

“This Course Is Helping Us All Arrive at New Viewpoints, Isn’t It?”

Making Meaning Through Dialogue in a Blended Environment

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This qualitative study explores how individuals made meaning of their life history experiences while in dialogue with others in an online learning group that was part of a graduate course on adult development. All online discussion forum postings exchanged by the group over the 3-week assignment period were downloaded and analyzed through phenomenological thematic analysis and discourse analysis. Our goal was to better understand both what happened in this online dialogue and how it took place. Four aspects of how the participants made meaning through dialogue emerged: noticing, reinterpreting, theorizing, and questioning assumptions, each with specific speech acts. These findings expand our understandings of how individuals transform meaning through narrative and dialogue. The identification of specific aspects of meaning making and their related speech acts make a contribution to the literature on online dialogue, the power of restoring, critical reflection in public meaning making, and transformative group learning.

Keywords: blended learning environments; dialogue; group meaning making; online discussion; narrative; life history; group learning

Two recognized ways adults make meaning and transform their understanding of the world are through narrative and dialogue (Bruffee, 1999; Rossiter, 1999). As people understand their lives in terms of stories, meaning making takes a narrative form (Bruner, 1990), whereas shared meaning and authenticity are at the heart of dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986). Narrative and dialogue are discursive practices and are described in the literature variously as both private thoughts and public discourse. What people are to themselves and to others is the result of discursive practices

(Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999; Sidorkin, 1999). This study examines the record of an online public discourse for insight into cognition and personal development as an inherently dialogic and social process.

Narrative is deeply appealing and richly satisfying to the human soul with an allure that transcends cultures, ideologies, and academic disciplines. Autobiographical narrative, especially, is a fundamental structure of human meaning making (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1983), influencing one's life at every juncture. Life history, embedded in a cultural context, shapes how an individual develops a distinctive way of knowing. As a structure for making meaning of experience, narrative approaches an individual's development from the inside as it is lived rather than from the outside as it is observed (Bruner, 1990). "Narrative is a central structure in human meaning-making; thus, the life course and individual identity are experienced as story" (Rossiter, 1999, p. 59).

The centrality of narrative in the human experience makes it particularly relevant for studying adult development from an inductive, constructivist perspective. "The narrative orientation emphasizes the subjective and retrospective interpretation of how one develops" (Rossiter, 1999, p. 67). Narrative learning parallels the approach used by individuals as they learn through the interpretation of their own lives (Cohler, 1982). This narrative approach to learning supports the view that knowledge is structured as a meaning system (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Kegan, 1993; Mezirow, 1978). A meaning system includes one's values, beliefs, and assumptions as the lens through which personal experience is made sense of and mediated. In this view, learning is a cognitive process in which an individual incorporates new information and experience into the existing meaning system or alters that system in light of new information and experience. Randall (1996) conceived of the alteration of one's meaning system as "restorying" one's life. He explained that life events do not have an inherently assigned meaning. "Rather we make its meaning for it; we construct the event ourselves. We story it, as we do our entire past" (p. 230). Narrative learning, from Randall's perspective, includes reinterpreting experience to make it less contradictory and more generative. This process involves stepping back and reflecting on one's experiences to inquire how these have shaped the meaning of one's life and even to consider the role that culture plays in limiting acceptable interpretations. Restorying that alters one's meaning system is also described by transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991) and occurs when a meaning system becomes inadequate for making sense of experience. Meaning systems change through questioning assumptions that have been assimilated unconsciously from one's culture, family, or prior experiences.

Most literature on narrative learning and its potential for transformation focuses on the individual or the individual in relationship with an instructor. There has been less focus on the learning that occurs among a group of peers as they engage in the reciprocal process of telling and listening to each other's stories with the intention of learning. Dominicé's (2000) research on the educational aspects of life history includes the use of a peer group to analyze a life story, yet the focus is still on how the individual makes sense of the life history by incorporating input from peers. Dominicé did not focus on what occurs when a group of peers makes sense of their stories together.

Encouraging adults to share their life stories through dialogue may be a powerful way for them to make meaning of their life experiences both individually and as a group. The importance of viewing one's life against the backdrop of others' lives through dialogue is central to Stahl's (2002, 2003a, 2003b) social theory of learning. Stahl positioned learning not as a knowledge-transmission process but rather as a knowledge-creation process, in which knowledge is created through conversation. Stahl (2003b) argued that individual knowing is in essence an interpretation of the meaning that is first made while in communication with others. He pointed out that when small groups are working together, "they must make their learning visible to each other in their discourse in order for them to collaborate successfully" (2003b, p. 34). Engaging in dialogue about one's life history leads to the collaborative construction of new meaning. Viewing learning as a meaning-making process that occurs in conversation shifts the focus from an individual and cognitive process to a social and holistic process. Little research has been conducted on this heuristic type of group learning.

Cranton (1996), drawing on Habermas's (1971) domains of knowledge, postulated that group learning occurs in three ways, with each way yielding a different type of knowledge or meaning. Cooperative group learning occurs when groups engage in sharing information and expertise to complete a task, resulting in content knowledge. Collaborative group learning occurs when individuals interact through shared inquiry to construct their understanding of each other and their social worlds. Process and content become inseparable and yield communicative knowledge. Transformative group learning occurs when individuals engage in critical reflection to examine their own and others' assumptions about their lives and the world around them. This type of learning leads to emancipatory knowledge or freedom from constraining meaning systems.

One reason that little research has been conducted on group learning may be the difficulty of capturing the richness of live group conversations to fully document the meaning-making process. However, when groups participate in online dialogue with computer-mediated communication tools, this heuristic process is not only visible as it occurs but also can be retained for study. Online group dialogues are increasingly integrated into both formal and informal adult learning environments (King, 2002). Blended learning environments include both face-to-face and online elements (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Asynchronous online dialogue makes it possible for learners to interact without the constraints of space and time. Small groups of students can complete learning tasks largely, if not solely, through online communication (Graham & Misanchuk, 2004).

These online dialogues can be investigated for elements of meaning making in blended environments (Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003; Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2006). These dialogues can be observed in real time as they unfold in the discussion forums, yet at the same time these conversations are persistent and can be read long after the course is officially over. Transcripts become artifacts of the dialogic meaning-creation process that took place (Stahl 2002, 2003a, 2003b).

Although online discussions have been studied extensively, few of these studies have used the dialogue itself as a theoretical framework for investigating meaning making. Gorsky and Caspi (2005) proposed two categories of interpersonal

dialogue: social dialogue and subject-matter-oriented dialogue. Social dialogue is “a discursive relationship in which participants project themselves socially and emotionally” (p. 139). Subject-matter-oriented dialogue is “characterized by thought-provoking activities, such as hypothesizing, questioning, interpreting, explaining, evaluating and rethinking issues or problems at hand” (p. 140). This study explores the subject-matter-oriented dialogue of one group of four graduate students. These students shared their life history narratives in a course on adult development that was conducted in a blended environment. A previous study, using the same data, examined the social aspects of the dialogue as defined by Gorsky and Caspi (2005). A climate of engagement was identified as the overarching theme capturing the essence of how participants interacted with one another online. Four aspects of this climate of engagement were engaging in the online environment, engaging in dialogue, engaging as a group, and engaging with the content (Ziegler et al., 2006). This study explores aspects of meaning making and shifts the focus from the social to the subject-matter-oriented category of dialogue (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). The purpose of the study was to explore the holistic process by asking the following question: How do people make meaning of their own experiences in light of others’ experiences through dialogue?

Method

CONTEXT

Data for this study were drawn from a graduate course in adult development offered in a blended learning environment. The authors, all in the same university department, conducted the study as a team. One author was also the instructor of the course. The class met for 15 weeks with 11 face-to-face meetings. Readings on theory and research in adult development guided the face-to-face meetings. In addition, the class met asynchronously and synchronously through the university’s course management system, Blackboard. This platform enabled the instructor to set up private asynchronous forums for small online groups. The online portion of the class was structured as four separate 3-week assignments. This study analyzes only the online portion of the course.

Groups were created with the widest age range possible and remained the same throughout the semester. The first three assignments were to identify themes of adult development from (a) one’s own life history, (b) interviews with older adults, and (c) the literature. The final assignment was to link these themes to the adult development literature. The four assignments addressed three major topics related to adult development: identity, relationships, and work.

PARTICIPANTS

For this study we selected the most active group of students during the first assignment based on the following criteria: This group (a) exchanged the greatest

number of posts, (b) exhibited the greatest thread depth, and (c) completed the assignment effectively with demonstrated understanding. Four students were in this group: Ada, Millie, Pearl, and Sally (all names are pseudonyms). Their ages ranged from 24 to 56. All are Caucasian females enrolled in a 4-year land grant university in the southeastern part of the United States. They had not known each other prior to this course and were enrolled in four different academic programs: educational psychology, agricultural extension, counseling, and adult education. Two were at the master's level, one at the doctoral level, and one was a nondegree licensure-seeking student.

DATA COLLECTION

Before we selected the group for analysis, all students in the class were invited to participate in the study. Protection for the participants included an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the study and the methods used. In preparation for the first assignment, the students created a life history graph that depicted key transitions in their lives, then they shared the graph during a face-to-face class session. Students were then given the following instructions:

Building on your life history graphs, write a paper describing the key transitions in your life and the next direction you think your life is taking. Each member of your small group will read the others' papers. Your group will discuss themes that are both similar and different in your lives in relation your group's topic.

By the end of the 3 weeks, the group had completed the assignment and posted a summary online for the instructor and other groups in the class.

The group organized the forum into 12 threads. Pearl and Millie each began 5 threads. The longest threads were Questions and Relationships. The Questions thread, initiated by Millie, contained 15 posts over the course of 6 days, September 13 through 18. Millie also initiated the Relationships thread, which contained 13 posts over the course of 5 days, September 10 through 14. Both of these threads went 8 posts deep (see Figure 1).

Data included all forum posts made by the group during the 3-week assignment period. We downloaded the transcripts from Blackboard into word processing files for analysis. We organized the transcripts in two ways: chronologically and by thread. There were a total of 61 posts during the 3 weeks. Sally posted 16 times, Millie and Ada each posted 15 times, and Pearl posted 12 times. The instructor contributed 3 posts, all related to questions from the group about beginning the task.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interpretivist philosophy provided the foundation for the qualitative method used to examine this online group's dialogue (Schwandt, 2000). This philosophy guided our phenomenological inquiry into the essence of the online dialogue experience. Polkinghorne (1983) suggested that phenomenological human science

☐ <u>Relationships</u>	<u>Millie</u>	09-10 14:10
☐ <u>Re: Relationships</u>	<u>Ada</u>	09-10 18:47
☐ <u>Re: Relationships</u>	<u>Sally</u>	09-11 09:33
<u>Re: Relationships</u>	<u>Pearl</u>	09-12 16:43
☐ <u>Re: Relationships</u>	<u>Sally</u>	09-11 09:54
☐ <u>Re: Relationships</u>	<u>Ada</u>	09-11 15:12
☐ <u>Re: Relationships</u>	<u>Sally</u>	09-11 18:37
☐ <u>Re: Relationships</u>	<u>Ada</u>	09-11 19:30
☐ <u>Re: Relationships</u>	<u>Millie</u>	09-11 21:43
☐ <u>Re: Relationships</u>	<u>Ada</u>	09-12 08:53
<u>Re: Relationsh...</u>	<u>Ada</u>	09-12 14:40
☐ <u>Re: Relationsh...</u>	<u>Sally</u>	09-14 13:41
<u>Re: Relatio...</u>	<u>Ada</u>	09-14 15:50

Figure 1: The Relationships Thread

“seeks to describe the schemata or themes that constitute experience” (p. 231). We used the hermeneutic circle to continually look at parts of the text in light of the meaning of the larger text, returning to the parts and then back to the larger whole (Geertz, 1979). We utilized discourse analysis as the method to examine the language in use, that is, the text of the online dialogue (Herring, 2004.) Thus, our analysis included two steps: (a) phenomenological thematic analysis to identify what happened during the dialogue and (b) discourse analysis to understand how it happened.

Phenomenological thematic analysis: Aspects of the meaning-making process. The first phase of the analysis led to our holistic rather than reductionist understanding of the aspects of the dialogic meaning-making process. We read the transcript numerous times (individually and as a group), first chronologically and then by thread, to gain a holistic understanding of the online group’s experience. During

18	Early relationships with parents (a...	Pearl	09-09-2004 16:43
19	Re: Early relationships with par...	Millie	09-09-2004 16:58
20	Re: Early relationships with par...	Ada	09-10-2004 18:23
21	Re: Early relationships with...	Sally	09-11-2004 09:47

Figure 2: The Early Relationships With Parents Thread

the multiple readings, we made notes of words, phrases, and events that conveyed the experience of the online group, continually searching for the underlying meanings. The rereading continued until our understanding of the experience was validated with the text. Continuing to use the hermeneutic circle, each of us independently identified themes, or aspects, of meaning making. We came together to discuss and modify these themes then returned to the transcripts and finally agreed on four aspects of meaning making through dialogue.

Discourse analysis: Speech acts used to make meaning. The full meaning of any dialogue is possible only in context; thus, we analyzed a four-message thread in detail to tease out how meaning making occurred (see Figure 2). First, we identified speech acts in each message of the thread. A speech act describes a specific action being performed through the dialogue (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). We next looked for speech acts related to the four themes or aspects of the meaning-making process, identifying these acts independently and then negotiating agreement as a group. The aspects of the dialogue and the related speech acts were continually refined during this iterative process. This process continued until we agreed that the aspects of the dialogue and the speech acts represented the online group's meaning-making experience.

STANDARDS OF TRUSTWORTHINESS AND AUTHENTICITY

Guba and Lincoln (1989) identified four criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings. We achieved credibility, or the fit between the constructed realities of the participants and the reconstructions made by the research team, through prolonged engagement with the study site and active involvement in the process of designing and researching this learning environment. All three of the researchers were involved in the data collection and analysis processes and were immersed in the data for a long period of time, well beyond the semester itself. During regular meetings, we conducted peer debriefings to document and reflect on every phase of the study. Our own diverse backgrounds proved beneficial in recognizing biases during data analysis. A limitation of the study is that member checking was not used to establish trustworthiness. Member checking, the process of checking with participants that coding schemes, categories, and conclusions reflect what they actually meant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), did not occur because contact information was unavailable for two of the participants.

Dependability is “concerned with the stability of the data over time” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 242). Guba and Lincoln (1989) pointed out that shifts in constructions and changes in methods are expected in an emergent design but that such shifts need to be tracked. Confirmability in the constructivist paradigm is that the “integrity of the findings are rooted in the data themselves. . . . This means that the data can be tracked to their sources” (p. 243). Although we did not conduct an external audit to establish dependability and confirmability, we did keep a record of our researcher meetings and maintained an audit trail of our data collection and analysis processes.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) replaced the notion of generalizability of results with transferability of the working hypothesis developed through naturalistic inquiry. As they suggested, we used thick, rich description to support and facilitate transferability of our findings to the readers’ own contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, readers are given the opportunity to decide on the degree of congruence and applicability of our working hypothesis to their own teaching and learning environments.

Findings

This course is helping us all arrive at new viewpoints, isn’t it? (Ada)

Four aspects of meaning making through dialogue emerged from the first step of the data analysis: noticing, reinterpreting, theorizing about, and questioning assumptions (see Table 1, Step 1). Speech acts describing each of these aspects emerged from the second step of the data analysis (see Table 1, Step 2).

NOTICE

Thankfully, I have found a great number of like-minded people. (Ada)

As the women shared and discussed their life histories, one aspect of the dialogue was an initial noticing of a particular event in their life experiences that seemed relevant to the discussion. The aspect of noticing focuses on the self and making meaning of one’s own experience in light of the other. The participants did this through the speech acts of describing and extending. Pearl, for example, described her relationship with her parents in a concrete manner:

I am quite understanding about my parents because of their low education. . . . They had no concept of self-esteem, quality time, or such matters and were immigrants from Europe with very different views than Americans.

Reading about the experiences of others seemed to draw out new memories or the willingness to share other life experiences that were previously omitted. Thus, a prevalent speech act was to extend a story by making additions to the original version that had been shared. Later in the same message Pearl added, “My dad

Table 1: Aspects of Meaning Making and Its Process

<i>Step 1. Aspects of Meaning Making From a Phenomenological Perspective</i>	<i>Step 2. Speech Acts of the Meaning-Making Process From Discourse Analysis</i>
<p>1. Notice This is a focus on the self. Notice one's own experience, talking about one's own experience in light of the other's experience. It could be implicit or could occur in the subject line of a posted message.</p>	<p>a. Describe Give an account of or depict one's own concrete experience.</p> <p>b. Extend Provide additional information or details about one's experience.</p>
<p>2. Reinterpret This is a focus on the other, as in a response to the other's experience that has been shared: reinterpreting what another has said in the discussion or in the posted life histories.</p>	<p>a. Find commonalities Make similarities between experiences explicit.</p> <p>b. Find differences Make dissimilarities between experiences explicit.</p> <p>c. Evaluate Examine and judge the other's experience that has been shared.</p> <p>d. Refute Contradict an earlier reinterpretation. Respond to what the other said about one's own statement.</p> <p>e. Request clarification Request additional information to clarify. This could be asking back about an earlier reinterpretation.</p> <p>f. Provide clarification Provide additional information to clarify.</p>
<p>3. Theorize This is a focus on one's own experience or a focus on the other's experience. It creates an abstraction for what has been shared concretely.</p>	<p>a. Label Assign a category or explicitly name a concrete experience.</p> <p>b. Provide explanation Develop or add details to what has been shared.</p> <p>c. Make assumption Draw a conclusion or make a generalization based on a theory.</p>
<p>4. Question Assumptions This is questioning one's own or another's assumptions.</p>	<p>a. Provide evidence about one's own assumption Identify one's incorrect assumption and provide information about it.</p> <p>b. Challenge the assumption of another Request that another provide more information about an assumption.</p>

also had an alcohol problem, but drank to excess only at home—and only with the wine he made himself.” In another example, Millie extended her contribution, “Not sure if I mentioned this in my paper, but Dad was also pretty much an [*sic*] drunk for awhile. It was part of the reason Mom divorced him (but then moved in with a violent drunk, which I never figured out).” During the dialogue, individuals talked about their own experiences, at times expanding beyond the content for their original papers. Participants also extended their focus to others in the group through reinterpretation.

REINTERPRET

I wonder what it was like . . . (Pearl)

The second aspect of meaning making was a reinterpretation of the others’ experiences. Through reinterpretation, the focus was on the others’ experiences conveyed through the dialogue. Speech acts that characterized reinterpretation included requesting clarification, providing clarification, finding commonalities, and evaluating. Less common speech acts were finding differences and refuting. For example, Millie reinterpreted her individual experience in light of the group. She responded to Pearl’s post, first by finding the commonality and evaluating Pearl’s post: “I love that you used the word *achievers*. . . . Relationships with parents could definitely be another [theme]”; and moving on to finding a difference: “My early relationships were great though”; and then finding another commonality: “Up until the divorce (which could be another theme in itself—we’ve all been through it in one way or another).” This then prompted a shift back into the noticing phase, where she extended her own experiences:

My parents both seemed involved and supportive. I just don’t think my Mom knew how to handle me “choosing” Dad over her, which is how she viewed my moving out. The only thing she could handle at the time was shutting down for a while.

Millie closed her post by requesting clarification from others: “What about everyone else?”

Reinterpretation altered the focus of the dialogue as participants moved from self to others. They demonstrated active listening and a willingness to respond to questions. As they articulated commonalities, they saw that they could understand themselves in terms of others and vice versa. When they found differences, they focused on “the other” and carved out a space in their own worldview for her.

THEORIZE

The world is crazy. (Sally)

In addition to noticing and reinterpreting their experiences, group members also theorized as they talked together, shifting from talk of concrete experiences

to more abstract concepts. Theorizing included a focus on both one's own and the others' experiences. The participants theorized about the experiences through speech acts of labeling, providing explanations, and making assumptions. Ada provided an explanation for why as a child she worried about what other people thought:

The main goal for my family . . . was that I make my debut through the Cotillion Club. . . . I was so disgusted with myself and what I saw as pure "fako," tradition-laden sell-out that within a year I quit my college sorority (another UGH! experience) as well as every club I was involved in.

Following this was her reinterpretation through providing clarification of the experience as she added, "(Hmmm—that was one of those "waking up" points I forgot to put on my lifegraph)."

Later in the same message, Ada responded to Sally's post, beginning with a reinterpretation through evaluation and finding commonalities: "Sally, I *completely* identify with what I perceive as anger and frustration coming from your story. Your story, in particular, has hit me *hard*." She moved on to theorizing through making assumptions:

It is a huge lesson in realizing that the stuff that *I* think is earth-shaking for *me* is mere child's play to the bigger, more tragic things that can happen. At the same time, I am wondering what happens to our sense of love, compassion, trust in the face of self-doubt, betrayal, and heartbreak. We can become cynical, yes. We can become numb. But such a large, sensitive, universe-connected part of us wants to experience love in the same measure as we feel it in our hearts.

Sally responded to Ada in the final message of the thread, making further assumptions:

Ada, trust in anybody after repetitive betrayals has made me nontrusting, now i trust but validate, so that's really not trusting at all . . . i now look for the true motivation in people . . . although some actors are so good, we really never know some people . . . things are not always as they seem . . . perhaps things are never as they seem . . . our morals and values as a society have dwindled . . . sometimes its difficult to have faith in people . . . i see a wide, diverse, variety of people in my work . . . the world is crazy . . . people are so in touch with materialism, and self-centeredness . . . pettiness . . . later, Sally

The thread ended here, with no further dialogue on the topic.

QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS

I've just recently realized . . . (Millie)

Questioning of assumptions made by participants did occur but it was not as prevalent as other aspects of meaning making. Most instances of questioning

assumptions were individuals' questioning their own prior assumptions in light of the dialogue. For example, here Sally identified an incorrect assumption she had made about relationships and how her reinterpretation guided her present action:

i've made the mistake of assuming that other people who I've had relationships with were working from the same set of values and morals as my own. this assumption has been a huge factor relative to the disintegration of relationships. I think people have read me, and used my kindness and compassion, and once their needs have been fulfilled they move on to fulfilling their next need. I'm trying to find a balance, not to become one of them, i couldn't be anyway, but seeing people for who they are and what they want from me, and doing what i can for them, while adhering to my values and morals.

One of Millie's messages also revealed how she questioned her initial assumptions:

I have made huge assumptions about my roles in relationships! I'm just realizing how huge. For a LONG time, the first thing I would look for in relationships was the back door out if things got too real too fast. I didn't even realize I was doing it, but the other person ALWAYS had to make the first move. I have had some real damage done to my ability to trust when I was rather young, and I've just recently realized how that has affected the way I relate to others.

Millie's comment, "I didn't even realize I was doing it," showed how her awareness had changed. One of Pearl's posts revealed another example: "My husband also valued money and power. He won all the battles, but I feel he lost the war. Even though I did not realize it, I valued intimacy and spirituality highly, neither of which he shared with me." "Even though I did not realize it" showed that her understanding has changed.

Although there was evidence of individuals' questioning their own assumptions, there was less evidence of critically questioning assumptions made by each other in their online dialogue. For example, there was no questioning of Sally's universal claims about human nature. No one asked Sally to share evidence of what she meant, nor did they provide a counter-example to challenge her assumptions. Rather, posts with such broad assumptions either triggered a complete change of subject or prematurely ended the conversational thread. For example, when Pearl posted, "I believe that if God is not part of the marriage triangle, the relationship will either fail or be incomplete," there was no response.

The four aspects of meaning making that emerged from the dialogue—*noticing*, *reinterpreting*, *theorizing*, and *questioning assumptions*—describe the essence of the online dialogue experience of this group. The speech acts for each of the four aspects specify the actions that the participants used to make meaning. The following discussion focuses on how these findings relate to the process of *restorying*, Cranton's hypotheses on group learning, and the role of reflection in learning from dialogue.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand how people make meaning of their own experiences in light of others' experiences through dialogue. We distinguished between Gorsky and Caspi's (2005) two categories of interpersonal dialogue: social dialogue and subject-matter-oriented dialogue. We conducted a prior study on the social aspects of dialogue that focused on how the participants engaged with one another relationally and emotionally (Ziegler et al., 2006). That previous study raised the issue of learning as a process of meaning making during the group's dialogue in terms of what occurred and how it occurred. What occurred was meaning making through noticing, reinterpreting, theorizing, and questioning assumptions. How it occurred was through the participants' speech acts that characterized each meaning-making aspect. These aspects and the accompanying speech acts showed how participation in a group led to restorying one's life in light of the stories of others, constructing knowledge at the individual and group levels, and understanding the role of reflection and the need for challenge.

RESTORYING ONE'S LIFE IN LIGHT OF THE STORIES OF OTHERS

Through the aspects of dialogue identified in this study, participants engaged in restorying as described by Randall (1996). Restorying included both individual and collective learning. Because each life story was told anew to a fresh group of listeners, the restorying created a dialectic tension between abstract or theoretical reflection and personal experience (Griffiths, 1995). The tension alluded to by Griffiths (1995) reflects the process of making sense as individuals step back from an experience to reflect on it. Indeed, group members did not have all the answers in the moment; rather, they were still engaged in the process of meaning making as they maintained dialogue online. For example, as the participants related their lives to the themes introduced in each new thread, they described their experiences and extended them. Ada's response concerning how her work related to her relationship with her parents came after a specific question asked by Millie. Ada was clear in her response that she was still trying to make sense of the career-parent relationship as she states, "I can't quite put my finger on it." The tension was between the theoretical question asked and continuing to wonder about the answer. Rather than a knowledge-transmission process, viewing one's life against the backdrop of other lives encourages a knowledge creation process inherent in group dialogue (Stahl, 2002).

CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE AT THE INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP LEVELS

Knowledge creation revolved around two processes, telling the story and taking apart, or deconstructing, the story (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, & Epston, 1997). In this study, writing the life history was telling the story; sharing the life history meant not only telling the story to oneself but also telling it to others.

Connecting the life history to larger themes began the second process, that of taking the story apart. In the dialogue, suggesting themes usually began with a reference to all of the life histories. In a sense, each group member not only took her own life history apart but also that of the other group members. For example, one thread begun by Pearl was titled *Early Relationships (With Parents) and Achievers (Students)*. Pearl addressed each of the group members by asking questions, trying to relate the theme to each of their lives, and encouraging more dialogue. Pearl went on to ask others questions about what relationships meant to them. Her questions reflected her attempts to try to make sense of the stories in terms of the themes and to help herself and the others restore their narratives. The narrative process was iterative as long as participants wanted to construct new meaning (Monk et al., 1997).

Meaning making through narrative occurred as each group member noticed events in her life, reinterpreted these events in light of the experiences of others, and emerged from the dialogue with a new narrative. Despite references in the literature to the important role of discourse in meaning making, the learning process resulting from discourse is described as fundamentally an individual one (Dominicé, 2000; Mezirow, 1991). Findings from this study emphasize not only how dialogue may extend or change individual perspectives but also how the group as a whole constructs a shared perspective. Thus, the learning is both individual and shared.

At the group level, individuals together create shared meaning through dialogue. Cranton (1996) described this process as collaborative learning—when individuals interact to better understand themselves, each other, and their social world. In this type of group learning, meaning making is shared and the group collectively constructs new knowledge. This aspect of shared meaning is often neglected in the literature on transforming meaning systems (Belenky et al., 1986; Kegan, 1993; Mezirow, 1978, 1991). Although an individual's meaning system might have expanded or changed, the group constructed a common meaning system that was ongoing and related to the collaborative group learning described by Cranton.

However, we did not see what Cranton (1996) described as transformative group learning, with group members challenging commonly held views or questioning themselves and each other. Cranton did not distinguish between the learning that occurs when one questions one's own assumptions and that which occurs when one questions the assumptions of another. We found this to be a critical distinction that needs further exploration. In our study, group participants had little trouble describing ways they had questioned themselves in the past and were even able to question themselves in the context of the group's dialogue. This resulted in collaborative learning and the construction of what Cranton described as communicative knowledge. The communicative knowledge was shared meaning but not shared meaning that had resulted from critical reflection. What the individual group members did not do was ask critical questions of one another or challenge each other's assumptions. This lack of critique may have truncated the group learning process prematurely. The literature on reflection and learning through stories focuses on this critical stage of meaning making.

THE ROLE OF REFLECTION AND NEED FOR CHALLENGE

One element of critical reflection is that of questioning one's or another's assumptions (Mezirow, 1991). Critical reflection is a key step in the process of learning from stories (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002; McDrury & Alterio, 2003; Rossiter, 1999). Several models of learning through stories include a change through critical reflection as the final step. Moon (1999) called this *transformation*, similar to Mezirow's perspective transformation (2000). According to Schank (1999), change in meaning occurs when there is a disjuncture between the story being told and the listener's experience. In this case, there could be disjuncture between the storyteller's current understanding of the experience and what she had thought before or between the storyteller and the listener. In either case, such reinterpretation occurred as the participants shared their stories online. Conflict or disjuncture is an important component of many learning theories. We did not see this happen as much as we expected. What was not said may have been as important as what was said. Based on a study of online collaborative groups, Smith (2005) suggested that group process and psychodynamic issues might play a role in whether group members challenge one another's assumptions. A challenge that is too strong may lead to an unsafe learning space. Although Smith addressed group process and challenging assumptions, she did not address how group members co-construct knowledge and shared meaning through this process.

Implications for Practice and Directions for Further Research

The findings from this study suggest several ways of approaching learning through online group dialogue. Research indicates that meaning making occurs through dialogue but limiting dialogue to the classroom constricts the opportunities that students have for subject-matter-oriented dialogue (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). The following suggestions focus on (a) helping individuals learn ways to facilitate the meaning-making process with an online group, (b) emphasizing online group learning and the process of critical reflection, and (c) helping learners authentically participate in an online transformative learning group.

We suggest that instructors introduce learners to the four aspects of meaning making identified in this study and describe possible speech acts in each aspect. Instructors and learners could create and engage in role-playing that practice noticing, reinterpreting, theorizing, and questioning assumptions. This practice would highlight meaning making as an intentional component of the dialogue. Critical reflection provides a foundation for questioning assumptions. To help learners develop this capacity, instructors might include an intentional time and place for critical reflection. Because we found the learners in our study did not demonstrate critical reflection of others' assumptions, providing specific opportunities to become comfortable with this process may enhance this key aspect of learning. Helping learners become comfortable with questioning assumptions within the group environment will lead to a richer dialogical experience and ultimately to transformation.

Narrative and dialogue, rather than being knowledge-transmission processes, are knowledge-creation processes (Stahl, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). Although Sidorkin (1999) suggested that this knowledge-creation process among a group of individuals is equally accessible to everyone in every culture, the aspects of meaning making that emerged from this study suggest that some individuals may find identifying and questioning the assumptions of another off-putting. Understanding more explicitly the difference between questioning one's own assumptions and questioning the assumptions of others is an important area for further exploration. Some cultures may view questioning assumptions as face threatening or too confrontational. Examining how participants from various cultures construct shared meaning in group settings could aid in our understanding of this area. Another direction for further inquiry is to look at the aspects of meaning making across effective and ineffective groups. This could illuminate the relationships between the aspects of meaning making, speech acts, and a rich group experience.

Conclusion

When learning in a group is viewed as a dialogic process of creating knowledge together, there are aspects of meaning making that when present help collaborative group learning to occur. To encourage learners' critical reflection and examination of assumptions, expectations, and multiple perspectives, practitioners and researchers may want to focus on what happens related to meaning making during group dialogue and how this meaning making does or does not occur. A better understanding of the meaning-making process may influence transformative group learning that results in emancipatory knowledge.

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