

## **The Trouble with Transformation: Reflective Curricular Designs for Adult Learners**

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### **Abstract:**

*The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between a curricular design and transformational learning. This research explores how adult students use the Living Research Project (LRP) as a transformative learning tool. Using focus group interviews and survey data, this exploratory study seeks to examine students' experiences completing LRPs. The study reveals (1) how students define and value the LRP, (2) their experiences integrating components of the LRP and (3) students' experiences using critical reflection in their LRPs. Results suggest students defined the LRP as a worthwhile assignment that connected their life experiences to course content. Although students had difficulty employing aspects of the curricular design, they deemed it a valuable tool for reflection. Misinterpretations of the design may have prevented its use as a transformative tool. Suggestions, such as employing explicit transformation language, are offered in developing deliberate transformative curricular designs for adult learners.*

### **Key Words:**

transformative learning, curricular design, living research projects, reflection, life experience, adult learners.

## **Introduction**

Research compiled by the National Center for Educational Statistics shows the population of students over the age of 21 has increased steadily since 2000 (NCES, 2015). Enrollment analyses predict that this trend will extend well beyond the year 2020. With more adults enrolled in college, constructing pedagogical and curricular techniques that honor the experiential resources students bring to school becomes important. Studies demonstrate that integrating the knowledge adults bring with them to the classroom can create learning environments that facilitate motivation (Hains and Smith, 2012), engaged participation (Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005), and stronger learning outcomes (Qualters, 2010).

However, developing techniques that authentically amalgamate students' experience and course content is no simple task. The goal of injecting real life into the curriculum is a challenge for all educators, yet a particularly thorny one for those who teach adults. Balancing adult students' experiences and course content often creates tension between what is articulated in learning objectives and actual outcomes shaped by individual experience. For educators who desire to move beyond simply honoring the experiences students bring to class in favor of helping students develop a critical analysis of these experiences, the task is even more challenging.

Transformative learning theory has been shown to guide curriculum and pedagogy intended to engage students in critically examining life experiences and course content. Various scholars have made efforts to explore the conditions that support transformation, examples of transformative learning, and guidelines for assessment (Osmond and Darlington, 2005; Smith, 2011; Chandler, 2012). Practitioners tout transformative learning's ability to produce paradigm shifts (Cranton, 2002). It is equally known as an obscure instructional theory, difficult in its application and implementation (Ryan, 2011). The current inquiry examines a specific curricular design and its relationship to transformational learning. The study offers an example, in the Living Research Project, of a transformative curricular design and the difficulty with intention and execution.

The Living Research Project (LRP) assists students in constructing new ways of knowing by integrating research, personal experience, and course content. This curricular design is intended to help adult learners develop strategies to transform beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and skills that constitute their prior meaning schemes. Through the LRP, students are pushed to sharpen evaluative skills, learn how to integrate personal experiences and course content, and deepen their use of critical self-reflection. The components work in tandem to produce authentically engaged learning.

This study explores the LRP and its attempt to foster transformation in a small sample of adult students enrolled in a liberal arts undergraduate degree program. It adds to a growing body of research that empirically supports and complicates the use of transformative learning and development in college classrooms. This exploratory study uses focus group interviews and data obtained from a survey to examine students' experiences completing LRPs. Moreover, it reveals difficulties in (1) how students define and value the LRP, (2) their experiences integrating components of the LRP and (3) students' experiences using critical reflection in their LRPs. These themes provide a

foundation for discussing the challenges of conceptualizing the LRP as a tool for transformation.

## Literature review

### ***The role of transformative knowledge in student learning***

Any review of transformational learning theory yields a literature landscape that is vast and varied. Some of the literature focuses on individuals' tacit experiences and explores the ways in which transformational learning helps students to understand social events that are situated in various contexts. Other iterations of the theory extend beyond the internal dialogue that is produced by thought and affect. In these understandings of the theory, a key feature of transformation is the behavioral activity that accompanies the internal dialogue.

The apex of transformational learning theory involves engaging students in emancipatory knowledge. It is this type of knowledge that propels students to challenge their prior frames of reference and to envision their actions with the full understanding of how they impact society. Emancipatory knowledge (Foucault, 1980; Habermas, 1972) is concerned with creating opportunities that challenge the dominant discourse and move individuals toward action embedded in social justice and social development. It is action oriented in that it suggests strategies that can supply individuals with schemes that challenge and interrupt the status quo. This form of knowledge idealizes praxis, the ongoing interaction between reflection, inquiry, discourse, and action, and builds critical consciousness, so individuals have opportunities to deepen their awareness of social realities that shape their lives (Freire, 1971).

Jack Mezirow (1997) defines transformational learning as a 'process of effecting in a *frame of reference*' (p. 5). It propels one to interpret concepts, behaviors, emotions, beliefs, and judgments so that one might understand how these ideas shape and define thinking and actions. Frames of reference are the building blocks of assumptions. They dictate how we understand and act upon our experiences. Changing our frames of reference, so they reflect thinking and affecting that is more cultivated, insightful, and discerning is an important skill to instill in students.

Mezirow (1997) also states that a chief responsibility of an educator is to "help learners reach their objectives in such a way that they will function as more autonomous, socially responsible thinkers" (p. 8). Scaffolding students to this point requires educators to design and implement lessons that toggle students' various frames of reference and challenge them to delve deeply into self-understanding. In doing so, they devise environments where rational processes are met with emotional, social, and prior learned thoughts and behaviors. The process of transformation is a response to agitation, or what Mezirow (1997) called dilemmas which drive an individual to change and challenge prior perspectives. In essence, transformational learning actuates a different lived experience for the individual.

Much of the curriculum and pedagogy that is consumed by today's college student is focused on the what Tillapaugh and Haber-Curran (2013) describe as one-way transactional approaches to teaching and learning that emphasize the recall of facts and information (p.519).

Less of it is organized around making meaning out of one's experiences. At its core, that is the objective of transformational learning. The question then becomes, how does one activate this type of learning in students? Understanding the conditions in which transformation can be achieved is a major concern of critical pedagogues, and quite possibly an obstacle in effectively designing and implementing transformative learning curricula.

### ***Critical reflection as a catalyst for transformation***

Through purposeful processes, transformational learning enables individuals to develop and understand how they come to conceptualize and act on knowledge. Of course, transformation does not materialize on its own. According to Merriam (2004), 'for transformational learning to occur, one must be able to critically reflect and engage rational discourse' (p. 60). Critical reflection is, at its most basic level, 'an activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it' (Boud, Keogh, and Walker, 1985, p. 19). Much of the literature on critical reflection tends to describe it in this way; that is in private and linear terms. Some research broadens the concept. These studies challenge readers to understand critical reflection and the ways in which people come to engage it as more than just an intimate cognitive process (Malkki, 2010). They also highlight how critical reflection might be employed in educational settings to facilitate transformation.

Fernandez-Balboa's (1998) description of critical reflection emphasizes how the individual is in a cycle of review with how the self is experiencing the world. He describes critical reflection as a practice that 'helps us see how, in many cases (and even with the best of intentions), our actions are void of meaning. Critical reflection reaches true effectiveness when it lies between excessive rumination and superfluous thought, when it looks not only backward and forward (connecting us to the world) but also inward (i.e., self-questioning) in a constant cycle of coming back to our starting point and purpose' (p. 47).

Fernandez-Balboa's characterization of critical reflection is most aligned with what van Woerkom (2010) describes as ideological critique. Through this lens, critical reflection exposes those dominant regimes that suppress the voice of individuals and decouple the political and historical processes that create ways of navigating and understanding the world. van Woerkom's review is needed because it helps us to understand that critical reflection is complex, developmental, and can reveal many forms of transformational learning in students. It is important to know that although varied experiences emerge from critical reflection these [traditions] 'all express normative ideals for better, deeper or more liberating ways of learning' (340).

One's understanding of terms associated with critical reflection deepens the process of engaging the phenomenon. Further, emotions embedded and unearthed by the activity as well as the products of reflection are also significant. Educators must be aware that critical reflection can expose feelings and reveal trajectories that were unintended. The language used to assign a critical reflection task, the products of the task, and the future uses of these products then become essential considerations. Thus designing curricular projects that use critical reflection is an important exercise and one that educators should take seriously.

## **Actualizing transformation**

### ***Transformative curricular designs***

Research in recent years has produced a chasm between transformational learning theory and application of the theory (Newman, 2012). A review conducted by Malkki (2011) suggests that many transformational theories fail to fully expose the conditions that support critical reflection, one of the fundamental elements of transformational learning. Nor do these theories explicitly reveal the challenges to reflection. Malkki (2011) notes that a holistic theory of transformative learning 'would by necessity need to include conceptualization of the dynamics of reflection that would (a) explicate the presuppositions of the very process of becoming aware of and questioning one's assumptions; (b) depict the conditions for carrying it out; and (c) also indicate possible barriers for the process' (p. 43).

Stevens, Gerber, and Hendra (2010) offer a look into how critical reflection can be used within college classrooms to exercise transformative learning. Their study explored the degree to which a prior learning assessment (PLA) program contributed to transformative learning. Data collection involved transcribing responses to a survey sent to students and alumni who had completed PLA portfolios. Their survey underscored the impact PLA had on the way that students transformed prior frames of reference. Stevens et al. (2010) found that participants often did not refer to critical reflection, reflective discourse, or action in their responses. However, these researchers were quick to note that the absence of these transformative learning phases was not an indication that transformation did not exist. Their research highlights the need for educators to be explicit in their development of transformational pedagogies and clear in the many ways that transformation might surface.

How to measure transformation is a hot-button issue that is inextricably connected to one's definition of transformation. While some scholars highlight concrete techniques that are used to invoke and assess transformation (Gilstrap and Dupree, 2008; Smith, 2011), others are more concerned with exploring the nuanced, emotional, and subjective processes of the theory (Dirkx, Mezirow, and Canton, 2006).

King and Wright (2003) attempted to assess how transformational learning was experienced and promoted in an adult basic education classroom. Using a mixed method design, they explored the frequency, forms, and facilitators of transformation within 19 students. Results from their study accentuate the importance of allowing each individual to gauge their own results of transformational learning. Rather than educators having predetermined outcomes for assessing transformation, King and Wright (2003) opted to emphasize 'the learning opportunity and process of developing new frames of reference and understandings, [and advised] the journey and outcome remain in the learner's hands' (p. 104). Advocating for this type of self-assessment allowed the authors to note "perspective transformations" and allowed students the ability to develop and gain insight from their experiences, rather than produce a specific checklist of transformational criteria.

King and Wright (2003) observed that various class activities such as reflective writing assignments, journaling, role-playing, and engaged class discussions were just a

few facilitators of transformation. They note that strategy can vary, however, a commitment to constructing activities and curricula must illuminate profound shifts in meaning making. Their work helps pinpoint that fact that a one size fits all model to transformational learning is erroneous.

### ***Living Research Project design***

The curriculum design explored in this research is called the Living Research Project (LRP). The LRP is a semester long project that utilizes reflection as a way for students to integrate course content and theory, life experiences, and primary research. The goals of the LRP are threefold. First, the LRP assists students in evaluating their prior life experiences. Students have the task of selecting an experience and examining the elements of this experience. They must assess how an occurrence has impacted their understanding of a particular concept. Secondly, the LRP is rooted in integration. At its core, it requires students to apply their understanding of a concept to their life experience. This integration is achieved by employing primary research to investigate the relationship between the concept and the life experience. Students are given a choice of completing an interview, a questionnaire, a case study, observation, artistic work, or a reflective analysis.

Finally, after evaluating and assessing their experiences and course content, students can begin to see their experiences within a theoretical framework. It is this connection that allows students to see that their experiences are not within a vacuum but connected to social structures, political ideologies, and frames of mind. The end goal of this project is toward transformation. It is presumed that the LRP will aid students in envisioning themselves and their life experiences in new ways.

Students begin their work on the LRP by completing a contract. The contract is the primary teaching tool used by instructors to facilitate completion of the LRP. In the contract, students outline, select, and then concretize theories relevant to the discipline and course in which they are enrolled. For example, students taking a developmental psychology class might use Mary Ainsworth's (1964) attachment theory as a way to understand one of their life experiences. The phrase "life experience" is broad and encompassing. Students are permitted to discuss events they have encountered personally or events they find interesting. Students write drafts of the LRP throughout the semester. Drafts are the basic unit in which most instruction for the LRP is based. Class time is spent fine tuning drafts and ensuring that the integration of course content and life experience is explicit.

### **Methods**

Data for this study were generated from a sample of students attending a small private college in the northeast. Participants were enrolled in a baccalaureate program for adult learners. The college was located in an economically disenfranchised area of the city. Most of the students in attendance were educationally marginalized and had little prior success in school. They were low income, with more than 95% receiving some form of financial aid. The school offered a liberal arts focused education that held experience as the basis of learning.

Given the strained history of marginalized groups and research, a mixed methods design was employed to create opportunities for open, secure participation (Guthrie, 1997; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). The study was conducted in two parts. Focus groups were used as non-threatening information gathering sessions where students could discuss their experiences with the LRP. Focus groups were intended to provide “collective conversations” and to link students’ educational experience (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2013). It was thought that providing a shared space for students to explore the LRP process would aid in students’ sense of the assignment’s transformative properties.

Data gathered from focus groups assisted in the construction of a survey. As with most, this survey was used to locate trends in participants’ experiences with the phenomenon (Fowler, 2002). Time and budget dictated a sample of 50 students. Although a small sample, data gathered were sufficient for an exploratory study.

**Phase I – Focus group**

Two focus groups were conducted on two separate dates during the school semester. Students were recruited using signage posted throughout campus. Participants in both groups had been in attendance for at least two semesters. Nine students (eight females and one male) participated in the first focus group. Three students, two females, and one male participated in the second focus group. Most studies suggest that a focus group consist of at least six participants (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). However, given the small number of students attending morning classes, the second focus group was sufficient.

Focus groups were conducted in empty classrooms. After introductions, the first question (see Table 1) was asked to participants. Neither group deviated from the structured questions. Follow-up inquiries were made only to clarify statements made in response to structured questions.

**Table 1: Focus group questions**

1.	<i>What is the Living Research Project (LRP)?</i>
2.	<i>Explain your experience doing your first LRP?</i>
3.	<i>Why do you think the college requires students to do LRPs?</i>
4.	<i>What are some of the <b>pros</b> of doing a LRP? What are some of the <b>cons</b> of doing a LRP?</i>
5.	<i>In what ways has the LRP <b>hindered</b> your education? In what ways has the LRP <b>helped</b> your education?</i>

## **Phase II – Survey**

A 38-item survey was designed to explore students' experiences with the LRP and Course Development, another curricular design employed by the college<sup>1</sup>. Students were recruited through random sampling over four days. The survey contained 23 items that targeted students' experiences with the LRP. It also included five (5) questions about students' overall college experience. Six (6) questions isolated student demographics and the remaining four (4) questions were aimed at Course Development. It typically took participants between 15 and 20 minutes to complete the survey.

### **Survey participants**

Fifty students participated in the survey. Students needed to be enrolled at the college for at least two semesters to be eligible for this portion of the study. This criterion ensured participants would have completed at least one LRP. Thirty-two percent of students surveyed completed two to five semesters at the college. Fifty percent of students completed six to nine semesters, and 12% indicated they completed ten semesters or more at the college.<sup>2</sup> Over 80% (81.6, n=40) of participants identified as female. Males accounted for 18% (n=9) of the sample.<sup>3</sup> These percentages varied a bit from the college's general population, as 95% of students attending the college identify as female. African Americans accounted for 74% (n=37) of the sample. Six percent (n=3) of participants identified as Caribbean/Black. The same percentage (6%, n=3) of participants identified as Latino/Latina. Ten percent (n=5) of participants chose "other" to categorize their race/ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> Sample percentages for race and ethnicity were parallel to the general college population. Those participating in the survey were also a representative sample of students within a particular area of interest<sup>5</sup>.

## **Findings**

Results from this project expose the challenges in (1) how students define and value the LRP, (2) students' experiences integrating components of the LRP and (3) students' experiences using critical reflection in their LRPs. These themes are outlined below and serve as evidence for acknowledging the connection between the LRP and transformation. Themes were generated based on the lead researcher's ideas of how best to explore the relationship between the LRP and transformation. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey data. Much data was generated from questions 1 and 2 of the survey. Question 1 was comprised of seven sub-questions and asked students using a five point Likert scale to describe the LRP. Question 2 consisted of six sub-questions and asked respondents to describe their first LRP experience.

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<sup>1</sup> This project only focused on data derived from questions about the LRP.

<sup>2</sup> Six percent (n=3) of participants failed to respond to this question.

<sup>3</sup> One participant did not answer this question.

<sup>4</sup> Upon further investigation, those participants who choose "other" as their race/ethnicity identified as biracial or multiracial (n=3); African (n=1) and American (n=1).

<sup>5</sup> The school actively offers four areas of interest within their liberal arts curriculum: communications, letters, psychology, and social sciences.



### ***Defining and valuing the LRP***

One of the primary aims of focus group sessions was to explore students' knowledge and assessment of the LRP. Participants' base knowledge of the curricular design was important to determine if any connection was to be made in evaluating this design as a tool for transformation. Evidence showed that students had a firm foundation for understanding *particular* aspects of the LRP. Many spoke about writing the LRP from their personal experience. Marcel, a second year social science student, described the LRP in this way:

The project deals with whatever is surrounding you. It makes you analyze things. What I get from the LRP is that you are integrating your life experiences, but from many aspects. *It may be an experience from a relative or a friend, and you integrate it with the course material. You also have to go back and reflect on it, so you not only have to integrate it with course material but also with your own ideas about the experience.*

Marcel employed some key ideas in his description. Terms such as “analyze”, “reflect” and “integrate”, highlight cognitive processes that are integral to the LRP. His summary of the design emphasized experience. Grace, a third year psychology student, echoed Marcel's statement:

The Living Research Project is like the art of presenting your life or something that you have experienced. In each class that I have been asked to write a LRP, they [instructors] have said that we should write about something that you have experienced. So whatever the topic is, it has to be something you have experienced.

The LRP as a vehicle to write about one's life experience was the primary descriptor that surfaced in focus groups. All focus group respondents mentioned its experiential nature. Although this is a central component of the LRP, it is only one aspect of the design. This conceptualization of the project leaves out two important tenets, which are the primary research and course content, and threatens how the LRP might be used as a tool for transformation. Remember the LRP is designed like a three-legged stool where experience, course content/theory, and primary research collaborate to foster critical reflection and meaning making of students' experiences. Not one focus group participant offered an explanation of the LRP that included any reference to how its components work to facilitate a deeper understanding of experiences. Nor did any student indicate how the LRP might be used to expand their understandings of how life experiences are connected to larger social, political, or cultural phenomenon. Participants merely discussed the process of identifying a life experience and its relationship to a course topic.

Focus groups and survey data also were organized to reveal the worth of the LRP to participants. It was hypothesized that participants' ability to articulate the value of the LRP might expose its connection to meaning making. Table 2 contains descriptive statistics of participants' responses to question 1 which states, 'How would you describe the LRP?' Most students surveyed believed the LRP was an important endeavor. Close to 80% of those surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, '[The LRP] is a waste of time'. In addition, more than 60% of students did not object to

completing the project. No member of either focus group indicated they felt the LRP was a waste of time.

**Table 2: LRP description**

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Agree/Disagree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
<b>Links life and course content</b>	62.5	30	29.2	14	6.3	3	2.1	1	0	0
<b>Same as research</b>	14.6	7	22.9	11	18.8	9	35.4	17	8.3	4
<b>Waste of time</b>	4.2	2	6.3	3	10.4	5	39.6	19	39.6	19
<b>Increase one's understanding</b>	34.8	16	45.7	21	6.5	3	6.5	3	6.5	3
<b>Object to complete</b>	10.4	5	8.3	4	16.7	8	45.8	22	18.8	9
<b>Invades privacy</b>	8.3	4	4.2	2	12.5	6	52.1	25	22.9	11
<b>LRP and research paper</b>	6.4	3	8.5	4	8.5	4	27.7	13	48.9	23

Questions were constructed to investigate students' clarity of purpose. Focus group data indicated students were aware that the LRP was a college requirement. Julia, a third year psychology student, discussed how the school's philosophy aligns with the LRP. She also stated why she believes the LRP is a requirement:

I think the LRP is a requirement because instructors want to gauge what you are learning. They want to understand how you are doing and how you are developing. [The LRP is a requirement] also because the school is a combination of progressive and traditional ideologies. The progressive is intended to help you sort through your experiences while continuing your education.

Julia described the LRP as a measure for faculty to assess students' learning, instead of a tool for integrating primary research, course content, and experience. She does not characterize the LRP as a way for students to make meaning from their experiences. Nonetheless, her mention of progressive ideology is interesting. Acknowledging the LRP's progressive roots suggests that she distinguished this curricular design from others. Likewise, the majority of students surveyed also recognized the developmental aspect of the LRP. Eighty percent of students surveyed strongly agreed with the statement, [the LRP] "helps take me from one level of understanding to another".

Julia was on the brink of articulating a more nuanced explanation of the LRP. However, some participants were set on drawing connections between the LRP and concrete skills. Immediately following Julia's response, Marcel chimed in and offered this explanation:

I feel it [LRP] is a requirement because of the fact that a lot of us write the way we talk. It's like we write a letter to Congress or to our child's teacher and say something like, "I ain't gonna do this" and when you read it, it's terrible. So I think that is why the LRP is mandatory. It is for us to look at ourselves and see that our diction is off and therefore try and change it. Then hopefully our writing will follow.

A few other focus group participants echoed Marcel and labeled the LRP an academic skills strengthener. While this is most surely a product of the curricular design, explanations gathered from the college's characterization of the LRP posited it as a transformative tool. Specifically it is a tool, which when used as intended, can help students make meaning of their worlds. Thus for students to miss this crucial function of the LRP is a major omission.

**Integrating life experience, research, and course content**

A second theme addressed integration. During the process of integration, students apply their understanding of particular course content with their life experience in effort to develop new and deeper understandings of prior experiences. Survey data revealed students' knowledge of LRP integration. Most participants acknowledged the integration of course content and experience. As 92% of students surveyed either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "[the LRP] is a project that links my life experience and coursework" (Table 2). Some confusion existed between the LRP and a secondary research paper. Thirty-eight percent of participants believed the LRP is the same as a secondary research paper (Table 2). While the LRP contains some secondary research, it is steeped in primary research. As explained previously, students are required to use the prescribed methodology to make meaning of their experiences.

Data also were collected to note if there were differences between students' first LRP and the last one they completed. This comparison was established to determine if students became more comfortable marrying components of the LRP as they acquired more opportunities to do them. Differentiating between their first LRP and the last completed also provided an occasion for participants to reflect on how their LRP journey had progressed over semesters. Survey participants were asked to describe their first LRP experience (Table 3).

**Table 3: First LRP experience**

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Agree/Disagree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	N	%	n
<b>Challenging</b>	48.9	23	27.7	13	8.5	4	14.9	7	0	0
<b>Easy</b>	8.3	4	18.8	9	16.7	8	41.7	20	14.6	7
<b>Fun and Exciting</b>	25.5	12	31.9	15	23.4	11	17.0	8	2.1	1
<b>Therapeutic</b>	33.3	16	33.3	16	10.4	5	14.6	7	8.3	4
<b>I don't remember</b>	0	0	4.4	2	15.6	7	37.8	17	42.2	19
<b>Bad memories</b>	10.9	5	27.7	10	4.3	2	34.8	16	28.3	13

The statement that received the largest percentage of responses was that students' first LRP was challenging. Of those surveyed, 77% described their first LRP as a challenge. Grace remembered her first LRP in this way:

For me, writing my first LRP was very hard because at first, I did not have an understanding of it. I had to rewrite it a couple of times. It was hard for me. Yes, I had a topic but how to bring my experience into it was very tough.

The act of integration was a major hurdle for students. The first step students are required to make is to identify a concept connected to their course of study. Then they must relate that topic to their life experience. On the surface, this seems like a relatively straightforward task. However, the LRP requires more than just mapping a concept onto personal experience. It is the act of integrating or exploring how the life experience and the concept join together on various attributes that were difficult for participants.

Rakia, an advanced social sciences student and graduating senior at the college, shared her challenges with integration:

My first LRP I thought to be easy. I had a psychology of women class, and I went through that one with no problem. I wrote about things that happened as a woman and in my childhood. It is now that I am taking my advanced courses that I am finding my LRPs are more difficult. It's hard to connect the two. The course and the life experience. I think now that I understand the LRP better, I see how hard it is to make the connection.

Rakia's comment is important because it offers a look into the LRP's various points of entry. Rakia notes that her first LRP was a recount of past experiences that happened in her childhood and at points in her adulthood. She hinted that there was not much investigation of these events. She believed that as her courses became more advanced and her understanding of the LRP more refined, the project became more difficult. Although she was unable to articulate factors that challenge the integration of life experience and course content, the fact that she recognized that she developed in her articulation the LRP is essential.

### ***Critical reflection and the LRP***

This study also examined the relationship between critical reflection and the LRP. Again, critical reflection is a process that moves students to acknowledge an experience, describe how it affects them, and evaluate how the experience alters their understanding of their world.

As stated previously, the LRP utilizes various methodologies to ground students' primary research. Sixty-six percent of students surveyed reported they used a reflective analysis in their LRPs at least once (Table 4). Of all the methods available to students, a reflective analysis was used most often. All focus group participants said that they completed at least one reflective LRP. Many claimed that they employed no methodology other than a reflective analysis.

**Table 4: LRP methodology**

	Used Method		Have Not Used Method	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>
<b>Case Study</b>	38	19	62	31
<b>Questionnaire</b>	52	26	48	24
<b>Interview</b>	60	30	40	20
<b>Observation</b>	38	19	62	31
<b>Reflective Analysis</b>	66	33	34	17
<b>Artistic Work</b>	6	3	94	47
<b>Other</b>	2	1	98	49

Focus groups provided rich opportunities for participants to speak freely about reflection. These accounts were valuable because they illustrated struggles students had while thinking and writing about their personal experiences. Corrine, a second year communications student, shared her experience:

For me it [reflective LRP] was a challenge. It was a big challenge. The process of doing it was a journey. I felt I was being healed. When you have to write something, when you have to go into details...it was a healing process for me. I hadn't been in school for many years, and it taught me a lot of things. It helped me with my writing. It taught me to look for sources. It helped me a lot.

Corrine's statement was typical of newer students' experiences with the project. Students who completed less than two years at the college had a dual notion of the LRP. They spoke about its reflective attributes and its ability to strengthen basic skills such as writing. As students became more advanced in their studies, they moved away from the dual function to characterize the LRP as a means to facilitate reflection. Specifically, students targeted the LRP's therapeutic qualities. Adel, a third year psychology student, described using the LRP as a way to help her process a personal event:

Adel: Sometimes writing the LRP is traumatic and hard to deal with. Like I lost my child, ten and a half hours after he was born. I did a LRP about this in my child psychology class. It was hard because I still deal with his death. When his birthday comes around, I am a mess. But I can say writing about it in my LRP helped me express my thoughts about his death. The LRP is like a little therapy. It is helpful to me in that way.

An incredibly intimate experience such as the death of a child and Adel's willingness to map that experience onto the LRP speaks volumes about her confidence in the curricular design. Being that she deemed this experience suitable for reflection is evidence that she believed that this project might help her sort out some of her feelings about her son's death.

The idea that the LRP could be therapeutic was a frequent response given by survey participants. In fact, 67% of students who utilized a reflective analysis described the LRP experience as therapeutic. In some ways isolating an experience and deeming it worthy of reflection is a first step in making meaning of an event. That experience must be salient enough for the student to access it and the student must be comfortable enough to divulge his/her emotions. The courage to expose vulnerability is crucial. Since without vulnerability, a student might find it difficult to unpack an experience and explore how this experience has an impact on how he/she understands the world.

In addition, evidence from the survey showed that there was a quantitative difference between students who completed fewer than two years (and thus no more than three LRPs) and those who completed more than two years (and by default completing at least four LRPs). Seventy-five percent of students who completed more than two years strongly agreed or agreed that the LRP was a therapeutic experience. Slightly less than 50% of students who were attendance fewer than two years believed that completing the LRP was therapeutic.

Although a large portion of students surveyed mentioned the therapeutic qualities of the LRP, there was a contingent who participated in the survey (12%) and two students from the focus group who deemed the LRP as intrusive. They described the disclosure necessary for meaning making in a different way. A second semester student named Brenda described the way the LRP made her feel:

At one point I felt the LRP was intrusive in writing about a personal experience and relating to the course. For instance, last semester I had to talk about something else [not a traumatic experience she had] because I was doing Introduction to Psychology and Human Body at the same time. I was trying to write LRPs relating to my experiences to the course and some of it was very personal. Then I had to present them in front of other students. I had a problem with that because I felt like I was revealing myself to strangers. I need to figure out how to write a LRP where I did not have to reveal so much to strangers.

The LRP as therapy became a point of contention and one that marked a clear divide between students in their second and third semesters and those more advanced in their studies. After Brenda spoke about intrusion and the LRP, Miki, an advanced student in her eighth semester of study, and Sharon, another eighth semester student, offered this exchange:

Miki: [In response to Brenda's statement] In a way you can look at it as a form of therapy. It is helping to heal your soul when you write those things down.

Sharon: Yes, what she [Miki] is saying is helpful because it is a little therapy for you. The LRP really helped me mentally. I got to talk about an incident that was very traumatic for me and it's kind of like I get to work on it as the years go. My mother was shot three times, and I work on it every single year. I try to do something to bring me to focus on what really took place inside of my soul. My LRP helped me due to the fact that I shared the experience.

Responses offered from Miki and Sharon explain a developmental aspect of the LRP. More advanced students acknowledged the LRP as more than just a project which

maps course content, and primary research onto personal experience. These students operationalized the LRP as a tool to share past life events. For these students, the LRP became a space to acknowledge emotions and process feelings.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to gain an understanding of how transformational learning might be exercised in a reflective curricular design. The LRP intended to foster transformation by tapping into students' ability to critically reflect on past personal experiences. The design holds personal experience, course content, and primary research in concert in order to provide a framework for helping students make meaning of their worlds. In making meaning, students explore how their prior experiences are not isolated events, but rather incidents that are connected to larger social, cultural and political structures. Using data gathered from focus groups and a survey, this study examined students' experiences utilizing the LRP.

Participants defined and held the LRP in high regard. Some believed the LRP's ability to strengthen writing skills was an advantage. Most every student valued the LRP's capacity to cradle conversations about life experience. Also, they typically regarded it as a developmental tool that helped them review past events.

Data revealed that experience with critical reflection influenced students' sense of the LRP's value. Students in their early years of study felt the LRP was invasive. They reported feeling exposed by the assignment. However, more experienced students spoke about the cathartic quality of revealing experiences. These students referred to the advantages of writing about traumatic occurrences in their lives. Differences in students' perspective were most likely the product of more exposure to the LRP, however one cannot be sure, as there were other confounding variables. For example, students' choice of targeted experience certainly had an influence on invasive feelings. Also, the course in which the LRP was conducted most likely was a factor. One could imagine courses such as psychology eliciting more intimate experiences than those courses in science, technology or mathematics.

While critical reflection is the method the college chose to foster transformation, there is little evidence to suggest students utilized critical reflection in completing their LRPs. Most students indicated that the main goal of assigning the LRP was to help students strengthen grammar and other traditional writing skills. Students were less likely to mention the LRP as a conduit to make meaning out of their experiences. Teaching students to make meaning needed explicit instruction, and required more than the drafting activities that seemed to characterize LRP instruction. According to Ryan (2013), teaching students how to reflect in deeply meaningful ways may require instructors to understand various levels of reflection and how these levels often are neglected in pedagogical and curricular designs. Had students been taught how to reflect, they might have had more insight on how and why particular experiences were chosen, and how their understanding of these experiences was complicated by their LRPs. This omission not only may have hindered critical reflection (Fernandez-Balboa, 1998), it may have also impeded students' ability to understand the transformative import of writing about disorientating dilemmas.

Integration of primary research (reflection), course content, and life experience was another data theme that produced significant outcomes. Evidence suggested participants' typically attempted to integrate life experience and reflection that resulted in summaries of their experiences. Others mapped experiences onto course content in rudimentary ways, such as selecting and then writing about a life experience that was topical to the course. These students may have been engaging a type of 'perspective transformation' as outlined by King and Wright (2003). Very few were able to integrate these components and endeavor to analyze how their experiences shape their worlds.

This may not have been the fault of students, but another flaw in the design of the LRP. Missing from the design, and inevitably stifling students' ability to integrate, were explicit instructions on how to actively process the ways in which the life experience can alter how you understand your world. Unfortunately, absent were opportunities for students to evaluate their reflections. Had the LRP been designed so students were compelled to reflect on how their ways of understanding the world had been shaped by their targeted life experiences, and how the act of critical reflection continues to alter how they understand this phenomenon, instances of transformational learning, as defined by the LRP, may have been more apparent.

Yet, the question remains. Did the students effectively use critical reflection and in effort achieve transformation as it is intended by the curricular design? The language used by students to describe their LRP experience provides evidence that they were not cognizant of the transformative intent behind the LRP. Students consistently spoke of and reported on how the LRP was useful in *changing* how they viewed particular experiences, however transformation is more than shifts in perspectives. The LRP's goal is for students to engage course content and critical reflection in order to develop new understandings of personal experiences. This integration and the new meanings that are made from the integration is how transformation is defined by the LRP.

Clearly, the language of transformation was not in students' purview. Absent from students' introduction to processes associated with the LRP were concepts and language unique to the theoretical underpinnings of transformational learning. Without the language and the discourse to frame the experience in larger contexts, which happens in the LRP through integration of course content (theory) and critical reflection, there can be no modifying action and limited ability to engage meaning making.

However, while none of the students explicitly characterized the LRP as transformative, their descriptions of the design highlighted shifts in how they perceived targeted life experiences. Of particular note is how more advanced students described and relied on the therapeutic nature of the LRP. These students used the LRP to shift their perspectives on personal experiences. They also used the LRP to cope with the emotional distress of disorientating experiences. The LRP as described by students was most characteristic of what Jaruszewicz (2006) and Gravett (2004) describe as intentional reflection, or the purposeful process of strategically structuring active meaning making. Although it is not necessarily the kind of meaning making that is dictated by the LRP, it still might be a type of transformational learning. Specifically, students could have been activating their frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997). Selecting personal experiences through the LRP did produce thinking that was more cultivated and discerning.



This project speaks to the importance of developing transformative curricular designs that have clear and deliberate intentions. It highlights the difficulty in evaluating the process of transformation. This study also reminds us of the importance of creating spaces for clear objectives and new conceptions of transformation to emerge. While the study is an example of how reflection can be used in a curricular design, it is unknown if students were cognizant of the transformative purposes of the LRP. Future research should explicitly require participants to define transformation in order to clarify their understanding of the process and its value to their learning. Future research might also devise specific questions that review students' exploration of a life event pre and post exposure to a transformative curricular design. Then one may be able to make a more concrete assessment of a curricular designs' ability to facilitate transformation.

Finally, this research provides guiding notions for curriculum development. In creating transformative curricular designs for adult learners, educators should assist students in recognizing the value of experiential learning. Experiential learning is not simply recounting past experiences, but rather as outlined by Kolb and Kolb (2005) where 'social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner' (p. 194). Selecting a salient occurrence is the beginning of acknowledging the power of experience. Educators should scaffold learning, so students recognize how this experience shapes thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. However, to end the process of exploration here would surely halt transformational learning. Providing language and tools to effectively evaluate and explore the experience are essential. The theory and concepts typically outlined in courses can help students situate their experiences in larger social context. Also, it provides opportunities for them to expand their emancipatory knowledge. Then they can see how their experiences are connected to social, political, and cultural structures and not simply just isolated acts. Critical reflection becomes the tool by which students can evaluate their thoughts and behaviors. In the end, a design fosters transformation when students' perspectives have deepened and altered their behavior, cognition, and affect.

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