Facilitating adult learning and a researcher identity through a higher education pedagogical process

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Abstract: This empirical study uses auto-ethnography to describe a higher education pedagogical process that facilitated largely doctoral students in preparing their candidacy proposals through the use of specific adult learning principles. Students' experiences and points of view of such a learning environment were explored, including: (1) how they contributed to their peers' learning; (2) how their peers contributed to their own individual learning; and (3) how the learning environment impacted the process. Key factors identified as pivotal to learning to learn, include creating a learning sanctuary and trusting relationships, engaging in mutual inquiry and the co-construction of meaning, and bridging research theory and practice. These factors enabled students to expand their identities to include a researcher identity and to negotiate deep knowledge at the personal level. Throughout this article, the students' points of view are used to elucidate shared and diverse experiences, in addition to supporting conclusions and recommendations for practice and further study.

Key words: adult education; graduate studies; researcher identity; adult learning; learning environment; trust

1. Introduction

> Being part of a community of learners that is comprised of people who are truly dedicated to the pursuit of meaning making is both engaging and energizing. (Graduate student, 2008)[1]

For more than a decade, the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta has offered a graduate course enabling doctoral level students, primarily, to further clarify their conceptualizations of epistemology, ontology, and methodology within the process of developing individualized candidacy research proposals. Through the establishment of a safe learning environment and with support from the instructors and classmates through oral and written feedback, students develop and refine their research proposals and constructively contribute to the development and refinement of their peers' research proposals.

The pedagogical principles underpinning the conceptualization and implementation of the course are based on a commitment that all participants, students and faculty, bring and share different but equally critical pieces of knowledge and together co-create a respectful and trusting educational environment. Such an environment

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[1] Students' voices are revealed through verbatim quotes throughout this paper.

upholds equality, respect, and dignity for all participants in the teaching and learning context where risk-taking is encouraged and identity explorations are safe. Accomplishing the creation of such an environment requires establishing and maintaining the following norms:

(1) People are of prime importance, and as such, bureaucratic needs must occasionally be set aside to first address students' personal needs;

(2) All students can be successful, often accomplished by relating new concepts to learners' previous experiences and knowledge;

(3) The relationships between theory and practice are explored and made explicit through co-construction of understandings (i.e., developing and supporting others to develop analytic and synthetic abilities);

(4) Excellence is expected by everyone of themselves and their colleagues (i.e., feedback comes from all of the peers, faculty and students, to provide constructive criticism for each other by applying learning about ontology, epistemology, and methodology to their own and peers' written work);

(5) The collective expertise of the group far exceeds that held by any individual.

This empirical study uses autoethnography to describe a higher education pedagogical process that facilitated largely doctoral students in preparing their candidacy proposals through the use of specific adult learning principles. Students' experiences and points of view of such a learning environment were explored, including (1) how they contributed to their peers' learning, (2) how their peers contributed to their own individual learning, and (3) how the learning environment impacted the process. Key factors identified as pivotal to learning to learn, include creating a learning sanctuary (Lange, 2009) and trusting relationships, engaging in mutual inquiry and the co-construction of meaning, and bridging research theory and practice. These factors enabled students to expand their identities to include a researcher identity and to negotiate deep knowledge at the personal level. Throughout this article, the students' points of view are used to elucidate shared and diverse experiences, in addition to supporting conclusions and recommendations for practice and further study.

2. Theoretical framework

Seminal adult education theorist, Malcolm Knowles (1970, 1975, 1980) distinguishes between adult education and K-12 schooling by the characteristics and needs of adult learners. In particular, he states that:

> (1) The adult self-concept moves from dependency toward being self-directing and autonomous;
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> (2) Adults accumulate a vast reservoir of experience that is a rich resource for learning;
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> (3) Adults have a readiness to learn particularly where it relates to the developmental tasks of their various social roles;
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> (4) Learning is more problem- or performance-centred rather than subject-centred;
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> (5) Adults are motivated more by internal factors than external ones. These key characteristics of adults as learners have been hotly debated, disputed, and extended. (Pratt, 1993; Nah, 2000)

However the notion that adults ought to have learning conditions that enable them to be/become self-directed learners—with a role in diagnosing their needs, setting their goals, designing and implementing their learning, and evaluating the learning process—has become a primary tenet in the adult education field (Knowles, 1984; Tough, 1981).

Extrapolating from Knowles, it is now orthodoxy that, the most conducive learning conditions build from the previous life experiences and desires of adult learners, often as the starting point of the learning process.

Experiential learning is vital as a central pedagogical component not only for bridging new learning from past experience, but also in using concrete, sensory experiences to facilitate the integration of new learning into the existing mental framework (Dewey, 1929; Rogers, 1969; Kolb, 1984). Rather than passive, information-giving teaching, participatory and active learning provides a space where adults can discuss, process, and apply their learning both individually and collaboratively (Silberman, 1996). Learning is further deepened when it is pragmatic and the learner judges the learning activity to have a high degree of relevance to issues either in their work, personal life, or both (Knowles, 1975). This concept of participation emphasizes a learner-centered approach focusing on the autonomy of the learner in terms of choices within the learning situation, responsiveness to their needs and learning styles, full engagement in the act of learning, learning as a process not a possession (Thomas, 1991), developing a sense of competency, and organizing their meaning-making processes (Perry, 1970).

To foster this learner-centered approach, Kurt Lewin (1948) originally advocated for learning environments that provide a sense of belonging, security, and freedom to make such choices. Knowles (1975) describes an environment that reduces distress and fear by building mutual trust, respect and safety, thereby enhancing self-esteem according to Brundage and MacKeracher (1980). This was later expanded by Daloz' (1986) contention that learner growth is best promoted through a combination of high support as well as high challenge, often most effectively manifested in a mentoring relationship with learners. Mezirow (1990) describes this educator role as an "empathetic provocateur" (p. 360), where the educator is both a committed co-learner and caring guide while prodding learners to deeper learning and critical reflection. MacKeracher (1996) suggests establishing learner networks through small group and peer teaching methods that lead to the formation of peer relationships and possible study partnerships and alliances. Such collaborative learning is a cornerstone of accepted adult education practice where through communicative interaction and an exchange of knowledge among peers and the educator, learners can renegotiate existing meanings, co-construct new meanings, and let go of unviable meanings (MacKeracher, 1996). Finally, another convention in the adult learning theory is holistic learning—where the learning process addresses the emotional, relational, physical, metaphoric or intuitive, and spiritual capacities alongside the cognitive, intellectual elements (Griffen, 1988; MacKeracher, 1996).

In a particular strand of theorizing bridging the instrumental and humanist approaches into the critical approach, the importance of fostering reflective thinking is highlighted as unique to adult learning. Critical reflection on past experience can "(bring) to critical consciousness the assumptions and perspectives about knowledge and social processes learned uncritically" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 4). In providing a space for surfacing inherited opinions, customary beliefs, professional conventions, and dominant ideologies absorbed uncritically, adults learn to understand why, what, and how they have learned in the past. Often this process is facilitated by rational discourse, identifying contradictions, evaluating the soundness of ideas, and questioning values as a way to shape more informed perspectives. Learning in this way is a dialectical process where internal and external discussions explore a number of alternative viewpoints eventually leading to an integrated viewpoint. As MacKeracher (1996) describes, learning is constitutive as a learner becomes a researcher and theorist about formal bodies of knowledge, how the world works including particular social patterns and cultural understandings, and one's personal mental model and how it informs daily action. Drawing from Habermas, Grundy (1990) summarizes three kinds of critical reflection: (1) critical reflection for technical interests which is utilized to find a solution to an immediate technical problem; (2) critical reflection for practical interests which is used to enhance communication effectiveness, understand meaning-making and inform ethical judgments; and finally, (3) critical

reflection for emancipation where learners question learning goals as well as the social and personal forces that shape reality. As Jarvis (1987, p. 11) quips, “Learning rarely occurs in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives; … it is intimately related to that world and affected by it” (cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

Emancipatory critical reflection can lead to transformative learning where basic premises or underlying assumptions can change significantly as a result of the learning process. Mezirow (1991) calls this “perspective transformation” when an awareness of the existing constraints within one’s personal model of reality arises and the learner begins to develop a new model or reality. This kind of transformation contributes to learning to learn, as learners use higher order cognitive skills to objectively examine their own learning processes and the social contexts in which they move (Candy, 1991). Freire’s (1970) liberatory learning is another form of transformative learning that moves beyond the individual to social transformation where a group of learners undertake a social analysis of existing power structures and respond by learning within the struggle for justice and equality. In particular, Freire suggests that the purpose of learning is to become critical and creative producers of the conditions of existence, our societies, ourselves and our destinies (Allman, 1990). Through problem-posing, learners examine taken-for-granted aspects of their reality and envision new possibilities that they can contribute to. In a problem-posing process, educational relations operationalize democracy by equalizing the power between all participants through symmetrical communication that recognizes all participants as bringing significant knowledge and insights (Shor, 1992).

However, such learning can be difficult and painful—often creating emotional upheaval for the learner, impacting their family and work commitments (Cranton, 1994). As many learners seek out educational opportunities not only for advanced knowledge but during life transitions (Bridges, 1980), Kasworm, Sandmann and Sissell (2000, p. 458) suggest that “(l)earning through higher education is not just a mental journey; it also is a very treacherous journey engaging the heart and identity of the adult”. Compounding this is the need to shift from a professional identity to incorporating an identity as a researcher (Labaree, 2003). Higher education creates cross-cultural environments of meaning-making, alternative value and belief systems as well as multiple knowledge frameworks, thus provoking dissonance and anxiety as learners need to renegotiate their meanings of the world (Kasworm, et al., 2000). Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest this kind of deep learning is best done in learning communities where the being of the learner is not denied but is part of a situated and collaborative negotiation. While there is often a hidden societal safety net for learners in K-12 schooling, Kasworm, et al (2000) assert that postsecondary educational institutions must also provide supports that work with, instead of oppose, the adult life-world, including facilitating such an identity negotiation. They need to recognize the profound learning process that touches that deepest part of individuals … and where research is involved, the communities they are associated with.

3. Method

To explore the facilitation of an adult learning environment characterized by trust, respect and risk-taking, we examined our individual and collective experiences as graduate students (four doctoral and two masters students at different stages of degree programs). A constructivist pedagogy was used to honor multiple realities and enable us to “create mutual trust, hear each other, pose questions and look for answers together, and make sense of our common work” (Lambert, 1998, p. 18).

Autoethnography was the main research approach (Patton, 2002; Thomas, 1993) used to uncover and

co-construct deeper understanding of how adult learning environments facilitate reciprocal learning and teaching relationships and identity conceptualization. As "research subject(s)" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 636), we examined students' experiences and reflections around the establishment and maintenance of norms supporting individual and collective learning. Data were socially-constructed and collected primarily through: (1) a whole-class debriefing session, lasting approximately 90 minutes, where students shared perceptions and reactions related to their course experience (Patton, 2002); (2) a series of open-ended format questions students responded to; and (3) ongoing field observations (in class and online).

In the spirit of collaboration, understanding and openness, we are engaged in "systematic sociological introspection" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 752) and reflective processes for data analysis and synthesis. The first stage of data analysis occurred while data were being collected; the second stage was undertaken immediately after the completion of data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Through thematic analysis, we independently read and constantly compared data to identify patterns and emergent themes related to the purpose of study (Berg, 2004; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

As described by Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), we were drawn to autoethnography as a form of self-study to "provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm or settle" (p. 20). Therefore, consideration was given to disconfirming evidence, counter-interpretations and an absence of patterns (Berg, 2004). Data interpretations were examined "in light of a formalized body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories" (Mertens, 2005, p. 423), particularly contemporary adult educational literature. Additionally, themes and interpretations were compared to explore the tension "between self in relation to practice and the others who share the practice setting" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 15). When disseminating research findings, students' verbatim quotations have been used to capture the significance of shared and diverse experiences and to support conclusions.

Trustworthiness of the data collected and the subsequent analysis of these data was obtained through member checking of thematic interpretations. Each student verified, corrected, and elaborated on emerging themes and supporting quotations. In addition, prolonged engagement at weekly classes and online, over four months, afforded numerous opportunities to capture salient issues and note divergent information (Guba, 1981). Regular in-class discussions, in addition to sharing emerging insights and seeking external critique with other graduate students and instructor colleagues, allowed for consideration of new perspectives. Rich illustrative quotations have been used extensively to allow readers to assess transferability of the findings to other adult learning environments and policy contexts.

4. In the students' voices

In this section, we explore students' points of view of this specific learning experience and environment, including:

(1) How students contributed to their peers' learning;

(2) How peers/instructors contributed to students' own individual learning;

(3) How the learning environment impacted the process.

4.1 How students contributed to their peers' learning

Central to adult education practice and this graduate course is the opportunity for learners to engage in collaborative learning, to negotiate existing meanings, to co-construct new meanings and to let go of unviable meanings (MacKeracher, 1996). Throughout this course, graduate students are engaged in ongoing meaning

making through collaborative dialogue, planning and writing with their peers. How and to what extent students contributed to their peers' learning is described as below:

> I had a role in the formal review of proposals at various stages, as well as many informal conversations and supportive roles outside of class time about our learning experiences and our lives. My contribution was as an encouraging peer and in emphasizing other students' skills and strengths.
>
> I realized that if we truly value constructivist learning, then I needed to fully engage with my peers. Making sense of my own research questions specifically, and understanding research frameworks and methods more generally, happened as I shared resources and ideas willingly and gave constructive feedback regularly to my peers. I supported my peers by developing trusting relationships that allowed for authentic dialectic engagement. By demonstrating respect for my peers, I validated their work and individual research identities.
>
> I tried my best to support my peers through the ups and downs of the writing process. For some, including myself, writing proved difficult. Having someone to listen to my writing woes and to share ideas was the best support. I did my best to return this favor to my peers.
>
> Providing my peers with timely, quality feedback was one of my commitments as a member of this class. I tried to provide detailed, constructive feedback—both orally, as well as online. If I had learned any time-saving tips, or other resources that may be of use to others, I would openly share them.
>
> Although it was easier to just provide encouragement or positive feedback, I pushed myself into asking serious questions about my peers' proposals. Using the phrase, "Have you considered … ?" seemed to work as a way to provoke new thinking or to provide constructive feedback.

Students contributed to their peers' learning in a variety of ways, including:

> (1) contributing to class discussions; (2) listening; (3) answering questions; (4) sharing resources; (5) providing feedback on written proposals; (6) respecting differing learning needs, interests and styles; (7) providing constructive and positive feedback; and (8) provoking reflective thinking. Meaning making and learning were enhanced within this collaborative learning community. (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

4.2 How peers and instructors contributed to students' own individual learning

The design of this graduate course reflects Griffen (1988) and MacKeracher's (1996) conceptualizations of holistic learning (i.e., the learning process addresses emotional, relational, physical, metaphoric or intuitive, and spiritual capacities in addition to cognitive and intellectual capacities). Students described how their peers and instructors contributed to holistic and individualized learning. Drawing on the students' voices, the nature of reciprocal and holistic learning within this course is described as below:

> It was a tremendous amount of work to write and re-write my draft candidacy proposal! Having constructive feedback that provided forthright assessments of my work prompted my desire to write subsequent drafts.
>
> Positive support in the class influenced me to work through the difficulties I faced in my writing. At one point my proposal was covered with comments. However, the last comment stated that I should not let the comments get me down and that I should not give up. This comment pushed me to work harder and to do my best.
>
> Most useful for me was feedback and questions about parts of my proposal were ambiguous to a reader who was not familiar with my chosen field of study and research topic. It was then evident to me that if my writing is intended for a broad audience, I need to be explicit in the ways in which I explain terms and ask questions.
>
> The instructors' personal and professional investment in this course was evident in the generous feedback that they provided. They contributed written and verbal feedback at each stage of the proposal writing process. The written feedback was provided within our documents using "track changes" and "comments" features, while they also sat with us in one-to-one conversations in the classroom to discuss our ideas and their suggestions or comments. I always felt supported and encouraged by their responses, while being challenged to improve or clarify the writing and my ideas.

> Fellow students gave great feedback and were willing to assist in additional exploration of my topic area. Students willingly shared time and also took time to allow for questions to be raised and addressed. There was no hint of selfishness in the discussions or when a student may be taking extra time to explore or present.
>
> The diversity amongst the instructors and peers (in regard to professional background, epistemological and ontological approaches) strengthened the depth and breadth of feedback received.
>
> Time to work with my peers afforded ample opportunities for me to strategically build networks with other students, as well as learning about other professors that may be able to support my work. This is one of multiple networks that will contribute to my growth as a doctoral student.
>
> One of my colleagues shared a book with me that included many essays that were relevant to my research topic. I continued to read the work of one of the key scholars, and wrote to him about my research. At a conference in Inuvik, NWT in June, I met him in person and he came to my presentation. I am now part of the rural and remote community research network and have been invited to speak at another northern community development conference in 2009. When I review the past months of my research and writing process, I can see the progression, and trace back to key moments where one of the instructors or peers has had a lasting impact on my learning and identity as a new scholar.

Students described many ways that peers and instructors contributed to their own individual learning, including: (1) illuminating new and diverse perspectives for consideration; (2) elucidating common issues and frustrations; (3) sharing knowledge, expertise, and resources; (4) alleviating anxiety and frustration; (5) asking questions and providing feedback to clarify context and language used within the proposal; (6) providing motivation and encouragement; (7) promoting reflection about researcher positionality and epistemological decisions; (8) creating accountability for timely progression and completion of the candidacy proposal; and (9) creating valuable networking opportunities. Overall, students felt that their learning was enhanced by individual and collective feedback and reflection.

Developing a candidacy proposal is very complex and difficult work. Students were continuously balancing their course learning with work and family commitments. Within the context of this learning community, the "being" and identity of each learner was acknowledged and honored through situated and collaborative negotiation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Moreover, this learning community provided the delicate balance of pressure and support that students needed to develop and refine their candidacy research proposals (Daloz, 1986).

4.3 How the learning environment impacted the process

On the very first as well as subsequent classes, students and instructors discussed and planned for the creation and maintenance of a respectful learning environment. The classroom was viewed as a sacred place—a sanctuary that promoted, nurtured, and protected authentic learning. Recognizing that adults ought to have learning conditions that enable self-directed learning, course instructors provided ongoing opportunities for the graduate students to diagnose their needs, set personalized learning goals, design and implement learning, and reflect on and evaluate their own learning (Knowles, 1984; Tough, 1981). Below, students' voices illustrate how and to what extent this environment impacted adult learning by (1) creating a learning sanctuary, (2) establishing trusting relationships, (3) engaging in inquiry and the co-construction of knowledge, and (4) bridging theory and practice.

4.3.1 Creating a learning sanctuary

Together, students and instructors endeavored to create a learning environment that supported each student's individual development from a professional to researcher identity (Labaree, 2003). Below, students' voices illustrate how a respectful and safe learning environment was established and maintained throughout this graduate course.

> The instructors set the tone for a climate of mutual respect by emphasizing that any time we were critiquing the work of a peer, we must think about what types of suggestions we might make to assist with them on how to address our comments. Class time to speak with our peers as partners and engage in conversations about our proposals, our questions, and our writing process built trust and rapport.
>
> The structure of the class was very much like a workshop. Interruptions were minimized within the learning environment. The instructors ensured all members of the class had time and an opportunity to discuss the progress of their work or to ask any questions. The physical environment was organized so that all members could see and hear each other. The instructors sat amongst the students. It was a very active atmosphere. Questions were always encouraged, honored, and responded to. Often, other students would echo the same questions that I had.
>
> I felt that each student and the instructors were living examples of adult education in action. Each of us were both learning and educating or teaching at various stages of the course… teamwork contributed to a more equal distribution of power and authority in the classroom, and contributed to a safe and trusting environment. Peers shared their personal interest and experience in their chosen research—This required a safe environment in which to express these often personal, impactful stories.
>
> A discussion about our respective roles and responsibilities ensured that there were no misunderstandings about expectations that would potentially derail mentorship. Students were involved in the decision-making processes related to course design and delivery—our instructors asked for our input, including what we needed, desired and valued in this course. Engaging students in this process required a commitment, on behalf of the instructors, to a dialogical process in the classroom. This set the tone for the remainder of the course.
>
> Honouring and supporting the uniqueness of each graduate student's epistemological framework and ontological approaches and perspectives helped to create a climate of mutual respect and understanding.
>
> Our previous experiences were acknowledged by both instructors and peers, and there was an ongoing emphasis on how the proposal writing process is not linear, and differs for each researcher and student .... Students were not made to share their work unless on their own accord. Instructors were very aware of the individual needs of each student. Some students needed extra time, which was gladly given.

Within this graduate course, instructors and students viewed the classroom as a learning sanctuary. This learning environment was characterized as safe and respectful due to the: (1) establishment of trust (i.e., getting to know each other on a personal and professional level); (2) equal distribution of power and authority within the classroom (i.e., setting direction for the course and providing input into pedagogical approaches and the use of time); (3) recognition of both students' and instructors' expertise, feelings and experiences; (4) accessibility of instructors and peers through face-to-face interactions, online or e-mail correspondence, and by telephone; (5) opportunities for risk-taking, asking questions, and learning from success and mistakes; (6) understanding that participation was highly personal and voluntary; and (7) flexibility within the course structure to enable differentiated learning opportunities based on students' interests and needs. In the context of this learning sanctuary, students discovered a sense of belonging and security (Lewin, 1948). Moreover, within a collaborative learning environment characterized by trust, respect and safety, students' fears, frustrations and distress about the writing and research processes were diminished (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980).

4.3.2 Establishing trusting relationships

As already revealed in the students' voices above, relational engagement was critical to the learning process within this graduate course (Lave & Wenger, 1991). When the environment was viewed as respectful and positive, and when rapport and trust were present, students' learning was enhanced. Below, the students' voices are used to describe how the establishment of trusting relationships was integral to learning.

> By allowing students to openly express their feelings and validating them is a huge step in creating a safe and

> trusting learning environment. For me as an Aboriginal student learner, this is a key step that instructors must not overlook and must make attempts to address within their classrooms. It was helpful that the instructors acknowledged the needs of students first over the bureaucracy of the timelines for the class.
>
> Most importantly, the instructors were cognizant of the insecurities of sharing writing with the class. The instructors often sent comments to each individual student, rather than posting works that the students felt uncomfortable sharing.
>
> I really appreciated the stories that both instructors shared about their own doctoral experiences and what they have learned from those experiences. This assured me that what I was experiencing was normal and okay. It made the instructors more human and approachable. Through their stories, they modeled tenacity and empathy... As they openly shared their narratives, I came to see that I could trust others enough to share my research journey and stories too.
>
> I have experienced a sense of social isolation during my time at the university. My days are often spent alone at my computer. This class helped me address some of the feelings of displacement. I felt a great sense of camaraderie and support. The small class size facilitated relationships and trust building within a community of learners and researchers. The feeling of displacement was eased within this collaborative, trusting setting.
>
> Indigenous knowledge systems are still a "new" concept within academia; yet it is an ancient practice that still exists in indigenous communities today. The instructors opened themselves up to learning and acknowledging these ancient ways which in turn helped me to share my perspectives. This helped me in my own growth and development versus having to defend that this system actually exists, which unfortunately, is the case in some of the graduate courses.

As described in the students' voices above, trust was integral to collaboration and reflection. Trust was built gradually over time. Students' learning needs were placed above bureaucratic requirements. Subsequently, when students had the physical and metaphorical space to dialogue, question, identify contradictions, and evaluate writing in progress, learning became a dialectical process of considering and reflecting on alternative viewpoints and multiple theoretical perspectives that eventually led to more integrated understanding (Grundy, 1990).

4.3.3 Engaging in inquiry and the co-construction of knowledge

The establishment of trusting and authentic relationships enabled dialogic learning that recognized all participants, students and instructors to achieve, as having and bringing significant knowledge and insights (Shor, 1992). Individual students' contributions were valued within collaborative inquiry processes. Through situated and collaborative negotiation, students learned to learn within multiple knowledge frameworks and belief systems. Below, students' voices describe learning to learn within this graduate course through inquiry and the co-construction of knowledge.

> The instructors told us that if we had constructive criticism, or if we identified a problem, then we needed to offer a solution. Problem posing, and more importantly, solution finding really provoked and solidified learning. We provided feedback and held each other accountable for our learning.
>
> Through reflection and conversation, my peers and I negotiated new meanings. We made sense of the course content through collaborative activities. This social reinterpretation of course content, as well as listening to others' perspectives and questions helped me refine my own thinking.
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> Both instructors acknowledged the skills and experiences that we bring to grad studies. They often commented on how much they have learned from us. I felt like a "junior colleague" rather than a "student".
>
> I was a little "rusty" with my use of new technologies. The in-class demonstrations were very helpful. All of us "mature" students were able to learn alongside of and from our technology-savvy classmates.
>
> A key message in this course was that revision is necessary and a natural part of the writing process. This was helpful to me as a learner, as I was previously self-conscious to have someone read my work that did not feel "polished" or at a final draft stage. Understanding that brainstorming and initial drafts are part of the writing process was a lesson I had taught before in English and communications courses, but I had to embrace this theory as a learner in practice…. I recognize now that peer and instructor feedback expedites the writing process and prompt feedback helps to remove some

perceived barriers and encouraged me to continue with the work.

To truly receive constructive feedback or criticism is a professional obligation and responsibility. I had to be open to diverse and conflicting perspectives. Negotiating other points-of-view took time. I realized that I needed to consider all feedback; however, I was not compelled to act on all feedback! Rather, feedback prompted me to learn to defend my ideas and to take greater ownership for my work.

As suggested in the students' voices above, constructivist learning approaches and inquiry allowed for the co-construction of meaning and recognized the personal, holistic and dialectical nature of learning. Reflection was most relevant when students are engaged in knowledge creation and meaning making around specific problems related to their research studies. "Learning to learn" was integral to students' becoming self-directed learners—again, students diagnosed their needs, set their goals, designed and implemented their learning, evaluated the learning process (Knowles, 1984; Tough, 1981), and took ownership of that process. Instead of using passive, information-giving instruction, inquiry provided a space for students to actively discuss, process, and apply their learning individually and collaboratively (Silberman, 1996).

4.3.4 Bridging theory and practice

As students in this graduate class assumed the role and identity of researcher, they initially experienced tension while negotiating new theoretical learning with their own rich knowledge of practice. A variety of instructional approaches used within this course required students to step outside of the comfort of their practice. Shifting from a professional identity to an identity as a researcher (Labaree, 2003) required students to consider how theory building may be as useful as practical experience or may in fact enhance professional practice. Again, students' voices illustrate how they bridged practice and theory within this graduate course.

The mock candidacy was very helpful in enhancing my understanding as it allowed me to apply course learning by sharing my proposal and answering questions from my classmates. In essence, the mock candidacy put theory into practice. Furthermore, I was able to broaden my learning as I observed my classmates defending their proposals using their own unique understanding of course content to share their work. The mock candidacy provided a setting to share what was learned from the course materials and allowed us to learn further from each other.

Stepping away from the practical aspect of my practice has been a struggle. Practice is something that I know and feel comfortable with. Intellectual theorizing is much more challenging and risky. There is always a chance that one may not feel comfortable with what they learned and have come to see.

Learning the theory behind educational research proved helpful in defending our proposals as theory was the foundation behind the writing, while practice helped to strengthen and support this foundation-making us stronger in our abilities to write and understand educational research.

Our instructors demystified the dissertation process. Going into this class, I was unsure about program expectations, what certain terminology meant, what the "right" questions were to ask about the candidacy process, and the criteria which would be used to determine the quality of my proposal or dissertation. Both the philosophical research tenants and practical logistics were presented and reviewed. Theory informed the research decisions that I had to make. This was highly useful and relevant to my practice.

As students, we had ample opportunities to make sense of how theory informed our own practice and research. Through hands on activities, dialogue and reflection, theorizing on our own practice and research initiated deeper learning.

Meaningful connections between theory and practice were forged as students continuously engaged in experiential activities and accessed divergent forms of content with peers and instructors. Experiential learning bridged past experiences with new learning and therefore facilitated the integration of new learning into existing

mental frameworks (Kolb, 1984). When students viewed theory as pragmatic and having a high degree of relevancy to their lives, work, or research, learning and meaning making would be deepened.

Overall, instructors and students viewed the classroom as a respectful learning and safe environment that fostered the trusting relationships deemed integral to learning. Meaning making and connections between theory and practice were further enhanced as students are engaged in collaborative inquiry and the co-construction of knowledge.

5. Expanding students' identities to include a researcher identity

Wenger (1998) theorized that identity is lived, negotiated and social in nature, whereby "identity is a becoming; the work of identity is ongoing and pervasive" (Wenger, 1998, p. 163). To Wenger, identity is formed through a dialogical process whereby an experience and its social interpretation inform each other. Throughout this graduate course, students developed deep knowledge at the personal level and a more nuanced understanding of their expanding identities as researchers. Students interpreted the meaning of different research experiences in participation with others. Identity was lived, negotiated and constructed through a process of social interaction within the context of students' lived experiences. Lave and Wenger (1991) theorized that learning in the context of a situated learning environment is facilitated through the process of collaboration. By engaging in collaboration with colleagues, these graduate students constructed their own knowledge and understanding of identity as they participated in this community of practice—the course served as a living social community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The notion of communities of practice placed student knowledge and learning as situated within students' own experiences. Situated learning in this context drew upon a student's previous experiences to facilitate reflection and the transfer of knowledge from one situation to another.

> Positioning myself in my own research is paramount within Indigenous research as there is a thin vale difference between researcher and researched. The belief that the research stems from my own learning experience and is driven and lead by 'spirit' is a factor that I was able to articulate and express within this classroom.
>
> The survival metaphor has haunted me as I moved into doctoral studies. However, the support provided by the instructors and my peers have significantly changed my perception of the dissertation process and content. I now see my doctoral studies as a journey laden with opportunities, learning, collaboration, questioning, and possibilities.
>
> In this course, we learned to break free from the illusion of expertise and knowing the "truth." As we engaged in course readings and class discussions, we intentionally studied our own practice and identity as researchers. Course content made me question who I am as a researcher. I was able to untangle myself from all of the external expectations that I felt to be a "certain type" of researcher. There was physical and metaphorical space to try on different methodological approaches and paradigms.
>
> As graduate students we have multiple roles and competing commitments at school and at home. Our instructors recognized our life priorities and accommodated our individual situations. As a "mature" student, the valuing of my life experiences was particularly important to me.
>
> My voice is important! Through the use of my voice, I own my research. I was excited about this new learning. I no longer feel compelled to silence my voice or hide my identity.
>
> This course was, in part, a catalyst to write a book review and to present at a conference on rural and remote community health. Intellectually, the course was challenging; emotionally the course was engaging and supported personal responses and sharing of our professional and personal "lived experiences" related to our research topics; and building rapport and relationships with academic colleagues as emerging scholars enhanced my interpersonal skills.
>
> As doctoral students, we are crossing the boundary into the inner framework of scholarly inquiry. Engagement with experienced individuals (i.e., course instructors) assisted with this role and identity transition. At first, I emulated the

> instructors. Later, I took what the instructors offered and integrated this with what I believe and my existing identity. I was discovering who I was becoming as a researcher.
>
> Being exposed to the notion of positionality was integral to my identity formation. I felt liberated as I learned that I could be true to myself and that I could speak to my beliefs, values and assumptions within the research process. In this way, my previous, current and newly-learned facets of identity commingled and became infused.

Wenger (1998) acknowledged the roles of newcomers and old-timers to the professional community of practice. As emerging scholars or researchers, the students (i.e., newcomers) began their new practice on the periphery. As these graduate students crossed the boundary into the inner framework of practice by engaging with experienced researchers (i.e., the course instructors), their knowledge and understanding of "being a researcher" was co-constructed with their instructors and peers through collaboration, inquiry and reflection. Over time, the newcomers (i.e., students) expanded their identities to include a researcher identity.

In contrast, Lave and Wenger's (1991) perspective of newcomers' peripheral experiences were challenged in this course as students come with a wealth of knowledge about their research topics and projects. In this way, students were "shifting (their) perspectives from border crossing to building new communities and from forsaking identities to co-constructing new facets to identity" (Beynon, Grout & Wideen, 2004, p. 106) through the collaborative structures inherent in this course. Beynon, et al (2004) argue that a new third dimension is created through socialization, rather than relinquishing their previous identity. That is, the researcher identity did not replace students' previous identity(ies); rather, being a researcher was an additional facet of identity taken up by students as they engaged in the course, as well as in their work and lives.

> I appreciated the honesty with which students spoke about their lives, their children, family or work commitments, and speaking about how these other aspects of our identities both challenged and enhanced our academic experiences.
>
> Learning to question and challenge the status quo is a gift that will serve me well in my academic research and practice. I have learned to look at myself and educational institutions as objects of analysis. Through my reading of the literature, I continue to synthesize, analyze, and critique my world and my practice. In this way, my research agenda has supported a more intellectual assessment of my identity as a researcher. This awareness allows me to stay focused on practical solutions to everyday educational problems that might have otherwise gone unnoticed in my practice.
>
> A tension existed as I entered this new learning community. Although I was "like" many of my classmates, my professional and life experiences were "unlike" my counterparts. This disconnect initially stalled my learning. At the time, I did not understand how difference would promote and support my learning. Acknowledging these differences, and articulating how this may contribute to future learning, is important to address early on in the course.
>
> I was encouraged by the responses from other peers and the instructors when a student's son sat in on the class one day. It was clear that there was an understanding that the proposal writing process is entwined with who we are and why we choose to engage in this work—this includes our support systems outside the university. We are constantly negotiating and balancing focus on our academic path.
>
> Despite my more nuanced understanding, I leave this course wondering: (1) What do I believe about human nature and the essence of truth? (2) Who decides what knowledge is "true" or "valued"? (3) What is in my own belief system (conscious and unconscious) that informs and impacts how I see the world? (4) How do I break free from the Western views that influence my worldview? (5) How will I disrupt practices of "othering" by interrogating insider/outsider binaries?

As students expanded their identities by taking up a researcher identity, they continuously engaged in reflective and reflexive thinking. This "very treacherous journey engaging the heart and identity of the adults" (Sandmann & Sissell, 2000, p. 458) was complex, challenging and even painful for some learners. The structures and collaborative supports within this course allowed students to negotiate deep knowledge at a highly personal

level. Fear and frustration often provoked critical consciousness (Brookfield, 1995). As students were disrupted by ambiguity, contradictions, tensions, and their own unexamined assumptions, they are engaged in critical reflection (technical, practical and emancipatory) (Grundy, 1990). At times, critical reflection and the meaning-making processes transformed how students viewed themselves, each other and the world (Mezirow, 1991). Such transformational learning experiences shaped students' subsequent learning and meaning-making because "transformational learning shapes people; they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize" (Clark, 1993, p. 47).

6. Conclusion and recommendations for future practice and study

This empirical study explored a higher education pedagogical process that facilitated largely doctoral students in preparing their candidacy proposals through the use of specific adult learning principles. Overall, students' experiences and perceptions of this learning environment had "a profound impact on my ability to complete my research proposal, and proceed to candidacy this year". When asked if they would recommend this course to their peers within the department or faculty, students indicated:

> When I recommend this course to other students, I tell them that the course is well organized, breaks the proposal writing process into manageable, timely steps, and helps to demystify the system of academia and also the doctoral student experience.
>
> Collectively, the overall learning experience was very powerful and supported the transition from practitioner to researcher.
>
> I would and have already recommended this class to others. This class provided me with an understanding of the structures and processes used in educational research. It was a focused class as we learned about all aspects of graduate writing. Furthermore, it was very meaningful because we chose the topics. The icing on the cake was the support provided by classmates and instructors that made me feel comfortable sharing my work.

Students' voices illustrated how the learning environment impacted the process of learning and enabled reciprocal relationships whereby students contributed to their peers' learning and benefited from their peers' and instructors' contributions to their own individual learning. The study identified key factors that facilitated adult learning and a researcher identity, including creating a respectful and safe environment comprised of trusting relationships, engaging in mutual inquiry and the co-construction of meaning, and bridging research theory and practice.

Although this graduate course shows potential as a means to facilitating adult learning and a researcher identity, students also provided suggestions for improving this course, including:

> It would be helpful to have a student who has recently defended their proposal come in as a guest to present their work and to speak about their experience with candidacy.
>
> In order to make the most of the course time, a logistical improvement might be to set the stage for conversation with partners/peers right at the beginning of class time …. Although the less structured approach allowed for varying schedules, as well as informal time to connect with peers and instructors and ask questions, this time could have been more focused.
>
> Working on-line and limiting the use of paper was positive; however, it often took time to set up and I felt the time could have been invested in reading paper drafts of our work. Most students printed drafts of their work for their own reference and we could work directly from these while being environmentally conscious ….
>
> I'd like more information on department and faculty professors and groups. In particular, knowing the current research interests and methodological approaches used by other professors would serve as a road map to connect with

> other scholars and to build wider scholarly networks. Finding individuals with complementary interests can be challenging, but critical to advancing one's thinking and research.
>
> I would have really enjoyed taking some time to read and discuss some of the instructors' published research. It would have been very valuable to talk about the "behind the scenes" research work that underlies each of their published articles.

While this course was viewed primarily as a positive learning experience, students' voices (as indicated above) elucidated how learning could be deepened. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, we offer the following recommendations for practice:

(1) Establish a safe and respectful learning environment (e.g., smaller class sizes to facilitate relationship building and to uphold principles of equality and respect for all participants);

(2) Emphasize the establishment of trusting relationships through face-to-face interactions. However, continue to incorporate online learning tools to support peer review and provide opportunities to share expertise among students and instructors;

(3) Promote pedagogical models based on active learning and the co-construction of meaning through inquiry, collaboration, and reflection;

(4) Recognize the very diverse needs and skill sets of students at all academic/career stages and ability levels;

(5) Provide choice and flexibility in groupings for collaborative inquiry and reflective activities. Groups should not be pre-determined, rather students should be allowed to select or change groups based on project similarities and personalities of group members;

(6) Provide students with access to new and differing research perspectives (e.g., meeting other professors in the department, hearing from students who already presented their candidacy proposals);

(7) Involve graduate students in program planning, as well as delivering content and sharing knowledge and research skills. Consider the use of multiple presenters and facilitators to support theoretical and practical learning;

(8) Allow for voluntary participation in large group sharing, mock candidacy sessions, and online posting of draft research proposals;

(9) Balance flexibility and structure within collaborative activities (e.g., students reported that it was helpful to have the proposal divided into smaller more manageable sections, and to have periodic deadlines for work completion);

(10) Extend this type of course offering to both Masters and Doctoral students who are at different stages of writing their theses—both groups would benefit from flexible and structured learning opportunities related to the research process.

Upon examination of these students' voices, we raise the following critical questions for future research:

(1) What is the role of reflection/reflexivity in enhancing students' understanding of educational research and the development of a researcher identity?

(2) How are bonds of trust formed and shaped within graduate-level courses?

(3) How, and to what extent, are constructivist and critical pedagogies currently integrated within university-based doctoral programs?

(4) How might alternate and multiple theoretical frameworks and epistemological perspectives or ways of knowing impact students' understanding of the research process and the development of a researcher identity?

(5) To what extent are indigenous and other cultural ways of knowing acknowledged, taught, and honored

within university-based research programs?

(6) How is transformational learning provoked, maintained, and maximized within graduate studies?

We hope that the student voices highlighted within this article will provide the impetus for others to design and implement more fully-developed graduate courses that facilitate adult learning and a researcher identity.

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