itself played a similar role, or if it encouraged her in any way to register for the second semester.

Cate

The second case is that of Cate, who is 20-years-old, female, American Black, a freshman, and a philosophy major. This was her first semester in the program, and she

had enrolled in three of the cohort courses – English, History, and Philosophy – per the recommendation of her academic advisor. As with Deja, Cate indicated that the peer-led team learning element of the program appealed to her; however, what appealed to her perhaps more than this was the opportunity to study with tenure and tenure track faculty. As she relates, "My first semester at the university was an enjoyable one, and I feel I learned a lot. But, I learned the most in courses where I had actual professors." Cate and I shared a laugh at her choice of wording, and then she continued, "My philosophy professor, who taught the introductory critical thinking course, made me realize how important critical thinking is to getting the most out of this [academic] experience. When my advisor told me that it was a focus of this program, I decided to enroll." Her commentary provided a natural segue into my next question, which was, "What is your understanding of critical thinking as a life skill?" Her reply was interesting because, by her own admission, it was generated from recalling coursework studied in the previous semester. She explained, "To me, critical thinking is the ability to address situations, of all types, logically, rationally, and from a position of lived experiences." I asked her to explain what she meant by lived experiences, and she replied, "Experiences that allow you to approach a situation using prior knowledge to find a reasonable solution to the problem." I asked further, "What if that knowledge doesn't exist?" and she exclaimed, "That's when you listen and learn from someone more experienced than you!" In summary, Cate's burgeoning understanding of critical thinking skill acquisition and reference to content knowledge is what encouraged her to seek a university program that focused particularly on these life skills.

Zoe

Like Deja, Zoe was a second semester sophomore student; however, unlike Deja, Zoe had never been enrolled in the program. This fact prompted me to ask her why she had decided to enroll this semester. Her response, somewhat similarly to Cate's, was, "My academic advisor indicated it was a good program and that the courses offered for this semester in English, History, and Philosophy would satisfy several core requirements for my degree plan." She proceeded to say, "I also really appreciate the opportunity to attend classes with professors rather than TAs. I feel like I am more challenged by them." Deja, Cate, and Zoe all seemed to agree that courses taught by full-time faculty created more meaningful academic opportunities for them, and such influenced their decisions to participate in the program.

In the subsequent portion of the conversation, Zoe informed me that she was taking an English course for the second time. Curiously, I asked her to explain why this was. She noted, "The regular freshman course was not literature based. The program course is. As an English major, I want to study literature! The first course was good because it taught me a lot about the writing processes I'll need to know for college-level writing; however, and as my advisor made clear, the combination of the two have a tendency to strengthen both." This was interesting to me because, as David and Natalia mentioned in their narratives, a primary function of the program was to employ a great books approach to not only teaching literature, but also to composition and rhetoric. Zoe already had a grasp on this concept, despite the fact that she had just enrolled in the program.

Her understanding of the great books approach to instruction in the humanities and social sciences led me into my next line of questioning, which addressed deeper

process content knowledge. To start, I asked her if she understood what I meant by this phrase. She explained, "I'm not sure exactly what it means, but I think it has to do with learning content so that it can be recalled and used in future studies." Thereafter, I asked her how she envisioned this being achieved. To her, "…this is achieved by studying and making an effort to really understand the material." The final portion of the conversation was spent discussing peer-led team learning and its functions in cultivating both critical thinking and deeper process content learning outcomes.

Gunter

The final case is that of Gunter, a 30-year-old, European White male who was born and raised in Germany. Like the previous three cases, Gunter was enrolled in three of the cohort courses for the Spring semester of 2017: English, History, and Philosophy. During his senior year of high school, he participated in a foreign exchange program in south Texas. Since that time, he graduated from high school in Germany, moved back to the United States, and began work as an auto mechanic servicing German vehicles. For the Fall semester of 2016, Gunter commenced his studies in the College of Business Administration at the university in which this study was conducted. His goal, upon graduation, is to open and operate his own German vehicles service center.

Gunter's perspectives on the program were unique because of his academic background in Germany. As he relates, "Your program is very similar to the one I completed in high school. All academic subjects used primary sources for instruction, and collaboration was very important." Wishing to understand further his perspectives on the use of primary sources in academics, I asked him to explain further his experiences with

them. He elaborated, "Primary sources offer firsthand accounts of events and experiences, whereas secondary sources do the exact opposite. They provide after-the-fact or interpreted material, which is often unreliable." To support the latter portion of his comment, he recalled, "One thing I experienced during my semester as an American high school student was that textbooks were used, in many instances, as replacements for primary sources. This was new to me and a bit of a shock. In Germany, if we were studying the Enlightenment, we read Descartes, Locke, and Bacon directly, maybe using secondary sources for comparison and contrast purposes. In the States, we read nothing but secondary sources. I found this frustrating and, if I'm honest, futile; however, many of my peers seemed content with it because it was easier for them." His last comment resulted in an interesting exchange, which gave me an insight into some of the differences he perceived between a European and American secondary education. "Among them," he related, "is expectations in this country seem to be pretty low. For example, I read *Hamlet* in junior high school, in both German and English, and when I reread it as a senior student in America, it was heavily annotated. Even then, my classmates were complaining about how difficult it was to read. This confused and angered me. I just couldn't wrap my head around their complaints." This portion of the conversation eventually led back to our original talking point, which addressed the reason he registered for program courses. As he reflects, "I registered for courses in this cohort because I agree with their content approaches. They're what I am accustomed to, and I feel like I will have a good opportunity to learn the material in a more constructive way." As with some of the other referenced cases, the descriptions provided in the university's

registration program did a sufficient enough job of prompting student interest in the program.

Connecting the Dots

To summarize, Deja was a program veteran who was returning for a second semester because she felt that her previous participation yielded constructive learning outcomes. She really enjoyed the peer-led team learning addendum and was looking forward to continuing her participation in PLTL sessions; moreover, she was enthusiastic about the opportunity to potentially become a peer leader for the Fall semester of 2017. In speaking with her briefly about course content, she revealed that it initially did not interest her because she thought it was going to be boring or difficult; her conclusion, though, was that it was neither, and the manner in which the program was structured facilitated an enjoyment of course content she had not anticipated.

Another aspect of our interview that revealed the potential utility of the program, especially of the peer-led team learning addendum, was that it prompted Deja to organize informal PLTL sessions in some of the courses in which she was enrolled outside of the program, during the Fall semester of 2016. For example, she referenced numerous occasions where she, and a group of peers who attended multiple classes together, organized sessions designed to address content discussed in criminal justice courses. Doing this helped to facilitate in participants a deeper synthesis of course content, which, in turn, created more positive learning outcomes, at the conclusion of the semester. Deja was interested in continuing to organize these sessions, for the Spring semester of 2017.

Cate, who was new to the program, was directed toward it by her academic advisor. As with Deja, Cate appreciated the idea of participating in peer-led team learning sessions, as a supplement to traditional classroom instruction. She likewise valued the opportunity to attend courses taught by tenure and tenure-track faculty, as her experiences with pool faculty and graduate teaching assistants had not been as academically fulfilling.

As a philosophy major, Cate had already completed an introductory philosophy course focused on critical thinking; thus, when queried about how she would define it as a life skill, she already had a general answer in mind. As with other cases examined for this study, Cate supposed this skill vital for rendering informed and intelligent decisions associated with one's interactions with the world in which s/he lives; with this noted, she also acknowledged her perceptions of this skill would evolve to reflect a more sophisticated understanding, over the course of her degree (and beyond), indicating further that this had already occurred several times during her short tenure at the university.

The final issue Cate and I addressed together in the initial interview was her notions of lived experiences – how she defined and applied them to her life and when interacting with others. In accompaniment, we spoke of the knowledge base generated by these experiences, would likely change, as well. She concluded that integrating one's perspectives with the perspectives of others was the most suitable method for facilitating positive interpersonal connections as well as generating solutions to both small and large-scale human crises.

Zoe was the other sophomore case examined for the narrative portion of this study; however, dissimilarly to Deja, she was a new member of the cohort, with the Spring semester of 2017 her first in the program. Zoe knew some details about it, based on information provided by a peer who had participated for multiple semesters. She had also heard other peers speak about it on campus. Ultimately, though, it was her academic advisor who encouraged her to enroll in program courses, just as had been so with Cate and Gunter.

As with other participants interviewed for this study, Zoe felt strongly that having the opportunity to attend courses taught by assistant, associate, and/or full professors was among the elements of the program that made it appealing. She concluded that this might increase the likelihood of higher quality academic instruction, which might encourage more positive learning outcomes for student participants.

Zoe's decision to participate in the program was unique because she had already successfully completed a section of freshman English; that course – a standard, university core requirement offering – did not utilize the peer-led team learning addendum and great books approach to teaching literature and composition and rhetoric. Wishing to participate in PLTL sessions, and seeking to learn from the above referenced pedagogical methods, Zoe chose to enroll in the program. In her estimation doing so would allow her to become potentially a more effective student of literature and writing, which she concluded as important for an English major.

Finally, Gunter came to the program for reasons similar to those referenced in the previous cases but from much different academic, social, and professional backgrounds.

Born and raised in Germany, he was accustomed to the great books approach to teaching and learning subjects, across multiple disciplines, and was encouraged by the fact that a program employing this instructional paradigm existed at the university. He was also sufficiently acquainted with peer-led team learning and appreciated its functions in the program. As with the previous interviewees, he was eager to begin the PLTL sessions.

While Gunter's academic experiences in Germany largely shaped his perceptions of content-based, primary source instruction, these perceptions were cultivated further, during his time as a foreign exchange student in south Texas. To him, American students were not being given sufficient enough opportunity to review primary sources; that is, there was too much reliance on textbooks and other interpreted source material, which perhaps limited the breadth and scope of topics requiring deeper process inquiry. What surprised him, though, was that despite abridged content being assumed as simpler to read and evaluate, a population of student still found it tedious and, to his surprise, too difficult. This concerned him, but he was also encouraged that a university program existed to amend these perceived deficits.

To conclude, Gunter believed that participating in this type of program would benefit him in multiple ways. First, and as referenced in the foregoing, he was familiar with this curricular and instructional approach and believed in its potential efficacy; next, he surmised that these methodologies would help him to become a more polished student in other academic disciplines; and finally, he subscribed to the notion that peer-led team learning was an effective way to not only promote critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge, but also the interpersonal skills necessary to interact with a wide variety of individuals effectively, intelligently, empathetically, and with a

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common good in mind. As an aspiring business owner, these characteristics might be germane to how he is perceived by current and potential customers.

<u>Emerging Themes</u>

The following information was generated from various data streams, which include interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and written communications. I have restoried them here, to create a sense of linearity for my reader. All information has been reviewed, carefully member checked, and approved for use in this dissertation project.

- <u>Teachers Matter</u>: Who teaches program courses is important. Almost all cases, including those not presented in this dissertation, reveal that students prefer tenure and tenure-track faculty to pool faculty and graduate teaching assistants.

    <u>Deja</u>: "Whether in this program or elsewhere on campus, I will always register for courses taught by actual professors. I've gotten spoiled!"

    <u>Cate</u>: "The instructor does matter, and the ones I had in these courses were great. I'm not sure teaching quality is related to title or not, but it kinda seems to be. For me, it's the quality of what's done in the classroom, and the quality of instruction in these courses has been really good."

    <u>Zoe</u>: "Teachers certainly matter! I've never had such good teachers in my life. It's because of them I want to keep taking these courses."

    <u>Gunter</u>: "To be honest, I'd never heard of an adjunct faculty member, before coming to this university. I have nothing against them

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personally, but I don't want them teaching me. I refuse to take a class from a T.A. It's a waste of my time and money."

- Information Matters: The manner in which the program was described in the university's registration system captured student attention and stimulated curiosity. This curiosity led to inquiry with university advisors, each of whom understood the program's philosophies and practices.

> Deja: "I think a lot of incoming freshmen students might pass this program up if our advisors didn't know about it. They led me to it. A lot of my classmates are the same."

> Cate: No response.

> Zoe: "The registration program gave really good information. It gave me enough information to ask my advisor questions. When she gave me more information, I decided to enroll in the program."

> Gunter: "My advisor introduced me to the program, but it was a meeting with the program's director that got me really interested in it. The advising center is pretty useless in a lot of ways. I think program administrators should advise students for the program."

- Content Matters: While it is still somewhat unclear how content affects overall perception of the program, several cases, including some not presented in this dissertation, reveal that course content influenced student decisions to enroll.

Deja: "I'm not sure about perception, but I'm more interested in the content of these courses because of the way they are taught."

Cate: "My perception of the program hasn't changed to this point in the semester. I was interested in the subject matter beforehand."

Zoe: "I immediately liked that we were going to study topics that were more difficult than in other freshman courses. I think this will help me study other difficult subjects later in my degree."

Gunter: "Content is everything! Why would I want to study in a course that didn't have high expectations? It's expensive to go to college, and I want to get the most for my hard-earned money."

- Structure Matters: Almost all cases, including some not presented in this dissertation, reveal that students enrolling in the program were generally seeking classroom structures that differed from those perceived as typical at a university; moreover, almost all cases reveal that the peer-led team learning addendum to the program generated interest – that collaborative learning was enjoyable, useful, and a welcome departure from wholly lecture-based instruction.

    Deja: "I got used to group learning in some of my high school classes. I liked this type of classroom, where we would work together during class. That was a big appeal of this program. I don't always do well in normal classes."

Cate: "I like all types of classes. The peer-led team learning part seemed cool to me though, because it was so different than my other [university] classes."

Zoe: "I wouldn't have taken these courses if they weren't structured the way they are or if the PLTL wasn't a part of it. What I mean is that I probably wouldn't have registered for them to begin with. I'd register for them again now, but that's only because I know what they're like, and I really love them!"

Gunter: "I care more about rigor than structure. I do like this structure though, and the PLTL sessions are amazing. My favorite part of the program, even though I really enjoy the classes too."

- Outcomes Matter: Almost all cases, including some not presented in this dissertation, reveal that students seeking instruction in alternative curricular and instructional settings have the expectation that positive learning outcomes will occur. For this program, the focus was on critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge.

Deja: "I know I'm becoming a better student. It's only halfway [through the semester] but I feel really good about what I'm learning."

Cate: "I hope to make straight A's."

Zoe: "When I think of outcomes I usually think of grades. For some

strange reason I'm not worried about my grades. I'm learning so

much that I feel like the grades will take care of themselves."

Gunter: "Where I'm from grades mean nothing. Knowledge is

demonstrated through mastery. If mastery is not evident, instruction

continues until it is. I don't plan on going to graduate school, so having

a perfect transcript is irrelevant to me. I want to learn something

while I'm here."

In Medias Res

The aim of each section presented throughout this dissertation study has been to

associate how specific curricular and instructional methodologies assist in cultivating the

critical thinking skills and deeper process content knowledge necessary for university

students to emerge from their studies prepared to become productive members of society;

however, this portion of the narrative, along with the one concluding this chapter, might

perchance elucidate most explicitly how these methodologies yield the positive learning

outcomes they are designed to promote.

The following interviews were conducted the week before the March break, for

the Spring semester of 2017. Deja, Cate, Zoe, and Gunter had recently completed

midterm exams; prior to this, each had completed course content exams, in each of the

three referenced program courses, a five to seven-page expository essay in the English

section, multiple reading quizzes in History and English, and PLTL sessions examining

content across the cohort. For the sake of avoiding repetition and content saturation, the

goal, hereafter, is to discuss how, and what, each participant had achieved in a particular course, to that point in the semester, and to determine if critical thinking skill acquisition and movement toward deeper process content knowledge was evident.

<u>Deja</u>

Deja's favorite course in the program was the history course because, as she related, "I really enjoy learning about American history. As a Black woman, I'm interested in understanding how my people have played an important role in helping build this country. I'm also interested in knowing how we continue to have an impact on its current and future growth." It was from this premise we began to discuss how course content influenced her purview of both the traditional classroom structure and the peer-led team learning sessions. To begin, I asked her, "Does the fact that you enjoy this course have any bearing on how you interact with your peers in the classroom, in the sessions, or even outside of the program?" She responded by explaining, "All of the above! When I began in the program last semester, I wasn't necessarily shy, but I was usually hesitant to speak up in discussions, regardless of where they took place. As I became more comfortable with the content, my confidence grew, and my voice grew with it. Now, I feel like this semester I am a leader in both. I would say this confidence has carried over to my other courses, as well." As explained by David and Natalia in their respective narratives, helping students to build confidence in their academic and social abilities was one of the chief objectives of the program; as such, I was interested in knowing how and why this was evolving for Deja.

To begin this segment of the conversation, I asked, "Is there a particular instance that paved the way for your newfound confidence?" In detail she articulated, "Yes, there is. In history we were studying pre-Civil War America and, of course, the issue of slavery was a primary talking point. Most of the Black folks in the class reacted one way and the non-Black folks another. It was very awkward for some, angering for others, and so forth. But the professor addressed it from a strictly factual perspective and encouraged us to do the same. He basically said, "This is what we know, this is what we think we know, and this is what we can likely disprove, with further investigation." He was unemotional about it, which was new to me. Usually when you talk about something so controversial, emotion is a driving force. Not here. We just talked. Read. Talked. Reflected. Synthesized. The results of this were amazing! We had successfully taken a subject that nobody wants to talk about and talked about it like reasonable adults. I didn't know this was possible!" From this information, I wanted to understand if the same was evident during the PLTL sessions.

I queried further, "Were there any moments in the PLTL sessions that civil discourse ceased or anger was evident?" Deja replied, "I wouldn't say anger was evident, and I don't recall any rudeness. There was still discomfort, at times, but what do you expect? This is not a fun topic; however, it's an important one, and we need to be able to talk about it, no matter what color we are. It's a part of our shared history." At this point, I asked her to explain, in more detail, if she was more comfortable speaking about these issues in the classroom or PLTL sessions. She related, "I'm comfortable with both, but I could definitely tell others were more comfortable around their classmates. To be clear, our professor did a great job of making the subject matter approachable – or, as

approachable as it can be – but, based on conversations I've had with some of my peers outside of the classroom, there's still a fear of saying the wrong thing [in the classroom]. That fear didn't seem to exist in the PLTL sessions. People opened up, said what they felt, but did so with the understanding of where they were. It was strange. There was inhibition, but only in the sense that people didn't just blurt out the first thing that came to mind. Their words were carefully considered and meaningful." It was at this juncture I asked the questions most closely associated with this dissertation study.

I began, "Based on your evolving understanding of critical thinking skill acquisition, do you feel the program is helping you to approach subject matter more critically?" Deja's answer was clear: "Absolutely it is! I have never taken courses that encouraged me to think so intensely. They've most always been the ones that required a bunch of memorization for a quiz or test. Sure, we are still expected to know for this course certain dates and the names of people and places, but these elements are incorporated into a bigger picture. The content was the focus, not trivia questions. This was new to me and to a lot of my classmates. For the first time in many of our school careers, we were discussing content and not worrying about tests. The cool thing is that the discussion helped most of us to understand the content so well that we actually didn't mind taking the tests anymore." I interrupted her here and asked, pointedly, "You understand that what you just said is essentially the definition of deeper process content knowledge, correct?" She smiled and answered in the affirmative.

Deja and I concluded our conversation by addressing the other aspects of her coursework: the quizzes, exams, and writing-related assignments. She divulged that she was maintaining "A" averages in History and English, which her instructors confirmed,

but that she was carrying a low "B" in philosophy. The reason for this will become clearer, in a subsequent case narrative, as her issue is reflective of an issue pervasive in the philosophy section of the cohort. Moving past this, though, Deja was pleased with all of her courses and felt confident that each was helping her to become a better critical as well as deeper thinker. To her, this was evident not only in the discussion portions of her courses, but also in her writing, which she believed was evolving to reflect a more sophisticated understanding of grammar, mechanics, and organization, and in her ability to perform well on essay and short answer examinations. In her estimation, she was becoming a "bona fide" college student, and she feels the program is a substantial reason why.

Cate

Whereas Deja was particularly interested in the varieties of discussions generated within program courses, and the effects they have on the learning outcomes targeted by them, Cate was more attuned to the writing instruction she was receiving in all of her courses, but especially English. To begin, she related, "My weakest area coming to college was writing. I've never had difficulty putting together sentences with a subject and a predicate, but my style has always been choppy and difficult to read, and I've always had a hard time providing enough content to develop a good essay." I asked her to clarify the last part of her comment, and she explained, "There are always word or page lengths attached to writing assignments, and I always have a difficult time meeting them. It's not that I am incapable of thorough research, and I certainly have ideas running through my head, but I have a difficult time putting them down on paper." At this

moment, we focused the conversation on how the program course was helping her to overcome this concern.

To start, I asked, "What about your previous instruction maybe contributed to your inability to write essays you feel are acceptable for college-level work." Her immediate answer was, "I was never made to write in high school! If we wrote at all, it was one-page book reports, journal entries, or, occasionally, a short answer test. In elementary and junior high school I learned about the five-paragraph essay – the one with an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion – but I was never really taught beyond this structure. Subsequently, I can write short essays that have thesis statements, topic sentences, transitions, and relevant content, but in college, the expectation is much more. You have to be able to extract more information out of a wider variety of sources and then be able to communicate that information in a way that indicates understanding – deeper process content knowledge, as you call it. I'm only now developing the ability to do these things, but I am still very much a work in progress." I wanted to know more about how this process was evolving for her and if the program was contributing to its evolution.

As the conversation progressed, Cate made reference to a writing assignment she had completed in her English course earlier in the semester. The topic was Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and as she recalls, "I initially liked this novel because it was short and easy to read; however, I grew to love it because of how it spoke to me, as a person who was in the process of beginning my journey through adult life. "The Youth" was me and I him - I identified with him as a character. Many of my classmates did, as well, so we had several great discussions about him and his role in the

work." Cate proceeded to explain how this fact influenced how she approached the assigned writing prompt." She explained, "I read the novel. We discussed it in class. We discussed it further in the PLTL sessions, and then the essay was assigned. By the time we got to that point, [sarcastically] I had 150 pages of information to write about a novel that was only 120 pages long! This was a first for me! As I said earlier, interest in the subject matter stimulated further interest, and it is from this further interest that I began seeking information outside of the text." Cate reiterated that this type of research interest was new to her but that she viewed it as a turning point in her ability to approach university-level writing tasks, in a more inclusive manner.

Cate now began to offer specific examples of subtopics, within a larger topic, which gave her the confidence to write a more developed, college-worthy essay. She described, "If I had simply read the words on the pages of the novel, I would have been able to determine a lot about its content and purpose; however, by studying terminology and learning how to reference scholarship, the words on the pages became more compelling. Let me offer an example: Two of the themes we studied, in great depth, were the journey – in this instance the bildungsroman, or coming of age of the main character – and the ambivalence of nature. For the first, I learned a German word, but more importantly than this, I learned how the journey motif was important in so many works of literature – *The Iliad, The Odyssey,* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* just a few of the works we referenced. This was new to me and further captured my interest; more than this, though, is it gave me additional information to research, which gave me more content to discuss. The same is true with the second theme. I was unaware that nature was so important in so many works, especially works like Crane's, which were written during

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the period of American Realism. I had no idea what realism was! This trickle down effect was being created, in that every time I explored one theme, another theme became apparent. And then another and another. It got to the point that I had to stop researching and just write my essay!" Cate's excitement about her newfound abilities to locate, research, and synthesize content was palpable and made the conversation enjoyable for both of us.

From the information provided throughout our interview, Cate and I debriefed and extracted the overall benefits of her coursework on creating the positive learning outcome of becoming a better college-ready writer. She surmised, "This evolution began with being required to read. We were assigned a work, and most of us read it. Nothing abnormal here. It became abnormal for some of us, though, when we started discussing it beyond a simple plot summary. We talked about character, theme, characterization, and style; we learned terminology, read scholarly articles, and used the PLTL sessions to discuss it all. I was thoroughly hooked on this work because it spoke to me on a personal level; I developed an interest in writing about it because I understood it much more deeply than I had any other work I'd ever read. This meant something to me – gave me confidence in my abilities to do good work. I've never lacked confidence, but I'd never had this type of confidence before. It felt good!"

The conclusion was that Cate not only had developed an appreciation for a work of literature, but also was cultivating an interest in approaching her coursework – all of her coursework – in a less superficial and more focused manner. To her, this new approach represented a move toward deeper process content knowledge; to me, this certainly was evident, but what was also evident was that she was becoming more

capable of viewing subject matter, of all kinds, through a more critical lens. The content was no longer superficial to her; rather, it was connected to who she was and who she wished to become. Much like the "Youth", she was undertaking a new journey, and she understood that aspects of that journey had the potential to be unpleasant – to fall prey to the ambivalence of the world in which she lives. She concluded, though, that it is from both positive and negative circumstances that character is built. Amazing to me as an observer in these proceedings was that this realization was generated from a work of fiction and the discussion of its content, and of its scholastic history, on a university campus. The program was continuing to achieve one of its primary aims, which was to associate content with the real world, and to facilitate life lessons that help students to live more productively within it.

Zoe

Similarly to Deja, and to other cases not presented in this study, Zoe was struggling in the philosophy section of the cohort and thriving in others. As a researcher, I was interested in determining why this was happening. Zoe replied, "I think I don't understand philosophy as well as content in other courses because the terminology, and associated concepts, is too difficult. For example, I never studied things like modus ponens, modus tollens, denying the antecedent, post hoc fallacies, and tautology. I understand them better now that I have studied them some, but as a group of us told our professor, this information seems too advanced for an introductory philosophy course. What ended up being strange is that the professor agreed, and the course content went in a different direction." The curricular direction to which Zoe referred addressed more basic concepts such as logic, morality, ethics, and personal values. When modifications to

the content were implemented, Zoe confirmed that she began enjoying the course more and performing better academically.

In order to determine how the referenced curricular changes influenced Zoe's performance in her philosophy course, I asked, "What about the study of more basic philosophical and critical thinking concepts has changed your outlook of the course, and how has this new outlook translated into other portions of your coursework?" Zoe's explanation was a detailed one; she related, "I had always been told that good morals, ethics, and personal values were important to being a good person, but I never understood exactly what these things were and how they related to my own life. When we began studying them in class, the light bulb went off! I was beginning to comprehend that ethics were principles created and imposed by individuals within structures, to guide positive behaviors and constructive social outcomes; I began to recognize that morals are a system of personal beliefs meant to guide one's perceptions of good and evil -- right and wrong; and I was evolving to appreciate that personal values combine each of these elements to govern how one interacts with the world. This made sense to me, and what was even more important was that I was becoming conscious of how to apply these concepts to my daily life, in school and out." At this point in the conversation, I wanted to know how Zoe's "light bulb moment" was influenced by her interaction with the real and academic worlds, but I was especially interested to know about the former.

To begin, I asked, "Is there any particular aspect of the course, or courses, in which your emerging understanding of these concepts is more useful, less useful, and so forth?" Zoe explained, "They are quite useful in the PLTL sessions, particularly in the philosophy sessions. Our professor never really assigns specific question sets, like in the

English and history courses, but asks us to choose a current social issue and discuss it on ethical and moral grounds, to determine how it impacts our own personal values. Of course, Donald Trump, travel bans, climate change, and Obamacare have been hot button topics in several sessions, but for me, the issue of illegal immigration hits closer to home. I was born and raised in south Texas, and so were my parents; however, my grandparents immigrated from Mexico – legally, by the way – and I have friends whose parents are living in the United States illegally. This is a very real issue for me, so how I approach and discuss it is important. From a logical perspective, I understand that entering any country in a way that violates its established immigration laws is illegal and thus punishable by incarceration or deportation; ethically, I am again forced to use logic to make clear that willfully breaking the law is, by definition, unethical, as the person committing the offense is in violation of a set of principles established by a larger structure – in this instance the U.S. government. The conversation gets more complicated, when applying moral and values-based standards." For the remainder of the interview, Zoe and I discussed how morals and values influenced the ability of session participants to engage conversations that, by her own admission, and as referenced in Deja's narrative, were not always comfortable.

Zoe continued, "I think I'm a smart woman and feel that my judgment is usually pretty sound, but I'll have to admit, when emotion plays a role in a conversation, things can get difficult. Immigration is an emotional issue, and some people have strong opinions about it. These opinions can get pretty extreme, on both ends of the spectrum. In a couple of sessions, this was evident. I began one of the conversations by saying that I had friends whose parents were living in the United States illegally, and a couple of my

peers said, almost without thinking, that those people should be deported. No questions asked. Just deported. So I, as well as several of my classmates, requested they evaluate their statements, both from moral and ethical perspectives, and it was from here that several healthy conversations emerged. One of them went as follows: Steve said that all illegal immigrants should be deported, based on the fact that they entered the country without proper documentation. Looking through an ethical lens, I agreed, saying something to the effect that consciously breaking the law is unethical. I truly believe that and made that clear to him. He couldn't believe I agreed with him! But, in doing so the tone of the conversation softened, and a more productive dialogue emerged."

"From here," as Zoe proceeded, "I asked him to address the issue on moral grounds. Not emotionally or politically, but strictly from a definitional sense – the definition we'd been working through in class for weeks now. He began by saying that morals differ from person to person - about which I agreed - but that certain core principles are usually evident: compassion, sympathy, empathy, and selflessness among them. His answer was long and detailed, but the gist was that he didn't believe in orphaning children, splitting up families, or returning individuals to lives of famine and hardship; however, he did believe strongly in the rule of law – he was a criminal justice major – and believed that no one was above it. Again, I agreed with him, but I asked him to set aside statute for a moment and humanize the situation, with the objective of determining if he would be willing to impose the same standards of judgment on his own family and friends. He said he absolutely would, and referred back to his statement about the rule of law; it was obvious at this point, though, that my line of questioning, and that of other classmates, had stimulated him to think more deeply about the topic. I know for

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sure that his input made me assess my own feelings about the matter. He seemed now to have an emerging realization that this issue was a real one for a lot of people, especially people in Texas, because I provided evidence to demonstrate my claims; conversely, he was helping me to understand that laws are nonnegotiable and must be applied to all citizens, even in lieu of moral and ethical considerations. I can say for sure that we didn't resolve our differences on the matter, but what we did do was discuss it civilly, applying our own moral and ethical standards to the conversation." Zoe concluded that she'd never had a civil conversation about this subject previously and was glad to know that such was possible.

Zoe's narrative provided another example of how peer-led team learning helps to facilitate productive dialogues about subject matter that, for many, has the potential to be unpleasant. Other cases presented in these findings demonstrate that conversations about these topics become more approachable, when involved parties approach them with civility in mind; furthermore, incorporating one's morals, ethics, and personal values into the discussion creates an opportunity for deeper understanding of why individuals address certain subjects the way they do: e.g. Deja American slavery and Zoe illegal immigration in the United States. These were personal topics for them because they were applicable, if only in part, to their own lives. Their perspectives helped to elucidate certain realities, which, in subsequence, permitted classmates to address these subjects more critically. As Zoe noted, this does not always translate into resolution, but it does create a clearer and deeper understanding for those whose life experiences, and the moral and ethical values that have shaped them, may differ.

Gunter

Unlike the cases presented prior to this one, Gunter was not in the process of taking that leap of faith into adulthood; rather, he was already a professional person and had enrolled in the university to develop the business acumen needed to help improve his position within his profession. He enrolled in the program to assist in this process, as he felt the peer-led team learning addendum would assist him in becoming a better communicator, with his American peers. But, the primary reason he entered the program was because he viewed it as being similar in content and structure to the secondary programs he had completed as a student in Germany.

To initiate the conversation, Gunter related, "We studied the Canon, a Classical curriculum. We read primary sources and discussed their content well beyond the text. We wrote long, scholarship-heavy essays and took essay exams. I didn't know what a Scantron was, until I came to the United States. I wish I didn't now! I'm telling you this to make clear that I believe in the approach of this program. It is academically authentic and requires students to think profoundly about course content; they are then expected to be able to discuss that content as thinking adults. So many other programs seem so one-dimensional and perfunctory – easy and generally meaningless. A university education isn't meant to prepare one for trivia night at the local pub but rather the real world!" Gunter's passion not only for the program, but also academic, in general, was palpable during this interview. During its next segment, we discussed specifically why he thought the curricular and instructional methodology employed by the program offered students wishing to study the humanities and social sciences a better opportunity to learn and synthesize related course content.

I began by asking, "I know you believe in the great books approach to teaching and learning liberal arts subjects, but what about this approach makes it work so well in this particular cohort of classes?" Gunter responded, "It works because its content is rich. Not trivial or designed to appease the "C" student. It pushes students to think inside and outside of the box, and in doing so encourages them to evaluate content less superficially and more critically. Let me give an example: We were studying Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in our English class. Reading it, discussing it, and applying critical theories to the text, in a freshman course, no less. A centerpiece of the work is Jaques "Seven Ages of Man" soliloquy, which obviously discusses a man's evolution through life – from birth to death. Superficially, it's just a chronology, meaningless in itself; more deeply and critically, though, it is filled with meaning and becomes relatable to one's own life. We've all been infants, a life stage in which we are completely at the mercy of our elders; the school children, scared to death of the real world but ever curious about it; the "lover", easily in and out of infatuation with our schoolmates; and, in many of our cases, the "soldier", working our way into the world in which we live, and often prone to foolishness. No student in the program has reached the stages of justice, old age, and incapacity yet, but some of our professors have {Gunter expressed with a hearty laugh}. The moral of this tale is that reading this monologue as text on a page produces one result, whereas reading it for meaning produces another. To me, the purpose of a university education is to teach students to seek meaning in things, and this program does that." Gunter and I wrapped up this portion of the conversation and moved toward the end of our interview.

To conclude, Gunter discussed his affection for the peer-led team learning portion of the program. He related, "The PLTL sessions have been outstanding because they allow us to really dissect the subjects like what we just talked about. Students can reflect back on when they were in grade school and relate their feelings, emotions, and experiences to Jaques' words. They can reflect on adolescence and early adulthood, to identify the people, places, and things that have made them who they are and will shape who they become. They can share all of these reflections with their classmates, and then dialogue comparing and contrasting individual experiences can interconnect the one thing we all have in common, which as that we're all human beings. Different in many ways, but all requiring a working brain and beating heart to live. In this program PLTL is the bridge that connects us as people and encourages us to identify our differences, discuss them critically, civilly, and empathetically, appreciate how they make us unique, and then create a sense of community in which our similarities and differences are sincerely valued. Sixty or Ninety-minute traditional classroom periods simply cannot achieve this same effect – at least I haven't experienced it." By the end of our interview, it was very clear to me that Gunter thoroughly appreciated the opportunity to be a part of this program and wished to continue in it, as a student and peer-leader, for as long as cohort courses were available.

Gunter's narrative was led more so by him than me, as the researcher, but I was sufficiently pleased with this fact. Him speaking openly, without any prompting from me, helped to provide me clearer insight into why the program was effectual and meaningful to him; furthermore, his examples helped to elucidate how the curricular and instructional paradigms employed in the program seemed to lead naturally toward positive learning

outcomes, specifically as these related to critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper

process content knowledge. Student participants were discussing content-related and real

world circumstances both individually and correlatively, which many had not done in

previous studies. The typical result was a more refined, deeper, more critical

understanding of each – a clearly stated objective of the program, as it was being

developed.

<u>Continuing Themes</u>

Perhaps more so than in the section titled "In the Beginning," the preceding

narratives demonstrate the interconnectedness of experiences between program

participants; that is, while their likes, dislikes, challenges, and successes may have

differed, the results they experienced were similar. Critical thinking skill acquisition and

deeper process content knowledge was evident in each of the four cases presented and

was likely attributable to the following themes:

- <u>Teachers Still Mattered</u>: Many of the program participants, including those in the

  presented cases, built positive relationships with their professors, which

  influenced their willingness to participate wholly in the program.

  > <u>Deja</u>: "I've actually gotten close to my professors. They take the time
  >
  > to meet with me after class. I appreciate this, it helps me be a better
  >
  > student."

  > <u>Cate</u>: "I like two of my three professors. The other one is a nice person,
  >
  > but her expectations are too high for a freshman course. I wish she'd

dial things back some, because the content could probably be

interesting if she did."

Zoe: "My professors are teaching me to think about things so much

differently than I ever have before. This is what I wanted from my

college experience. I just didn't expect this to happen as a freshman.

Some of my friends told me they didn't learn anything their freshman

year. I'm learning a lot, because of my great professors!"

Gunter: "I've had some really good teachers before, but my English

and history professors are some of the best I've ever had. They're

really intelligent, but past this, they explain things so well. They're

also very patient. This seems pretty important for professors who

teach freshman courses."

- Content Still Mattered: Actually, content mattered more than ever. Many students

  appreciated that they were able to study primary texts, including works they might

  have determined previously as unapproachable (Shakespeare was mentioned

  frequently), and doing so made them feel more like university students; more

  importantly, sophisticated content led to sophisticated discussions, which

  encouraged more sophisticated critical thinking skills and deeper process content

  knowledge.

  Deja: "It feels really cool to study difficult subjects. What feels even

  better is understanding those subjects. I never thought I'd like

  Shakespeare, but now that I can read his plays and understand the

language, I want to read more. I never had this opportunity in senior

English [in high school]."

Cate: "I don't like the one of the courses much, but that's not because

of the content. It's the way the content is being taught that bothers me.

Other than that, I'm good with how I'm getting the content."

Zoe: "Some of this stuff is really hard, but the professors do a great job

of explaining it. I actually like that it's hard, because when I start to

understand it, I feel good about myself. I can actually tell that I'm

learning something!"

Gunter: "As I've said repeatedly, content is everything. University

students should learn university content. Some students don't get this.

They want everything to be easy and self-explanatory. Life is not this

way, so why should a university education be this way? I love the

content of the three courses I'm taking and look forward to the second

half of the semester."

- Structure Still Mattered: Simply stated, the program would not succeed without

  the peer-led team learning addendum. For many of especially the younger

  freshman students in the program, the course content was quite difficult; as such,

  approaching it in a traditional classroom alone might have created frustration and,

  down the proverbial line, failure. The PLTL discussions, as well as the

  discussions they stimulated in the traditional classroom, gave students more

opportunities to synthesize content, which mitigated frustration and yielded more positive learning outcomes.

> Deja: "I enjoy the PLTL sessions more now than I did in the beginning of the semester. I was a little shy in them at first, but now I can't say enough. It's great to have the opportunity to be heard."

> Cate: "I like the whole program, but the PLTL is my favorite part."

> Zoe: "I love the PLTL, but I love the classroom part just as much. A lot of what we talk about in sessions comes back to the classroom with us, so it's easy to see how the whole program blends together. We also talk about other subjects in different classrooms. Everything is related."

> Gunter: "I'm actually to the point where structure doesn't matter. It was the structure that made the program attractive, but I realize now that I can learn from this group of professors and students in any type of structure."

- Outcomes Still Mattered: At this point in the semester (midterm), learning outcomes, like with other facets of the program, were becoming increasingly important. Students were now focused heavily on critical thinking skill acquisition, deeper content knowledge, and the positive learning outcomes each might facilitate. They were also making a push toward completing the semester and earning satisfactory grades in program courses.

Deja: "I'm excited that I'm making good grades. I'm more excited that I'm learning a lot. I'm learning a lot more than I expected to. We'll see how I do in the end, but right now, I think I'll make two A's and a B."

Cate: "I usually make straight A's, so that's my expectation now."

Zoe: "I know so many people who are good with being C students. I was always good with being a B student, but I think I can be an A student. Even if that doesn't happen, I know so much more than I did at the beginning of the program. Isn't that the point?"

Gunter: "Grades still don't matter to me. What matters is that I'm becoming a better, more critical thinker. I have always been this way, but no one ever stops learning, or they shouldn't. I appreciate some of this content more deeply than I may have before, and this is the important thing. My understanding should result in good marks on my transcript."

The End as a Beginning

The final interview took place on campus, as a group, the week of final examinations, for the Spring semester of 2017. Participants were fatigued and ready for the term to end, but they were also keen to share with me their conclusions about the program. This was by far the shortest interview held during the research process, but it provided the information I needed to draw tentative conclusions regarding the potential efficacy of peer-led team learning in a humanities and social sciences program, at a midsize university.

The Group

I began the final interview by opening the floor to the participants, to summarize their experiences. Deja was always eager to speak, so she began, "I really liked the program and feel I have benefitted from the way it is structured. It's a lot of hard work – a lot of reading and writing – but I think my skills in both have improved dramatically, from when I began in 2016. I want to continue improving these skills because as a criminal justice major, I'm going to be writing a lot of term papers! I'm also looking forward to applying for a peer-coordinator position for the Fall [of 2017]. I like that role, and I can use the money!" Deja then reopened the floor.

Zoe continued the conversation, by explaining, "Like Deja, I really enjoyed the program. I've never worked so hard as a student before, but that's what college is all about: putting in the effort to become educated. I understand content, across disciplines, much more deeply now, and I feel like I will be able to build on this content knowledge, as I continue my studies. I've made new friends, and have learned to be more open-minded about perspectives that I may not agree with. This has always been difficult for me, so developing this skill is a really big deal. The only complaint I have is that I'm going to eventually run out of courses to take in this program!" Some of the group nodded in agreement, and the conversation moved forward.

Gunter picked up, "The program has been great on so many different levels. For me, the first was actually being able to study content again. When last I studied in the United States, we learned what amounted to trivia. I could tell you dates and important historical figures, but I couldn't explain to you why either was important. Reading Homer

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in abridged form, or studying the Magna Carta in contemporary prose is useless. Easier but useless. This isn't about easy; it's about developing knowledge. The more involved the acquisition process, the deeper the synthesis; the deeper the synthesis, the better the likelihood the knowledge produced by it will be accessible and usable. That's what I need – an education that I can actually use!" As had been so in multiple other interview sessions, the excitement among student participants was evident.

Cate concluded the conversation by saying, "I agree that the program is awesome, and I have gotten more out of it than I ever could have imagined; however, I don't think I will continue in it next year. As a philosophy major, the volume and content of the readings we do is so intense that adding other, equally difficult readings on top of them, in English and history, is super stressful. I'm glad I read what I read this semester, in all of my courses, but I'm on the verge of burnout. I just want to focus my attention on philosophy. Regarding the PLTL sessions, I'd like to continue those in whatever courses I take. Deja talked before about organizing informal sessions in other classes, and I'd like to do this, as well. Even in subjects like kinesiology and family and consumer sciences. Some might call these study groups, but when personal experiences and moral and ethical considerations make their way into the conversations, they're much more than study groups, at that point." Cate concluded her explanation, and the group moved into the final portion of the interview.

Revisiting the Research Questions

In this closing stage of our discussion, I asked what amounted to the research questions for this dissertation study:

- How does peer-led team learning influence classroom performance, appreciation for course content, and desire to participate in similarly structured course offerings?
- What do writing samples, exams, quizzes, and verbal narratives as evaluatives reveal about how the combination of traditional classroom structures and peer-led team learning influence critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge?

The preceding narratives provide extensive detail examining these questions, but to conclude this study, I asked each participant to provide a brief reflection:

- Deja – "Peer-led team learning influences classroom performance because it helps students understand content more deeply. I appreciate content related to English, history, and philosophy much more now because, again, I understand it better. I will participate in the program for as long as there are courses available. My writing has improved dramatically, as is indicated by my grades, my exam scores improved throughout this as well as last semester, and from each, I feel there is evidence supporting that my ability to think critically and internalize content more profoundly has occurred."
- Cate – "The PLTL sessions were my favorite part of the program and helped me understand my coursework much better. I don't know if I appreciate the content more because I've always appreciated it; however, I think I appreciate it more sincerely. Though I will not participate in the program moving forward, I wish to apply some of its philosophies and practices to other coursework. I made "A's" and "B's" on all of my assignments and feel that the combination of classroom

and PLTL sessions was part of what allowed this to happen. It definitely helped me to become a better critical thinker, and my content knowledge has undoubtedly improved."

- Zoe – "My classroom performance has been good not only in cohort classes, but also in my other studies. I think PLTL has played a huge role in this. As far as content, I take it course-by-course, so this really has never been an issue. I'm a bookworm, so I like to study. I look forward to studying in this program in future semesters. I've always been a decent writer, but I think I'm a better academic writer now. The traditional classroom influenced this more. The PLTL sessions made me a better thinker, which is probably the most positive outcome of this whole thing."

- Gunter – "PLTL is part of what attracted me to the program, and it is a significant reason why I intend to stay in it. Classroom performance has never been a concern for me because I have high expectations of myself. This stated, PLTL helped me enjoy the subject matter more, which likely influenced my performance and appreciation of it. I'm definitely a better academic writer, made "A's" on all of my exams and quizzes, and have become more comfortable speaking amongst my peers. Combined, my ability to think deeply and critically has assuredly improved, and I think it will only continue to improve, as I continue with the program."

At this juncture, we reflected on our summer plans and then adjourned. Deja and Cate would begin summer school soon; Zoe would go back to her hometown to work a part-time job; and Gunter, who worked full-time year round, would continue doing so.

- Deja – History = A; English = B; Philosophy = B

- Cate – History = A; English = A; Philosophy = B

- Zoe – History = A; English = A; Philosophy = A

- Gunter – History = A; English = A; Philosophy = A

Though participants and I discussed grades at multiple points during the semester, I did not have them submit to me graded assignments, on every occasion that one was completed. I reviewed samplings of writings, exams, and other artifacts to gain a deeper insight into whether the amalgamation of course content and PLTL were yielding positive learning outcomes related to critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge. For this particular study, graded material was of less importance to me.

Connecting Themes: An Intersection between Professor and Student Narratives

The following information was generated from various data streams, which include interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and written communications. I have restored them here, to create a sense of linearity for my reader. All information has been reviewed, carefully member checked, and approved for use in this dissertation project.

- Conclusions About Teaching: All case administrators and student participants agreed that teaching was among the most important facets of the program studied throughout this dissertation project. It began in the traditional classroom structure and then reached well beyond it into the PLTL sessions, where students were offered the opportunity to evaluate content more deeply, critically, and personally. This was among the primary aims of the program, as it was being developed. This

peer-to-peer teaching structure, as an addendum to the more traditional one, permitted students to address subject matter autonomously and with an eye toward more sophisticated understanding of an array of academic and social topics. Approaching content in this manner enabled instructors to teach more widely and students to synthesize course content more profoundly.

- Conclusions About Content: All case administrators and student participants agreed that program content must be rich and germane, in part or whole, to the academic and social lives of student participants. Among other factors, this differentiated the program from more traditional lower-division course offerings, which are generally perceived as more foundational or preparatory in nature. Program content was comprised of more difficult readings, lengthier and more involved writings, and additional factors that resulted in more rigorous instruction. Without this rigor, all participant cases agreed the program might be less effective in facilitating positive student learning outcomes, thus circumventing the program's overall intent.

- Conclusions About Structure: All case administrators and student participants agreed that the manner in which the program was structured was vital to its efficacy. Its arrangement, with the PLTL sessions as complimentary to the traditional classroom, permitted faculty members to teach using more traditional instructional techniques. They appreciated the opportunity to conduct their courses in this manner, as, in general, it aligns most closely with their pedagogic training; however, they recognized and embrace the value of permitting students to address content autonomously. From this autonomy typically emerged a deeper

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and more critical understanding of course content, in student participants. All participant cases agreed that operating the program without the peer-led team learning addendum would likely have diminished its efficacy, thus negatively affecting intended student learning outcomes.

- Conclusions About Outcomes: All case administrators and student participants agreed that outcomes were likely the most important element of the program. This does not refer to grades but rather the learning outcomes participant students achieved, as a result of participating in a program that integrates peer-led team learning with traditional classroom instruction. These outcomes included the ability to discover content more critically and deeply -- to relate it to their own lives and be capable of using it in subsequent studies as well as the real world. A longitudinal study will confirm or refute whether this is possible in the current case group, but the tentative conclusion of all participant cases is that peer-led team learning successfully facilitates critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge, in a variety of academic and social topics.

Concluding Themes: Final Supporting Questionnaire, Observation, Survey, and Artifact Data – Feedback from Non-case Participants

The following information was generated from various data streams, which include interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and written communications. The resulting data is raw and has not been restoried, as in previous data sets. All information has been reviewed, carefully member checked, and approved for use in this dissertation project.

Student Feedback - Questions

1. What do you find most beneficial about PLTL discussions?

2. How do you feel these discussions can improve?

3. Does having the opportunity to express your ideas enhance or diminish your academic experiences at the university? Please offer a short explanation.

4. Would you attend PLTL sessions in the future? Why?

Taryn (20-year-old Caucasian female)

Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity for answering these questions, and also that you see that I am a leader in the PLTL sessions. I feel that it is an honor to be called a leader especially in PLTL, which I look forward to going to every Friday. Here are my answers to your questions:

1. What I find most beneficial to PLTL is that you are in an environment with your friends, but you get to talk about important topics that I would have not thought about if it were not for PLTL. PLTL is a way for people to get together and talk about things that are not just strictly schoolwork, and also not about gossip or sports. PLTL helps me personally think and really use my head and look at the different aspects to many issues.

2. I personally feel bad that Chris and I mostly talk in all of the sessions. I feel that I try to give people the opportunity to talk in the discussion, but sometimes I feel that Chris and I talk too much. So I think that before we start the sessions, maybe do some ice breakers, just to get people in the talking mood. I feel that most of the people in the PLTL sessions want to talk, but are too afraid to, or do not want to say the wrong thing.

So maybe the thing to do is to do those icebreaker exercises. So I would like to improve that more people talk in the PLTL sessions, not just 2 people.

3. The opportunity to express my views enhances my experience at the university, because it teaches me to look at every side of an argument. In the past, I would just argue my point and no one else's would matter to me, or would I pay attention, but ever since the PLTL I have completely changed. Seeing the different opinions of other people has also formed my own opinions.

4. I would defiantly want to attend more PLTL sessions. I know that I have said on multiple occasions said that the session has gone by to fast, or that I want to stay longer. I like PLTL because it gives me a chance to voice my opinions in an environment that if someone were to disagree with me, they might argue with me about it, but they are not going to be mad at me forever for having a different opinion then them. These sessions allow an environment, for letting people be themselves and to confess what they truly believe and not get shot down for it. Another thing about why I would come back is that we may get off topic, but what we end up getting off topic on is actually related to the main topic of what we are talking about. I like the fact that the conversation can go either ways, and it does not matter which way it goes, because us as a team took it to that place, not a teacher.

A little side note: I know that sometimes you are saying that you talk too much, but I think that you talk just enough. If you were not to talk as much as you do know, I know that on multiple occasions the conversation would have been ended in a couple of minutes, so like how much you do put into the conversation.

Dunn (30-year-old Caucasian male)

1. I think that being able to discuss the topics covered in our classes allows us to hear other people's viewpoints that we might not otherwise have get the opportunity to hear because of lack of time in class. Plus we are able to discuss other topics that relate but would be of topic for the purpose of our classes. By hearing these opinions we are able to broaden our views even if we don't necessarily agree with what we are hearing. This allows us to modify our opinion and consider options we might not have otherwise.

2. The only way I can think of to improve on what you are already doing is maybe to mix the groups up a little bit so that we don't always have the same people in each group. This would possibly get some of the people who don't participate as much to maybe get drawn into the conversation a little bit more if the already have a rapport with someone who is not in their current group. Could work the other way around too, I don't know.

3. I definitely feel like it improves my experience here! It allows me to connect with people about important issues that I would otherwise have not got to discuss with my peers because your average student is not going to put out the effort to do something like this. I personally am glad to have the opportunity to interact with my peers and learn their opinions.

4. I would definitely attend PLTL groups in the future if given the option. The discussions we have help to improve our knowledge about topics that help us in class and get us thinking in ways hearing other people's perspectives does not use us to.

Chris (17-year-old African-American male)

1. The thing that I find to be the most beneficial about our discussions is the ability to give my opinion openly about a subject or topic that we are discussing. I feel that I can not only give my opinion without the thought of being persecuted later for it, but also that I can give it while having other people interject their own thoughts to either go along with my ideas or go against them.

2. I feel our discussions can improve through possibly allowing more questions into our arguments in order to allow people who do not have a high preference on one question to be able to at least lean one way or another eventually on one of the questions. Three questions at the most would give everyone that chance.

3. Having the opportunity to express my ideas greatly enhances my academic experiences at the university because it allows me to exercise not only my personal freedoms as an American in a controlled setting, but while it is a controlled setting, we are free to express our thoughts based upon our experiences in life, along with our own general ideas.

4. I would most definitely attend the PLTL sessions in the future because I enjoy hashing out my point of view on issues with people my own age. Also it allows us to talk about relevant things to our lives, to become more aware of how people from different backgrounds feel about it that are our age, and gives us the hope that one day we can possibly change some of the problems around us.

Final PLTL Session Evaluation Summary

Section I

1. What were your reasons for taking this course?

Jessica – I took this course because I was advised to. My advisor said that the instructors were the best and that I would learn a lot from this course that was being put together.

Dunn – I felt that I could benefit greatly from the professors teaching in the program.

Erica – My reason for taking this course is that I was recommended by my advisor. He said that it would be great experience for my first year in college.

Taryn – I took this course because I learn better with a small group environment.

Jasmine – I took this course because it was the only English class open when I registered.

Elizabeth – My reason for taking this course was to better my time management skills and to get more organized in life. I also took it to help prepare me to be in the honors college.

John – I wanted to be in a cohort that shared my same interests and make friends.

Thilo – I was offered to take this course by the program director and it was of interest to me to gather more information about ethics, morality, and literature.

Ranadeep – I took this course in order to help myself succeed and make my transition from high school to college, and I believe I have learned a lot in this course.

Chris – I took this course because I believed it would help best prepare for introduction to college.

Emily – My advisor talked to me and my family at orientation and said it would be a great learning opportunity.

Jrew – Because of my interest in the content as well as the close knit community of students that the cohort represents.

Sarah – I learned about it at orientation and thought it would be beneficial to my academics.

2. Please describe what you liked most about this course.

Jessica – I liked the instructors teaching methods the most. I feel like I've learned a lot and have been motivated to do my work because I clearly understand the material.

Dunn – The discussion groups allowed me to look at the problems presented from different angles, which left me with a better understanding of the topic.

Erica – I like the PLTL sessions the most. The sessions are really educational and it gives me a chance to voice my opinion about certain topics that are given.

Taryn – I liked how open and free the topics were, the fact that you could say anything.

Jasmine – I mostly liked the freedom to talk and not just listen to a long drawn out lecture.

Elizabeth – I like the way the course combined the three classes in the discussion group that took place once a week.

John – It engaged the other students in a way that is not done in regular classes.

Thilo – To talk (have the opportunity) to talk about everything.

Ranadeep – I liked the discussion groups, the small classes, and the interaction between students.

Chris – I liked most the PLTL sessions and the ability to voice my opinions on a topic, regardless of how I felt, and how other student's perspectives on their experiences helped to influence my thinking.

Emily – The smaller classes. I have never been a fan of big classes and I appreciate the personal contact I have with my professors.

Jrew – The way the information was presented as well as the closeness of the students compared to an average class.

Sarah – Being able to interact more with professors because of the small classes.

3. Please describe what you liked least about this course.

Jessica – It seems like we didn't meet much for our regular class time, outside of the discussion group, making these last few weeks feel rushed.

Dunn – The obvious lack of motivation and lack of participation of some of my classmates.

Erica – I least like the philosophy course. I feel like it was pointless in my opinion. Even though it was interesting, I still stand with my opinion.

Taryn – The fact that only specific people would speak in a group, not everyone.

Jasmine – I really did not like the selections chosen to read and discuss.

Elizabeth – I didn't really like the philosophy course, because the teacher did not really know what he was talking about. And he would give unnecessary assignments just so it can look like he has a lot of grades for us.

John – Nothing.

Thilo – People not participating.

Ranadeep – I didn't like how the discussion groups were shorter.

Chris – In the PLTLs, I didn't like how some students did not voice their opinions.

Emily – Philosophy. That class seemed pointless to me because I honestly feel like I have not learned anything at all.

Jrew – I believe the philosophy course was more of a rigorous class instead of a helpful elective and we tended to get off topic and to unrelated matters.

Sarah – I liked everything.

Additional Comments:

Jessica – n/a

Dunn – I feel that the active discussion of what was discussed in class helped improve my understanding of the subject and Mr. Pratt did an excellent job of keeping us on topic when we got side-tracked; he also left most of the talking to us only talking enough to keep us talking and to sometimes make us think a little bit more about what we were saying.

Erica – n/a

Taryn – n/a

Jasmine – n/a

Elizabeth – n/a

John – n/a

Thilo – Keep up your great work!

Ranadeep – n/a

Chris – I would like to continue doing this!

Emily – I really had a fun time in the PLTL groups. Those were always very interesting.

Jrew – n/a

Sarah – I believe this program has truly helped me become a better student.

Section II

1 = Strongly Disagree   2 = Disagree   3 = Neutral   4 = Agree   5 = Strongly Agree

1. PLTL discussions were conducted at an appropriate level of difficulty and were relevant to all students, regardless of race, gender, or level of academic competence. 4, 4, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 4, 5, 5 = 4.8

2. PLTL discussions appropriately covered course content. 4, 5, 4, 5, 4, 5, 5, 4, 5, 4, 3, 3, 5 = 4.3

3. PLTL Discussions appropriately covered contemporary moral, ethical, and traditional issues, as outlined in the course description. 5, 5, 4, 5, 3, 4, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5 = 4.7

4. The size of the PLTL discussion groups was appropriate. 5, 5, 4, 4, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 2, 5, 5, 5 = 4.6

5. The instructor was good at facilitating class discussion. 5, 5, 5, 5, 4, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5 = 4.9

6. The instructor treated all students fairly. 5, 5, 5, 5, 4, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 4, 5 = 4.8

7. The instructor effectively assimilated personal and academic experiences to assist with discussions. 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 4, 5, 5, 5, 4, 5, 5, 5 = 4.8

8. I would recommend this instructor to other students. 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5 = 5.0

9. The current textbooks should continue to be used. 5, 3, 5, 5, 3, 5, 5, 5, 4, 4, 2, 3, 5 = 4.1

10. I would participate in this type of program in the future. 5, 5, 4, 5, 3, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5 = 4.7

11. I would recommend this course to other students. 5, 5, 5, 5, 3, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5 = 4.8

12. I have a stronger interest in this subject because of this course. 5, 5, 4, 5, 2, 4, 4, 5, 4, 4, 4, 4, 5 = 4.2

Final Program Evaluation Summary

1. Are you interested in applying for a PLTL leadership position for the fall semester, 2011?

Responses: 11 Yes, 3 No

2. Do you wish to continue in the program beyond this semester?

Responses: 12 Yes, 1 No, 1 Maybe

If yes, what courses are you interested in taking outside of the core requirements? Please list below:

Courses listed by students (number of responses in parentheses): Biology (6), Business Management, Chemistry (2), Economics, English (2), Foreign Language, Kinesiology, Music, Philosophy (4), Political Science (2), Psychology (3), Sociology (4), and Theater (2).

3. Please choose which format you prefer for the PLTL sessions:

Responses: 5 prefer 2 - 1 ½ hour sessions, 9 prefer 3 – 1-hour sessions

4. Are you interested in helping recruit new/incoming students?

Responses: 12 Yes, 2 No

5. Would you be interested in travel abroad for college credit, as part of the program?

Responses: 11 Yes, 1 No, 2 Unanswered

6. Please write any additional questions, comments, or concerns on the back of this questionnaire.

Comment 1 (Dunn): Would it be feasible to have a three-hour long discussion group in which we discuss a scenario from each of the three classes in the cohort?

Comment 2 (Nicole): I love this program, and I cannot wait for it to continue!

Observations of the Researcher: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Peer-led Team Learning Sessions

Initial Communication from the Researcher to Administrators and Faculty

With the first PLTL session now completed, I wish to share with you my initial impressions. I can say with confidence that each of the three sessions was more productive than I had originally anticipated. The participants were prepared for the meetings and exhibited an eagerness to discuss and dissect the presented subject matter; moreover, they were willing to embrace or refute the ideas of their peers in a dignified manner. This speaks well not only for the participants, but for the professors who labor diligently to encourage in them an intellectual and civic consciousness. Thus, the assimilation of academic content with invigorating discussion appears to stimulate in students a keen awareness of the value of critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge.

I feel that PLTL sessions should cultivate the student's ability to process information eloquently and cerebrally. Sharing ideas in a comfortable environment kindles the opportunity for internalization of content and appreciation for the viewpoints of others; in my opinion, each of these factors should prove beneficial to students as they continue their studies.

Analysis After Ten Non-concurrent PLTL Sessions

<u>Positive Remarks</u>:

       I believe that the PLTL sessions are stimulating in program participants the ability to synthesize information in a meaningful and intelligent fashion. The uniqueness of the sessions is directly attributable to the diversity of the student base, as each brings to his or her group differing perspectives on the topics discussed. Because of this, the discussions are multidimensional in nature and encourage members of each group to internalize – and even appreciate – the viewpoints of their classmates. This does not imply that consensus is always achieved on a selected topic; in fact, this is seldom the case. However, each student has illustrated to me the willingness to either embrace the ideas of his or her peers, or to intelligently dispute them. By approaching the discussions conceptually versus concretely, students begin to meld their personal realities with the realities of others. This serves to achieve several important ends: First, students who may not wholly understand, or have exhibited intolerance toward, other groups of people start to approach these issues with an open mind and a readiness to amend their views. For example, a white student who was raised in a small, predominantly white town begins to realize that many of the racial or social stereotypes he or she embraced previously are likely untrue. Or, a black student who was raised in a large, urban setting begins to realize that not all members of the ethnic majority can be labeled in a specific manner. This cultivates an environment of tolerance and acceptance - an environment conducive to the free exchange of important ideas. Second, students become aware that their backgrounds, while obviously unique to them in many ways, are not entirely dissimilar from the people around them. From this, a sense of community is established, which, in turn, allows

students to attack sensitive moral, ethical, and traditional issues with compassion and diplomacy. Finally, students begin to understand the power of intelligent discussion. That is, through the expression of personal beliefs and acquired knowledge, each is gaining an awareness of his or her academic and social voice. The value of eloquent expression will be consequential to them, as they proceed with their education.

While the above may not be wholly reflected in classroom performance, I believe that, given the time and opportunity, the majority of program students will exhibit clear signs of academic and social progress. After all, many of them are very young and have yet to realize the importance of developing proper university habits. As a program instructor so eloquently stated, the aim of this program is to break down and eliminate poor academic habits, and to replace them with those which will allow the student to prosper at the university level and beyond. In my opinion the PLTL sessions will play an instrumental role in achieving this objective.

Constructive Criticism:

I can assert with confidence that the positives of the PLTL sessions far outweigh the negatives, as each have been productive and beneficial to participants. With this said, there are a few issues that should be noted for the sake of rendering improvements in the future. First, it is important for the administrators of this program to observe carefully the personalities of their students. Doing so will allow the discussion groups to be constructed in the most sensible and productive fashion. While the groups are, by in large, comprised in this way, it is becoming evident that certain students simply cannot work well together. Much of this has to do with the strength of one's personality and his

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or her ability to accept constructive criticism. When two or more students in the same group exhibit these qualities, the session becomes one sided, and those who wish to discuss are unable to do so. Though this phenomenon will never be entirely eliminated, I feel the program must see to it that each student has an equal opportunity to express his or her ideas. Thus, careful observation and timely communication are imperative to forming constructive groups.

The final issue deals with the length of time in which the sessions are conducted. At the beginning of the semester, a program administrator determined that hour-long sessions would be time enough to hold a proper discussion over a selected topic. With this, he concluded that smaller groups would allow for an even distribution of discussion between students. While the latter appears to be mostly accurate, the former may need to be modified in future semesters.

<u>Summary</u>

To conclude, I selected data sources that I believed would offer the most lucid insights into how peer-led team learning combined with traditional classroom instruction might influence critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge in student participants. These included questionnaires, interviews, classroom and PLTL session observations, and examination of classroom artifacts. From this information, I composed a comprehensive narrative, using restorying techniques, which detailed six cases: two from administrators/instructors, and four from students. I began with the administrators/instructors, as a way to establish for the reader program foundations, its evolution, and a contemporary view. From this groundwork I built the student narratives.

Each chronicled student perceptions from the beginning of the semester, through its middle, and then to its end. Contained therein were specific details about how the curricular and instructional model employed in this program helped them to achieve positive learning outcomes in critical thinking and content synthesis. The conclusion was that these objectives were realized in all student participants, though the manner in which this was achieved differed from student to student.

CHAPTER SIX:

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

For this dissertation, I conducted a narrative case study, with a mixture of phenomenological and practical action research techniques. It was undertaken, in its entirety, in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, at a midsize Texas university. The aims referenced in my research questions were multifold and are summarized as follows:

- To examine the efficacy of peer-led team learning as a pedagogical tool in humanities and social sciences courses (English, History, and Philosophy for this study).
- To determine if this pedagogical tool yielded in student participants positive learning outcomes in critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge.

From within these parameters, I worked to gather and interpret data reflecting administrator, faculty, and student experiences, while participants in the program. This data was then used to generate the personal narratives shared in chapter five of this study. Each was produced via multiple qualitative data collection paradigms, including questionnaires, individual and group interviews, classroom and PLTL session observations, and student artifacts such as personal and academic writing samples. Because of extant factors, I was able to collect data over the course of only one full university semester, the Spring semester of 2017; as such, trend data is unavailable. My

intention is to conduct further research on this subject, for the purpose of determining the long term impact of peer-led team learning on critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge in students undertaking humanities and social sciences coursework.

Integrating Study Findings into Extant Literature

Beetham and Sharpe (2013) conclude that while collaboration is not a new pedagogical technique in academics, it has ascended in prominence during the early 21st century, to help facilitate more positive learning outcomes in a wider variety of student populations (p. 15). For the program examined throughout this study, those outcomes focused on critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge. While each has always been a central concern for the academic departments participating in this study, the perceived need to address them in a more pointed manner had begun to emerge. Exemplars investigated in the review of literature conducted before, and during, this dissertation study indicated that critical thinking skill outcomes and deep process content knowledge in university students, as well as university graduates, were becoming increasingly insufficient. Thus, measures to combat these recognized deficiencies were devised at the university in which this study was conducted. The succeeding will summarize how the program evaluated for this study, and the research data it yielded, might be integrated into existing and future scholarship.

In general, founding program members felt comfortable with the content offered in their respective academic departments, concluding that it provided for a median of students a solid instructional foundation on which to construct new, more sophisticated

knowledge; however, there was mounting evidence illustrating the traditional classroom structure, and the learning outcomes produced from it, were inadequate for students on the periphery of this median. It is from this conclusion that peer-led team learning (PLTL) sessions as supplements to conventional classroom environments were envisaged as potentially useful for improving student academic experiences and, in association, facilitating a deeper level of content synthesis and appreciation. Jyotsna and Ejiwale (2016; 2014) identify that such curricular and instructional models were used most frequently in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields but also acknowledged their potential efficacy across disciplines. Program developers agreed with this supposition and thus designed the program, with the PLTL session addendum in mind. The exemplars produced by this study might influence program developers at other institutions to experiment with, and potentially implement, similar curricular and instructional approaches. Their perspectives and experiences may then be shared in subsequent studies.

The epicenter of the program would remain the traditional classroom, as it was here that content delivery would take place; with this said, the PLTL meeting would provide participant students the opportunity to address this content with classmates, in an environment absent of an instructor or other figure of authority. As Krienke (2017) makes clear, this student-guided structure must maintain a sense of organization, in order for it to achieve its ultimate aim: to address classroom content, how it intersects with students' moral and ethical consciousness, if at all, and how it may be integrated and applied beyond the classroom and university. It is unclear if PLTL sessions conducted in STEM fields share aims related specifically to personal morals and ethics not related to practice

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(practice-related research addressing moral and ethical considerations is abundant), as literature supporting this has yet to be discovered; however, peer-to-peer sessions associated with STEM courses, as with those conducted in the program evaluated for this study, do employ an instructorless, student-centric approach, encourage students to address content deeply and meaningfully, and make clear the importance of intersecting course content with the real world. Similar aims may be germane in other circumstances, including those unrelated to academics – e.g. business, industry, or anywhere critical thinking skills and content synthesis are expected.

Another very clear objective of PLTL, in both STEM and humanities and social sciences coursework, is to arouse in student participants an interest in the presented subject matter (Krienke & Hendrickson et. al, 2017, p. 3). Colbeck et. al (2000) concluded, as did the founding members of this program, that heightened content interest has the potential to yield more positive learning outcomes. The results of this study support this notion. Referring back to the participant narratives presented in chapter five, interest played a vital role in student intellectual and social growth, during the course of the research semester. For some, the subject matter did not sufficiently interest them; rather, it equated to coursework that had to be completed to earn a degree. This trend seemed to change, as a result of the PLTL addendum. Among the reasons was the opportunity to examine traditional subject matter in untraditional ways, creating a sense of enjoyment. This sense of enjoyment created openness to new ideas and then a willingness to explore them more deeply and critically (Pekrun et. al, 2010, p. 91).

Interestingly, PLTL session dialogue had a tendency to reemerge in the traditional classroom, which then permitted instructors to share their perspectives with the group.

Per interviews conducted after the conclusion of this study, it was revealed that many student participants viewed these perspectives as beneficial in expanding their own; however, they seemed to appreciate that instructor commentary was shared, after the opportunity for self-directed discussion had passed. The general conclusion, then, was that PLTL generated subject matter interest where perhaps none had existed previously. This facilitated enjoyment, which then facilitated opportunities for critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge. There is an abundance of literature equivocating subject enjoyment with positive learning outcomes, but none has been identified as correlating PLTL with subject matter enjoyment, in subjects outside of the STEM fields. This research may perhaps encourage future inquiries related to PLTL as a mechanism for stimulating in student populations a wider appreciation of a variety of academic topics.

At the core of this study, and of the program evaluated for it, is critical thinking skill acquisition and the learning outcomes it facilitates. After examining an extensive body of scholarship, it is clear that reaching a consensus on the forms and functions of critical thinking is impossible; with this noted, many definitions seem to merge on certain core principles: questioning, logical, reasonable, and fair-minded evaluation, reflection, and dissemination of answers and ideas, and individual and collaborative problem solving. The manner in which the preceding is approached, and ultimately achieved, is decidedly subjective in nature; however, in focusing specifically on this study, the results yielded from the collected data support that the above referenced principles offered general guidance for program participants. At this juncture, though, it is unclear whether such was achieved intuitively or intentionally. In my estimation it began for many student

participants as an effort to address the critical thinking principles to which program faculty alluded at the beginning of the semester; thereafter, it evolved, almost naturally, into the student's academic and social consciousness. Further evaluation might confirm or refute this supposition, but a tentative conclusion, based on evidence generated by this study, is that PLTL employed as a supplement to traditional classroom instruction creates a pathway to more sophisticated critical thinking skill acquisition and deep process content synthesis. Exactly how this was achieved requires additional assessment.

When critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge were determined as needing improvement in students undertaking humanities and social sciences coursework at the university in which this study was conducted, it became necessary to identify exemplars conceived to enable these improvements. Program administrators referred to one of the preeminent works of Dr. Ernest Boyer (1995) as their initial exemplar. This study likewise references this work, but in much more depth, and with correlative support from preceding exemplars, both from Boyer and other scholars. The purpose for expanding on these exemplars was to demonstrate how theory and practice had intersected to create a comprehensive academic program that encourages the learning outcomes Boyer spent a career seeking to improve in higher education.

As with most dissertation studies, the function of this one is to draw parallels between existing scholarship and practice and the topic(s) the researcher seeks to discover. From this research, the ultimate objective is to generate new scholarship and encourage new practice – to contribute well-considered, examinable knowledge to an existing, much larger body of knowledge. Boyer's works are a few, among several, bodies of knowledge referenced for this research, and it is from these foundations that

evidence supporting specific theories and practices have emerged. For examples, Boyer (1998) encourages in his Academic Bill of Rights such curricular and instructional ideologies as removing barriers to interdisciplinary studies, building on the freshman foundation, and linking communication skills and coursework (p. 12 – 13). This study was designed, in part, to determine if these ideologies were practical in the laboratory setting, which they proved to be. What is interesting is that another researcher may employ the same paradigms to her/his research and achieve entirely different results. The point is that published studies offer a research precedent on which to base future studies, just as had those foregoing this one.

To support whether or not the suppositions of Boyer and others held merit beyond the words in a scholarly publication, large-scale, comprehensive, longitudinal studies were necessary. For this dissertation, the Organisation of Economic and Cooperative Development's (2012) (OECD) Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) examination was referenced. The resulting data led the OECD to conclude that critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge were becoming increasingly less evident in college and university student populations, especially upon graduation. Thus, it deemed necessary that colleges and universities examine curriculum and instruction related to these learning outcomes. This is exactly what the program examined throughout this study was designed to accomplish, and the results generated support that positive learning outcomes related to critical thinking and content synthesis have occurred. While this research presents such a conclusion on a very small scale – much smaller than that generated by large, multinational research bodies – it does support

(in part) the findings of precedent studies. The aim, hereafter, is to build on these precedents, in order to identify a clear trend, or lack thereof, in collected data.

To conclude, this study reflects on the origins of peer-led team learning, both locally and globally, and explains its emergence in post-secondary education. It reflects on the curricular and instructional priorities of many colleges and universities and makes reference to scholarship indicating how these priorities should change. That is, the literature seems to conclude that curricular and instructional models designed to benefit the largest number of students should guide administrative policies and practices. This dissertation draws similar conclusions – that re-prioritizing student learning outcomes might reinvigorate in student populations the ability to think critically and process content more deeply. Subsequent research, whether my own or that of other researchers, will support or refute whether this tentative conclusion has merit, just as this study has done with previous exemplars.

Limitations

Certain limiting factors influenced the breadth and scope of this study. Foremost, the participant population was, at the project's conclusion, fairly small: N = 6. Group interviews containing 21 members were conducted on multiple occasions, and individual interviews on several others. While these structured, semi-structured, and unstructured sessions yielded worthwhile data – data that has been utilized throughout this study – additional interview opportunities, as well as sufficient opportunities to code, decode, and disseminate their content, might have resulted in a more comprehensive sampling. A

longitudinal study will hopefully bridge any gaps the condensed nature of this study has created, if indeed any exist.

As with the above, the questionnaire forms given to program participants at the beginning of this study produced usable and meaningful information, highlighting everything from student perspectives and attitudes, to their understanding of critical thinking and knowledge processing characteristics; however, the opportunity to generate and distribute additional questionnaire forms related to these topics might have benefited this study, as they may have assisted in producing more identifiable patterns in perceptions and expectations of targeted learning outcomes.

Implications for Practice

This research reveals that peer-led team learning as an addendum to humanities and social sciences coursework produces positive critical thinking skill and deeper process content knowledge outcomes in student participants. The program examined in this study is designed to merge traditional classroom content with the personal experiences of its participants, which is then meant to reveal its applicability to their lives, those of their classmates, of members of the communities in which they reside, and of individuals across the globe. While peer-led team learning is an accepted instructional paradigm in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, there is little evidence to suggest its use in humanities and social sciences programs. Projects such as this one might facilitate a change in this trend.

To continue, this study identified that peer-led team learning sessions cultivated in a percentage of student participants the willingness to assume leadership roles, both in

PLTL sessions and in the traditional classroom. This was a new experience for many of them, as for the first time in either their personal or academic lives, it afforded them the chance to assume this type of responsibility. Per my experiences, this proved important, for multiple reasons. Foremost, there were instances where reticent students developed into those who approached the learning process deeply and holistically; that is, students who, for a variety of reasons, had demonstrated an unwillingness to interact with their instructors and/or peers, and with the content being addressed in their courses, evolved to not only do the opposite, but also to encourage the opposite in their classmates. The result was more engaging learning environments for a larger number of program participants. According to Solis and Turner (2017), an important function of a university education is to assist in developing individuals capable of assuming leadership roles in their communities and professions, once they leave the university (p. 4). A program such as this one seems to encourage this type of development.

Finally, emerging evidence not addressed in this dissertation, but which has emerged in data collection following its completion, suggests that students attending program courses achieved better academic success in courses outside of the program. For instance, five students interviewed following the conclusion of the Spring semester of 2017 indicated that program courses taught them to approach their studies in other departments on campus more critically and with an eye toward deeper process content synthesis – to relate course content to their own lives as well as those of their peers. Three of the interviewees indicated they had created unofficial peer-led team learning sessions, as a supplement to these courses. The purpose for sharing this information is to demonstrate that programs employing the curricular and instructional strategies discussed

throughout this dissertation may have a positive impact on learning outcomes in subjects outside of the STEM fields and humanities and social sciences – e.g. education, law, medicine, criminal justice, business, and other academic subjects.

Rationale from Previous Research

While the data for this dissertation study was collected during the Spring semester of 2017, my history with the referenced program is an extensive one. I am among its founding members and have studied it, both individually and with multiple stakeholders, for approaching a decade. I have also written term papers addressing its curricular and instructional philosophies and practices for this doctoral program, had qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods articles published, and given speeches to stakeholders as well as potential stakeholders. It is from each of these experiences I determined a dissertation-length project might be worthwhile. The concluding purpose was to generate narratives that provided for individuals not involved with the program a comprehensive accounting of program participant experiences and the learning outcomes associated with them. From these narratives, those studying this, and similar, projects will perhaps be better informed when deciding whether or not this pedagogical approach is appropriate for their instructional circumstances. The feedback I have received throughout this process indicates its potential utility in a variety of disciplines and in multiple levels of the academy: primary, secondary, post-secondary, and post-graduate structures included.

Recommendations for Future Research

Since its inception in 2010 – 11, the program's structure has not changed. It is comprised of a cohort of courses from individual departments housed in the College of

Humanities and Social Sciences at the university in which this study was conducted. The departments referenced include English, History, and Philosophy. There are five additional departments in this college. Including them in future short-term and longitudinal studies would likely produce larger, richer data sets, which might elucidate further how program courses facilitate positive learning outcomes across the College.

Students wishing to enroll in program courses were required to register for a minimum of two available program sections (e.g. English and History, History and Philosophy, etc.), with each course classified in the university's enrollment system as "open registration". This, in itself, is not a concern but merely confirms that no prerequisite requirements were imposed on students – e.g. completion of associated coursework or minimum semester hours attempted. In future semesters the program will require student participants to enroll in a minimum of three available courses per semester; additionally, registration will only be made available to students who have been advised by the program's director or appointed representative. Such course load and registration policies might yield results differing from those presented in this study (and related, studies) and thus require further investigation.

Interviews with program administrators revealed that a percentage of enrolled students were unaware of the differences between traditional department course offering and those unique to this program. To alleviate confusion resulting from this unawareness, the university's enrollment system evolved to provide detailed course information, which was designed to guide students toward coursework appropriate for their individual degree plans. For those who still registered for one, or multiple, program courses but had not intended to do so, administrators and faculty permitted them to transfer into a traditional

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offering, so long as a request to do so was made before the conclusion of the university's late registration period, or before the eighth class day. Many choose not to make this request. No students choosing this path were interviewed for this study, so it is unclear whether or not the program produced for them positive learning outcomes related to critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process content knowledge.

Participant students were responsible for understanding that peer-led team learning sessions were held on a biweekly basis, in place of the traditional classroom component, and on days, and at locations, determined by the program's director. In reference to location, sessions are comprised of an equal number of student participants – e.g. a class or fifteen will be divided into three groups of five – so multiple session locations are necessary. Further studies might be necessary to determine if session location plays any role in its functionality; furthermore, examination of group sizes might elucidate whether the number of participants in a given session influences its productivity.

Finally, because PLTL sessions comprise a large percentage of the student's final course average, s/he must attend them regularly or provide sufficient documentation relating why this did not occur. Sessions typically begin the third week of the semester, or by the fifteenth class day. Referring to the former, the research presented in this dissertation supports that PLTL sessions facilitate positive learning outcomes in a significant percentage of student participants; however, further research might reveal whether or not making PLTL optional rather than compulsory might influence these outcomes. As for the latter, additional data is needed to determine if holding the initial

PLTL session at a predetermined point in the semester influences student participation and/or short and long-term learning objectives.

Threats to Internal and External Validity

Before I began the official research process for this study (January 2017), I was careful to select participants and, subsequently, individual cases, that would generate streams of data that were practical, replicable, accurate, and trustworthy. I feel I was able to achieve this, by collecting and reviewing a significant volume of data produced from surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and writing samples. Prospective student and faculty participants who provided negligible or incomplete responses to the questions developed for these various data streams were not selected; that is, their responses were separated from those of potential participants who offered sufficient, carefully considered detail, in response to these questions. From this point, additional screening was performed, and only the most comprehensive data was selected, particularly in reference to the cases selected for final presentation. These processes were lengthy and came to completion, after many days of careful consideration and reconsideration. I am confident the narrative portion of this study reflects the time and effort undertaken to select prudently the data that most adequately and accurately represents this topic.

A primary reason I selected the cases presented in chapter five of this study was my supposition that future researchers might be able to replicate the multiple streams of data and their associated conclusions. A further supposition is that this could be achieved in a variety of environments and diversity of subjects. The joining link between this and other studies is the presented research questions. If these are asked and explored

similarly, the theory is they will produce similar results; what's more, they might potentially yield more refined questions, which might assist future researchers to conduct more comprehensive studies. The purpose of this statement is to reinforce that the basic structures of this study are sufficient enough to guide other studies – structures that should produce similar, or potentially more refined, results.

Among the concerns prevalent in qualitative research, especially in phenomenological and narrative studies, is how the researcher interacts with the individuals and environments he is studying (Creswell, 2017, p. 76). I took special care to be as inactive a participant as possible, when performing observations, in the classroom and PLTL sessions. During interviews, I was occasionally more engaged, as I felt that being so would help participants to feel more at ease with the research process. Upon reflection, this seemed to be true. All questionnaire, survey, and written data were modified, insofar as they were restoried, to create a linear, readable narrative. Their content was not altered in any way. Being passive, when necessary, more active, at specifically designated times, and relating written data, to align with the participant's true perspectives, resulted in what I believe is an honest and authentic representation of participant experiences in the herein referenced program.

To conclude, all data presented in this study was member checked by the referenced, and additional, participants. Their information, in the form of various streams of data, provided me the information I needed to organize a cogent narrative. Once this narrative was created, each participating member supplied verbal and written feedback, indicating whether or not my translations of data most accurately represented their responses. In each of the cases presented herein confirmation was provided. With this

noted, the drafting and validation processes were lengthy, but the result of this effort is a meticulous and dependable case narrative.

Final Conclusions

Prior to beginning this study, much attention was paid to developing research questions that were thorough and addressable in a project of this size and scope; furthermore, significant effort went into examining, reexamining, cross-referencing, and incorporating the most robust and current scholarship available, into the review of literature that preceded the data collection processes undertaken for this study. This was necessary to illustrate how the assessment of instructional archetypes such as those theorized by Boyer (1987, 1990, and 1995), the results of large-scale sociological and academic testing mechanisms such as those produced by the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) (2102) examination, as well as the many supplemental studies relating the utility of collaborative and peer-led team learning in post-secondary education, guided the development, implementation, and administration of this program, and functioned as scholastic reference points for this study.

The review of literature is important for establishing the foundation and rationale for a study of this type, along with demonstrating to readers the investigator possesses a sophisticated understanding of the topic-related philosophies and practices that preceded it; however, the most meaningful part for me has been producing scholarship unique to my own pedagogic interests. Chapter three was the beginning point, and it was from here that my interests in, and experiences with, the subject matter began to guide the project. First, I carefully deconstructed the curricular and instructional methodologies utilized in

the referenced program, by elucidating its finer points, particularly related to its curricular and instructional makeup; thereafter, I examined and selected research paradigms I felt would afford me the best opportunity to produce a comprehensive accounting of my topic. The qualitative narrative, phenomenological, and practical action research approaches, with heavy emphasis on narration, were what I chose. In reflection, I feel these were correct choices.

The narratives generated from many hours spent reviewing questionnaire, interview, observation, and artifact data are meaningful to me because they provide a lucid glimpse into how the referenced program has had a meaningful impact on the lives of its participants – administrators, faculty, and students, alike. I really enjoyed watching these individuals thrive in the program – watching their interest in the subject matter, ability to engage their peers civilly and with genuine curiosity about their personal narratives, and aptitude for the coursework, across disciplines, evolve from the first class day to the last. This is an experience I will always hold dear because it is related to something that I, along with individuals about whom I care deeply, had a hand in creating. This program is changing student's academic lives, and perhaps their lives outside of the academy, by simply giving them a forum to express their natural curiosity, and to explore that curiosity with individuals whose life experiences and worldviews differ from their own. It is the real world within the sheltered world of the university; the hope is that merging these two worlds will help students to be more polished critical thinkers and have better command of the subjects they study – to become productive members of the communities in which they live, work, and play. The conclusions evinced by this dissertation study seem to indicate a move toward all of the above.

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APPENDIX A

**University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans**

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Dr. Richard B. Speaker

Co-Investigator: Daniel E. Pratt

Date: February 2, 2017

Protocol Title: A Narrative Case Study Examining the Influences of Peer-led Team
Learning on Student Critical Thinking Skill Acquisition and Deeper
Process Learning in a Midsize University Humanities and Social
Sciences Program

IRB#: 07Jan17

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures are compliant with the
University of New Orleans and federal guidelines. The above referenced human
subjects protocol has been reviewed and approved using expedited procedures (under
45 CFR 46.116(a) category (7).

Approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the
procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to
implementation. Use the IRB number listed on this letter in all future correspondence
regarding this proposal.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you
are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project!

Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

APPENDIX B

Dear potential study participant,

My name is Daniel Pratt, and I am a doctoral student working under the direction of Professor Dr. Richard Speaker in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education and Human Development, at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting a qualitative, narrative case study examining the influences of peer-led team learning on student critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process learning in a midsize university humanities and social sciences program.

This consent form is meant to solicit your voluntary participation in the below described study. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to: 1) participate in observations and interviews, both of which will be audio and/or video recorded with some frequency; 2) complete questionnaires honestly and to the best of your ability; 3) allow the researcher to analyze and deconstruct completed coursework; and 4) complete all other program course requirements, as outlined in program syllabi. Please understand that participation in this study is voluntary, and that you may withdraw from it at any time.

Brief Study Description

Those of you admitted to the examined program will be required to attend biweekly peer-led team learning (PLTL) breakout sessions, in order to fulfill one of the requirements of your course (or courses). As your instructor will explain, PLTL breakout sessions are out-of-class meetings conducted by you, the student participant. Your instructor will not be present, though a moderator will be. The moderator's function is to record attendance, mitigate occasions of incivility, and report pertinent information back to instructors. S/he will not conduct or directly participate in the sessions.

The primary purpose of PLTL is to supplement and enhance your classroom instruction, with the ultimate objective to improve your ability to think critically and process information more deeply and meaningfully. This dissertation study is designed to examine the effects of PLTL breakout sessions on these important cognitive processes.

Please understand that your willingness or unwillingness to participate in this study will in no any way enhance or hinder your ability to participate fully in PLTL sessions; furthermore, neither will determine how your instructor evaluates your semester work and participation in her/his course (or courses).

Data Collection Procedures

Data collected from observations, interviews, questionnaires, completed coursework (primarily writing samples), and other qualitative research tools will be used exclusively, and confidentially, to fulfill a portion of the requirements necessary to complete this dissertation study, per the Graduate School, College of Education and Human Development, and Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of New Orleans. The researcher will keep student participation data in a secured physical location at his residence. Only he will know the identity of study participants,

and all participant information, including names, or other identifying material, will not be revealed in the results of this research. All participant data will be destroyed, at the conclusion of this study.

Study Timeline

This project will begin in February of 2017, continue throughout the spring semester and conclude on Thursday, May 11th, the final day of classes. There will be no additional work assigned as a result of your involvement in this study.

Additional Information

There is no potential risk of physical, emotional, intellectual, and/or social harm associated with participation in this study. Although you may not benefit directly from participating in it, you will make a major contribution to establishing how PLTL breakout sessions influence critical thinking skill acquisition and deeper process learning in participant populations. Data generated as a result of your cooperation may benefit students who choose to enroll in programs such as this one, in future semesters; additionally, your assistance may allow program administrators and instructors to design courses that increase the likelihood of student success.

Sincerely,

Daniel E. Pratt

Doctoral Candidate

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

The University of New Orleans

Email: depratt@uno.edu

Phone: (936) 443-3324

Your signature on this form means that you understand the presented information, and that you consent willingly to participate in this study. Your signature also means that you consent to be video and/or audio recorded at points to be specified clearly by the researcher, while this study is being conducted. Finally, you understand that participation in this study is voluntary, and that you may withdraw from it at any time.

Printed Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-3990.

APPENDIX C

PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING and CRITICAL THINKING SKILL ACQUISITION –
FRESHMAN STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

1. How do you define knowledge? What do you consider as its role in critical thinking and learning, in general?

2. Tell me about your understanding of peer-led team learning.

3. Tell me about your understanding of critical thinking as a life skill.

4. What do you envision as the primary components of peer-led team learning? How might they improve or hinder critical thinking skill acquisition?

5. Did you have any experience(s) with peer-led team learning during your primary and/or secondary schooling? If yes, please explain.

6. What do you perceive as the differences between courses employing peer-led team learning components and courses that do not?

7. How do you envision courses employing peer-led team learning components versus those that do not influencing critical thinking skill acquisition? Please explain.

8. How do envision other students responding to the use of peer-led team learning as a component to their coursework?

9. What do you believe might be the advantages of peer-led team learning? The disadvantages? Might either affect critical thinking skill acquisition?

10. How would you define classroom environment?

11. How might the classroom environment affect critical thinking skill acquisition? Please explain.

12. Do you believe undergraduate university students should be afforded the freedom to explore course content, without an instructor present? Why or why not?

13. How might lessons supplemented by peer-led team learning breakout sessions encourage freedom to explore course content? Please explain.

14. How might freedom to explore course content facilitate critical thinking skill acquisition? Please explain.

15. How do you envision peer-led team learning functioning amongst diverse populations of students? Please explain.

16. Might cultural differences maximize the usefulness of peer-led team learning breakout sessions? Diminish it? Please explain.

17. How might peer-led team learning encourage students to connect content across multiple courses? Please explain.

18. How might connecting content across multiple courses facilitate better critical thinking skill acquisition? Hinder it? Please explain.

19. What assessments should instructors use to evaluate whether or not peer-led team learning breakout sessions are promoting critical thinking skill acquisition? Please explain and offer examples.

20. Now, and in future semesters, what do you envision as your role in courses that employ peer-led team learning as a supplement to standard classroom instruction?

21. As a student, what types of learning tools do you use outside of the classroom?

22. Do learning tools have a place in peer-led team learning breakout sessions? Please explain.

23. Should breakout sessions center exclusively on peer-to-peer discussion? Why or why not?

24. What do you envision as the role, or roles, of peer-led team learning breakout session coordinators/moderators? Are you interested in becoming one, in future semesters?

APPENDIX D

<u>PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING and CRITICAL THINKING SKILL ACQUISITION –</u>

<u>SOPHOMORE STUDENT PARTICIPANTS</u>

1. Referring to your experiences in the EWCAT program, please define peer-led team learning. Please compare this definition with that from your entry into the program.

2. Referring to your experiences in the EWCAT program, please define critical thinking. Please compare this definition with that from your entry into the program.

3. What importance, if any, do you place on peer-led team learning as a supplement to standard classroom instruction? Does it assist in improving critical thinking skill acquisition? Please explain.

4. Beyond your time in the EWCAT program, what, if any, were your experiences with peer-led team learning? Please explain.

5. Has your ability to think critically improved or diminished, during your time as a participant in the EWCAT program? Please explain in detail, giving specific examples.

6. Has your understanding of classroom content improved or diminished, as a result of your participation in the EWCAT program? Please explain in detail, giving specific examples.

7. Do your end-of-semester course grades indicate below average, average, or above average mastery of course content? Do you find these evaluative criterions arbitrary or fair-minded? Please explain.

8. How do you envision incoming program participants responding to the use of peer-led team learning as a component to their coursework? How might their initial responses compare to your own?

9. After a year as a participant in the EWCAT program, what do you believe might be the advantages of peer-led team learning? The disadvantages? Please explain.

10. For those who are coordinators/moderators, in what way(s) do you examine the foundational knowledge of your peers, during breakout sessions? Does this influence your interactions with them?

11. Do you surmise that foundational knowledge improves or reduces the quality of a breakout session? Why? How? Please explain, citing specific examples.

12. What strategies do you use to help contextualize course content with incoming student participants, during breakout sessions? Please explain, citing specific examples.

13. Do the above techniques engage or disengage your session participants? What strategies have you employed to engage recalcitrant participants? Please reference specific examples.

14. Is there value in encouraging program participants to think critically, or to strive to think critically? Whether yes or no, please explain.

15. Did coordinators/moderators from your first year in the EWCAT program encourage you to think critically, or strive to think critically? How or how not? Please explain, citing specific examples.

16. How do you gauge student interest in the subject matter being discussed? Please cite specific examples.

17. Should students be afforded the freedom to explore course content, without an instructor present? Why or why not?

18. Were you afforded the freedom to explore course content, without an instructor present? If so, was this a positive or negative experience? Did it help facilitate in you a noticeable ability to think more critically? Please explain.

19. How did instructors assess your work, to determine whether or not peer-led team learning breakout sessions promoted critical thinking skill and content acquisition? Please explain and offer examples.

20. How would you define the "culture" of a classroom, and do you consider it to be important? Why or why not?

21. How, if at all, did the above affect your ability to think critically, to synthesize course content, and to enjoy the process of content acquisition? Please explain.

22. If diverse populations of students were represented during your first year in the EWCAT program, how did this maximize or diminish the effectiveness of the peer-led team learning breakout sessions in which you participated? Please explain, citing specific examples.

23. How, if at all, did peer-led team learning breakout sessions encourage you to connect content across multiple courses? Please explain, citing specific examples.

24. If the above occurred, did this facilitate in you a more pronounced ability to think critically? If this did not occur, how was it a hindrance? Please explain.

21. As a student, what types of learning tools do you use outside of the classroom?

22. Per your experiences, do learning tools have a place in peer-led team learning breakout sessions? Or, should they center exclusively on peer-to-peer discussion? Why or why not? Please explain, citing specific examples.

24. For session coordinators/moderators, what did you envision as your role, or roles, during a breakout session? Did you fulfill this role, according to your initial expectations? How did this role change, throughout your experience? Please explain.

25. Are you interested in continuing as, or becoming a, session coordinator/moderator in future semesters?

APPENDIX E

<u>PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING and CRITICAL THINKING SKILL ACQUISITION –</u>

<u>INSTRUCTORS</u>

1. How do you define knowledge? What do you consider as its role in critical thinking and learning, in general?

2. Why choose peer-led team learning as a supplement to your teaching?

3. Why do you feel that peer-led team learning will assist students to become more effective critical thinkers? Please explain.

4. Per your experiences, what are the key differences between courses employing peer-led team learning components and courses that do not?

5. How would you define classroom environment, and do you consider it to be important? Why or why not?

6. How might classroom environment affect critical thinking skill acquisition? Please explain.

7. Do you believe undergraduate university students should be afforded the freedom to explore course content, without you present? Why or why not?

8. Per your experiences, how do lessons supplemented by peer-led team learning breakout sessions encourage freedom to explore course content? Please explain.

9. Per your experiences, how has permitting students the freedom to explore course content facilitated critical thinking skill acquisition? Please explain.

10. Per your experiences, how have peer-led team learning breakout sessions functioned amongst diverse populations of students? Please explain.

11. Have cultural differences maximized the usefulness of peer-led team learning breakout sessions? Diminish them? Please explain.

12. Per your experiences, how have peer-led team learning breakout sessions encouraged students to connect content across multiple courses? Please explain.

13. Per your experiences, how has connecting content across multiple courses facilitated better critical thinking skill acquisition? Hindered it? Please explain.

14. What assessments do you use to determine whether or not peer-led team learning breakout sessions are promoting critical thinking skill acquisition? Please explain and offer examples.

15. Do learning tools have a place in peer-led team learning breakout sessions? Please explain.

16. Should breakout sessions center exclusively on peer-to-peer discussion? Why or why not?

17. If a "knowledge gap" exists between a significant number of student participants, what instructional strategies will you employ to close it? Do you envision peer-led team learning breakout sessions as useful tools in achieving this? Why or why not?

18. With the notion of a "knowledge gap" aside, how might you encourage students who are failing to demonstrate improvement in critical thinking skill and content acquisition to approach more effectively the subjects with which they are struggling? Please offer specific examples.

19. Are you willing to modify your curriculum, along with your instructional techniques, to accommodate struggling learners? If so, how? If not, why?

20. In what way(s) do you demonstrate the importance of critical thinking in your own teaching? How do you express this to beginning university students?

VITA

Daniel Pratt teaches 8th grade English Language Arts and Reading at a middle school in Texas. He also coaches football, basketball, and track and field. This is his first year teaching at the middle school level but his fifteenth year teaching, overall. Previously, Dr. Pratt taught developmental and freshman English courses at Sam Houston State University, where he was a graduate assistant, and Blinn College; thereafter, he was a graduate assistant in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at The University of New Orleans. He has also taught primary and secondary grade-levels at two private schools, including one that he owned and operated.

Dr. Pratt earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in English Literature at Sam Houston State University. His academic interests include English and curricular and instructional pedagogy, Tudor & Stuart drama - including Shakespearean drama - composition and rhetoric, and interdisciplinary peer-led team learning.