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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1269972

Published online: 13 Jan 2017.

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ABSTRACT
Researchers have examined learning partnerships from one-dimensional perspectives, exploring the voices of faculty or the voices of students. This duoethnographic study explored the learning partnership between a faculty member and graduate student on a research team. The authors situated this study employing a tripartite conceptual framework that included Freirean liberatory pedagogy, the learning partnerships model, and duoethnography. The researchers used personal narrative essays and transcripts from two interviews as the basis for this duoethnography. This work revealed key strategies for navigating dissonance including: validating, being vulnerable, and engaging the material. This study has implications for faculty members striving to enhance critical reflection strategies for facilitating transformative learning experiences for graduate students as well as graduate students aiming to build efficacy as scholars.

Over the past decade the learning partnerships model has been integral in helping faculty and student affairs professionals strive to create transformational learning experiences both inside and outside of the academic classroom for college students (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Baxter Magolda and King (2004) posited self-authorship as an essential and transformative goal of higher education in the twenty-first century. They defined self-authorship as ‘the capacity to internally define a coherent belief system and identity that coordinates engagement in mutual relations with the larger world’ (p. xxii). The process of mutual engagement with a diverse world is indispensable to the success of college graduates. Baxter Magolda and King (2004) suggested, by referring to Freire (1970), that college should employ a liberatory pedagogy in which the banking model of education, students as passive recipients of knowledge, is replaced by a problem-posing pedagogy, students as active co-constructors of knowledge (Freire, 1970).

The scholarly literature on graduate student socialization intersects with liberatory notions of education. Students’ socialization into graduate study and corresponding researcher identity is enhanced by a student’s ability to make the transition from dependent student to in(ter)dependent scholar (Gardner, 2008; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Yet, how this process develops, particularly in relation to faculty and graduate students conducting research, is limited in scope. Taylor (2007) conducted a critical content analysis of research about transformative learning from 1999 to 2005. He asserted that there is minimal research about ‘the possibility and process of transformative learning occurring in a particular context or in result of a particular life event’ (p. 176). Taylor (2007) called on researchers to examine, ‘What are the ways to effectively recognize the influence of context and how do educators capitalize on context...
when fostering transformative learning?’ (p. 185). Additionally, scholarly literature has often narrated learning partnerships from a one-dimensional perspective, uncovering either the voices of faculty (Olsen, Bekken, McConnell, & Walter, 2011) or the voices of students (Quaye & Baxter Magolda, 2007). For this reason, this duoethnographic study explores the learning partnerships between a faculty member and graduate student on a research team. The main research question that drives this line of inquiry is, ‘how does the creation of learning partnership in this context facilitate a transformative learning experience?’

Learning partnerships can compel educators to invest in the lives of students either providing them with support (‘guidance’) or allowing them to act autonomously (‘empowerment’; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). This deeper, humanizing form of investment in the lives of students has the possibility to make pedagogy transformative (Freire, 1970). Thus, we first examined what constitutes a transformative learning experience. Then, in seeking to understand the possible composition of a transformative learning experience, we reviewed three relevant concepts to situate this study: liberatory pedagogy, the learning partnerships model, and duoethnography. These frameworks collectively served as our conceptual framework for this study.

Understanding transformative education

When describing transformative learning it is helpful to distinguish between informational learning and transformative learning (Kegan, 2009). When someone learns information, this learning facilitates a change in ‘what’ one knows, whereas in a transformative learning experience a person makes changes in ‘how’ one knows; an epistemological shift occurs (Kegan, 2009, p. 52). Kegan (2009) asserted that both types of learning are helpful, but when thinking about transformative learning it is imperative to understand what ‘form’ is being transformed. Mezirow (1978) described in his emergent theory of transformation that transformation is a restructuring of ‘problematic frames of reference’ and ‘sets of fixed assumptions’ (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). The theory was constructed from empirical data collected on women that re-entered college after a long hiatus. Using Habermas (1981) theory of communicative action, Mezirow outlined transformation as both an outcome and a process (Taylor, 1998). Nohl (2015) summarized the process in five phases:

… (1) nondetermining start and continues with (2) a phase of experimental and undirected inquiry and a (3) phase of social testing and mirroring. The process is boosted during a (4) shifting of relevance and, finally, leads to (5) social consolidation and the reinterpretation of biography. (p. 39)

Each phase works at altering cognitive structures that will ultimately reconfigure problematic frames of reference making them more inclusive, flexible, and reflective.

Additionally, Boyd and Meyer’s (1988) theory of transformative learning emerged from an analytical psychology perspective. Taylor (1998) made a useful distinction between Boyd and Meyer’s (1988) notions of transformative learning and Mezirow’s notions of perspective transformation. For Boyd transformative learning is embodied in integration; he focused on reconciling the first half of one’s life with the latter (second half). Boyd also incorporated the whole person in the process of transformation, not just the ego. This approach to transformative learning situates transformation as a communal project, encouraging individuals to seek greater interconnectedness, and not solely in becoming more autonomous. For Boyd transformation is grounded in greater recognition of a collective spirit. Boyd’s notions of collectivism connect him to liberatory notions of transformation. This review of literature about transformative learning is essential when examining possible epistemological disorientation that may arise while conducting research (Kegan, 2009; Mezirow, 1978). In the next section, we explore in-depth the three elements comprising the conceptual framework for this study.

Conceptual framework

Liberatory pedagogy

A liberatory pedagogy begins with the assumption that all actions are expressions of power (Giddens, 1979) and the act of teaching is inherently political; therefore, schools cannot be considered neutral
learning sites (Freire, 1970). Institutions of higher education can either serve as sites of social reproduction that promulgates oppression and dehumanization, or they can serve as sites of social transformation that humanizes and liberates. Freire (1970) connected social reproduction and social transformation to two divergent pedagogies. Educators help to maintain social reproduction through the banking model of education. In this model, students are viewed as empty containers that are to be filled with the knowledge from teachers. Because of their expertise, teachers claim normative (or socially derived) power (Carspecken, 1996) in the classroom. We understand power to be embodied in action, and that no matter the degree of the action (large or small) an individual takes it is always an expression of power (Giddens, 1979). Students are understood to have limited agency and can only legitimize power claims by conforming to teacher standards. Freire explained that because of the emphasis on reproduction, this model of education can only reconstruct and imagine what has been; it cannot produce innovation or spur reinvention. Social transformation is facilitated through problem-posing pedagogy in which the binary between teacher and student is blurred and learning becomes an act of co-construction. Deconstructing the teacher–student binary disrupts normative power claims and creates a consciousness in which students see themselves as being able to claim power and assert agency. Freire emphasized that inviting teacher and student to labor together is not only liberatory and humanizing, but it also incites creativity and (re)creation.

Finally, Freire (1970) made clear that humanizing pedagogies in education begin by creating conscientização, a critical consciousness. The creation of conscientização is a critical form of self-authorship in which individuals become conscious of the contradiction created by the oppressor–oppressed dialectic. Once made conscious individuals work toward the resolution of the contradiction through liberatory acts. The act of raising consciousness and participating in the work of liberation comprises the core concept of praxis; it is essential to enacting a liberatory pedagogy. Next, we referred to the learning partnerships model as the second dimension of the conceptual framework for this study (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004).

**Learning partnerships model**

The learning partnership model emerged from a 17-year longitudinal study that focused on the learning and development of traditional college age students (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). The theory of learning partnerships is grounded in the notion that the ultimate college learning outcome is to create effective citizenship, which is characterized by students that take ‘coherent ethical action for the good of both the individual and the larger community’ (p. 6).

Self-authorship is built on three pivotal foundations: epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Epistemological foundation acknowledges multiple ways of knowing and through which mature students are able to leverage multiple forms of knowledge to forge their own understandings of the world. Self-authored students recognize ‘knowledge as contextual’ (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Intrapersonal foundation is the understanding of one’s own values, culture, and identity; mature students are able to assert their own values and claim their own identity. More simply stated students are aware that their culture does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is both distinct from and incorporated in larger and different cultures. Finally, the interpersonal dimension is the establishment of relationships for a mature student; this means connecting with individuals coming from different spaces intellectually, socially, and spiritually.

The learning partnership model facilitates the development of self-authorship via three assumptions present in the educational environment: (1) knowledge is ‘complex and socially constructed,’ (2) ‘self is central to knowledge construction,’ and (3) ‘authority and expertise were shared in the mutual construction of knowledge among peers’ (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, p. 42). In addition to the three assumptions are three principles that help guide the learning partnership. They are as follows: (1) validating learner as knower; (2) situated learning or scaffolding knowledge; and (3) mutual meaning construction (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004).
While these perspectives are informative and instructive, learning partnerships are inherently dialectical; they are built through the interactions of teacher with student. The power dynamics between teacher and student are generally not critically interrogated in this form of scholarship, neglecting the context in which learning partnerships are constructed. Hernández (2016) noted that the theory of self authorship (and by extension learning partnerships) focused on development from the vantage point of the student, but failed to address student development in connection to the political, gendered, and racialized environments within which an individual may exist. Historically and contemporarily, student development occurs within the context of institutions of higher education that have been implicated in the perpetuation of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy through epistemological racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997), slavery as a form of institutional economic capital (Patton, 2016), and patriarchal academic capitalism (Metcalf & Slaughter, 2011). Also, by focusing on the vantage point of the student, faculty learning within the partnership becomes secondary, and student voices are often marginalized as sage academics at times literally and figuratively speaks for the student. Freirean (1970) notions of liberatory pedagogy assert that faculty learning and student voice are central to the partnership. However, few academic venues provide space for conscious students to speak back to oppressive educational practices (Freire, 1970; Job & Sriraman, 2015; Kaufmann, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2016) or for faculty engage in learning from students free of instrumental action (Habermas, 1981). This dichotomy emerges from the learning partnership because it is not inherently liberatory. Therefore, students within the learning partnership can become objects of inquiry and faculty learning becomes secondary to the student creation of an individuated-cognitive self. This particular construction of the self is emblematic of Western Eurocentric philosophy.

While it can be argued from a cognitive perspective that self-authorship is the highest form of consciousness raising, the model does not fully speak to cultural ways of knowing. The concept of self-authorship does not examine cultural intuition (Bernal, 1998) and endarkened feminist (Dillard, 2000) ways of knowing, the epistemological perspective is limited to Western Eurocentric thought that human existence is predicated on consciousness and that existence can be summarized by the revolutionary idea that ‘I think therefore I am.’ This articulation of consciousness drove Western philosophy toward notions of truth as objective and disembodied that is the antithesis of subjective and embodied knowledge. Therefore, by invoking duoethnographic methods researchers–participants remember and (re)construct narratives on transformative learning. Further, this methodology aids in eliciting critical insights as to how these partnerships function dialectically and have the potential to further cultivate transformative learning experiences for both the graduate student and faculty member conducting research.

**Duoethnography**

Sawyer and Norris (2013) defined duoethnography as ‘a conversation … between people and their perceptions of cultural artifacts that generates new meaning’ (p. 2). Duoethnography is a method in which two or more researchers engaging in a dialogical critique of a social phenomenon. It arises from the autoethnographic tradition in which the researchers foreground themselves as participants in the study. Duoethnography differs from biography in that researchers use their personal narratives as space through which they can explore larger sociological phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Nash, 2004; Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012; Sawyer & Norris, 2013).

These transcendent personal narratives are often steeped in social justice advocacy, and can be geared toward unearthing different subjectivities through the deconstruction of oppositional binaries. Sawyer and Norris (2012) wrote “Juxtaposing their stories duoethnographers discover and explore the overlapping gray zones between their perspectives as intertwined intersections that create ‘hybrid identities’ (Asher 2007, p. 68) instead of binary opposites” (p. 3). The construction of these ‘hybrid identities’ begins with the recognition of how structural domination is executed through binary opposites and polyvocality in duoethnography works to deconstruct structural domination and reconstruct these ‘hybrid identities’ with the potential for the marginalized to claim power through binary opposites.
To reiterate duoethnography, as part of a conceptual framework, is often linked to social justice because it promotes hetereoglossia, or the critical inclusion of multivoiced perspectives.

**Methodology**

In addition to serving as part of the conceptual framework, duoethnography is also the central component to our methodology. We are influenced by Sawyer and Norris (2015) outline of four tenets critical to constructing a duoethnographic study. These values include: (a) the dialogic nature of the process between scholars, (b) the examination of life history as part of the conception of the work, (c) the importance of learning together and not aiming to profess to each other, and (d) to learn from each other's differences. Because duoethnography unhinges binaries between voices, we intentionally structured the introduction through the methodology in a traditional format to then demonstrate how polyvocality in duoethnography revealed new ideas about the three parts of our conceptual framework: liberatory pedagogy, learning partnerships, and duoethnography. Throughout the remainder of this section and the entire findings and implication sections, we have incorporated short vignettes designed to explicate the tenets of duoethnography. We first offer some background information to provide context concerning our methods of data collection.

**Context for the duoethnography**

To provide a larger context we begin with a brief description of who we were when the project began. Lucy is a White cisgender woman that designed a graduate special topics course in higher education and student affairs on diversity and organizational change during her first-year on the tenure track in the Spring of 2013. J.T. is a Black cisgender man that was a doctoral student in the course. There were 11 graduate students enrolled in this course and Lucy designed the course as research teams to investigate the process campus educators use to respond to bias-related incidents on college campuses and whether or not this process leads to organizational change. After the semester-long course, a smaller group of four graduate students continued in the research and wrote two manuscripts based on the larger study (LePeau, Morgan, Zimmerman, Snipes, & Marcotte, 2016; LePeau, Snipes, Zimmerman, & Morgan, n.d.). This study uses duoethnography to explore the transformational learning experience shared between us (Lucy and J.T.) conducting the research for the seminar. We collected data for this study (i.e. one individual reflective essay, three in-person/google hangout interviews transcribed verbatim, and one individual post-data collection reflective essay) the summer through the academic year following the conclusion of the graduate seminar. Further, through the reflective process of revising this manuscript for publication, ongoing reflection about transformational learning experience has continued.

**Data sources**

For this study, we collected data from two sources. The first source was reflective essays. The study began with us individually writing a reflective essay that explained our previous experiences with transformative learning experiences, as well as our guiding epistemologies, and our conceptions of liberatory pedagogy. These reflective essays were written based on the following prompts:

- Describe your previous experiences with transformative learning experiences and your conceptions of liberatory pedagogy? We also explored questions such as: How would you describe your own epistemological stance? And what positionalities were salient to you in conducting the research and why? The reflective essay also served as our ‘cultural artifacts,’ it gave us something upon which to reflect, discuss, and theorize (Sawyer & Norris, 2012, p. 2).

After we exchanged our narratives via email, we scheduled two interviews, our second source of data. Following our review of the narratives we collaboratively created a research protocol, and took turns asking each other questions from a semi-structured interview protocol for the first interview. The semi-structured interview protocol was not used in service of replicability, which we feel is incompatible with an emergent methodology like duoethnography. The interview protocol was used to help structure our first 90-min conversation using Google Hangout; it allowed us to deeply interrogate the cultural
artifacts that we created through our reflective essays as well as our collective experiences within the learning partnership. The second interview was conducted face-to-face and lasted 60 min. For these conversations we asked questions such as: ‘what does a transformative learning partnership look like?’ and ‘what are some of your responsibilities in this partnership?’

Data analysis
Our process of data analysis employed consensual qualitative coding (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). In this process of data analysis, we individually open coded the reflective essays and interview transcripts looking for key ideas that emerged in the data, and then compared our initial collective codes. We continued the iterative process of consensual qualitative coding for several rounds until we were able to construct themes that accurately reflected the esthetic and content of our experiences with transformative learning within the bounds of learning partnership. This process closely resembled the constant comparative method employed in constructivist grounded theory data analysis (Charmaz, 2006) and led us to further investigating strategies used in facilitating our partnership such as mutual vulnerability and engaging in praxis. In addition to coding, we used memos and kept researcher journals to help refine and clarify ideas. As a form of peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we shared the themes from this duoethnography with two of the students involved in the graduate seminar and subsequent research team. They were able to ask questions about our themes as we progressed with data analysis when we presented a roundtable session about the project at a national conference. They asked us questions such as why don’t we talk about mutual vulnerability in graduate education? And validated the strategies we used in the learning partnership because they saw us enact some of these strategies or participated themselves.

Prologue: our life history as context
In keeping with the Sawyer and Norris (2015) tenets for duoethnography, we share several brief vignettes. This first series of vignettes explore our life histories as only part of the work. Our life histories begin here but will appear throughout the manuscript as *currere*, a unifying methodology of self, academic knowledge, and social reconstruction (Pinar, 2004). We begin with our life histories because we recognize because as Pinar (1975) notes, ‘… the past is manifest and apparent, however so transparently that it is veiled, and one assumes to be in the presents when one is not. To ascertain where one is, when one is, one must locate the past.’ In order to locate ourselves in the present, we must explicate the past.

J.T.: So tell me about your previous research experiences and learning experiences.
Lucy: No you first. I’m interested in hearing about your experiences. Plus you’ve already heard a little bit about me in class.

J.T.: Ok. I guess the best place to start would be undergrad at Baylor. It was the summer between my sophomore and junior year; I was studying to be a medical doctor. So on a whim I applied to and was accepted to the Honors Premedical Academy at Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine. The summer I took three classes one of which was an internship. In the internship I shadowed a pulmonologist. For my first two years of undergrad I had learned about how the body functions at a macro and micro level. This would be the first time I would see how these ideas played out in practice.

Lucy: I didn’t know you wanted to be a medical doctor. I also at one point was on a similar path.

J.T.: Really?

Lucy: Yes, I wanted to become a pediatrician. I’m interested in hearing your story, continue.

J.T.: Well it was eye-opening experience for a couple reasons: for once I saw that what I was learning in the classroom mattered. Doctors were talking about how disruptions were happening at the cellular level in terms that I understood and had studied. It was invigorating to know that what I learned literally affected matters of life and death. The second and more important reason was the social context within which doctors exist. I wanted to study medicine because I believe deeply that doctors exists to bring healing and restoration to a world that is literally sick and dying. I quickly learned that our system of healthcare in this
country severely limits physicians’ ability to bring healing and wellness to their patience, and that capitalism drives the quality of care that a person is able to receive.

Lucy: That sounds like a tough reality to grapple with.

J.T.: It was. It was really destabilizing to know that physicians have access to treatments that will make people well but because of insurance (or lack thereof) people will die. That experience altered my course of education. After that experience I re-evaluated why I wanted to be a physician, and at that point I began exploring other options with trusted mentors in my community. I eventually stumbled into a student affairs masters program, and the rest is history. What about you how did you end up as a faculty member here?

Lucy: As you were talking I was reminded of two pivotal educational experiences. The first was a research experience in my masters program here at university. The other was my teaching experiences in my doctoral program.

J.T.: You completed your masters here?

Lucy: Yes. I took an advanced student development class and we analyzed longitudinal data from our professor’s research about Latino/Latina development and experiences in college. The class was divided into teams. As a collective we researched different questions, such as students’ process for obtaining information through academic advising and what that process looked like, their ethnic identity, and some questions related to retention of students. And so that’s when I started learning how to code for process, and started learning. That experience introduced me to research in higher education, and I knew I wanted to learn more and do more as a researcher.

J.T.: So you decided to go on and complete your doctorate.

Lucy: I did and in my doctoral program my colleagues and I often found ourselves in this unique position of being both teacher and student. We actually presented on this phenomenon, during my third year in the program, in a symposium; we claimed that we were situated ‘on both sides of the desk’ (Robbins, Long, Chang, Riera, & LePeau, 2011). This experience taught me that something is happening in this liminal, in-between space, where both teacher and student are invited to be co-constructors of the learning environment. Hopefully our research can illuminate this treacherous, ephemeral, and enlightening space.

Uncovering our epistemologies

Lucy: What did you think after reading our essays?

J.T.: It’s clear that we both approach this work from a critical qualitative lens but our approaches have some nuances. Your approach is informed by constructivism because you see the world as actively created through relationships – society exists through creation (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). My epistemology embraces the central tenet of an Afrocentric epistemology because I see all knowledge is autobiographical (Asante, 1987; Myers, 1993) and embodied (Dillard, 2000). I value multiple perspectives and experiences.

Lucy: I too value multiple perspectives and experiences. That is why I designed our study in the way that I did. I wanted as many voices and perspectives to be represented in the work we do. I’m interested in hearing where you think our epistemologies diverge?

J.T.: I think of our epistemologies as sojourners that part ways when it comes to questions about the origins of knowledge. I think social constructivism posits that knowledge is a product of active social creation; it doesn’t exist independently - it must be constructed. Afrocentric epistemologies posits that all knowledge exists within us and that the human inquiry project is removing the artificial fissures between ourselves and the world. The goal is not the creation of a new world, but connection and oneness within the world that already exists. Afrocentric epistemologies allows for knowledge to transcend cognition and become tangible, embodied. What do you think?

Lucy: I think those are important and true distinctions, and yet we share a critical epistemology. One that emanates from an overarching desire to understand structural domination, inequality, and power. We were both able to define structural domination as the systematic deprivation of power to marginalized and oppressed groups, and understand inequality to be an intended byproduct of this form of domination (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2013). We’re going to need to revisit how these tensions arise when we’re deconstructing our learning partnerships (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004) and liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970).
The ontology of a scholar

Lucy: Moving past our epistemology, I think it’s important to discuss our ontological assumptions as well.

J.T.: I don’t know too much about ontology, except to say that I’m unsettled. It’s interesting; you and I both hold critical epistemologies that guide the work we’ve done together. The outcome for both of us is liberation from oppressive systems. But what does that mean for our project?

Lucy: I don’t think it’s something that we knew at the outset. We began this project because we knew something transformational happened through our learning partnership.

J.T.: Yes. It was intuitive, experiential, and most importantly embodied knowledge. After journeying with you through this project, I knew I was scholar. That’s why I wanted to do this inquiry project together in the first place. I felt an ontological shift and wanted to articulate how this impacted my ways of knowing (Brown, 2015).

Lucy: Hmm. I want to play with the connections between our epistemologies and ontologies. One of the most obvious connection is the ontology of connectedness. Both you and I believe in the connectedness of humanity; it is indeed what makes us human, our ability to empathize, love, and co-exist with each other. As you’ve already shared your afrocentric epistemology dictates a philosophical position of oneness and interconnectivity. My connection with constructivist ontology creates a similar space for human connectivity. It is at the center of inquiry; we as human beings must be able to understand and connect to each other on the journey of seeking out truths.

J.T.: That reminds me of what I learned in my critical qualitative inquiry class. We discussed that qualitative research is embedded in hermeneutics, which can be summarized as humans beings connecting and understanding each other (Carspecken, 1996). A social constructivist project fails without human beings understanding each other. But what is the ontological nature of a scholar?

Lucy: We have an intuitive sense of what it is. Our journey through this duoethnography will reveal what it is. We’re both participating in the knowledge creation process through conducting this duoethnographic study.

Act I: beginning the journey

J.T.: Last night as I was looking over our artifacts for this research project, something struck me. Have you seen the movie Pariah; it was a 2011 Sundance Film?

Lucy: No.

J.T.: It’s a coming of age story about about Alike, a seventeen-year-old Black teenage lesbian from Brooklyn, and her struggle to find her identity in a world rife with misogyny and homophobia. She endures a range of hardships from physical and verbal abuse from her family to rejection from a love interest. At the end of the movie she asserts her humanity and her freedom through the words of the poem I’m not broken, I’m free. I want you to watch the movie and let me know your thoughts about the poem.

***

Lucy: I watched the film. I agree with you that the poem is palpable, visceral, and transferrable. While our journey and some identities differ from that of Alike’s, I can see why the poem resonated with you.

J.T.: It is transcendent, visceral, and malleable and reminds me of Arts-Based Research (ABR) that invites multiple meaning for diverse audiences (Black, 2011). I think we could connect each stanza from the poem with the themes we generated from our data analysis about transformative learning experience.

Lucy: We’ll test it out. How does the opening of the poem relate to our ideas about liberatory pedagogy?

Act II: creating a liberatory pedagogy

Heartbreak opens onto the sunrise
For even breaking is opening
And I am broken
I’m open
Lucy: I remember a scene in class that I would classify as ‘heartbreak,’ similar to ideas presented in the poem. Do you remember when we discussed our respective epistemologies in relation to the study?

J.T.: Yes, I remember that class session vividly. We discussed how one's worldviews shaped how each person thought the study should be executed.

Lucy: I reflected on this moment in my essay. Looking back I was hopeful that conducting this research could enhance our collective conscientization (Freire, 1970). What I mean is that uncovering real needs and actual problems in the campus climate when students experience incidents of bias was embedded in the purpose of the study. I could have conducted this study on my own but my own positionalities and experiences as a researcher could limit the process. For example, I've experienced sexism in my professional life. Yet, as a person who identifies as heterosexual I may recognize and acknowledge heteronormative behaviors and practices at our university, but I have not experienced firsthand homophobic behaviors directed at me. Yet, the point of developing a research team of students who hold similar and divergent positionalities as myself was not to tokenize the students or me as the ‘voice’ of any one population.

J.T.: Yes, you expressed that everyone brings different vantage points and experiences and hopefully bringing together those multiple perspectives could enhance the interpretation of the data and the ideas for implications for practice.

Lucy: Right, and I remember when you were making the point in that class session that bias-related incidents are rooted in an environment that operates from hegemonic practices and that I followed up that your views were not congruent with some your peers who took a more pragmatic approach. In that moment, I was wondering how long or if students would encourage more conversation or retreat from the ambiguity. What were you thinking at that time?

J.T.: I assumed there would be a resolution because I wasn't driving the ship. I remember waiting for the moment when you would say we're ending it and this is what we're going to do ... it was jarring for us to leave these things unresolved when you shared that we're not going to come to consensus, but this is where we're at. I was wrestling with trying to be part of the research team and sharing my viewpoints without dominating the conversation. I didn't want to win an argument but wanted more dialogue from my peers.

Lucy: I could see that you had more to say and held your own but also gingerly asked to hear more from your peers. This class session is an example of where I broke with traditional configurations of classroom discussion – where the professor primarily claims power in decision-making. Reflecting on the experience I wrote the following: I wrestled with acknowledging my own perspectives while offering space for students to wrestle with their own worldviews and for all of us in turn to commit to the epistemological stance used for the research ... I didn't want to be in a situation where I selected or dictated the perspectives we used because I would then be perpetuating the oppressor-oppressed dialectic that Freire (1970) references. Because I am the faculty member in this situation and the person who grades the students, if I am doing this exercise without a willingness to authentically listen to differing perspectives or hear the voices of my fellow research team members then I'm potentially marginalizing the students within the research process. I also knew that the students had to consider the tensions of wrestling with differing worldviews of their peers and their professor.

J.T.: Yes, I can see how you're connecting the journey to our transformational learning experiences to this notion of ‘heartbreak’ I see heartbreak as an alienating and dehumanizing experience of learning within an educational system that emphasizes a banking model of education (Freire, 1970). For over twenty years I was socialized in systems of education that largely reified the notion of teacher as expert and student as empty vessel. I learned, trusted, and even excelled within this oppressive model of education. I wrote, ‘I mastered this disembodied knowledge and was a good student, largely because I did not question authority and learned the information and recalled it at the appropriate time. I was the perfect cog in a system of social reproduction.’ So when you presented a problem posing pedagogy in this class session we’re talking about, I clung tightly to past constructions of learning environments. Eventually I would come to love the creativity and innovation engendered by your humanizing pedagogy, but my heartbreak began with you re-arranging my mental furniture.

Lucy: Can you tell me more what you mean by re-arranging your mental furniture?

J.T.: Yes, you talked about the metaphor of operating on ‘both sides of the desk’ in your reflective essay as teacher-student when you were a doctoral student – the conference session you did with some of your peers about this phenomenon (Robbins et al., 2011).

Lucy: Yes, those opportunities of teaching with faculty members or doing my own teaching while I simultaneously upheld my identity as a doctoral student.
J.T.: Your ideas about a round table with no set sides or boundaries and rolling chairs placed around the edges and likening that to liberatory learning was part of re-arranging my mental furniture. I appreciated the tenets you suggested about liberatory learning …

Lucy: When I wrote about not being stymied by a team of individuals operating from different epistemological stances, letting go, pushing back, and anticipating experiences with ‘getting stuck.’

J.T.: Yes.

Lucy: And, I referred to mentors who facilitated my learning on ‘both sides of the desk.’

J.T.: I think there’s something about creating a partnership that messes with the desk, because I do love the metaphor. That’s why I came to it, because I think it’s helpful in that it creates in a real way boundaries. Although the desire to transgress the boundaries traditionally ascribed by the desk began the deconstructing process, actual disruption of the banking model of education needed to play out in different scenarios. And our reflection about that class session is one of those examples.

Lucy: Hmm, it’s interesting that you say that because in our research process you still looked to me to provide expert knowledge or ‘drive the ship.’

J.T.: Haha, our journey of deconstruction was not linear.

Lucy: No. I was wondering during that class session if some folks would throw in the towel if I pushed too hard in figuring out our collective epistemological stance? I was spending a lot of time observing, Who’s talking right now in class? Who’s not talking right now?, I also had the opportunity to read the positionality papers everyone submitted so I considered that I had more or different knowledge than some of the students.

J.T.: So even though you sought to co-construct the design, the reality is that you were still ‘driving the ship’ in many ways.

Lucy: Yes, it’s messy. We were both wondering whether or not this process would work and where are we headed.

**Act III: conversations at SOMA (Humanness)**

*Broken to the new light without pushing in*

*Open to the possibilities within, pushing out*

*See the love shine in through my cracks?*

*See the light shine out through me?*

J.T.: As we stumble our way through this beautiful poem, two things strike me: First the crux of the second stanza is predicated on acknowledgement. The poet asks the deeply existential question, ‘Do you see me?’ Through the course of my graduate career I asked this very question, because often I felt invisible to faculty inside and outside of classroom.

Lucy: What do you mean? You are an excellent student. My colleagues respect you and the work you’ve done in their classes. You did well in your coursework, correct?

J.T.: Yea. That’s right and my classmates affirmed that faculty valued my work and my intellectual contributions because I got good grades. But those classroom interactions felt transactional. I often demonstrated mastery of a topic and received good grades in courses. But I wanted more, I wanted to known. And up until your class, I felt largely unknown and invisible.

Lucy: What was different?

J.T.: Hmm … I don’t know. I guess you got to know me. Our relationship felt less transactional, more personal, more human. I feel like this relates to the second thing that struck me about the poem. It is the anthropomorphic nature of both light and possibilities. We don’t normally think of light as having agency, and I know I definitely don’t think of possibility as active and agentive. But that is how the poet talks about them. Taking advantage of the breaking process new light pushes its way in, while simultaneously new possibilities emerge organically from within. The embodied light and possibility act on the body of the poet. Bending. Breaking. Freeing. It is simply beautiful.

Lucy: I think our experience at the coffee shop fits that metaphor well. It was at Soma that we begin to let our mutual ‘lights shine’ and new possibilities begin to emerge. I remember you started sharing about your
research interests, and particularly what it means to identify as an atheist in a Christian or different religious space. You may still be seeking community in that space and what it means to be an insider or an outsider in a space but still wanting to go to that space. I felt like that was a breakthrough for you.

J.T.: Yeah. I co-sign on that - that was a big moment for me to have a safe testing ground for my thoughts.

Lucy: It was a big moment for both of us. I got to understand and question in a more critical way what your interests are. My perception was that you felt validated in that conversation that I could see you as someone beyond a student taking a class, my class, but that I was more genuinely interested in some of what your passions are. Whether or not I fully grasped them was not being critiqued at that moment, but it was the willingness to engage in that dialogue meant that you and I could continue those conversations inside or outside of the class.

J.T.: It was validating to have a faculty member to affirm my work as worthy of deeper contemplation and interrogation. So much of grad school felt dehumanizing, it was a rare moment that made me feel human again. I don't think I was the only one to experience that form of support and validation.

Lucy: No you weren't. I think all of us who committed to continue the research project after the semester ended received some form of validation. I'm thinking of a couple students in particular that sought out reassurance from me during the data analysis process. They weren't interested in 'giving me the right answer' but instead they wanted to discover what information was extrapolated from the data. This was one critical turning point between those students.

J.T.: You're talking about me too right?

Lucy: Actually I wasn't sure how committed you were to the project. I hoped you would continue, but I didn't know. But with the other students, it was a moment in which I felt my 'new light' pushing its way in and new possibilities emerging. I had an inkling that you and the other three students were committed to the research and not just the course work. My intuition was correct as all four of you continued on to the summer. It was validating to know that students were committed to learning with me, and that the process I worked so hard to facilitate was making an impact.

J.T.: You're right. I wasn't sure about the process. But ultimately I committed because in the back of my mind, in terms of my own understanding of wanting to see what a good teacher, facilitator / co-learner looks like – there's a push for this connection to be happening in multiple spaces. As a graduate student with faculty aspirations, it gave me a glimpse of a future possible self as well as reaffirmed the idea that good teaching is relational.

Lucy: YES! I also adhere to the notion that good teaching is relational. I also agree that space matters. The physical space - us meeting in the coffee shop contributed to changing the nature of the interactions. You remember my analogy of 'messing with the desk'? I believe that is what we were doing. And I think it engaged us as student and faculty in deeper forms of learning through knowing each other both inside and outside of the classroom.

J.T.: That is a nice story, but do you think that level of connection is possible with all of your students. You know? Going out and grabbing coffee with all your students?

Lucy: Well I can't have a cup of coffee with every student, nor can I expect that meeting will necessarily awaken new understandings about how each person learns. It is foolhardy to suggest that finding humanness can happen within the set boundaries of a semester for every teacher and student relationship. Yet, schooling is often bound by particular time periods. However, I do think it is important to seek out different avenues of brokenness from which light and opportunity can flow 'through my cracks' and begin the transformation process anew with budding scholars. Research supports the importance of meeting a student where they are and treating each person as a holistic being with different skills and worldviews (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). In our particular learning partnership, we were able to articulate what worked for us, as well as find and share our common humanity.

**Act IV: continuing the project/creating hybrid identities**

_I am broken_

_I am open_

_I am broken open_
See the love light shining through me
Shining through my cracks
Through the gaps

J.T.: Even though we shared the work of doing research together, the power dynamic between you and me and you and my peers still existed.

Lucy: Yes, we tried to create hybrid identities (Sawyer & Norris, 2012) – hyphens between seemingly oppositional identities of student and teacher or student-researcher. This idea is similar to what we’re doing now in this duoethnographic study. We learned how to live in this in-between space of being both broken by previous academic experiences yet open to new possibilities as outlined in the poem. What were some turning points in this process?

J.T.: I think some of our discussions and attempts to unpack my lurking feelings of the impostor syndrome.

Lucy: I also think there was a turning point between the end of the class – the point where you had decided to either continue the work beyond the class or move-on from the project. I discussed with everyone that the research project would not be completed within the semester. As the semester progressed, I knew that we had enough preliminary findings to develop a conference paper proposal. I was hopeful that you would make the decision yourself and I respected that part of the process. To me, if students continued with the research they were no longer invested in the grade but fully invested in the work. Seeing scholar students making that choice was validating.

J.T.: How so?

Lucy: I was validated because you chose to do the work outside of the class. You didn’t have to, but you built commitment to it and in turn commitment to working with me … this did support my socialization because students took on that scholarly persona whether or not there’s a carrot of a grade or additional funding.

J.T.: I saw this as an important final liberatory act. It was an act of validation that demonstrated to me that our ideas and thoughts had merit, and was worthy of continuing the learning process outside of the context of the classroom. The power of this single act cannot be understated. While not everyone participated in the opportunity having it offered is an important step. I think this transition from the classroom research team to the smaller continuing research team destroyed any perceived hierarchy; we were collaborating as equals. This move was critical because it continued to breakdown the established binary of teacher – student and principal investigator (PI)- novice student researcher.

Lucy: Why was this move critical?

J.T.: For me, your model of collaborating with students in the research process embodies Freirean problem posing pedagogy. This was not a banking model of education where professor lectured and we took copious notes in order to regurgitate that information at the appropriate time. We were creating something together.

Lucy: Did the perceived hierarchy really go away or did it persist?

J.T.: There was a residual hierarchy because power cannot solely be given but must be claimed. You were our fearless leader into these spaces, so at times I do think there’s on my end an overreliance on the process to which I largely attribute. I don’t want to carry this too far because I do think I have a role in it, and I do think you offer us spaces to claim power and to claim ownership in the project. But I think in some ways there’s still that recognition of a power differential in terms of experience that I just rely on out of habit, if that makes sense at all.

Lucy: I agree that there is a natural reliance on normative power differentials based on habit. Even if the grades are removed this notion of the residual power dynamic needs to be addressed. This is also a space where additional reflections from other members of the research team could add complexity to this dynamic.

J.T.: Perhaps I was a little zealous in the idea of being these power dynamics being destroyed, but our relationship was different. Something had changed.

Lucy: I’m not going to engage in a duoethnography with every student or engage in this level of reflection. So this is a unique example of transformative learning. Yet, as a professor it makes me hungry to create more co-constructed learning that leads to this material space. Critics may ask me, what I might lose by allowing
students to claim to power. It gets at the ways we view learning. I genuinely believe the research is better with all of us in the work … not only are the relationships strengthened but the research is also strengthened. However, even though I believe the research was strengthened by the contributions of the graduate student researchers, you still reflected on ongoing battles with the imposter syndrome.

J.T.: I wanted some reassurance and validation of my work.

Lucy: Could you elaborate about how impostor syndrome presented itself in your growing identity as a scholar?

J.T.: I hold on to the idea that I can beat this fear; if I have enough time I can win against impostor syndrome. I hoped that I would magically transform into a scholar, leaving behind the feelings of being an impostor. However, while collecting data in your class I found myself playing the role of the researcher, instead of simply being myself and asking a series of research questions. Being a part of a mixed class of master’s students and beginning doctoral students I felt the burden to provide insight and information to my peers. However I quickly realized that we were all on an even playing field. While I had taken more courses my colleagues provided amazing insights and challenged unexamined assumptions that I had made.

Lucy: I see these as ongoing struggles in the academy. There’s not a monumental moment where someone completes a research project and this means a person has overcome the impostor syndrome.

J.T.: I assumed that you are over the impostor syndrome.

Lucy: Well, let’s go back to my essay. I mentioned in my essay that I developed this course in the second semester of my first year as an assistant professor. At the time I wrote the essay it had been a full year since I had developed the course. Today that was over three years ago. Time flies. Back then I knew that I was in a phase of proving myself in a faculty role.

J.T.: I’m just wonder, negotiating, do you as a faculty member take that responsibility on in terms of negotiating the process for the students while you’re dealing with your own stuff?

Lucy: When I think about our project, this project, in terms of liberatory pedagogy and learning partnerships, socialization, seeing impostor syndrome in your students and pushing forward, but also recognizing that you’ve got your own challenges, I think acknowledging that those ends happen simultaneously is where space to be liberatory can occur, because if you don’t acknowledge your own issues then it’s inauthentic.

J.T.: That makes sense. I find myself thinking, ‘What is broken or open through admitting to the impostor syndrome? What is open or broken for me when thinking about myself as a scholar?’

Act V: engaging in praxis

My spirit takes journey
My spirit takes flight
Could not have risen otherwise
And I am not running
I’m choosing

Lucy: So you’re saying that praxis matters?

J.T.: Yeah. Like books and Black lives, praxis still matters. In fact I think that’s how our transformational learning experience began – with an act of purposeful creation. We took the theories we discussed in your class and applied them to create something new. That practical experience inside and outside of the classroom was vital. I can’t help but think that praxis is a core component of transformational learning.

Lucy: That and quoting Prince apparently (laughs). Before you start singing ‘Purple Reign,’ let’s interrogate this notion of praxis further. In educational circles I hear the term praxis frequently used. Why is it so important to you in the context of our project?

J.T.: That’s a great question. I will say it is not just praxis that is important, but purposeful (or critical) praxis that is important. I remember my first year doctoral student engaging in research and evaluation that felt purposeless; I felt frustrated because I was pencil-pushing, or paper-pushing. There was no connection to why this work or research mattered or how the evaluation would be used to transform the program or interventions. Again it felt purposeless.
Lucy: I agree that purpose is important. But I also think that in order for praxis to be transformational, something different had to occur; new paradigms had to be crafted. I had been on a research team where I felt connected to the importance and purpose of the study. But what shifted the paradigm for me was constructing and leading a process of collaborative inquiry from start to finish. In my previous experience as a graduate student, we were given access to the data but didn’t collect the data or help in the design of the study. So as a new faculty member I was willing to take some risks and teach in new and challenging ways.

J.T.: What was the risk?

Lucy: That you all would not engage in the research. As a new faculty member this course would shape not only student perceptions of me as an educator, but it would shape my colleagues perceptions as well. If the course fell apart, faculty and students could label me ineffective as an educator, and limit opportunities for collaboration and could present challenges to achieving tenure. First impressions are usually lasting impressions. Luckily you all were willing to engage in praxis with me.

J.T.: That engagement began in the classroom where you created an inclusive and collaborative environment, and was then strengthened by investing into the relationship at Soma. I know my willingness to engage was a product of praxis. Throughout the course you offered the opportunity to contribute to the project and eventually the field. I wanted to make meaningful contributions to our field and do work that mattered to me. And this project offered that opportunity.

Lucy: In our previous conversations you shared that the learning experience going from the class to the summer research team was transformational what was it about this opportunity that made it so special?

J.T.: It is a couple of things. First there has to be a point where I’m actually doing the work. And to be able to touch it, to see it from start to finish I think was very important for me. Then there has to be an opportunity. This was the first time I had the opportunity to help with the design of a study, collect data, analyze data, and write up a scholarly article. It was validating to know I could be scholar and produce scholarship.

Lucy: So in summary the learning experience going from the class to the summer research team was transformational because you saw research from the inception, almost, to completion, and that validated you as a scholar.

J.T.: Exactly. Completing the manuscript awakened a new consciousness in me. It makes me think of the poem ‘my spirit takes journey, my spirit takes flight, could not have risen otherwise.’ Without making the choice to engage, or taking the journey, my spirit could not have taken flight. Indeed without praxis I don’t believe it could have risen otherwise.

Lucy: That is beautiful but it wasn’t completely altruistic. I know you mentioned several times that you were interested in becoming a faculty member and publications are important for even graduate students. I know because as a newer faculty member I was/ am under pressure to produce scholarship. So while there is beauty inherent in the knowledge creation process and in praxis, it is a beauty borne of necessity.

Discussion

Lucy: It’s clear that our transformative learning experience occurred both inside and outside the classroom. As we sit here in a coffee shop, my awareness of setting is once again heightened.

J.T.: The findings revealed how ‘heartbreak’ evolved into a humanizing pedagogy that we both experienced. The process of conducting research together both inside the class and now through this duoethnography provided us with opportunities to create knowledge together.

Lucy: Although our work confirms the work of Mezirow (1978) and Taylor (1998), how do you think our experience with navigating dissonance was unique?

J.T.: It was unique in that we explicitly reflected upon the power differentials between graduate students and faculty that did not completely dissipate, in spite of the transformational experience. I think our findings revealed how we invoked strategies of validating each other as teacher-student, being vulnerable, and engaging in praxis; these strategies are the outline for a liberatory process of transformative education. They also informed the elements of our partnership or ‘humanizing pedagogy’ (Bartolomé, 1994; del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Zinn, Proteus, & Keet, 2009).

Lucy: Was the ‘heartbreak’ metaphor in the poem our way of renaming navigating dissonance?
J.T.: I think that’s accurate. I explained how the majority of my educational experiences led to reproductive and oppressive modes of education. When you invited my classmates and me into this space of collaborative research in the classroom, you initiated dissonance or a disorienting event dilemma (Mezirow, 2000). Nohl (2015) explained that transformative learning often begins surreptitiously, but once initiated is not imperceptible.

Lucy: You noted seeing me positioning myself as both teacher and student. And, I acknowledged earlier in our conversation that I was internally wrestling at times too, even as I was trying to embrace the uncertainty. I discussed how I took the calculated risk as a non-tenured faculty of all of you or my colleagues not perceiving me as an ‘expert.’

J.T.: You were hopeful that doing this research together could turn into a transformational learning experience. I’d been positioned as an object of student learning previously and when positioned as a collaborator and subject I confessed, ‘fearing the power within my own voice.’

Lucy: In this way, we both touched on the impostor syndrome phenomenon (Gardner & Holley, 2011), however what is largely absent from the literature are collaborative narratives discussing how learning partnerships may aid in mediating impostor syndrome. Let’s talk about the first strategy in the humanizing pedagogy or our partnership, validation.

J.T.: You talked about anticipating dissonance based on your own teaching and researching experiences.

Lucy: And, you mentioned that our partnership started in the classroom but truly extended when we addressed the dissonance during our conversation at SOMA.

J.T.: Correct – this was the space where we validated each other as both learners and teachers. You validated my experiences, thoughts, desires, and dreams by paying attention and listening. Freire (1970) wrote, ‘The teacher is no longer merely one-who-teaches but one who himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach’ (p.80). I tested out my new subject position as collaborator and fellow researcher and tested your commitment to collaborative inquiry.

Lucy: You connected with me beyond ‘one-who-teaches.’ After we engaged in our interviews for this study, I learned that our engagement at SOMA signaled to you that you were also teacher, the role I was encouraging you to assume on the research team. I learned about your research, your goals, and your passions that informed my understanding about collaborating with you.

J.T.: What did you learn about yourself from me in this role reversal space (Low & Sonntag, 2013)?

Lucy: I gained greater insights concerning the influence of my pedagogy on you and thought about my practices with different students as well. I know that having a cup of coffee with every student will not necessarily awaken transformative breakthroughs related to student learning (Berger, 2004). For instance, I know that research supports the importance of meeting a student where they are and treating each person as a holistic being with different skills and worldviews (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). But, living it out is more complex.

J.T.: Could you elaborate on that point?

Lucy: We were both vulnerable through conducting research in this class and in this duoethnography.

J.T.: Our second strategy in this humanizing pedagogy–mutual vulnerability through praxis.

Lucy: So within a liberatory pedagogy, mutual vulnerability is a crucial and distinctive principle (Freire, 1970).

J.T.: The concept itself is counterhegemonic in that it compels educators to not only elicit vulnerability from students, but also requires that educators themselves become vulnerable.

Lucy: I listened to your hopeful dreams and wanted to affirm you. At the same time I was vulnerable in sharing my apprehension about students freely choosing to continue the research after the course of the semester ended. I also shared about my feeling of students and colleagues ‘checking me out’ so to speak as a new faculty member in the community. I could lose credibility from students if the research failed.

J.T.: Your pedagogical efforts destabilized the teacher-student binary. This reminds me of Zinn’s (2009) ideas about mutual vulnerability. We both explored the hyphenated roles of teacher-student (or researcher-student) in ways that facilitated mutual sharing. For instance, you positioned yourself as a learner inside and outside of the classroom and opened up an intersubjective space for me to co-construct ‘new set of vulnerabilities’ (Zinn et al., 2009, p. 115).
Lucy: And, we played with notions of power that Zinn et al. (2009) also addressed. They shared:

...‘mutual vulnerability’ is the opposite of powerlessness, but suggests the establishment of a ‘power’ that emerges from solidarity over and above a power that is somehow provided through a social norm of power distribution, based on academic ritual, social biases or educational organization arrangement (p. 115).

Typically, faculty claim normative power largely in the classroom where the instructor is given legitimate authority to shape and control aspects of the environment through normative academic activities such as grading. And, we discussed this idea in our review of the literature about the banking model of education.

J.T.: Our mutual vulnerability created solidarity between us and further humanized each of us as essential partners. Did you feel weaker by sharing vulnerabilities with me?

Lucy: I think our learning partnership was strengthened by sharing. How about you?

J.T.: I agree. I think our mutual vulnerability enhanced our praxis. I also saw you being vulnerable with other students on the research team.

Lucy: I experienced transformation through engaging with you and your peers as we collectively committed to the work.

J.T.: We pushed each other to do better and more fulfilling work. Moreover, I moved through the dissonance and garnered new perspectives about seeing myself as a scholar (Kegan, 2009; Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 1998).

Lucy: I also not only achieved some of the necessary professional goals I set such as completing a research studies and collaboratively writing manuscripts suitable for publication with students, but our duoethnography provided a space of self-reflection and growth.

J.T.: Do you think the collective work of the team was what you had hoped for?

Lucy: Absolutely ... the work became the impetus for transformation. As a byproduct of liberatory learning partnerships, the work also became better and was transformed.

Implications

Lucy: Critics of our study might argue that we’re merely describing a mentorship relationship and mentoring relationships between faculty and graduate students often lead to students seeing themselves as scholars.

J.T.: Yes, but our study interrogates the process between faculty member and student from both of our voices and that is missing in the literature about transformative learning. And, there are several implications for practice that we discussed that extend beyond the confines of our duoethnography.

Lucy: Remember when we found the quotation from Taylor’s (2007) content analysis about research about transformative learning and his call that research is needed to provide ‘more substantive data of critical reflection and at the same time explore other means for capturing its presence in relationship to transformative learning’ (p. 186).

J.T.: Yes, our study does both. We reflected on our research process from the class and beyond, and we investigated our own engagement in this journey. Our duoethnography served as a form of critical reflection in a metacognitive way. We were conducting research and at the same time currently and retrospectively making meaning of the transformative learning occurring through conducting duoethnographic research about the process.

Lucy: And, we’ve been working together for four years now. I see a major contribution of this study is the embedded nature of critical reflection prior to, during, and after conducting the research.

J.T.: We’ve offered a space that is missing in the understanding of the conditions that cultivate transformative learning for doctoral students in education, particularly using duoethnography to inculcate critical reflection about transformative learning and deepen understanding for both of us (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). We also connected three frameworks (i.e. liberatory learning, learning partnerships, and duoethnography) that revealed new insights that would have been limited by using the frameworks individually.

Lucy: Indeed. I was also reminded of three critical points about teaching and learning in this study: first, course evaluations should be one but not the only form of teaching evaluation used, second that students need
spaces to test out their thoughts and question whether or not I empathize with them, and third, that students
need venues for instrumental learning or praxis (Taylor, 2007).

J.T.: And, that humanizing critical reflection is needed to assist students with navigating disorienting dilemmas
(Mezirow, 2000). I also find that our study can be a useful reminder to doctoral students to recognize that
socialization occurs both inside and outside of the classroom. Research on doctoral students points to obvi-
ous markers of graduate student socialization such as admissions, integration, and candidacy as researchers
such as Gardner (2008) outlined. Yet, where and how students (fail to) withstand dissonance (Kegan, 2009;
Mezirow, 1978; Taylor, 1998) and imposter syndrome (Gardner & Holley, 2011) is often difficult to articulate.

Lucy: And that talking about withstanding dissonance or negotiating imposter syndrome can be risky. Do you
think talking about these issues in this public way in this study was worth that risk?

J.T.: That is an excellent question; it’s one I’ve wrestled with throughout the course of this project. To be honest, I
don’t know if in the future I will regret how vulnerable I’ve been with you and now the world. There are real
risks associated with me engaging in a project like this. As a graduate student I have to potentially navigate
personality differences with faculty, articulate dissonance (even when I may not be consciously aware that I’m
going through it). But in spite of the potential dangers, I think the investment is worth the risk. I believe our
shared narratives testify to the fact that personalities can be navigated, and dissonance can be constructive
instead of destructive. Embedded in our shared narratives I see the healing, restoration, and transformation
that I sought out as an aspiring physician in undergrad. My hope that when other students read this work,
that they find themselves in it – in the beautiful struggle that at times constrains and frustrates us, but at
other times graces us with brief glimpses of freedom and grants us the strength to fuel forward.

Epilogue: fueling forward

This project has been a labor of love, through which we have engaged in critical conversations about
the nature of transformative learning partnerships in higher education. However, after writing, reading,
and re-writing multiple drafts of this manuscript, it became clear that we needed to again engage in
a final reflective conversation. We needed to talk candidly and explicitly about the power dynamics
between us, Lucy as a faculty member and J.T. as a graduate student in this learning partnership. The
revelations in this conversation were quite poignant. Although our working relationship was one that
sparked a transformative learning experience for both of us, the lingering gaps uncovered the associ-
at ed challenges in aiming to disrupt normative power claims between faculty and doctoral students. In
particular, we recognized variance in our identification with epistemological standpoints when working
across different social identities or positionalities that influenced our work. These differences are not
insurmountable nor do they diminish the work that was accomplished. Rather than leaving some of
these complexities unsaid or sitting in a place of trying to resolve something that’s not meant to be
resolved, we sat in this mess. For us, sitting in this mess is enticing; it is what drew us to the ‘mess with
the desk’ metaphor in this piece. We also invoked poetry in this study, understanding that time and
sequencing matter. Reading a poem, a stanza might mean one thing to a reader at a point in time and
something different at another point in time.

If we adhere to the propositions from Kegan (2009), Freire (1970), Mezirow (1978, 2003) or others that
if something is truly transformative something you once saw in a particular way no longer holds that
form–critics might wonder if our learning partnership was truly transformative. We still see dynamics
of power between faculty and student; we ‘messed with the desk’ but we did not fully remove it or shift
power dynamics. This study was situated in a conceptual framework focused on learning partnerships,
liberatory pedagogy, and duoethnography. Our examination of race and racism and gender and sexism,
although not foregrounded in the conceptual framework but always present, were revisited. We shifted
our question from does race and racism and gender and sexism influence our work to how does race
and racism and gender and sexism influence our work.

In examining this question directly, we unearthed the subconscious ways that race and racism per-
vaded this study. For J.T. he identifies as ‘recovering Black person,’ not recovering from Black culture or
life, but from white supremacy. His work in the recovery process is uprooting notions of white supremacy
and black inferiority embedded in his thinking. He mentioned that subconsciously he recognized his
bias to trust that White people are right. The implications for this current project are not unsubstantial. The process of writing this paper required him to remind himself that not only is he competent as a graduate student, but his White professor is not infallible. While a lovely narrative would be that he overcame that barrier in his thinking, the reality is re-programming his mind is an ongoing process fraught with stints of progression and regression. For Lucy, perceptions of race became precarious in the use of the poem. As a White woman she was leery of using a poem about the experience of a Black lesbian woman; it felt reminiscent of cultural appropriation. Although poetry is a medium for sharing connections within the human condition, she questioned our use of the poem and connecting our experiences with the words and experiences of someone's intersectional identities (i.e. Black woman and lesbian – historically marginalized identities Lucy does not share). It would not be the only space that questions of concerning gender emerged.

Similar to questions of race and racism, gender dynamics were also present in the research. For J.T., there were spaces within the inquiry where gender was present. Subconsciously, his deference to Lucy came through recognition of her position as a faculty member and a White person. There was little deference to Lucy's feminist epistemology. In fact, there was a visceral reaction to the times in which she invoked feminist ways of knowing. For example, she consistently urged him in several research settings to trust the process and to consider her experiential knowledge. This was a space in the larger research team where J.T. overtly spoke back to and openly critiqued as suspect. During class, Lucy wondered if some of this questioning would occur for her tenured colleagues. And yet, she intentionally designed learning spaces open for critique. For Lucy who identifies as a woman, she contended with herself and J.T. against a subconscious urge to make her and by extension her work smaller. Lucy noticed in the transcripts that J.T. did more talking than she did at times because she took on a facilitator role in the duoethnographic interviewing and paused more often for J.T. to finish his thought before chiming in.

We learned in this journey that 'messing with the desk' takes on nuanced forms. Lucy serves as a mentor, recommender for job references, and member of his dissertation committee. Lucy still offers a carrot or the grade we mentioned in our process, but in different forms; this means that normative power dynamics are still present. Lucy is still working to validate J.T. as a scholar and he is validating her as a professor. We're both learners who are mutually benefitting from the experience. These indicators are congruent with the conceptualizations embedded within the learning partnerships model. However, the 'messing with the desk' was an effort toward liberatory learning that Freire (1970) supports. We recognize that a stronger form of disruption would include removing the desk to envision something completely different. Although we did not remove the desk, the partnership moved us both toward fueling forward as researchers.

In conclusion, this duoethnography brings to light the power of being in ‘good company’ when engaging in a transformative learning experience from the vantage point of both the faculty member and graduate student (Berger, 2004, p. 246). We experienced transformation in that our individual views or horizons for (be)coming scholars were expanded through this learning partnership. Further, this study opens up the possibilities for both students and faculty to recognize when transformative learning may be occurring for oneself and also seek out opportunities to foster these learning experiences with colleagues in the future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Jeremy T. Snipes is a Campus Assessments Manager at the Interfaith Youth Core. His research interests are religion and spirituality in higher education, African-American collegiate students, and critical race theory in education.

Lucy A. LePeau is an assistant professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Indiana University Bloomington. Her research, teaching, and service activities have focused on academic affairs and student affairs partnerships promoting diversity and social justice initiatives on campus, organizational change, and improved student affairs practice.
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