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ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores peak learning (PL) experiences through a semi-longitudinal approach across the life space of multiple groups of learners. Appreciative inquiry (AI) was used to gather data through interviews that resulted in unique examples of PL experiences. Once collected, a novel application of phenomenology was employed to identify the structural elements of participants' experiences. Finally, thematic analysis was applied to the aggregated structural elements of each group to identify those common to all who participated in the AI. The final synthesis description was written in alignment with the structural themes and could be applied as a qualitative assessment to determine the presence of peak learning in learning environments. The description also serves as a foundation of the idea that may be extended through future research.

Introduction

In this paper, I sought to understand peak learning (PL) experiences, when they occur, and the themes of the experience that are present across various areas. My concern was not focused on the specific content of the experience such as an activity, or particular life lesson learned. Instead, I was interested in the experience of PL across all life domains. To that end I have collected stories of PL using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and facilitated the identification of its structural elements in groups using a novel, but not unprecedented (Wertz, 2005) application of Moustakas (1994) phenomenological method which is grounded in Husserl's work (1962). The final step was to apply thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to the aggregated structural elements to identify themes present across the groups of participants who have contributed to this work, and construct a thematically organized phenomenological description of PL experience. The description is a statement of the experience that can be used to assess other learning experiences and as a foundation for future research. The paper concludes by connecting PL to a host of experiential learning approaches that may contribute to peak learning experiences.

Peak learning

Bloom built upon Maslow's (1959) ideas of peak experience, in general, to focus on peak learning moments in classrooms. He claimed that these stood in contrast to the everyday "flatland" (1981, p. 198) of school-based learning and were "moments of truth" (Bloom, 1981, p. 195). He and others (Beard, Smith, & Clegg, 2007) described students' peak class experiences as "an extreme type of emotional reaction" where they had a "momentary loss of fears and anxiety, and their defenses and controls were suspended" (p. 195). Schoel, Prouty, and Radcliffe (1988) studied adventure-based learning which resulted in their interpretation of Maslow's (1954, 1962) ideas regarding peak experiences and the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1975) on flow as similar experiences.

While Bloom was concerned with classroom learning, the work here is focused on peak learning experiences across the life space, including the classroom. Several authors (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Ewert, 1989a,1989b; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Nadler, 1995; Schoel et al., 1988) have described this as learning that takes place through adventure, when one takes a risk, experiences personal growth and heightened consciousness, experiences flow, improves one's self-concept, experiences leadership, or self-actualization. These examples align with work on experiential learning which can happen virtually anywhere (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Greenaway, 2007; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004) but not simply through the sheer activity of the event. Reflection is often considered a critical element in order for learning to transpire. Dewey defined this as "active, persistent and careful

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consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends" (1938, p. 9). Kolb (1984) and others (Anseel, Lievens, & Schollaert, 2009; Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993; Dewey, 1966; Joplin, 1981; Maurer, Leheta, & Conklin, 2017) have also noted reflection's role in experiential learning.

Martin and Leberman (2004) studied adventure-based experiential learning and discovered that peak learning was not confined only to those experiences which included risk. These authors (Leberman & Martin, 2004) and others (Flor, 1991; Gilsdorf, 1995; Robinson, 1992) found that situations characterized by reflective and socially contextualized activities result in the most learning. This also includes nonphysical activities (Flor, 1991; Gilsdorf, 1995; Robinson, 1992). Dickson, Chapman, and Murrell (2000) found distinctive nuances regarding risk sensitivity that clearly shift across individuals which are relevant for effective service in the teaching, managing and facilitating professions. In addition, they found evidence that supported Leberman and Martin's (2004) work that risk is not always a physical experience and may, in fact, inhere in spiritual, psychological, or social experiences. The psychological, or social domain was further borne out by Matsumoto (2007) who found that peak learning could occur for American college students who were learning the Japanese language.

This review provides a perspective on related forms of learning; however, it provides these reflections without offering a thorough summary of the experience. While helpful, I am left wondering about the lived experience of PL across the general life space and if there is anything common to these domains; are there timeless, foundational human experiences that accompany PL regardless of content? The research question here then, is to identify the phenomenological essences of peak learning experiences and provide a phenomenological description of that experience. Doing so may lead to greater levels of this form of learning in learning environments, widely interpreted, which is likely to lead to more meaningful and engaging learning experiences for all. With this review, there are three objectives of this work:

(1) Identify the timeless essences of PL.
(2) Provide a thematically organized phenomenological description of peak learning that establishes a point of departure for future research.
(3) Identify resources for creating learning environments that are likely to yield peak learning experiences.

Method

This work employed three methods in the collection and analysis of data which will be described below.

Appreciative inquiry – data collection

Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) is a framework for organizing conversation that focuses on understanding experiences, organizations, people, and relationships when they are most highly functional and life-giving. This departs from more positive science which attempts to inquire in an unbiased way into the natural phenomenon as an unobtrusive observer. In an AI focused inquiry, the assumption of unbiased exploration is discarded as AI is a process interested in a particular form of experience. AI is used to create more of what is desired, and in that way, it is a generative (Bushe, 2007) approach. AI makes sense for this inquiry as it enabled me to study, at a fine level of detail, the contours of a unique experience when at its highest ideal. PL is exactly this – a unique, non-random phenomenon that may not be experienced across the general population.

Using an exercise (Conklin, 2009) employing appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), small groups in classes participated in an AI that sought to understand PL when it was most life-giving and in full bloom for these participants. The exercise included all four steps of the 4D model, discovery, dream, design, and destiny (Mann, 2001; Ricketts & Willis, 2001) in constructing peak learning experiences in classes. However, of the four steps, only the discovery step is retrospective and the data generated through this step is the data source for this research. The discovery step establishes an image of the ideal. This is then unpacked through the phenomenological analysis described below, so as to understand the fundamental essence of the experience and aid in creating PL over the course. The discovery asked groups to reflect on peak learning experiences in their lives through a set of 'conversation starters' (Appendix A). Conversation starters helped stimulate dialogue to aid in revealing the essence of their PL experiences.

The AI (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) was preceded by some discussion of PL as learning that occurred in situations that called participants to their learning edge. Participants' PL experiences ranged from single events at a given moment, to experiences that developed over an extended period. Examples included moving to new towns, new apartments, houses, or

neighborhoods, starting or losing jobs, entering college or graduate school, challenging work or school assignments that stretched them in new and novel ways, getting married, new roommates, new romantic relationships, a change in family structure, or dealing with a birth or death. These stories contained a rich emotional palette including excitement, sadness, joy, happiness, threat, fear, novelty, and anticipation.

Phenomenology

Husserl proposed that we "return to the things themselves" (1962, p. 168) which is at the heart of his phenomenology. Frankl described phenomenology as "an attempt to describe the way in which man understands himself, in which he interprets his own existence, far from preconceived patterns of interpretation and explanation such as are furnished by psychodynamic or socio-economic hypotheses" (1988, p. 7). It is a reflexive practice (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Hardy & Clegg, 1997; Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg, 2001; Harley, Hardy, & Alvesson, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Schipper, 1999; Schon, 1983) that introduces us to ourselves and how we understand our experience, free of theories or theories in the making (Schein, 1985). Other authors have described this as doubting what is taken as given (Fink, 1995) or a "systematic suspension of our belief in the reality of these phenomena" (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 138). By doubting what is, the participants and I entered the phenomenological reduction which helped us answer the question "How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98)?

In this work, the phenomenological reduction was facilitated through small group conversations as learners sought the structural foundations of their lived experience. I used Wertz's (2005) approach who discussed groups or systems of people who have some common relationship as viable sources of data. The work here falls within this category in the form of student groups in classrooms.

An opening discussion on PL, prior to the AI exercise helped to introduce phenomenology to participants as a way to explore the assumption that learning only happens in a class or around class-related activities. My hope was to suspend "our belief in the reality of these phenomena" (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 138), or what is called the "natural attitude" (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 417) of learning and inquire anew into its many contours. Doing so introduced the transcendental attitude (Husserl, 1962) which doubts what has been assumed to be true and frees us from our unreflective consciousness. This was also accomplished through the opening discussion where we explored rote learning as that intended to acquire facts and ideas, personal learning that may have a significant impact on one's life, learning through experience, and tacit versus explicit learning. These were identified as examples of learning variations that stood outside our pursuit of PL in particular. With this conversation, we were now prepared to explore the essence of learning experiences when they are peak as researchers/practitioners. Merleau-Ponty claimed the only way to understand and know phenomenology is to do it (1962); we were now prepared to do exactly that.

While group conversations covered a broad array of topics in the AI, it was the shared characteristics of PL, common to all of the individual experiences that bridged this AI to peak learning's phenomenological essence (Husserl, 1962) and Moustakas' (1994) invariant constituents. The essence, or invariant constituents, identified by applying phenomenology to the data created in the AI discovery, are what transcend the content of an experience and accompany PL experiences regardless of content. These stand as the experiences' structural foundations. These structural elements are "the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98).

Thematic analysis

Boyatzis (1998) claimed that thematic analysis (TA) is a viable method for use with multiple sources of data. Braun and Clarke (2006) declared it a meaningful tool for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). Given the language here it made sense to apply TA to the aggregated collection of structural elements generated through the many iterations of the AI exercise.

Thematic analysis was conducted in three steps. 1) Sampling and design issues; through this the themes of structural elements were identified and then supported by participants' textural statements. This was achieved through "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). 2) Development of themes and a code; here, attention was placed on creating the greatest distinctions among viable structural elements while avoiding conflation among them. Boyatzis described a "good code" (1998, p. 1) as one that reflects a rich qualitative description of the experience. 3) Validating and using the code; this step was used in subsequent readings of the structural elements as a rubric that increased its validation and sought full bloom of the themes. Saturation was achieved when themes ceased to emerge and existing themes were no longer enhanced by further analysis. The thematic

analysis reached saturation after review of 337 structural descriptors during the third reading and resulted in nine themes of PL.

The unit of analysis was spoken phrases, not full sentences or single words. I applied thematic analysis to the structural foundations and remained at the semantic and explicit level (Boyatzis, 1998), working with the surface level of the language offered by the groups. In doing so, I read and re-read the structural descriptors three times across three weeks, each reading separated from the previous by 1 week. During these readings I made notes in the margins of nascent themes that seemed to be present, however, each successive reading was conducted with a clean print of the structural elements to avoid contaminating that reading with prior thoughts of the emerging themes.
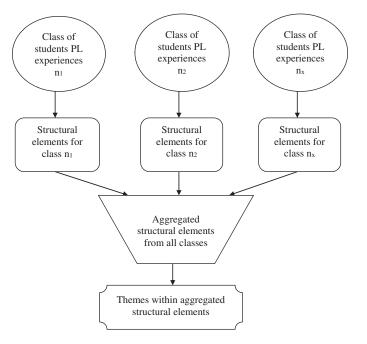
Participants and analysis

Research participants' gender distribution was evenly split between men and women, while approximately 70% of these participants were graduate (masters) level and 30% undergraduates. Participants were 20 to 56 years of age. The data was collected at three universities. Two were small (approximately 4,000 students) private universities, and the third was a large (32,000 students) publicly funded state institution. All participants were enrolled in the college of business. Data were collected at the beginning of 82 graduate and undergraduate level management related courses at the group level where all students in each course participated in a 1.5-h AI exercise on the

first day of these courses. Phenomenological analysis of the AI generated data occurred in each class. Each class generated approximately 12–18 structural elements (Moustakas, 1994) that in the aggregate sum to over 1000 structural descriptions of PL. These structural elements were analyzed using Boyatzis' thematic analysis (1998) described above. A theme was defined as "something important about the data…and…some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

In sum, AI was used to facilitate stories of PL in each of the 82 learning groups. These stories were analyzed by the learners in small groups using phenomenology to identify the structural elements among the textural details of each story. These structural elements were maintained by me over multiple terms. I then applied Thematic Analysis to the aggregated structural elements which resulted in the 9 themes that drive the phenomenological description below.

The process is graphically represented in Figure 1 below.

Thematically organized synthesis description of peak learning

The description below is punctuated with quoted textural comments that represent participants' core experiences of PL which gave way to the structural elements. Again, these structural elements emerged from the phenomenological interpretation shared among participants and are the invariant constituents of peak learning experiences. The textual elements contained below

Figure 1. Graphic model of method

are not exhaustive. They are included to help illustrate the structural essence contained in the nine thematic titles. Using participants' language ensured the authenticity of the phenomenological process and helped reduce abstractions or dilutions through interpretations by me.

I.Stretch, novelty, discomfort, edge experiences

Peak learning is often an uncomfortable experience. Indeed, there may be pain, suffering, and confusion that accompany this learning. Claims that I "found myself in the middle of the deep blue sea – adrift rudderless" with no orienting beacon to guide the way are common and reflect this unpleasant, on-the-edge sensation. At the edge of the abyss there is something unfamiliar and yet seductive, inviting, and palpable for the learner. The need to "see the big picture – times might be tough in the short term, but don't bail out" reflect discomfort and the absence of known responses at the ready. The presence of some vague, misty, unidentified threat or risk is alive for the learner in ways that both attract and repel her simultaneously. Some claimed they were "Discovering positive qualities of self through adversity and opportunities."

This creates a sense of danger as well as the compulsion to persevere despite the risk. Even in their participation in the AI exercise participants commented on the complexity of the conversation starters and how to engage with them. The exercise confronted students with a learning experience that many later said was peak itself. They had never been asked to share their thoughts about how a course should be managed or its focus. Here can be seen the very manifestation of a peak learning experience while it was simultaneously being discussed. As we explored peak learning experiences, we were also having one.

Peak learning experiences confront learners with the possibility of failure to understand and access the new knowledge. The unfamiliar was "painful but life changing." The dissonance creating result is the threat that comprehension may unsettle all that has gone before in ways that require one to reconfigure what once was believed to be known. Learners feel as if they are peering into a chasm. I was "Out of my element; had to deal with it." An insurmountable challenge is at hand which seems to require herculean strength and the compulsion to push on. On the other side of the experience is a relief. Learners expressed a sense of satisfaction for having taken up the challenge of these learning experiences. In the wake of the experience it "made me proud of myself and very confident."

II. Relational nature of peak learning

Relationships accompany peak learning experiences which are characterized by transcending given identities. Participants moved "past egos and roles and operated from the same level." The talk was genuine and authentic. The on-the-edge nature of peak learning invites learners into honest and authentic communication that requires shedding social artifice in service to the greater questions and possibilities of those involved. Transparency with others including "open communication with the professor" moved participants past roles and was at the heart of peak learning. Participants joined together in open dialogue where "informal conversation among others" was the norm and this increased comfort given the novel uncertainty of the situation. Peak learning situations are oftentimes confusing, and many participants experienced unexpected help and guidance from others. "Unexpected" and "enthusiastic" conversations emerged from unlikely outlets to float collective learners' efforts above any response they might muster independently. This resulted in learners claiming they "had good back-up."

Peak learning takes the learner out of her self. Liberation from one's social persona offers subtle invitations to relationships with others. One's availability for these spontaneous conversations and the contributions from unlikely sources highlight the experience and remove it from the gray flatland in which much of life is lived. This "supportive environment led to feelings of accomplishment and confidence." "The experience fostered strong working relationships" that lived beyond the immediate work challenge. There was a shared human network that served all in the pursuit of this new learning. Full and open communication where one felt fully self-expressed facilitated the development of relationships that ultimately served in apprehending new knowledge.

As a special form of relationship, mentors often accompany peak learning experiences. These are people who have taken a special interest and who "saw something in me, some potential or spark." They may provide a sense-making anchor, someone who can "set tone and direction" and help facilitate meaning. These relationships go beyond the demands of the immediate situation remaining intact for extended periods creating "a mutually satisfying relationship" where there was shared "passion for the topic." When a "Professor asked what I think" this student realized that she had gone beyond the traditional and ubiquitous "banking model" (Freire, 1970) of learning present in many learning environments. This was a person-to-person, as opposed to a role-to-role form of learning and this

was experienced at an emotional and personal level where the "Mentor saw something in me."

The social network that develops in these experiences creates a web of knowledge, skills, and capacities that extends beyond the sheer need to meet a challenge. Relationships provide a depth dimension that is a structural element beneath the utility of surmounting any given project. The scenario that calls one to her learning edge initiates the relationship, however, the relationship is the residue that remains which contributes to the interconnected nature of the learner's experience.

III. Self-affirming, validating; the learning was personal

Peak learning is a self-affirming experience which touches a person's deepest levels in ways that affirm some of what she feels and believes she knows. In using new knowledge, that which was novel and stretched them as in theme 1 above, learners gained a purchase on their perspective that enriched the distinctions they were able to make regarding what is known, and that which is new or up for re-negotiation. This provided learners with the "reinforcement [they] needed regarding…interpretations." Peak learning had personal value and was not simply sanitized fact or theory dissociated from the reality of life; it was emotional and was validating. In their connection to the personal learning, there was also a sense that "most students like that kind of learning environment. I think the other emotion it appealed to was that of validation." "The learning was about you" and was a meaningful experience that stayed with the learner and transcended simple acquisition of facts.

Learners moved beyond their own personal experience to feel into that of others. Their shared sense was that others also valued the personal nature of the experience. This ties this theme to the relationality of peak learning above. The relational component was a figural element that affirmed their experience. It also distinguished it from other more two-dimensional, and less self-relevant learning, frequently characterized by the simple memorization of ideas, facts, and data. Here participants "saw consistency and patterns."

IV. A transformative epiphany

Peak learning experiences change us. The emergence of new dimensions of self and self-vis-à-vis world is common. An a-ha sensation often accompanies the learning and results in deep personal revelation. It is an experience that is different than the self-affirming learning above. In peak learning, new meaning begins to be constructed such that learners are opened to new vistas of themselves, how they have constructed their reality, or what they take to be true. It is a shift in their being, how they conceive of themselves, or who they are in a relationship. It alters how they think of the world/cosmos. "Culture shock," "inspired," "lost track of time," "A realization of what the world is really all about," "Had lots of confidence and was then surprised that I didn't know that much after all," and personal "development and evolution" are elements in the experience of peak learning. How they know has much to do with who they are…their personal epistemology is bound up with their ontology. A reintroduction to one's self is part of peak learning. "There was a level of personal experience, development and evolution" and this is what separated it from much of what passes for learning.

Peak learning reserves its special status precisely because it is uncommon. Were it to be one's daily experience, likely it would devolve into just another day of learning, separated from other moments by nothing. While peak learning is not a common experience, given this interpretation perhaps it shouldn't be. How frequent? In what circumstances? With whom? While all good questions, they serve to dilute the experience and remove the learner from its richness thereby reducing it to the level of other unremarkable learning experiences, hence removing it from the category "peak." If one were always having a peak learning experience it becomes mundane, possibly meaningless. Receiving roses every Tuesday at 4:00 PM quickly loses its specialness becoming just another scheduled event absent any apprehension, psychic tension, or personal surprise often present in the grandeur of human experience.

V. Yielding: doubt, faith, humility, and trust in learning

Peak learning is characterized by yielding and "seek[ing] out advice from others." This deference requires that the learner doubt her knowledge and discover the courage to confront her limits in ways that create space for others/ideas. "The best way to overcome that is to listen to those who surround you. By doing so you create trust." There is a certain irony that in order to gain knowledge and wisdom the first step is an admission of its absence. One's humility attracts contribution from outside the self. The paradox is that while confidence is often married to that which is known, here, one must have confidence beyond this to doubt one's own knowledge in order to experience peak learning. How can one yield, doubt, remain uncertain, and publicly confront the limits to one's knowledge,

indeed doubt one's confidence while simultaneously remaining confident about what is known? The cohabitation of these dynamics must share the same psychic space in service to peak learning. Trusting beyond what is known must be alive in the learner as she pursues knowledge that threatens to dismantle the very meaning structures she has erected. Faith in what is unseen accompanies the learner as she actively engages in expanding what might be discovered. Attraction, seduction, confidence, doubt, curiosity, and the courage and desire to expand consciousness transcends any comfort that may be gained from clinging to the familiar. Peak learning is characterized by "trust – you have to be able to let go and have faith" while yielding. The learner must "suspend judgment of what I did not understand" and engage in "empathy to know others' experience." The draw to some, as yet unidentified locale on the distant horizon must so capture the imagination of the learner that she is willing to let go of known structures of knowledge that, perhaps, have outlived their usefulness. Transcendence of what "is" remains at the heart of peak learning and the only way to get there is to give up; to yield while embedded in faith.

VI. Real life/real world

Peak learning experiences have a real-life element to them. They are not simply experiences that live within the confines of a classroom or in theory, but are experiences that have a "real world" connection. Something will be affected by the successful/unsuccessful negotiation of the learning experience. It has weight, impact, and results. While it connects at the intellectual level, the learning also has significant and tangible outcomes for the learner. "I could use what I learned" and "it wasn't just principles in theory but in realistic application" – these realizations magnify the weight of the learning. Learners claimed to "understand the subject" in ways that made the learning meaningful in lived experience and took it beyond the limited role of knowledge for knowledge's sake. The learning came from the school of life and from "real world experience" and was not read to them from textbooks or spouted by professors. In this theme, learning lived at the gritty nexus of thought and action.

VIa. high stakes, risk

A sub-theme of real life/real world is that the learning had high stakes. There was a risk in not succeeding or learning how to navigate the knotty issue that called them to a higher plane. The learner would "succeed or fail" based on what they did and they would have only one attempt at getting it right. There was pressure to succeed and participants learned out of the "need to survive." The imperative nature created certain pressure and tension where "I had a lot at stake in this case...kind of a one shot deal to succeed or fail" and that created a "sense of ownership and ultimate responsibility for the project." Learners called on their deepest reserves and worked with the awareness that there was no second chance. They mobilized their personal resources to achieve performance and success, when the alternative was beyond imagination.

VIb. perseverance

Another sub-theme of the real life/real world character pertains to the need to persevere. "Guess, test, revise" was the mantra that enabled them to push on, reflecting their efficacy. They held onto simple faith that a "high determination to succeed" and the ability to "cope and develop strategies" would enable them to find their way and discover the path to success even when "We made mistakes, learned from them, moved beyond them and gave it another try." Perseverance "in the face of huge odds" and "proving self in the face of doubt" in a real-world context is a structural element of the experience and sets it apart from less meaningful learning experiences where there was some tendency to discount the significance of the moment. Here, the learners recognized the magnitude of what they were encountering that called them to draw upon resources reserved for the most important projects in their lives.

Vb1. meaningful success, mastery

The perseverance subtheme revealed a deeper layer of "meaningful success and mastery" as a structural element of peak learning. Learners said the experience was "fun" and that they "felt an accomplishment" that enabled them to "convey our new knowledge to others." The knowledge went beyond personal meaning and use. They realized that in the final analysis "grades don't count/matter" and this awareness helped them achieve new levels of success. It manifested in the learner in a way that helped them communicate meaningfully with others. Participants felt a level of "achievement [that] led to a sense of competency and power."

Trustworthiness and credibility

Given the uncertainty of the qualitative paradigm, there are reliability and validity issues that need to be addressed. What confidence can I have that the description reflects the essence of PL and the participants' actual experience? Osborne (1990) identified four means by which the validity of a qualitative work may be assessed. First, the researcher may describe the data collection and analysis steps. This was accomplished by providing details of this

step in this manuscript. Second, the researcher may work collaboratively with the participants to determine the goodness of fit of the interpretations and descriptions. This was accomplished through successive iterations of AI and then identifying the structural descriptors through phenomenology with each class of learners. Third, the researcher may validate interpretations by presenting "coherent and convincing arguments" (p. 88) while recognizing that there is no single 'correct' interpretation. This was accomplished by presenting the phenomenological description above. However, it is important to note that there are likely alternate descriptions which may emerge in future works which could provide an additional/deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Finally, the description's validity can be measured by the extent to which it reflects the experiences of others who were not part of the study. This was partially accomplished through a review of the phenomenological description by learners who participated in the AI, and the extent to which the description concurred with their experience. Their participation in the AI confounds and limits the confidence one may have in their review, however. Marshall (1985) suggested that standards of trustworthiness be applied to qualitative data, including 1) an explanation of the data collection process, 2) using data to support and explicate interpretations, and 3) data preservation such that it may be available for reanalysis. I have participated in all four of Osborne's criteria, and all of Marshall's standards.

Since the horizons and textural elements of students' peak learning experiences were collected over many semesters and across many courses it was not possible to conduct a member check of the final syntheses description with each of the cohorts. However, some validity of the results was achieved at the end of each exercise by reviewing the list of structural themes with that class of students. In addition, in the class session following the exercise, we reviewed the structural descriptors of PL that we crafted. This addressed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) 'credibility' concern as students could reflect on what they had created after some time had elapsed. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) 'dependability' was addressed via the numerous separate iterations of the process with distinct classes of students across many years. This accounts for the ever-changing context of the research site that has yielded similar results. Transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) refers to the generalizability of the results. In part, this was accomplished through the broad variety of contexts where students experienced PL that yielded the shared structural descriptors they agreed upon. This is further exhibited through the quasi-longitudinal nature of this research project which collected results over numerous semesters with a broad variety of participants, while the method was maintained. Finally, Lincoln and Guba discussed 'confirmability.' This is the extent to which results can be confirmed by others. As described above, this was attempted by submitting the final thematic description to two classes of undergraduate students who participated in the AI exercise. While there was not unanimous agreement among all themes, each of the themes received an agreement that they were present for the majority of the learners. They concurred that the description as written reflected their experience of peak learning. As mentioned above, this does not qualify as a pure double-blind experiment since they experienced the AI, however, it does show some support for the description. This is considered a limitation of this study. Finally, this addressed, in part, Lincoln and Guba's confirmability; it also reflected Osborne's fourth criterion.

Discussion

The synthesis description offers a statement of PL that integrates and extends extant literature. With this thematic description, others can now inquire into the level of PL occurring for themselves and those with whom they work. Questions based on the description include: To what extent do participants experience something novel or uncomfortable? Are others a central feature of the learning experience? Is there greater confidence regarding what one believes she knows while simultaneously remaining open to the tension new knowledge imposes on what was taken to be true? Is it personally impactful? Is there some change or fundamental transformation in the learner; does she now know something that she did not know before, including an awareness of the formerly unknown gap in knowledge which has now been made conscious? To what extent does this compel a change in who she is? Ironically, is there some paradoxical increase in one's confidence that is characterized by a greater doubt and the ability to simultaneously hold these seemingly disparate experiences in mind? Does the learning have weight; does it consequentially matter in the her lived world? Finally, what did it demand of the learner? Was there some requirement that she move beyond limits of comfort and persevere despite her desire for doing so, and has that led to some greater level of knowledge or action? To the extent that these questions are met with "yes," perhaps PL has occurred. These questions can inform future research.

The synthesis description establishes a context against which inquiry and even surveys may be constructed to determine PL's presence in our learning environments. Given this summary I believe the three

objectives were accomplished. Two are reviewed here. The third will be reviewed below.

(1) AI and the phenomenological analysis revealed the essences of PL.
(2) The synthesis description provides a thorough account of the PL experience.

Regarding the third, there remains a question that demands a response: given that many/most who read this journal teach, what can we concretely do to increase the likelihood of peak learning experiences occurring for our learners? Recent literature suggests numerous innovations in higher education that address this. Experience-based learning practices (Anderson, Boud, & Cohen, 2000), problem-based learning (Carroll, 2005; Coombs & Elden, 2004), student-centered learning environments (Biggs, 1990, 1999; Estes, 2004; Shuell, 1986), andragogy-based course design (Knowles, 1980, 1984; Lindemann, 1926; Roglio & Light, 2009), use of film as a teaching resource (Champoux, 1999), the role of compassion in learning organizations and other professions (Frost, 1999), internships (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007), online learning environments (Arbaugh, Desai, Rau, & Sridhar, 2010; Arbaugh et al., 2009), service learning, (Godfrey, 1999), and international experiences (Charlebois & Giberson, 2010) are alternatives to the traditional "stand and deliver" classroom. These authors and others (Nadkarni, 2003; Romme, Georges, & Putzel, 2003) are pushing the boundaries of what is considered a learning environment. Many of these variations extend beyond the classroom/training room in ways that stretch learners' and perhaps, instructors' capacities. They transpire in real life environments where there is something at stake for the learner and the instructor.

The methods cited above diverge from learning according to lecture and lesson plan. These, instead, are available to the unexpected, the novel, that which does not conform to the agenda. While well organized and structured plans are critical to good learning and its assessment (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) we must not forget that this too can be a constraining force. It is the "becoming" not the "being" (Whitehead, 1929/1979) of the learner that counts, not only the pre-planned delivery and clearly anticipated unfolding of prefigured events according to the logical presentation of content. Living with the uncertainty this presents for us as instructors requires certain courage as we may feel responsible for all the minutes and deliverables in our sessions. Given the catalog of teaching tools above, there is ample opportunity for us to learn and adopt these more facilitative, and 'learning-effective' methods. While they may create higher levels of uncertainty for

all involved, they better reflect the world learners will inhabit with its increased ambiguity and the demand that they still act. As noted by Freud, increasing our tolerance of ambiguity helps hold our neuroses in check (Cayne, 1988).

Finally, if we are to have any meaningful impact on learners, we must consider their experience. Classrooms are ripe "holding environments" (Winnicott, 1971) for much beyond the simple transfer of ideas and theories into the heads of others. They have the potential to transform how learners understand and organize ideas against existing frames and how that sensemaking integrates with their ontology which seems intimately informed by their epistemology. "[C]oncerns, values, and habits" (Doolittle, 1994, p. 223) occupy the psyches of learners and shape their meaning-making. Remaining available to these dimensions can serve more than just the sum of facts and ideas students carry with them; it can also contribute to the evolution of those learners. Further support for these ideas is found in recent writing on the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) backed by the United Nations. Sobczak and Mukhi (2016) claimed that educators have a responsibility beyond simply reviewing current theory as contained in textbooks. We must consider the larger frame within which our work and that of our current learners will transpire. When interviewed by Jonas Haertle of UN PRME, these authors revealed that we need to be conscious of our global responsibilities as business schools. We now educate on a larger platform that includes issues related to economic, social, and environmental concerns. These are likely to become increasingly relevant in students' lives and careers and they will need the ability to withstand, manage, and act in these increasingly ambiguous environments characterized by multiple and often competing demands.

Implications for future research

Assessing ongoing classes of students according to the themes contained in the description above could further develop these ideas and add refinements, additions, or deletions to that presented here. In addition, understanding the idiosyncrasies of peak learning experiences at the individual level would provide further distinctions. Multiple individual descriptions of the experience would strengthen the clarity of the current description. Parallel research focused on how to create these experiences might generate more of these experiences for learners and, arguably, educators. Cross-validation of this work against a more objective and/or mixed methods approach would add a level of rigor not available to research conducted through a single frame. This could be

accomplished through the creation of objective-like instruments developed from the thematic categories contained in the description here. Perhaps brief surveys of learners at random moments in learning environments using experiential sampling method (Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007) could bridge this retrospective approach to more "in vivo" data.

Given the phenomenological description, how might we move forward in creating and implementing PL experiences; in essence how shall educators behave? Experimenting with untried, yet novel approaches may unsettle the routine and rhythmic approach that perhaps has taken hold across class sessions and semesters. This may disrupt that which has become a habit, indeed the natural attitude of our work. It may also introduce uncertainty to our work as we experiment with new methods of engaging with familiar ideas. It is not beyond the realm that we too may have a PL experience as we attempt to push unforeseen boundaries that we have unconsciously become complicit in creating with our field and profession. What new themes of peak learning might this yield? And, what new questions might emerge?

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Appendix A

In reflecting on your most memorable peak learning experiences please consider and discuss:

(1) What happened?
(2) What you did to make that happen?
(3) What others did to contribute to that peak learning experience?
(4) How that experience felt?
(5) Keywords you would use to characterize/describe it?
(6) What are the shared characteristics of PL that were common to all of the individual experiences your group discussed?