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BEACHES, BUMPS, AND MILKSHAKES:  
A HUMANIZING, OPEN, AND DIALOGIC, POSTFORMAL  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACADEMY.

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A Dissertation Submitted to Molloy University  
The School of Education and Human Services  
Ed. D. in Educational Leadership for Diverse Learning Environments

---

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By  
ERIC ANTHONY KARAHALIS

Tricia Kress, Dissertation Chairperson  
DECEMBER 2023

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2023

Molloy University



**MOLLOY  
UNIVERSITY**

**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES**

The dissertation of Eric Karahalis entitled: *Beaches, Bumps, and Milkshakes: A Humanizing, Open, and Dialogic Postformal Autoethnographic Study of an Experiential Learning Academy* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the School of Education and Human Services has been read and approved by the Committee:

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## Abstract

The dominant educational paradigm is rooted in a Platonic, Cartesian, and Piagetian mind-supremacist epistemology that subordinates the body and experience to the mind, ideas, and objective concepts. This reduces students to cognitive receptors of information in a detached, decontextualized, and dehumanizing classroom, i.e., the banking educational model (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). Students are forced to sit at desks for several hours a day and expected to open their minds and ignore the body's needs. This educational model is dehumanizing because it only approaches students and learning through one epistemological lens and separates learning from the world. On the other hand, experiential learning is rooted in the educational philosophy of Dewey, Kolb, and Freire. It is a context-based educational paradigm that situates learning in real-world experiences where students can learn naturally and organically. This educational modality can help bridge the synthetic divide between the mind and body fostered in traditional educational paradigms. This postformal autoethnographic study explored students' transformative educational experiences in an Experiential Learning Academy, a two-year experiential learning Associate degree program. The researcher interviewed six student participants using semi-structured interview questions and artifact elicitation. Next, three participants provided the researcher with three songs representing their educational experiences. These three participants then participated in a follow-up, experiential 'car karaoke' dialogue group session, which involved a drive to and on the beach while drinking milkshakes and eating French fries. The use of music and memento elicitation fostered a more whole and embodied approach to data collection. During analysis, the researcher used art/ artifact creation to help embody the analysis process and to promote wholeness. The study's findings demonstrate how an Experiential Learning Academy fosters a whole-person, humanizing environment that

promotes wholeness through dialogue and openness. A humanizing and whole-person educational approach considers the social, historical, emotional, and environmental complexity of human individuals and, in doing so, fosters an accepting, open, and dialogic community.

### **Dedication**

I am most thankful for my wife, Theresa, who has privileged me with the ability to abscond from my family responsibilities to pursue a doctoral degree in education. Without Theresa holding the family up when I ran to my desk to read and write, this degree and scholarship would not have been possible. Thank you for your love and sacrifice! For my girls, Noelle, Thea, and Rose, my greatest teachers in openness and dialogue, to my family, I dedicate this dissertation.

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I am thankful to Dr. Kress for her ability to see a dancing star amidst the chaos; there is no way this dissertation would be possible without her humanized, open, critical, caring encouragement. Dr. Kress' scholarship and mentorship have been a constant source of encouragement on my journey as a critical practitioner-researcher. I am thankful to Dr. Cohan and Dr. O'Hara for their time, expertise, and assistance on my journey from practitioner to researcher and from teacher to teaching scholar. I must thank Dr. Michael Russo, my former professor, mentor, colleague, and friend, for always seeing the scholar in me. I am so fortunate and blessed to have had the opportunity to share this journey with a mentor, colleague, and friend like Mike.

Lastly, I would like to thank the members of cohort six, my gander of geese. Thank you for the endless encouragement and support throughout our doctoral studies process. Without you, without your lived experiences, personal insights, and open and dialogic hearts, our collective wisdom would not be what it is today, and I would not be completing my doctoral dissertation. Special thanks to Florence, Kelly, Alana, and Dave; without you guys, I'd be lost at sea.

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## CHAPTER 1

### BANKING EDUCATION AND EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

It was an overcast Friday in early June, and because of the cloud coverage, it was a relatively comfortable day on the thermometer. I was driving in my Anchorage Gray (an attractive blue) 1999 Mitsubishi Montero with Briarwood, Luna, and Frank. We went to a burger and milkshake stand called All-American, grabbed some fries and milkshakes, and drove southward toward the beach. While we drove eastbound on the Ocean Parkway, we listened to and lip-synched along with each other's chosen songs as they played on the radio. We were immersed in the moment and conversation. At that point, I pulled my Montero off Ocean Parkway and drove onto the 4x4 access road to Sore Thumb Beach. The windows were down, and we could smell the saltwater in the air. The road was bumpy, washed out in places, and composed of multiple textures. The start of the road was mainly hard-packed dirt with four-foot whoop-te-doo's cut out by rain collection and poor drainage. At one point, the road turned into deep sand, and at other points, football-sized rocks peppered the hard-packed ground. I took the access road out at a moderate speed, and because of the nonuniformity of the road and the multiple textures, it made for a slow-motion roller coaster-like drive out to the beach. My companions' expressions were animated the whole time we were off-pavement, and our energy levels were noticeably heightened. The excitement was so high off-road that when we finally returned to Ocean Parkway, we breathed and exhaled a sigh of relief as if we had been running uphill, and now, we were all back to walking. I drove west on Ocean Parkway and returned Briar, Luna, and Frank to their homes; throughout the ride home, we talked, listened, and laughed. It was clear that we had shared a wonderful experience and had a great deal of fun. Our shared endeavor was dubbed our 'Car Karaoke session,' and its duration was more than two and

a half hours. This was not the first time I had a group of students in a Montero driving on the beach, and this was part of my academic research study of the Experiential Learning Academy! This was the experiential component and dialogue group of my research study. Experiential learning is organic, situated, fun, and awesome; postformal research like this dissertation can also be organic, situated, awesome and fun.

In this postformal autoethnographic dissertation, I explore the philosophical underpinnings of experiential learning while anchoring the theoretical framework with my own practical educational experiences and those of the participants of this study. Postformal research is a non-linear, nontraditional theory and research method that allows practitioners to braid and weave multiple experiences, narratives, and disciplines and even fold spacetimes into a creative and coherent tapestry (Kress, 2021). This dissertation weaves various threads of student experiences, my own educational experiences, music, and cultural, historical, and philosophical theories and contexts into a multi-perspectival tapestry that speaks to the situated, humanizing potential of experiential learning through dialogue and openness. I have chosen this research method and study intentionally because it seems fitting for a nontraditional and educational study that examines the experience of nontraditional students to challenge and expand the limits of traditional educational paradigms.

While extensive research on experiential learning demonstrates the effectiveness of increasing positive outcomes for students and learners, the overwhelming research focus of existing literature on this topic has been in the service of traditional education (Burch et al., 2019). Traditional education and educational research are concerned with “students” and their “outcomes” through test scores, which is an extraordinarily decontextualized and detached focus (Greene, 2013). This postformal autoethnographic study demonstrates that education and

educational research should be concerned with learning, not just learning outcomes, with the well-being and growth of each person who bears the label of a student at the forefront.

The following section starts with a brief narrative discussing how I was accepted into a small private college in New York State in 1994. I use this story to discuss the traditional, banking, academic, detached, mind-superior educational paradigm and my relationship to it and other voices. This is where the conventional educational problem will come to light, and experiential learning will be explored as a solution to the problems of traditional educational models. In the remainder of the chapter, I will briefly discuss the context, questions, theoretical lenses, methodology, research design, analysis, and significance of this postformal autoethnography.

### **Genesis**

It was 1994 in New York, and a young man graduating from high school had to take an additional entrance exam at a small private college to determine if he could be accepted. The extra exam was required because of his low high school grades. The exam took place in May, on a beautiful day, which also happened to be the same day as the young man's senior class picnic at a local park. Wanting nothing more than to go to the picnic, the young man had first to endure a college entrance exam. On a positive note, his mother informed him that he could go to the park after the entrance exam. Despite being a beautiful day outside, the climate was hot and stuffy inside the testing room. The young man hastily worked through the exam to escape the heat and get to the picnic. The young man handed in his test, which was poorly done and written in haste so that he could run to the park. As fate would have it, the picnic was over when he arrived at the park, and his friends were already gone. The young man immediately felt foolish and regretted racing through the test. Despite his hastily and poorly completed entrance exam, the college

accepted him with a conditional, remedial status requiring enrollment in a remedial track English course to help boost his writing skills. Students enrolled in the remedial track receive comprehensive support and guidance throughout their college journey.

These educational experiences I endured represent part of the problem with the dominant modern banking and transactional educational paradigms. The current Western educational landscape is one where standardized test scores determine students' worth, capabilities, and success, which is reductive, dehumanizing, and a byproduct of dominant educational models (Bartolome, 1994; Kincheloe, 2017). The prevailing formula for assessing students' aptitude and future academic success through grades and tests does not provide an adequate picture of all students (Bartolome, 1994; Kincheloe, 2017). My test scores did not demonstrate that I was a student with educational aptitude, nor did my grades in high school demonstrate by the dominant metrics that I was college-bound or ready. I was forced to complete assessments that did not take into consideration my social-historical context, my human subjectivity, and the myriad of physical distractions, personal anxieties, or irrational drives interrupting my focus while taking a test (Emdin, 2016; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007). A student's daily context, place, personal emotions, and embodiment can affect their performance, so a test cannot adequately demonstrate a student's abilities or intelligence. Students are not just brains on stems (Ali-Khan), as the cartesian dualism assumes, but rather physical human beings whose creativity, openness, and ability to learn are deeply connected to their physical time, place, and social, and historical contexts (Ali-Khan, 2011; Ali-Khan, 2009; Chapman, 1981; Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2017; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007; Kress, 2013). Even now, as I complete the herculean task of creating and defending a dissertation, my physical surroundings, health, and

daily context directly impact what I can accomplish. My ability to focus, learn, research, sit, and write is primarily related to how I am and where I am physically.

### **The Problem**

Education is primarily a detached endeavor, extremely theoretical, and is too frequently removed from the reality it is supposed to serve. Students will learn about the civil rights movement in many places in the United States. However, there will be no connection to the modern struggle for racial equity, pay, privilege, or housing or a current discussion about the causes and demands of the Black Lives Matter movement (Bartolome, 1994; hooks, 1994; Love, 2019). Even some states limit what can be discussed in the classroom regarding race and gender. The dominant educational paradigm assumes that education is a detached conceptual endeavor and does not need to be rooted in context. Modern Western education is built on a Cartesian dualism that separates the human mind, thought, and theory from the reality of being a human.

Modern Western education fundamentally dehumanizes by reducing education to a mere transaction of ideas from teacher to student, mind to mind. It ignores the body, the social-historical contexts, concerns, and the immersive, communal, organic nature of learning (Callejo-Pérez, 2015; Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994; Quay, 2013). Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of experiential learning to foster a deep learning and transformative learning experience (Adarlo et al., 2019; Burch et al., 2019; Butler Byrd, 2004; Damianakis et al., 2020; Ferrer et al., 2020; Greene, 2013; Hayden & McIntosh, 2018). While these studies speak volumes about the importance and efficacy of experiential and transformative learning, they do not look directly at the relationship between embodiment and a particular place in their transformational experience. This autoethnographic study explored transformative educational

experiences through the narratives of students enrolled in an Experiential Learning Academy (EA) and my experiences as a student, professor, and researcher.

### **Purpose**

This study aimed to describe the transformative learning experiences of students and myself who have participated in an Experiential Learning Academy. A transformative learning experience will be defined as a memorable learning experience that challenges or expands a student's frame of reference regarding meaning and understanding and fosters a personal change in thought and action. This study explores what individual, collective, or social educational transformations students describe experiencing through an Experiential Learning Academy, abbreviated as EA, and what contextual elements, practices, methods, and pedagogies within EA help facilitate more humanized transformative learning.

### **Detached Theory in Practice**

In many, if not most, formal institutions of learning in the United States, there is a synthetic division between thinkers and doers, book intelligent and street-wise, academic knowledge, and practical knowledge (Kincheloe, 2017). This division is partly created by the systematized nature of education (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2017). In the following section, a brief history of education in America will expose that, in part, education has been a social tool to create order, safeguard literacy, and cultivate a dominant cultural norm.

The earliest documented schools were in colonial Massachusetts. Under the old Deluder Satan Act of 1647, town schools were created to teach children to read, 'the most important text,' the Christian Bible (Carleton, 2009). Education in America then evolved into the common schools established by Horace Mann, created in part to help cultivate an obedient citizenry with useful skills for the betterment of the country (Dimitriades et al., 2004). The school structure

mirrored the factories where students (future workers) were expected to take orders and manufacture under the hierarchical foreman – the teacher (Muhammad, 2017). Later, the common schools were used to help culturally integrate waves of immigrants into the United States' social fabric and workforce (Allan, 2019; Willis, 1977; Dimitriadis et al., 2004). Here, I think of my Greek grandfather, who only spoke English in his house so his children would speak fluently without an ethnic accent. Students who demonstrate the ability to do high-level thinking tasks and do not allow their physical limitations to impact their schooling are moved into leadership roles and higher education. While students with low academic ability due to their physical contexts, no family support, financial struggles, and language barriers would be subordinated into the factories and workforce (Bowles et al., 2005; Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Chapman, 1981; McLaren, 2015).

Unfortunately, today's modern educational system still employs this long-standing practice of labeling, classifying, tracking, and stratifying students through an abstract process of tests, which are evaluated, graded, and classified. As a result, a student's educational opportunities and future opportunities are primarily determined by their performance in a synthetic, unnatural educational setting and structure (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007; Muhammad, 2017). In the educational foundation's literature, there are countless examples of students whom teachers and administrators have told, if not directly, that they do not belong, are not good enough, or are not smart enough (Ali Khan, 2009; Allan, 2019; Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993). From my experience as a student going through parochial and public schools, I know that educational institutions were not always welcoming places or nurturing spaces that fostered belonging and self-esteem.

My high school guidance counselor told me in my senior year that I was not college material and should consider attending a trade school. My grades and efforts in high school certainly did not reflect a student capable of college; however, a quick conversation with me about life, humanity, or anxiety would reveal my analytical, critical thinking, and linguistic skills. So, despite my guidance counselor's suggestion of trade school, I went to college to study philosophy and music. I received my master's degree in philosophy six years later from K.U. Leuven, which is considered a top 100 university in the world. I was not a high-achieving student, but I passed all my classes and received my M.A. in Philosophy (I would like to point out that there was no GRE requirement to go to Graduate school in Belgium, and anyone could go to university; it was your job as a student to keep up and stay in. So, there were no standardized barriers to higher education).

Going to trade school and college involves a similar degree of intelligence or capability, but the two paths differ in substance. The ability to understand automobile repairs, plumbing, and welding is exceptionally theoretical knowledge; however, it deals with tangible materials and is taught through a 'hands-on' experiential learning model. Academia's substance tends to be purely theoretical, dealing with abstract concepts (or at least abstract conceptions of real-world things). It is often taught in a static, passive, expert-novice manner. There should not be a hierarchical divide between those pursuing academia and those seeking more craft and skills-related employment. The intelligence and skilled hand of an electrician or a carpenter could be equal to that of a neurosurgeon or a mechanical engineer. A critical question arises: Why is one form of handiwork given more value and status than the other in our social framework? Perhaps because one form of handiwork is perceived as academic (intellectual) and superior and another

as physical, lesser, or laborious (Abramowitz, 2017; Dimitriadis et al., 2004; Rose, 2005; Willis & Lake, 2020).

I have friends and family who will argue that they are not book-smart or college material, or worse, that college is entirely unnecessary. There is plenty of antiacademic sentiment in the world and on social media, which forgets that most of the benefits of the modern technical world are deeply rooted in applied academic wisdom. I cannot help but think of two pop-culture songs that speak to education's unnecessary, useless, and oppressive nature: Pink Floyd's 1979 "The Wall" and Paul Simon's 1973 "Kodak Chrome." Pink Floyd highlights the oppressive, socially reproductive nature of education, / we don't need no education, we don't need no thought control, no dark sarcasm in the classroom, Hey teacher! Leave those kids alone! (Pink Floyd, The Wall, 1979). Moreover, Paul Simon's declaration / When I think back to all the crap I learned in high school – It's a wonder I can think at all/ (Paul Simon, Kodachrome, 1973). Perhaps some people may feel they are not 'book smart' or 'college material,' or that school is unnecessary because of teachers and an educational system that tells them they are incapable or makes them feel like education is useless. I am thinking of my friend Rich, a high school graduate working for Comcast company in Pennsylvania. He continually downplays his intelligence and will refer to himself as not an academic. However, he can read and make sense of automotive factory service manuals (FSM). FSM are extremely thick texts within which are a piece-by-piece breakdown of an automobile. They are also diagnostic tools. The FSM reader needs high literacy and mechanical knowledge to read and understand. I have a cousin who argues that the internet today, with sources like Wikipedia, Google, and YouTube, makes a traditional college education unnecessary. Perhaps they hold this viewpoint because modern

education is so detached and decontextualized that little experiential and practical knowledge passes through universities' walls.

I recently spoke with one of my high-school friends about my dissertation topic and the need to contextualize learning to make it more relevant, engaging, and tangible for students. He agreed and gave me a great example. My friend Tom recounted that high school classes were dull, detached from experience and did not make him understand the importance of learning math. However, Tom and his bicycling friends will spend countless hours researching bicycle specifications, discussing the geometry of bicycles, and how the geometrical shape of bicycle tires and their relationship to the terrain is essential for a bicycle's design and success. Tom enjoys having a profound understanding of math and its relationship to the physical landscape. Tom expressed that if educators sought a tangible connection to our curriculum when we were in school, perhaps most people would have a different view of education and academia. I will return to this conversation with Tom in chapter 6.

This study explored the ways the synthetic divide between the mind and body, practitioner and scholar, book smarts and street smarts, can be amended through experiential learning, and learning in all its forms can be returned to the physical place where it is rooted, nurtured, and grows, a human being in the world. My goal in this research was to reimagine education as inextricably tied to being an experiencing body in the world. Education can be reimaged as natural, reflective, rooted in transformative experiences, sometimes solitary, sometimes in community, but tied to body, place, and space (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Kress, 2013).

One frustration I have as a researcher and academic is the pretentiousness of academic language, which can serve as a gatekeeper rejecting entry to anyone who cannot speak legalese

or possess years of academic training. In theory, having a robust vocabulary and knowledge base is excellent; however, academic language can hinder reaching the broader public and render it irrelevant. Therefore, academia and academic research must create meaningful, relevant, and understandable conversations with those unindoctrinated in academic language. When doing academic research, scholars should ask themselves, what is the real-world application of what I am proposing, and what is the most straightforward way I can communicate this complicated point (Willis & Lake, 2020)?

I have thought about ways to foster a richer simplification, a less academic and more embodied, humanistic way of communicating this study's problems, questions, and possible solutions. As an intellectual tinkerer (bricoleur), I will weave personal and student narratives and songs from popular culture, as I did above, that speak in a more holistic, poetic way regarding several cultural and social truths. There is a rich tradition of using music to help relax the body, connect people, communicate with the unspeakable, and make sense of our experiences. It is within this qualitative tradition that I decided to use a musical thread. (Beer, 2013; Dos Santos & Wagner, 2018; Levell, 2019; Rovetta Cortés, 2020) To help communicate complex ideas more simply throughout this dissertation. In the next section, I explore the social-historical context of the problem of the traditional education paradigm.

### **Educational Practice**

The dominant educational worldview and most educational practices are deeply rooted in a Western Platonic/Christian/ Cartesian dualism(Singh & V.,H.N., 2021). This dualism assumes the mind is both prior and superior to the body (Ace Staff, 2012; Ali-Khan, 2011; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993). This assumption has eroded the immersive, organic, holistic, and communal way humans naturally learn and has replaced it with an unnatural environment that is

predominantly arranged at the service of the "mind," ignoring the human body (Ace Staff, 2012; Berding, 1997; Callejo-Pérez, 2015). It has also inadvertently created an elitist, detached academy often seen by the broader public as unnecessary or subversive (Parker, 2019). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1993), as well as Kress and Lake (2021), advocate for a Postformal lens that employs a critical approach and recognizes the importance of embodiment and embodied cognition that presents a more holistic view of learning through living as a body in the world, in community, immersed in our social-historical contexts, engaged with the world, fostering deep humanized meaning, and understanding. In this research study, I take a Postformal critical approach to cultivate multiple streams of knowledge and help establish more inclusive kaleidoscopic views of being in the world (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Kress & Lake, 2021). This means, in practice, that there is no one way of seeing the world or being in the world.

The dominant banking model of education uses the exchange of assignments and tests to assess acquired knowledge, reducing learning to a mere transaction (Bartolome, 1994; Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). Banking education established students as empty vessels that the expert depositor of knowledge, the teacher, needs to fill (Freire, 2018). This form of teaching places students in a passive position and assumes they are ignorant and in need of the active wisdom of the teacher. It approaches learning as fixed, objective facts that must be memorized and regurgitated rather than acknowledging that knowledge and science are always learning, growing, and changing (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993). In part, transactional education was initially designed to create and reproduce social culture and obedience. Later in the industrial age, a docile workforce would not challenge management or authority (Allan, 2019).

Transformational education is rooted in embodiment learning, where the open exchange of ideas is essential, and the world (not just a building) becomes a classroom of transformation (Kolb,

1984; Mezirow, 2018). Transformative learning thrives on multiple ways of generating knowledge, knowing, and being in the world. Unfortunately, the dominant educational model alienates many learners and treats learning as an abstract, task-driven, almost redundant endeavor that must be endured to receive a certification or degree (hooks, 1994). Rather than viewing education and learning as an extension of the organic interplay of being an experiencing human, the dominant approach looks at the world in abstract, reductive, objective concepts (hooks, 1994). It fosters a synthetic detachment between the mind, the body, and the world. (Cordova, 2008; Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2017; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Matias, 2021).

The dominant banking model of education has many adverse effects, including creating a culture of educational elitism, detaching the body from the mind, theory from practice, and separating society into doers and thinkers (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). It fabricates performance gaps through testing and tracking, creating synthetic groupings like racial, socio-economic, ELLs, and students classified with disabilities (the mere deficit model of educational disabilities, in general, demonstrates the negative lens of traditional education) (Bartolome, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993). The standard education model is focused on quasi-objective measures like test scores and rankings, whereas learning is deeply rooted in human subjective experiences (Bartolome, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Kress, 2013). From a traditional lens, students who cannot sit still and focus on class are deemed academically deficient. In contrast, a student's inability to sit still and focus should have nothing to do with their intelligence, nor should it be seen as a hindrance to learning (Genro et al., 2006). Instead, active students who cannot sit still could be seen as assets, inviting a change in the learning dynamic begging teachers to get out, be active, listen, and learn from their students. This dissertation is interested in reimagining

education where students who cannot sit still or focus are engaged and can recognize their learning preferences and flourish.

In explicating my musical thread, I thought of "Flowers Are Red" by Harry Chapin (1978); this song always saddened me. Upon relistening for this dissertation, I realized that the song does not end on a sour note; it ends in a dialogue with an uncertain future and in hope (or perhaps that is my hope). This song tells the story of a child coloring flowers on a page in class utilizing all of the colors of the rainbow. This young boy is questioned and reprimanded by his teacher, who insists that flowers are red, and that grass is always green. The child dialogues with the teacher that there are so many colors in the rainbow, why not paint with them all? The teacher views the boy's attempt at dialogue as disruptive and disrespectful. The teacher then disciplines the young boy by physically isolating him in the corner. Out of loneliness, the boy gives into his teacher's coercive tactics and way of seeing the world, repeating that flowers are red, and the grass is green. In the second verse, the student grows up and moves to a new school where the teacher smiles, says art should be fun, and encourages students to utilize every color. The boy colors the flowers red and the grass green. When asked by his new teacher why he chose to use only red and green, he repeats the lesson that his prior teacher imposed upon him, "Flowers are red, and green leaves are green. There is no need to see flowers any other way than how they always have been seen" (Harry Chapin, *Flowers are Red*, 1978)

This song reminds us that education can be oppressive, culturally homogenizing, and hurtful to children's creativity. The creative young child gave into his teacher's cultural pressure and dominant lens merely to belong and not feel isolated. Moreover, even when later placed in a more loving, creative environment, where the teacher validated his initial creative inclinations, the boy is locked in the red/green binary lens pressed on him. There are many people whose

classroom experiences have deeply scarred them, and more ways of bridging, repairing, and healing through education must be established. This song demonstrates the problems with education but also offers a glimmer of hope that there are classrooms "out there" where teachers smile, strive to make children feel welcomed and encouraged, and cultivate safe and humanized spaces. This study investigated how experiential learning models can create more welcoming, holistic, and humanized classrooms and how that experience is understood through students' bodies.

While driving to the beach with three of the participants in the study, during our "car karaoke" dialogue session, I played the above Harry Chapin song to demonstrate quickly and creatively one of the problems of banking education. Frank, Briar, and Luna reacted immediately to the song's narrative. Frank likened it to classic educational thought control. At the same time, Luna and Briar told individual stories of art teachers they have had over the years who were demanding a specific formal method. They recounted how they felt that was not true to the subjective nature of art and stifled creativity. Teaching a particular art style is understandable; however, grading students on their ability to copy the method seems intense. It seemed to be the antithesis of art to Briarwood and Luna. I was not expecting to hear two personal accounts of somewhat rigid art teachers. However, I was happy that a simple song could generate an understanding of an educational problem and evoke the sharing of experiences that validate the song's narrative and a significant problem in education.

### **Experiential Learning**

My conceptualization of experiential learning is rooted in the philosophy of John Dewey and the developmental psychology of David Kolb. Dewey reminds his readers that education should be rooted in an experience where understanding is developed through the learning

process. Learning is not a static endeavor but a dynamic, cyclical, spiraling, multicolored process of creating, adapting, and evolving perspectives, knowledge, and meaning (Berding, 1997; Heilbronn et al., 2018). The experiential process involves the interaction between the human subject, experience immersed in a broad context and reflection. Kolb makes the case that the psychological development of understanding and meaning is deeply rooted in experience and reflection. Experiential learning works with the presumption that thought, intelligence, meaning, and understanding develop and depend upon the interplay between the individual and their environment (social, historical, and physical context) (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kolb, 1984).

Kolb envisioned Dewey and Piaget as the originators of experiential learning theory. Dewey was a pragmatist, and Piaget was a developmental psychologist. Kolb viewed Freire as originating a more radical and socially active wing of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Piaget can be associated with the more Eurocentric, positivistic, mind-superior branch of experiential learning because he views learning as linear, which involves moving away from the emotions (body) and achieving a more excellent intellect and a higher level of learning. (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Matias, 2021). Despite rooting learning in experience and the human body, Piaget reduced experience and experiential stimuli and subordinated them to higher-level thinking associated with the mind. The experiential learning of Dewey and Freire is deeply rooted in context, place, and being an embodied mind, a body/mind, or, to borrow a term from Merleau-Ponty, a lived body in the world (Gupta, 2021; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015).

Research has been conducted in the last 30 years since experiential modalities have been implemented in higher education. Experiential learning has the potential to transform students' civic engagement through meaningful experiences of service-learning programs and reflection

(Coyer et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020; O'Meara, n.d.). It is important to note that multiple forms of experiential learning and different terms all fit under the experiential learning umbrella. For example, service learning, global learning, situated learning, internships, apprenticeships, study abroad programs, embodied learning, problem-based, context-based, community-based, and project-based learning can all fall under experiential learning. Experiential learning's approach accounts for the social and historical contexts in which people are all immersed, in which its situated nature is a more humanized educational modality. This study adds to the literature that recognizes experiential learning's potential as transformative and humanizing (Berding, 1997; Roberts, 2016; Schumer, 1994; Singh & V., 2021).

Experiential learning is learning through an immersive experience and then encouraging reflection on the experience, creating new skills, attitudes, and ideas (Kolb, 1994).

Transformative learning facilitates a change in one's worldview or frame of reference through experience (Mezirow, 1997). This notion is explored by asking students to reflect on themselves and their frame of reference (worldview, paradigm, preconceived assumptions) before and after a given experience. If a student/person reported experiencing a change in their frame of reference (how they see themselves, others, and the world), that would denote a transformative experience. It is vital to Mezirow and thinkers like Dewey and Freire to recognize that the transformation is not merely a conceptual or mentalistic change in thinking but an embodied, contextual change of one's lived body's frame of reference. This work is essential to explore experiential learning modalities as a practical model for bridging the mind and the body, returning learning to its holistic, ecological context, and, in doing so, creating more humanized education. Experiential learning approaches the person and their social, historical, and physical contexts and seeks to provide opportunities for rich experiences that foster reflection, dialogue, and personal/

communal growth. It is experience-centered, person-centered, reflective, and dialogic, possessing all the necessary ingredients to promote a more humanized education model. In addition, experiential learning models and a more comprehensive understanding of learning spaces also have the potential to include, nurture, and help transform students who are discouraged and marginalized by traditional educational spaces (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994).

Experiential learning models like global learning and service learning have been ways that academic institutions have sought to incorporate these organic and transformative educational opportunities into their institutions; however, most schools utilize experiential learning to enhance and broaden the depth of the traditional education model (Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015; Wilcox, 2009). Merely including, revamping, and rearranging the classical educational models to include experiential learning programs will likely not lead to transformational results and deep learning. Instead, a reimagining and reframing of the traditional educational model is needed to return learning to its joyous, organic, holistic locus of life (Carbine, 2007; hooks, 1994; Kress, 2013). It is strange to think that it is a radical idea to reimagine learning as an embodied, natural, situated, and contextual process. Learning always involves an interconnectedness with place, people, and community, folded through a continuum web of event-based or Kairos time instead of linear Chronos time (Kress & Lake, 2021; Matias, 2021). Learning in context bridges theory and practice through lived experience. When openness and dialogue are present, collective and personal embodied experiences are reflected, and a humanizing community can emerge. (Callejo-Pérez, 2015; Kress, 2013; Quay, 2013).

### **Experiential Learning Research**

Experiential learning classes, global learning trips, and semester/ year abroad programs offer students profoundly transformative learning experiences (Butler Byrd, 2004; Coyer et al.,

2019; Damianakis et al., 2020; Ferrer et al., 2020; Hayden & McIntosh, 2018). However, all the studies I explored focused on classes and programs that are part of the traditional educational model. I could not locate studies that investigate college programs focused on a complete experiential structure. From my search, only one study utilized an autoethnographic approach to experiential learning from the researcher/ professor lens, utilizing student journals to tell the students' experiences. Very few studies were critical in design and nature; most followed the Piaget positivistic research design, a dehumanizing lens on learning and the classroom. No studies of a full two-year experiential program/associate degree using critical praxis were published. This Postformal autoethnographic study used the researcher's tri-lens of teacher-student-researcher combined with students' experience to focus on transformation and humanization through embodiment, context, and place.

### **Research Context**

The Experiential Learning Academy (hereon referred to as the Experiential Academy) is an educational program that seeks to reimagine learning and educational spaces in a two-year, four-semester associate degree centered on experiential learning. The Experiential Academy was designed to attract students who were not interested in attending college or were more likely to attend a two-year Junior college. I will go into great detail about the specifics of the experiential academy in Chapter 2, but for this introduction, I will briefly describe the program here. This program for nontraditional students aims to create an engaged, student-centered, experience-centered curriculum that returns learning to an active state of being in the world. This program incorporates context-based, embodied, community, student-centered, and relational teaching and is an excellent example of reimaging a liberal arts associate degree. Ideally, after the first two experiential years are completed, all the students in this program will be fully accredited and

ready for their junior year of college, after which they will finish their bachelor's degrees in various disciplines. Because of my relationship with education for over twenty years as a high-school teacher and a lover of knowledge, I am well positioned within numerous intersections to explore experiential learning at the Experiential Academy (EA). As stated earlier, I took a postformal autoethnographic (Self and Students) approach as I explored the connections between embodied experience in time, place, and space and how it fostered transformative, healing, humanized learning.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings**

This study and dissertation utilized a postformal lens and methodology presented by Kress and Lake (2021) in "Post Formal Method for Critical Educational Research." Kress and Lake expand upon Kincheloe's Postformal critical thinking as a means and method for critical educational research. (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Kress & Lake, 2021; Matias, 2021) Using the four constructs of etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization, this research study explored the importance of body, space, and place, the way one experiences education as transformative and humanizing (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Matias, 2021). The four postformal analysis constructs of etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization, in theory and as methodology, help the practitioner delve deeper into the physical-social-historical phenomenon or persons under study. They enable the scholar-practitioner to deconstruct and recontextualize the structures of daily life, exposing the power of hegemony and systemic oppression in education (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Matias, 2021). Like Kincheloe's understanding of bricolage as a method, utilizing numerous practical and theoretical, traditional, nontraditional, personal, philosophical, and cultural avenues for exploration, Postformal research is free to cross boundaries and disciplines. A postformal lens explores the intersections of

knowledge and experience, recognizing, studying, and utilizing all roads and resources available for exploration and analysis.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided this research:

RQ1: How do students in an Experiential Learning Academy describe their transformative learning experiences?

Sub 1. What contextual elements do students describe as contributing to a transformative experience and understanding of themselves, others, and the world?

SUB 2. What contextual elements, teaching practices, methods, and pedagogies within the experiential learning model do students describe as helping facilitate a more embodied, humanized, transformative learning environment?

### **Design and Method**

My research approach was a qualitative postformal autoethnography. I intentionally utilized a nontraditional design and method to explore a nontraditional program that serves nontraditional students. I was interested in exploring students' educational experiences, personal growth, meaning-making, context, lived experiences, and whole-person transformation. In addition, I was interested in understanding how the student's personal transformative growth is related to the process and social context of the experiential learning academy.

This study utilized autoethnography because I can testify to the personal transformations I have experienced in college, both on the undergraduate and doctoral levels. This study examined the conditions, context, and structure that foster applied knowledge, personal growth, and educational transformation. This Postformal autoethnographic study's analysis followed the

guiding categories of etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization to make sense of the students' lived experiences of experiential learning.

I recruited six students to participate in individual interviews and a dialogue group. All the students in this study were in their second year of the EA and were graduating but still attending the University for their bachelor's degree. I was particularly interested in hearing from them because they would have had the most time in the program to reflect upon and report about. I conducted individual interviews with each participant, utilizing artifact elicitation, looking for rich and detailed descriptions of students' educational experiences, experiences in EA, and their understanding of self, others, and the world. I asked them to participate in a dialogue group and choose 1-3 songs representing their educational experiences. The dialogue group evolved into our car karaoke session, where we discussed general themes generated from the interviews and listened to each other's songs and main takeaways. This car karaoke session was intentionally designed to create an embodied, experiential activity with the study participants. We took a fun drive and had milkshakes while listening to the playlist of songs collectively generated by the participants.

The analysis was layered just as the data streams are layered. The first layer of analysis consisted of the thematic analysis of the individual interview and artifacts. The second layer consisted of the thematic analysis of the dialogue group and songs collectively generated into a playlist. The final analysis applied the four-tenet Postformal category of etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization, always employing researcher humility to the interviews, artifacts, dialogue group, playlist, and research logs to see what new ways of understanding experiential learning emerged.

### **Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls**

Because this study focused on the subjective experience of the students in EA and my educational experiences (both as a teacher and a student), there is little outsider information. This study does not include the voices of the professors of EA or the parents of the program's students. The only teacher lens included was my recollections and experiences from my 22 years as a high school teacher and a college professor. However, it is essential to note that my teacher's lens is not an actual 'outside' lens. I utilized the tools of Critical Praxis Research (Kress, 2018) to explicate my thoughts, decisions, and apprehensions throughout the research process to maintain trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Because of the context-based nature of experiential learning, replicating this study would be limited because of the particular social-historical context of the EA. My transformative educational experiences, which I had as an undergraduate between 1994-1998 and over 20 years later as a doctoral student from 2019 to the present, can weigh on my lens and understanding as a researcher. I have maintained transparency about all inferences and conclusions made during the research process, highlighting my perspective bias and offering a counter lens. I utilized multiple data collection streams to ensure triangulation and an accurate and full-bodied understanding of the student experience of EA. I also member-checked my research to ensure that my findings and conclusions aligned with what the students in the study were experiencing and expressing. Finally, I checked consent multiple times throughout the research process to ensure the willingness of the student participants.

### **Significance**

This study adds to the literature that offers new ways to bridge and mend the educational gaps created through Cartesian dualism. Second, this study confirms and expands upon the

literature around the experiential learning models of Dewey, Kolb, and Mezirow. Third, this study offers new, more holistic approaches to learning that involve more community, experiential, and human-centered pedagogies. Fourth, this study provides pathways to bridge or intersect the world of theoretical knowledge with the world of practical knowledge. Fifth, this study adds to the literature that presents education as a life-long endeavor and process of growth and transformation rather than a static transactional system of classifications and certifications. Finally, this study is an excellent example of a more holistic, humanized, and embodied way of approaching educational research, design, and analysis.

Committed to creating a more human-centered research study, I decided to create a chapter that focuses in greater detail on the context of the Experiential Academy, the student participants, and my personal position in the research. The next chapter (Chapter 2) will explicate the context of the study to paint a broader picture of the details of the program and the social-historical complexities of the participants and my shared humanity. Next, Chapter 3 will consist of a nontraditional literature review that examines the historical, philosophical schools of thought on education and knowledge and a detailed look at educational studies on service learning, global learning, experiential education, and embodiment within the last ten years. This literature will demonstrate a two-millennia-entrenched mind-supremacist bias that subordinates the body to the mind and imagines human nature as a duality. Chapter 4 shall consist of a run through the research design that is interested in exploring experiential learning as a form educational modality that can repair the mind and body division and promote a pedagogy of wholeness. Chapter 5 will share the findings of this postformal autoethnographic study, bringing to light that a humanized and whole-person approach to learning fosters dialogue and openness.

And wholeness. The final chapter will review the study, its limitations, and its significance for practitioners and policymakers.

### **Beaches, Bumps, and Milkshakes**

I have titled this work *Beaches, Bumps, and Milkshakes* because it captures the backdrop of experiential-based research study and experience. It also served as a metaphor for some key elements of embodied, transformative, experiential learning. Beaches represent the outdoor experiences of the Experiential Academy that cultivated a humanizing, embodied, immersive, and contextual experience. I accompanied students to the beach on two separate occasions (i.e., Beaches), so beaches were the experiential context of this study. Bumps because, in this study, the students and I drove on bumpy beach roads that shook us up and brought smiles to our faces. The bumps also represent the counterpoint and challenges that emerge in openness and dialogue, which are essential to experiential learning, transformative learning, and this study. It is in the bumps in the road, the contextual ups and downs, where the intersection of self, other, and world are negotiated, navigated, and accepted. Transformative learning is rooted in cognitive dissonance, and epistemological counterpoint are essential to help cultivate a variety of voices and learn new perspectives (Mezirow, 2018). It was through difficult talks and challenging moments, like Frank's story in chapter five about his misunderstanding with the professor or (bumps) where transformative lessons are generated. And lastly, milkshakes, the drink we purchased on our way to the beach, which we enjoyed while listening to each other's chosen songs, our car karaoke playlist. Milkshakes are a mixture of ice cream, milk, and various desired ingredients that get "shaken up" and become a new substance that is a sweet treat. The milkshakes represent the transformation, the new knowledge, and the broadening epistemologies that are a byproduct of the humanized experiences and open dialogue of experiential learning.

The transformative gains, wholeness, and healing that the students gained from their educational experiences with their professors and peers are the milkshakes of Experiential education.

## CHAPTER 2

### CONTEXT, CHARACTERS, AND COMMENTARY

For a moment, I will take you back to the trip to the beach in my 1998 Mitsubishi Montero, where I began in Chapter 1. I was driving Briar, Frank, and Luna home from our car karaoke 4x4 beach experience. I asked them what compelled them to participate in this study, and trust me with their lives (I drove them around), their time, and their personal stories, it was clear that all of the students who participated in the study had a deep love and respect for Dr. Who, and they all knew that he genuinely cared about them now and always and that they could count on him constantly to offer his help when he is asked.

Another reason they wanted to participate was to give back to Dr. Who and the Experiential Academy for all they felt they gained through their experience. All the participants indicated they felt transformed and changed for the better through their experiences in the EA. The students were motivated by the love of their professor and program and wanted to volunteer their time and themselves to help me study and learn from them and the EA. When I started this study, I found I shared three commonalities with the students of the program: 1) Dr. Who is a professor and mentor who has inspired them to grow exponentially as human beings, and I have had professors like Dr. Who over the years 2) we are all nontraditional students who struggle in a traditional lecture style classroom, and 3) we all find learning through experience to be more memorable, organic, and liberating.

Postformal research captures the broader social and historical context of the phenomenon we wish to study. It is essential to explicate and explain the context of the Experiential Academy, the student participants, and my place in this autoethnographic study. When working through the study's findings, it became evident that a great deal of time needed to be spent explaining each

participant, the program, and my journey to finding the topic and research in some detail. Instead of elongating my findings chapter, I decided to introduce the program, students, and myself.

Here is chapter 2.

This chapter Consists of a brief description of EA and the development of the Experiential Academy, after which I describe how I came to this research topic through the experiential learning of a research internship. Next, I provided a brief introduction to each of the exceptional individuals who made up the participants of this research study. I recognize these seven individuals as complex humans who dedicated their time and intimate experiences with me for this study as humans rather than mere participants. Lastly, I briefly discuss my positionality as a researcher to promote trustworthiness and transparency before transitioning into Chapter 3, where I detail the literature and theoretical framework that informs this research.

### **Experiential Academy: The Experiential Learning Program**

The Experiential Academy is the brainchild of Dr. Who, an associate professor of philosophy. Dr. Who created this program after years of founding and utilizing experiential-based classes and programs like service learning, global learning programs, and a Gotham course rooted in trips through the five boroughs of New York City. Dr. Who had known anecdotally for years that students learn deeply through being open to new experiences. Knowing the value of experiential learning, Dr. Who did cursory research and discovered the Experiential Academy created by Alexander Meiklejohn, a progressive educator fashioned in the pragmatism of Dewey. Meiklejohn established an experiential academy at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in the 1920s, a more progressive experience-based learning model (Lewis, 2006; Meiklejohn, 1928; Nelson, 2001). With years of seeing students flourish through learning experiences and open

classroom dialogue, Dr. Who sought to combine various experiential programs that he has spearheaded in a two-year associate's program; thus, the Experiential Academy was born.

The Experiential Academy is a two-year, 4-semester associate's program with experience-based classes. It was designed to reach nontraditional students who might otherwise avoid college because of the detached academic structure and methodology of higher education. Dr. Who was recruiting nontraditional, creative, and intelligent young people, particularly those who would not be considered "good students" on paper. The program advertised itself as having a relaxed atmosphere, with no lectures, PowerPoint presentations, rote memorization, and, most importantly, no test-taking (EA recruitment pamphlet). In the recruitment pamphlet, the program coordinators suggest that the kind of student who would be a good fit is "one who's not afraid to experiment, who enjoys thinking outside of the box, and who believes that learning should be awesome." The Experiential Academy sought unique students to participate in a unique experiential and project-based program.

The two-year program is divided into four semesters with a specific focus each semester: to *create*, *reflect*, *explore*, and *engage*. The first semester explores students' creative potential through art, music, writing, and film. The second semester's focus is for each student to reflect on their present purpose in life utilizing meditation and yoga, mindfulness, and body-mind practices. The third semester focuses on the qualities that create a dynamic, sustainable, livable city, exploring the art, architecture, and social history of New York City. The program's fourth semester focuses on what it means to be an engaged community member. The final semester in the Experiential Academy culminates in a service project where students assess a significant local problem and create an action plan to help solve it. Students engage in community-based

research as part of the course load, which means they learn at the same time they serve (EA pamphlet).

### **Finding Experiential Learning as a Research Topic**

As a philosophy student from 1994 to 1998, an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy from 2001 to the present, and a doctoral student and researcher from 2019 to the present, I can certainly testify to the classroom's open and dialogic nature. As part of a research internship course requirement for this doctoral degree, I studied the Experiential Academy utilizing informal observations, interviews, and a short survey. While reflecting on my findings, I was serendipitously reminded of my journey: I was a sad high school senior who had no desire to go to college because I had no love of education and was tired of being graded, judged, and ranked. Twenty years later, I am now an adjunct philosophy professor, completing a doctoral degree in education. I was fortunate enough to walk into Dr. Z's class at a small private college in the fall of 1994, where a loud, curious, analytic young man, I was welcomed in a calm, open, and dialogic space where learning was conversational and personal experiences and reflections were welcomed and nurtured. I fell in love with wisdom, and a passion for learning was ignited in me throughout my four years at college. While I may have had a handful of professors whose classes I had to endure, most professors were inspiring and often utilized experiential modalities.

While researching the Experiential Academy and watching the students working with Dr. Who, I was reminded of the transformation experiences I enjoyed while in college; I will never forget working with a homeless women's and children's shelter on Long Island as part of a self-chosen service learning assignment for my ethics class (an experiential learning opportunity) and its impact on me, my service experience working for the homeless community opened my eyes to the myriad social problems in my backyard and positioned me as someone who could help

those in need with social action. I recall being pushed by Dr. X (a professor of philosophy) to be more academic, cite my work, and write more rigorous papers. After my four-year philosophy degree, I received a master's in philosophy from K.U. Leuven Belgium. I would not have applied nor survived in Belgium had I not had Dr. X mentoring me for two years. And to think, my high school grades and test scores were too low to be accepted into college. I certainly was not a good student by traditional standards or usual metrics. As mentioned, I would have been rejected for admission without their remedial program.

Without the school's desire to embrace those marginalized academic institutions, I would not have been afforded the privileged opportunity of a college education. Similarly, Dr. Who has Experiential Academy recruited students who would not be considered "good" by traditional metrics and built the Experiential Academy for and around them. Experiential education's organic, open, and dialogic nature sublimates the solid static classroom into the living ether of life. While learning in a structured classroom can be a struggle or stifling to many, learning through life's experiences is organic, natural, and expected by all in the Experiential Academy.

Through the stories of educational transformation shared by the students of the Experiential Academy, I was reminded and reacquainted with my educational transformation past, present, and hopeful future. My academic growth is through openness and dialogue with myself, others, and the world through space and time. Without the context of the Experiential Academy, the students I walked with, talked with, and reflected on, I would not have been reminded of my asymmetrical educational transformation. The students of the Experiential Academy reminded me of my educational journey. I do not want to reduce them to mere participants or subjects but want to introduce each one individually.

## **Experiential Academy: Student Profiles: Meeting the Group**

During this research, I had the opportunity to interview six students. Each individual who participated in this study is unique and is not reducible to pithy quotes. As I came to know them and learn with them, it became increasingly clear that the participants who joined me in this study were not mere students, participants, or raw data. They are complex historical, social, and emotional human beings. They opened themselves up to me, shared their stories, trust, and experiences, and deserve more than merely being referred to for their thematic correlations. Doing justice to the vitality and complexity of each individual would involve writing a chapter dedicated to each person, but that task is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, at the very least, I feel it is imperative to introduce each person and try to give a brief overview or window of their uniqueness. I hope this summary does justice to this study's generous and open individuals and their stories of personal growth and transformation.

### **Jeb**

Jeb describes his transformation from a not-very-social “nervous wreck” (especially when meeting new people) who struggled to have and maintain conversations into a less nervous, socially open, highly self-aware, expressive, and self-actualized young man. Jeb expressed that without the Experiential Academy and the transformative growth he experienced as a member of his cohort, he would not have been able to participate in the study. Jeb has grown to be more social, communicative, and expressive. Jeb has ‘come out of his shell.’ Although he still struggles with social anxiety a bit, he manages it and has grown in his ability to communicate what is on his mind. Jeb has grown in his ability to be more social with others, sit and listen, discuss, and accept various viewpoints, even if he disagrees. Jeb can communicate well with others as well as take criticism from others. Jeb’s outlook on life is one of hope and

openness to the world's possibilities and new experiences. After participating in the EA, he saw an infinite horizon of positive possibilities, whereas his earlier educational experiences left him feeling invisible and angry. Jeb is passionate about animation and plans on a career in animation.

### **JoAnn**

JoAnn is a creative, artistic, and analytical thinker. JoAnn stated that the experiential academy was good, academically and socially. At the beginning of the program, JoAnn did not think she would get along or click with anyone in her cohort; yet, through the experience, she came to befriend them all. JoAnn attributes her change of heart towards her classmates through practicing being open to others, listening, and dialoguing, all tools Dr. Who and the Experiential Academy cultivated. JoAnn is a changed person from having participated in the Experiential Academy. In part, she attributes this change to learning, social growth, and mental wellness through class mindfulness and meditation sessions. Dr. Who would do 20 minutes of mindfulness meditation at the beginning of their philosophy classes and help students manage their internal dialogue, thoughts, and stressors. JoAnn attributes her mental health and wellness to the skills she acquired when practicing mediation as part of the Experiential Academy. JoAnn feels personally transformed in her ability to manage her anxiety/overthinking and experiences overall better mental health. JoAnn's transformation regarding others is that she is more open and less judgmental. She is likely to talk to more people than she would have before. JoAnn has transformed her worldview by seeing the world as more kind. She recognizes that change is possible; there is more to the world than we know and more than we were taught to learn. JoAnn lives in the hope that there is more to the world than what is known.

**Briar**

Briar is a kind, creative, introverted young woman. Briar describes her education at the Experiential Academy as broad in scope and feels blessed to have had the opportunity to be a part of it. She was exposed to so many different kinds of people, points of view, and experiences that she finds herself more open and accepting of others. The EA experience was “eye-opening” for Briar. Through a series of reflective, creative assignments that were always related to the course material, Briar began to explore her thoughts and feelings about herself, others, and the world in a new way. Briar speaks of a deep awareness of her obsessive-compulsive disorder, social anxiety, and bi-sexuality, which emerged through her reflective assignments and meditations. During her interview, she made it clear that the self-awareness and fearlessness of sharing her story were only possible partly because of her personal and social growth after participating in the Experiential Academy. Briar is more accepting of herself and has made friends with students outside the EA cohort. She is also generally more accepting of others, as evidenced by her motto, “You do your thing; I am not here to judge.” Regarding the world, she thinks it is still a scary place, but the city is home and not a scary place, except, as she said, “well, maybe at night.” Briar went from being someone who struggled with social anxiety, belonging, and esteem issues to someone who is aware of her strengths and weaknesses. Despite struggling with social anxiety and belonging, she does not let her internal dialogue overpower her.

**Frank**

Frank had begun his senior year of college at the time of this writing. I interviewed him at the end of his junior year. Frank is open, energetic, and kindhearted. When I inquired about

Frank's prior educational experience, he talked about being a terrible student by conventional standards. He did not do his homework. He performed poorly on most tests and always managed to pull it together by the end of the year. Frank was allowed in his junior year in high school to participate in a Boces automotive program built around an experiential learning model where students would learn new information, apply it to a tangible object, and then take a test afterward. Frank expressed complete dissatisfaction with his overall high school experience; he said, "high school was nothing special for me; it was just a place I had to go for a bunch of years." Frank smiled as he exclaimed that the exertional academy "works," that it not only helped him learn the necessary academic curriculum, "but [he] also grew as a person, and [the EA] helped [him] understand and navigate people." Frank described experiential learning classes as fun, exciting, and, at the very least, interesting. He categorized regular track classes as "just class," and there was not much to look forward to. Frank spoke about "clicking" with all his classmates during the two-year process.

When I asked about personal transformation due to his participation in the EA, Frank said he has transformed from an unsure, directionless, purposeless, "Pukey kid" (his parents' nickname for his high school years) to a self-actualized, motivated, open, hopeful man. Frank has grown so much, is open to learning, is driven, and has a declared major associated with what he enjoys and sees as serving a great purpose. Frank viewed himself as more open and less judgmental than before the program. Before being in the EA, if he did not like how someone carried themselves or walked in the room, he would not be open or even want to know them. Frank spoke of allowing himself to get beyond those initial first impressions. He is willing to help others and does whatever is in his power to help anyone who asks for help, even needy doctoral students like me. Frank has grown in openness to the world by meeting people, making

connections, and being open to more opportunities, possibilities, and human potential. Frank sees infinite possibilities because we all know many things together. He said, “We can teach each other anything, and that is how I see it now.”

### **Luna**

Luna is a young woman whom I had the privilege of interviewing three times for this study. I initially interviewed her in the Fall of 2021 during my research internship and twice in the spring of 2023 as a participant in this action research study. Luna described her prior educational experiences as positive, and she described herself as a good student. Luna enjoyed high school, had many friends, and excelled in the arts and humanities but struggled with math and science. Luna presented a brilliant nuance when she described herself as a high school student. She explained,

I was a good student, but not really on paper. I took notes, I was attentive, I studied, but math, science and history were not my strong suits. I was actually failing 40 out of 100 [percent] in those classes. And the only places I excelled were in philosophy, English and more art based [classes]. So, while I was a good student but didn't understand math and science, that didn't give me the advantage that I could have gotten even though that was not my focus, if that makes sense. So, I was a good student just not in the right ways for me to pass high school by their standards.

The nuance that Luna presents is that a good student is one who cares, is curious, and creative and not just someone who can do well in the hard sciences. She even communicates a sense of having missed opportunities and advantages because of being overlooked due to institutionalized standards, “their standards.”

When describing her experience as a student of the Experiential Academy, Luna smiled and declared that it works. Luna described her learning as not only the necessary general educational requirements but also learning about oneself, navigating the world, relationships, and all of life's intricacies. Luna spoke of the diversity of people and views between the professors and students. Despite diverse views, everyone "meshed" and was open to learning from each other. Luna concluded that not only did she do well academically, learning new subjects and material, but the program gave her more life skills that she did not even realize she needed. Luna spoke of the relationships with her classmates and professors and the open, caring exchanges that fostered great academic learning and personal growth. When I asked about personal transformation, Luna stated that she is stronger than she thought and has more agency and the ability to center herself and control internal anxieties. While sharing an artifact during an interview, Luna elaborated that she struggled with health anxieties that could be so overwhelming that it prevented her from wanting to attend classes and school. Meditation and mindfulness practices were integrated into some of the courses in the Experiential Academy, and Luna benefitted from these practices. Luna was also encouraged by her professors and classmates to come to class and participate in the academy. Classes were so much fun, and the professors cared so much that Luna felt bad (like she was letting people down) if she did not show up. Luna's view of others has transformed into a more nuanced perspective and has evolved beyond the good/bad, black/white binaries. Luna recognized that good people could do bad things, bad people can do good things, and that people are just complicated social-emotional beings doing their best to navigate the complexities of life. Luna felt as if she had grown in her ability to communicate with others, both friends and older adults. Luna argued that her openness towards others, even older adults, and her ability to have open dialogue with strangers and find

opportunities in daily interactions could be attributed to her transformative growth in the Experiential Academy.

### **Abby Smith**

I had the pleasure of interviewing Abby twice, once in the fall of 2021 during my research internship and again in the spring of 2023. It is essential to mention that while recording Abby's second, more formal research interview, the recording devices failed to save our conversation correctly. As a result, my referencing of Abby's interview is rooted solely in recollection and my short-hand notes taken during the interview. The lack of a recording has affected the depth and richness with which I have been able to reflect on and represent Abby in this study. Abby was finishing her third year at university. Abby is a confident, caring, and creative young woman. She is also a childhood cancer survivor. While battling cancer, art, and art therapy were great outlets for Abby, fostering her strength and healing. Abby struggled socially in traditional classroom settings, and her public high school was given the opportunity to participate in an experiential learning/ cohort program that helped her to feel more socially accepted and welcome. Most of the students in the program were like herself: quiet, creative, and shy, so it was a pleasant, accepting environment. Despite this, Abby struggled with social anxiety that often manifested in an unwillingness to attend school. After coming through a cohort-based, experiential-style high school program, participating in the Experiential Academy seemed like a natural fit.

Abby is kind, expressive, and confident. She voluntarily shared her story with me twice. Abby's educational experiences in the EA have helped transform her into the woman she is. Her willingness to participate in two interviews is rooted in her desire to give back to her educational community and professors. Abby attributed much of her transformation to her professors,

particularly Dr. Who, who “worked with” her apprehensions and hesitations. Abby spoke of not wanting to disappoint her caring and understanding professors by missing sessions and eventually reaching a point where she looked forward to her experiential “class” and did not want to miss out. Regarding her personal transformation, Abby would say she is stronger than she initially thought. In the past, she struggled socially. However, now she is confident, self-actualized, kind, and expressive. Abby affirmed that the Experiential Academy has helped her recognize her social importance and strength. Abby’s relationship with others has also transformed; she is more open to others and less apprehensive about expressing and sharing her thoughts. Seeing that art therapy is the direction of Abby’s education, she also strongly desires to help others in need find ways to express themselves and feel accepted. Abby’s worldview has transformed into a more hospitable place of positive opportunity to help and hope. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to interview Abby and share her story.

### **Leo**

I interviewed Leo during my initial research internship at the Experiential Academy. Leo was unavailable to participate in this action research study. However, he was mentioned multiple times by his classmates who participated in the study. Leo was mentioned by Briar, Frank, and Luna and was a pivotal character for two students. Because Leo’s name and personality surfaced numerous times throughout the interview process, I thought it was important to share some information about Leo from my recollection of the original brief interview with him in the fall of 2021. I recall Leo enjoying the informal classes, the openness of his classmates, and the professor’s supportive and caring nature. He had said something unforgettable; I have carried it since. For Leo, the teachers of the Experiential Academy “are here because of passion, not a paycheck” (researcher’s reflective journal). Leo expressed how caring, engaged, and committed

the faculty of the Experiential Academy are to helping students grow personally, socially, emotionally, and academically.

### **My Positionality**

In a Postformal autoethnography, the researcher's personal, social, and historical context must be considered because the human meaning will be interpreted and derived from the researcher's own experience, the participants' experiences, and the interplay between participants and the researcher. To enter the research process both ethically and transparently, all researchers must discuss their personal and academic positions and how they intersect with the greater web of human ideas, beliefs, and relations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Goetz & LeCompte, 1981; Luttrell, 2000). My story is even more important in autoethnography because it is central to the research.

I am a White male born in New York City and raised on Long Island. Most of my education has been in the halls of Catholic schools, Catholic colleges, and universities, except for my four years at a public high school. I have grown up in a position of privilege, mainly attending private schools. I have spent the last two decades teaching philosophy and religion in a Catholic high school and public college. My natural educational style is relational and humanistic. I have a great deal of patience with my students and always try to make learning a familial, fun, engaging experience. I was labeled hyperactive and easily distracted through primary and secondary education. I felt I was not a "good" student by traditional educational standards from first grade through my first graduate degree. A private college was the only four-year school that accepted me (of those I applied to) in the spring of 1994 with the caveat that I take an extra no-credit (0 credit) remedial English class my first semester. In my junior year, my worldview was transformed through an educational experience facilitated by an assignment in an ethics class under the tutelage

of Dr. X. My connection to and understanding of being excluded by traditional learning makes my relation to experiential learning deep and personal.

As stated above, I came to this research study through my relationship with academia as an adjunct professor and a student. I have been a member of multiple academic institutions for close to 30 years, from acquiring a B.A. in Philosophy in 1998 to teaching philosophy as an adjunct at a small private college for the last 20 years and currently as both a professor and doctoral student. I have a dual perspective as a student and professor and have spent much time immersed in the school community, giving me an insider's lens. In my junior year of college in 1997, while attending college, I met Dr. X (he was my ethics professor). He gave the students in my class a choice of a research paper or a reflection paper after completing several hours of community service for social service organizations affiliated with the college. I was a selfish, self-centered twenty-year-old who walked into Dr. X's ethics class on the first day, but I was not the same person who walked out of his class at the end of the semester. The service learning, I participated in transformed my personal, social, and global lens. Service learning is a branch of the experiential learning modality, and I can testify to its transformative power. My personal, educational experiences with experiential learning and my almost 30-year relationship immersed in academic communities informed my reasoning for choosing autoethnography as the method of this study. I am cognizant of how my partiality and positionality might affect my lens and research. For these reasons, I selected an autoethnographic method where my experiences become data and are a necessary part of the study.

The EA is a one-of-a-kind experiential learning program founded and surrounded by an equally unique and loving faculty. The two-year focus on nontraditional students and creating an accepting, highly supported cohort-based community is the formula of a whole-person

humanizing pedagogical approach. The students who comprised the program and study are unique individuals who all came into the program with personal struggles and were transformed through their education experiences. We also learned that I had a transformative learning experience and a professor like Dr. Who, who helped me transform through my educational experiences from a young philosophy major in Dr. X's class to a researcher learning from the EA and its students. As a philosophy student, I was taught much of the classical Western philosophical canon, and its openness, questions, and wisdom helped me transform close to twenty years ago. Let us now turn our attention to the philosophical literature to examine the roots of the philosophy of education and human knowledge generation and what the most current educational literature has to say about the merits and shortcomings of experiential learning.

## CHAPTER 3

### ‘SHOW ME AN OPEN MIND’:

#### A POSTFORMAL PRISMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

It was early June of 1997; I was in my junior year in college and enrolled in a class with the beloved Dr. Z. Dr. Z was a philosophy professor at my college who taught a three-hour Zen Buddhism class, spending one-third of the class time practicing Zen meditation and the other two-thirds teaching about the history and theory of Buddhism and Zen meditation. Recognizing the benefits of learning through experience, Dr. Z gave the class a choice for our final project: either do a traditional research paper on Zen Buddhism or visit two monasteries, practice Zen meditation, and write a reflection paper on the experience. As a student always looking for the path of least resistance, I chose to visit a monastery and complete a personal reflection. As a result, I found myself doing Zen meditation in a local Buddhist temple. As part of the experience, everyone meditating was called into a separate space with the Roshi to speak and ask questions to help move them toward enlightenment.

I was sitting in front of the Roshi, and he asked me, "Why are you here?" I responded that I was a philosophy major, I had an open mind, and I was exploring Buddhism as part of a college class. The Roshi reached out to me with an open hand and said, "Show me an open mind." I was immediately confused by his question and accompanying gesture; no one had ever asked me to show them an open mind. I remember immediately thinking I should place my head on his hand, but internally, I self-doubt, telling myself that would be silly. I replied, "I do not understand what you are saying." He responded, "Do you philosophize about a cheeseburger, or do you?" He began gesturing as if he was eating. I was still clearly perplexed. He said, "Do you tell your girlfriend you love her, or do you?" He gestured, hugging and kissing. I was still perplexed. He

again reached out with an open palm and said, "Show me an open mind." I had nothing; I was clueless as to exactly what he was trying to say to me, so inwardly, I thought to trust my initial inclination – I moved towards him, lowered my spine, and placed my head on his hand. He responded with a great, jovial, and spontaneous laugh; he began ringing a bell next to him, and my session ended.

I have told this story to friends and family numerous times because it was a memorable experience. However, in a self-critical retrospective look, I believe I have always told this story implicitly to demonstrate my intuitive intellect. It has been part of my own personal propaganda. I can say this from the vantage point of the present understanding, informed, and transformed through my current educational experiences as a doctoral student. Reflecting on my early educational background, I realized I may have known what the Roshi wanted me to do, but I did not understand what he was trying to say. Well, that is, until the present time, place, and space. Understanding this event through a Postformal lens of time as Kairos, or event-based time, illuminates how this event that occurred 20 years ago in a different time, place, and space can inform, speak to, and help unfold my current educational understanding. The study's driving force is the merits and value of experiential learning and the need to bridge theory and practice and repair the false quartering of the mind and body.

Bridging theory and practice requires replanting or sewing together again what should be an inextricable connection between human thought, ideas, physical place, and space. During the monastery experience, I needed to be in the presence of the Roshi; I needed his dialogue and counterpoint to question my presumptions. To say one has an open mind is only part of the equation; showing the Roshi in action by placing my head on his hand requires physical openness and willingness. Moreover, I would argue that experience, educational or otherwise, is

constantly in dialogue with us. The question is, are we listening, and are we open? My academic doctoral degree is quite an educational experience, and I have learned deeply through an openness and constant dialogue with myself, others, and the world.

In this postformal autoethnographic study, I utilize multiple threads, disciplines, and spacetimes to weave a coherent tapestry about experiential learning, embodied education, and transformation. Mindful of the method, this literature review delves into the historical and philosophical roots of education and human knowing by utilizing music when appropriate. I also look deeply into research studies on experiential learning within the last ten years to illustrate patterns in the literature and the lessons they yield. I have been an adjunct professor of philosophy for the previous two decades and an essential part of who I am is interwoven with the pursuit and practice of philosophy. My academic growth is tied to recognizing that despite the contrived and contextual nature of human epistemologies (we all see the world differently, and there are multiple schools of thought created at different times and places), there is an epistemological prejudice of mind over body. Because of my connection to philosophy and a long historical preference towards a mind superiority world view in this discipline, I demonstrate that the Platonic, Cartesian detached mind is the backdrop of most educational settings, pedagogies, and studies. Unfortunately, this view does a disservice to the complexity of human learning and knowing.

This chapter begins with a historical survey of the philosophy of education and epistemology (human knowing) from Plato to Descartes. This historic reflection will demonstrate the long-standing tradition of thinking about learning and the problems that arise in modern education. The problem with modern education is that it is detached, decontextualized, and fundamentally dehumanizing. Next, I focus on experiential learning (EL) as a solution for

detached banking education. I will explore the classical originators of EL theory. Following this, I delve into the more marginalized academic voices, highlighting the benefits of the context-based humanized nature of experiential learning. Next, recognizing that context-based, embodied, experiential learning modalities can promote transformative learning, I focus on contemporary educational research studies and articles. It is important to note that in a traditional educational dissertation, there is no need to do a deep historical-philosophical tracing of Western thought about education and pedagogy. However, given the nature of this study, the historical philosophical background adds to the rich, layered, interdisciplinary landscape of a postformal autoethnography. As a philosophy professor, I find it fascinating and worth sharing the history of educational ideas and how they have helped shape people's ways of seeing and being in the world. Finally, turning my attention to educational literature, I examine articles and studies completed within the last ten years that discuss experiential learning, embodiment, transformational learning, and humanization. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings, concerns, and suggestions regarding the recent literature review.

## **Classical Western Lens**

### **Education as Liberation versus Bondage**

Plato's allegory of the cave is one of the first known examples of a critical lens toward education and systematic philosophy of education. For this study and dissertation, Plato's allegory serves as a formal historical model explaining the purpose of education. It also manifests the problem of education, namely its Western elitist, dualistic, and independent other-worldly thinking that is the dominant educational model. The allegory likens knowledge and education to humans, chained since birth in a cave, interacting with shadows on the wall, cast from artifacts (like a puppet) in front of a fire light kept by others (humans) who drive narratives

and tell stories. For the prisoners, reality is what they are taught and know merely through the shadows and narratives presented by those who keep the flame and artifacts. On the other hand, actual knowledge and genuine education for Plato is depicted by the prisoner who actively escapes their chains, looking beyond the shadows, driven by curiosity and love. Those who manage to get outside the cave are the enlightened ones who figure out reality by exploring the world and engaging in critical thinking.

Plato offers two forms of education. The first is passive, where bodies are imprisoned, and people are persuaded through coercion to a heteronomous world view of social reproduction. Plato classifies this form of learning as ignorance, and unfortunately, historically, this is the dominant educational model. The second is education as an active process of liberating one's body from social bondage through exploration, curiosity, and critical engagement. Plato's presentation of education as active is one of the first presentations of learning and knowledge acquisition as liberating humans from ignorance and social bondage. This is the primary educational distinction between education as a form of social manipulation, control, and reproduction (which is dehumanizing) and education as the practice of freedom and liberation (which is humanizing). As seen through Plato's passive prisoners, banking education thrives on physical coercion, dominance, social reproduction, and conditioning humans to see and be the same. On the contrary, education as the practice of freedom is active; it explores social norms and gets beyond the limits of coercion and persuasion through a critical exploration of the world.

### **The Body is the Prison of the Soul**

In the Phaedo, Plato wrote about the death of Socrates, which included his most harsh criticism of the human body. As Socrates died from the hemlock the Athenian State forced him to drink, he was surrounded by friends who inquired about his final wish and request. Socrates replied, "Offer up a rooster to Asclepius." Socrates' last words were a strange request. Asclepius was the god of cures, and within moments, Socrates was about to die incurably. Socrates and Plato conceptualized death as a cure for the ignorance of life, which is implicit in being a body in the world. Death is when the mind/soul separates from the corpus; the body and all its sluggishness, subjectivity, partiality, wantonness, and appetite are finally extinguished, liberating the mind to be free and enlightened. The body is seen as the 'prison for the soul' and human existence; the lived-body experience is shadowed reality and ignorance. This idea relates directly to the cave allegory because enlightenment, wisdom, and liberation for Plato were related to being a disembodied mind. Education as liberation for Plato was the liberation of the mind from the body. He believed people are born fettered and only know shadowed truth; the pathway to knowledge and liberation is through a detached freedom of the mind.

### **Other-Worldly Mind Over Body**

Unfortunately, Plato's allegory and understanding of social bondage coincide with being human. All people are born and indoctrinated into social, cultural, and political bondage over which they have no control. According to Plato, the limits of social conditioning, physical place, human subjectivity, and lived experience will always prevent humans from achieving knowledge and wisdom, which is why humans are categorized as ignorant. In Plato's view, the person who has made it outside the cave is a disembodied and detached mind that has transcended the limits of temporal physical humanity and discovered objective, immortal, universal forms.

Plato's desire for universal and objective truth and his fear of the uncertainty of reality drove him away from temporal reality to an imaginary world of unchanging (not living) concepts. Plato believed that human experience is shadow truth because the senses are not adequate couriers of knowledge. Only the mind and physical detachment can lead to enlightenment and the realm of the forms (a detached other-worldly place where God and perfect ideas exist). Plato discounted the physical world and its acquired knowledge for the perfect world of the mind and ideas. In Plato's view, the mind is superior to the body, and if one wishes to become truly wise and enlightened, one must be able to tame the wanton, base urges associated with the body. People must detach the pure, rational mind from the vulgar, partial, ignorant, animalistic body to become enlightened and wise. The Academy, the first school of higher learning founded by Plato, was a place for inquisitive minds to come together and discuss the various human experiences, behaviors, and impulses using a form of detached reasoning. How ironic that the Academy's history is rooted in Plato's preference for mind over body. One positive takeaway is that education was liberatory (even if it only meant a free mind for Plato and his contemporaries).

The historical context of the world that Socrates and Plato occupied was not one where people were free, even in democratic Athens. Socrates was not free to discuss sensitive questions and issues with the powerful contemporaries of his day without the threat of death. The authorities deemed Socrates an enemy of Athens for corrupting the youth (being a bad teacher) and being an atheist (not believing in the Athenian gods), and the state executed him. v that prompted Plato's impassioned philosophical mission. I remember being a high school student in class: tired, uncomfortable, socially anxious, unsure, and expected to absorb whatever my teacher was 'going on about' as I sat there and my mind broke free. Even though my body was

trapped at my desk, in my mind, I was riding a waist-high wave on a sunny summer day. When students are forced into a form of physical bondage with mandatory educational institution time, where sitting in place, giving up freedom, and being the subject of ridicule from either fellow students or teachers is a daily reality in schools, it is no wonder students prefer to escape into their minds.

Taking Plato's duality to the extreme, the Stoics made the case that the only thing people truly are is their mind or volition. This idea was a defense against life's harshness and physical realities. The Stoic individual argues that their status in life, health, and wealth is not in their control and should not affect them because it does not happen to them, per se, because they are not their body (Russo, 2000). Nothing in life is within people's control except their reactions, intentions, and thoughts; people are minds (Holowchak, 2008). So perhaps, in part, Socrates and Plato preferred the mind over the body due to their physical limitations and inability to reconcile their social bondage. In this branch of philosophy, the only human freedom is freedom of thought.

### **The Few vs. the Many – The Wise vs. the Ignorant**

Plato established the elitist distinction of the ignorant many versus the wise and knowledgeable few. As presented in the allegory of the cave, most humans are prisoners who believe what they are shown and whose education does not go beyond the limits of their social constructions. The wise are the few who can see beyond the limits of their social constructions. In his *Republic*, Plato established the wise ruling class of guardians or the Philosopher king to safeguard the ignorant masses. Most people might not realize it, but Plato was anti-democratic because he believed most people are ignorant and only a few (i.e., philosophers) are wise. Nevertheless, Plato considered himself among the wise. It is worth noting that Plato came from a

wealthy family of lawyers and senators. Plato's distinction of the rational over the irrational, the mind over the body, and the wise over the ignorant practically applied declares that the majority of ignorant fools need the elite, well-educated, and well-off few to structure, sanctify, and save society.

Plato's allegory is the bedrock of this study because he provides the first distinction between education as social control and education as liberation. Social control is both a part of and a problem of education and needs to be recognized and addressed. It is coercive and dehumanizing to students, whereas liberatory education is the only pathway to enlightenment, fostering new knowledge, and fulfilling people's humanity. Second, Plato's other-worldly philosophy is the Western source of the synthetic division between the mind and body, which has been the dominant worldview for two millennia. Moreover, Plato is responsible for the academic preference for rational formal thinking, reductive and detached conceptualizations, and the belief that those who practice such high-level thinking are superior to those who do not.

Plato was a wealthy young man with the physical and financial means to sit leisurely and contemplate 'big' questions. Plato saw an intellectual aristocracy as superior to the ignorant poor and working-class masses. It would seem at first glance that the aristocracy were more outstanding intellectuals than most common Athenians. However, one could equally argue, as Aristotle did, that any person can practice philosophy, but they would need their physical needs met because contemplation and deep thinking require leisure time. Downtime and leisure time are luxuries that working-class people in Plato's time did not have. So, it may seem that the aristocracy were better thinkers than the working class, but the reality could be that the masses were too busy scraping for a living to have time to think about abstract ideas and notions.

### **School of Athens: Rationalism and Empiricism**

The "School of Athens" (see Image 1) is a famous painting by the Renaissance painter Raphael. The image depicts an open-air Greco-Roman structure with several academics, thinkers, and mathematicians sitting and standing around, engrossed in philosophical discourse. At the center of the painting is an image of Plato and Aristotle gesturing. Plato is on the left, gesturing upward toward the heavens, and Aristotle is on the right, gesturing out toward the natural world. I use this image to help make a classical philosophical distinction regarding human epistemology. Plato could be categorized as a Rationalist – someone who believes all knowledge comes to humans via the mind and intellect. Rationalism is the belief that reason, and the mind are the sources of all human knowledge. In this school of thought, notions like God, innate ideas, and learning are a recollection of the remaining latent knowledge in people's minds (Russo, 2012).

Image 1: School of Athens by Raphael



Rationalism is also a dualistic system that separates the mind from the body and declares the mind both prior and superior to the body. Aristotle's outward gesture categorizes him as an

empiricist who believes that human knowledge comes from bodily and living experiences, which are processed in the mind in recollection. Empiricism (Materialism) is the belief that all knowledge comes to humans via the senses and sense experience. Empiricism makes the case that humans are essentially born as blank slates, and experience writes on us, bringing us to knowledge. Empiricists do not assume (like rationalists) that the Body and Mind are separate; instead, the body/brain/mind is a unified, organic whole.

This distinction is helpful because it establishes that there have traditionally been two leading schools of epistemological thought in the Western tradition. The first one espouses that knowledge production and acquisition is a product of being a human body/brain/mind in the world, where knowledge is a product of the lived-body experience, sensation, and reflection. The other holds experience and sensation with contempt and places the ground and the apex of human knowledge in the rational human mind. Rationalism is where one might find an epistemology of earthly and bodily detachment; rationalism holds that the source and summit of human understanding are in the ideal world of the mind. Interestingly, a materialist and Plato's most extraordinary student, Aristotle rejected his teacher's elitism, dualism, and otherworldliness, seeing it as a rational abstraction. Instead, Aristotle grounded his philosophy in an empirical, practical, scientific, inductive, and deductive reasoning methodology. Aristotle redeemed the body and the world as the place and means by which humans can come to knowledge.

### **The Modern Western Turn**

#### **Humans are Thinking Things: Cartesian Dualism and Scientific Objectivity**

The Platonic rationalism, dualism, and epistemological elitism were taken up and codified by Christianity and continued into the Enlightenment with the father of modern

philosophy, Descartes. Descartes was born in France to a Catholic household and educated at a Jesuit college at La Flèche. I mention this because Descartes was culturally influenced to view the mind/soul as superior and ontologically prior to the body. Descartes, a rationalist, argued that the mind is known ontologically prior to the body because the body is a material extension and tertiary, so it is of less value and significance than the mind. Descartes' famous *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am, declares that the essence of humanity, the constitutive ground of human essence, is the mind as a thinking subject. Descartes was looking for objectivity; he was able to ground the system and claimed that God granted humans clear and distinct ideas that verify the objective world. Descartes's best example of objective, precise, and distinct ideas are associated with the objective science of Mathematics. Descartes grounds knowledge and the verification of truth within the experiencing human subject (the mind) and knowledge rooted in objective sciences like math.

Descartes wrote nearly 2000 years after Plato but still reinforced the belief that minds/souls are superior and exist prior to experience and physical embodiment. Being a human (human nature) involves a dualism - living as a mind trapped in a physical extension, i.e., the body. Despite Descartes upholding Platonic-Christian dualism, a modern philosophical movement in the Western tradition that followed Aristotle's epistemological empiricism and materialism was revived. Some early modern empiricists like John Locke and David Hume were compelled to reject dualism, the separation of the body and mind, innate ideas, God, and the soul. Later empiricists, phenomenologists, and pragmatists like John Dewey and Merleau-Ponty had great insight regarding human embodiment and learning through experience. In the next section, I will focus on the modern Western thinkers who cultivated an epistemology of the lived body/ embodiment and a philosophy of education.

## **Experiential learning**

### **Dewey**

As mentioned above, the early or first wave of modern materialists, like Locke and Hume, felt compelled to reject duality, God, and the soul. However, later empiricists, phenomenologists, and pragmatists like Dewey cultivated more organic epistemologies of human experience. In this section, I describe the later second wave of modern empirical pragmatic thinkers who explored new insights and ways of understanding human epistemology and knowing.

John Dewey was a pragmatist, psychologist, empiricist, and constructivist; he rejected the Western dualism of Plato, Christianity, and Descartes and understood the human person as a physical totality (Shilling, 2017). Some have categorized Dewey as a radical phenomenologist in the spirit of William James, who saw Mind/Brain/Body as an irreducible /inseparable whole, and people come to learn and acquire knowledge through the cyclical nature of experience, sensation, and reflection. Dewey made the case that human cognition is rooted in the interplay between the physical environment and the world's sensing, experiencing, and thinking body. Dewey placed the immanence of sensation as a constitutive ground of knowledge generation along with consciousness (Shilling, 2017). Experience becomes the empirical precondition for generating human cognition and understanding. According to Dewey, learning is rooted in embodiment, being a human person immersed in the world, experiencing, sensing, reflecting, adapting, and problem-solving. The external material world, the social and environmental conditions in which people are immersed, constitutes the context of experience and the source of learning and knowledge. Dewey developed a theory of human learning and cognition tied to human experience, the organic practical reality of being a body in the world.

**Kolb**

David Kolb presented experiential learning as a continuum, starting with the progressive philosophy of Dewey and the experiential cognitive development theorizing of Piaget and Lewin. Unlike Piaget, who conceptualized cognition as the movement away from the body towards the superior mind and learning as a linear process from ignorance to knowledge, Kolb and Dewey posited that education should be rooted in an experience where understanding and knowledge are developed through an ongoing cyclical process. Kolb's understanding of experiential learning is a four-fold cyclical process involving experience, reflection, forming new knowledge, and then applying the new knowledge (Kolb, 1984; Lipson Lawrence, 2012).

The experiential process involves the interaction between the human subject, the objective world, and the broader ecological context. Kolb made the case that the psychological development of understanding and meaning is deeply rooted in experience and reflection. Experiential learning works with the presumption that thought, intelligence, meaning, and understanding develop and are rooted in the interplay between the individual and their environment (their social, historical, and physical context) (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kolb, 1984). Kolb referred to a second wave of "radical educators" like Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, who viewed the dominant educational model as an oppressive tool of social control that creates and maintains systems of classism and discrimination (Kolb, 1984). Kolb noted that an essential part of "radical" experiential learning models is the spirit of

social policy and action; experiential learning can be the basis for constructive efforts to promote access to and influence the dominant technological/ symbolic culture for those who have previously been excluded: minorities, the poor, workers, women, people in developing countries, and those in the arts. (Kolb, 1984)

Freire said the only way to change these systems of oppression and social stratification is through cultivating "critical consciousness," an active engagement with the human subject's social, historical, and environmental context in experience and dialogue (Freire, 2018; Kolb, 1984).

## **Freire**

For Paulo Freire, much of modern education is a form of social oppression. The dominant cultural/social/political forces utilize education to produce and reinforce their epistemological and ideological views (Freire, 2018). Freire grounded learning in the world, human experience, and the ecological and environmental contexts surrounding humans and the human community. For Freire, people simultaneously write on the world and are written on by the world, reinforcing the reality that learning, knowledge, and even human epistemologies are rooted in human experience and embodied reflection (Freire, 2018; Kress, 2021; Torres-Olive, 2021). Freire's view of the world was eloquently formulated in his family's physical relocation from the Brazilian city of Recife to the town of Jaboatão.

Freire's understanding of humanization implies being an embodied totality in the world, on the earth, with others (humans/ non-humans). One's ability to imagine oneself as detached or "outside" of earthly ecological foundations can quickly become "a precondition for maintaining classist ideologies and oppressive socioeconomic and political arrangements that are toxic for the earth and all its inhabitants" (Torres-Olave, 2021, p. 270). Freire reminds his readers that education should be liberating, humanizing, and rooted in dialogue with lived experience. Experiential learning's approach accounts for the social and historical contexts people are all immersed in, which is a more humanized educational modality. Experiential learning is

experience-centered, person-centered, reflective, and dialogic, all the hallmarks of humanized education. Experiential learning models and a broader understanding of learning spaces also have the potential to include, nurture, and help transform students discouraged and marginalized by traditional educational spaces (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994).

### **The Margins: hooks, Standing Bear, and Cordova**

During my doctoral studies, I was in an ethical theories class when my professor allowed me to put on my philosophy professor's hat and offer my classmates a quick synopsis of Western philosophical ethical theory. After finishing my quick synopsis, the professor highlighted that I had inadvertently given the class a look at the Western White male reduction to the one ultimate truth. I challenged my professor with counterarguments, but her analysis stuck, and I was crestfallen. I have a palpable memory of this experience because I felt misunderstood and misrepresented. I went from a high of feeling like I could educate my classmates on the history of philosophy to accepting my failure to recognize the unjust practical application of those historical thinkers and theories I knew so well. Transformative growth and its openness are often tied to intellectual jostling, some cognitive dissonance, experience, and perceived difference. Sometimes, learning does not feel good. Sometimes, we can grow the most in those uncomfortable spaces and experiences.

My professor's challenge slowly opened me up to seeing the blatant male superiority prevalent in the Western philosophical tradition (or the tradition as a whole). It did not feel good in class to be aligned with a mentality that is part of the problem of Western civilization. However, my emotional responses shifted from frustration and anxiety to an examination of the historical and cultural patterns surrounding the discipline of philosophy. The detached, impartial, universal logical world of a mind practically applied often translates into a sense-superior, male-

superior, life-denying philosophy of detachment. The subordination of the body over reason and heaven over the earth by default discounts and devalues being a body on the planet. It is this reduction and devaluation that this dissertation and research challenges.

Reflecting on Postformalism's guiding categories of etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization, a clear mind-centered/mind-superior preference in the Western tradition arises from the above historical overview. The Western philosophical tradition reveals a pattern in which the physical world, the human body, and one's social and historical setting are less critical and subordinate to one's inner mental life. For example, the Stoics embraced an extreme detachment. The body then was cast as negative, as were emotions, women, and cultural others. This mind equals superior, body/physical world equals inferior perspective manifests a necrophilic lens, which allows environmentally destructive behavior and helps structures of oppression flourish (Freire, 2018; Cordova, 2008; Kress, 2013). A mind-centered, euro-centered lens that rewards intellectual detachment negates and subordinates any other way of seeing or being, forcing a cultural and epistemological homogeny. Other-centered epistemologies or ways of being and knowing are ignored, deemed lesser, and often intentionally attacked (Cordova, 2008; Standing Bear, 2011). Cordova explains that the history of Western philosophy can feel "like sifting through attics of dead white men" (Cordova, 2008, p. 50).

In the Postformal tradition, this research embraces multiple avenues and ways of being human, generating knowledge, and knowing the world. While the Western philosophical tradition still dominates academia, dozens of critical studies emerged over the last century once practitioners and researchers challenged the academy and were allowed to expand the narrow academic lens. Critical race theory, critical disability theory, critical Latinx theory, critical gender theory, critical indigenous theory, afro-studies, and feminist studies are examples of just

some of these theories (Bartolome, 1994). A more expanded history of critical cultural epistemologies is needed to do justice to its deep, complex, and diverse history of other-based and other-centered ways of being and knowing. Because of historic male patriarchy and later White Eurocentric male patriarchy, much other-based thinking was thwarted, lost, or, if lucky, perhaps still in hiding, waiting for a time to re-emerge. However, the point remains that there have always been multiple voices and multiple ways of being and knowing, coupled with a power grab for the "One, Ultimate, Truth."

For this study, I will focus on some of the people whose philosophy has spoken to me during my educational transformation. Each of those I discuss in the upcoming sections has shaken me up and challenged my impartial philosophical conclusions with their partial experience and personal wisdom. First, Christopher Emdin's *for White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the rest of y'all too* is an influential text that modernized and contextualized the current failures of urban education (and education in general) by rooting them in a colonial history by which students of color can be understood as neo-indigenous (Emdin, 2016). He connected native Americans' colonial oppression to the contemporary education paradigm that discredits urban culture, language, and students. He concluded that gaps in standardized test score achievement are more likely educational and cultural divides rather than racial deficit gaps (Bartolome, 1994a; Emdin, 2016; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993). Next, I introduce additional "outsider" academics who offer their critical, cultural, and constructivist voices and share their personal, experiential, educational, and epistemological process over multiple avenues of experience, knowing, and being. Through my studies, I have been instructed and challenged by the teaching and ideas of bell hooks, Luther Standing Bear, and Viola F. Cordova. I have chosen

to share their work as examples of multidimensional forms of learning as they take a critical cultural lens and promote a transformative experiential educational paradigm.

### **bell hooks**

bell hooks presents education as a practice of freedom, as a liberating process, reminding us of the need for learning to be context-based, not a detached, reductive, objectified academia. She states, "The objectification of teachers within bourgeois educational structures seemed to degenerate notions of wholeness and upheld the idea of a mind/body split, one that promotes and supports compartmentalization" (hooks, 1994, p. 17). This dualism creates a system of dehumanized separation where one's academic performance and ability to achieve high grades outweigh learning, intellectual curiosity, and questioning. Academia's "self was presumably emptied the moment the threshold was crossed, leaving in place only an objective mind – free of experiences and biases" (hooks, 1994, p.17.). hooks experienced high school and college classrooms in spaces of mostly Western White male curriculum, objectified and detached with the teacher professor exercising privilege and power over their students. There was little concern for academic growth, intellectual curiosity, human actualization, or enlightenment (hooks, 1994).

hooks remind her readers of educational aspirations as well as problems. Duality and the Western objective, reductive epistemology produce dehumanization in education, which serves as an instrument of structural marginalization and oppression. Here, I note that the first several pages and academic thinkers discussed above in this chapter could be examples of philosophers upholding and promoting the classical Western patriarchy. To an extent, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Dewey, Piaget, Lewin, Kolb, and even Freire have all upheld the privilege of the White European rational man in philosophy and academia. hooks spoke about context, community, pleasure, joy, and embodiment as essential elements of education as the practice of

freedom. According to hooks, for education as a process of liberation and self-actualization, a sought wholeness must be rooted in physical context, the body, place, and space (hooks, 1994).

### **Standing Bear**

Luther Standing Bear was a Lakota native sent to the Carlisle school, a Christian boarding school meant to acculturate Western Plains native people into American-Christian White patriarchal culture. For White European settlers, these schools could be cast as loving and humane because they were based on the idea that the natives were not savages per se. They were just in need of Christian salvation and Western education. Standing Bear spoke of his experience at Carlisle as being both epistemologically and physically oppressive. The native children were forced to cut their hair, take Western Christian names, wear only Western clothing, not speak in their native languages, nor practice any of their native customs. Standing Bear described how most of the youngest and more vulnerable children died at the school for being unable to live so physically detached from their families, the earth, and their cultural practices. Standing Bears' father told him to learn the White man's ways, knowing that a cultural invasion was underway and that having a working knowledge of Western culture and language would help his son survive. Standing Bear eventually leaned into his education, thankfully so, because it is through the written English word that Standing Bear shared his lived experience under an oppressive education that assaulted both his body and mind.

Standing Bear shared an experience when he was an assistant to a teacher at one of the day schools that taught natives English. He recounted having the opportunity to lead a song in English to his Lakota students and did so by having them translate the words into their language. Instead of merely utilizing drilling and memorization, he helped put the song into their cultural context. Hence, they knew the song in English and could recite it in Lakota. When it came time

to perform the task, Standing Bear's students presented the words in English and their native tongue. The other teacher's students could also recite all the words in English but had no idea what they were saying. Standing Bear made it a point to ask his readers which teaching style they thought was better. However, it is hard to deny his context-based, culturally rooted approach as a more humanized and holistic way of learning. It is worth noting that Standing Bear grounded his approach and viewpoint in his own experience as a student at Carlisle School, which is evident in the following excerpt.

At the Carlisle, we had been ordered never to speak our language, and I remember how hard it had been for us to forgo the consolation of speech. I remember how lonely we used to get and how we longed for loved ones at home, and that taking away speech at that time only added to our depression. In teaching, I remembered all these things, so not only allowed but encouraged speaking of both languages at the same time. (Standing Bear, 1933, p 242)

Standing Bear reminds his readers that education is a contextual experience based on the body's freedom and comfort being an essential part of learning. He knew all too well that education in the Carlisle school was cultural murder and oppression that objectified, reduced, and decontextualized the world. It disembodied and dehumanized learning. These oppressive realities were not an accidental byproduct of a dominant educational model but rather an intentional violence to tame, cultivate, and refine the savage natives, as the settlers had done to the wild landscape.

### **V.F. Cordova**

Viola Cordova is a Native American woman and doctor of philosophy; she knew well the Western presumptions and the academic, detached worldview, which is an essential part of what

she refers to as the Eurocentric view sees humans as "MINDS or SOULS inhabiting BODIES" (Cordova, 2007, p. 50). Cordova asserted that Western thinking and philosophy are often a dry and detached endeavor that seems as if "someone is sifting through the cobwebbed attics of someone else's long-dead ancestors" (Cordova, 2007, p. 50). However, Cordova declared philosophy as essentially an activity. Its value resides in the questions it generates. Cordova told the story of a fellow female native American student for whom she was on the dissertation committee. The student started her research with a chapter about herself, her upbringing, and her social-historical context. Cordova and this young woman both viewed this chapter as essential for explaining how she had come to the pursuit of the degree and research. The Western academic members of the committee argued that there was no reason to spend a chapter talking about yourself; it was viewed as unacademic and unnecessary (Cordova, 2007). Like hooks's and Standing Bear's experiences, in Cordova's example the dominant Western academic world discounted marginalized groups' personal, cultural, and historical contexts. Like hooks and Standing Bear, Cordova reminded her readers that much of Western education is about cultivating a detached, disembodied objectivity that dehumanizes and decontextualizes the world and imposes a sense of self that floats above and beyond the physical world of context. Cordova explained, "meaning for the Native American is embedded in context" (Cordova, 2007, p. 73). Personal, cultural, and historical experience, that is, one's context, is essential in shaping humans' ideas, epistemologies, and intellectual landscapes.

Experiential learning is deeply context-based, experience-centered, person-centered, reflective, and dialogic, all the hallmarks of humanized education. Experiential learning models offer a broader understanding of learning and learning spaces and have the potential to include,

nurture, and help transform students discouraged and marginalized by traditional educational spaces (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994). Authors like hooks, Standing Bear, and Cordova, whose personal experiences of the traditional Eurocentric Western education system were marred by physical, verbal, and intellectual oppression, serve to remind their readers of the dangers of dehumanization in education and the importance of humanization.

The etymology of critical otherness involves coming from a lived experience different from the dominant view, not a lesser view, indeed a view that has been subordinated in the prevailing social arena. All three of the authors above come from minoritized groups historically attacked and oppressed by the majority White Male Eurocentric Christian order. There was a pattern of subordination, silence, violence, and cultural supremacy as an unspoken yet undeniable part of their daily structured life. The cultural negation, silence, and violence were experienced through schooling that was cultured and structured according to the Eurocentric, detached, Christian Cartesian dualism, a disembodied, oppressive educational paradigm. Through their lived experience, these individuals recognized the embodied reality of Western "epistemology" as if thinking was merely an abstract endeavor with no experiential or physical reality. Objectivity is a wealthy white male Eurocentric mind supremacy that discounts context, the environment, and subjectivity. As such, it is essentially dehumanizing.

### **Experiential Learning, Transformative Learning, and Embodiment Pedagogy Research**

As mentioned, the purpose of this chapter is twofold. The first part of this review looked at historical literature examining education rooted in human experience from Plato to the present. This part of the chapter explores current research on experiential learning programs that discuss transformative learning and embodiment. The theoretical/ historical run-through of experiential learning demonstrated the Western turn from human experience and academic reduction to an

objective, conceptual reality, which led to the separation of mind and body. There was also a historical movement that sought to restore human learning and epistemology to a grounded, experiential, and embodied context. The historical, philosophical review demonstrates the intellectual bias and the oppressive, detached, dehumanizing predilection of academia to place the mind as superior to the body. Such academic, reductive, objective beliefs in universal epistemologies discount, discredit, and dispel marginalized ways of being and knowing. Experiential learning, rooted in a human context, community, and the lived body, opens the door to multiple ways of learning, knowing, and being in the world. By exploring studies that examine experiential learning modalities, one can find educational experiences that foster context-based learning that transforms students' understanding of themselves, others, and the world and repairs the synthetic divide created by the Platonic/ Christian/Cartesian duality.

### **Finding the Language**

I started my literature review searching by using and discovering a variety of search terms that would ultimately lead me to the studies and articles included in this review. It is important to note that without the proper terms and language to search, finding studies that spoke to the scope and topic of interest was difficult. My initial search terms were "experiential learning, transformative learning, global learning, and humanization." These terms were comprehensive and yielded thousands of documents. I ran through the results, pulling articles and studies that seemed appropriate to my topic and interests. Next, I narrowed the search field by choosing peer-reviewed and published studies within the last ten years. Much research has been done on these topics, and I sought to acquire the most up-to-date articles and relevant studies for review. Finally, I narrowed my search again by focusing on "embodiment learning/ cognition, experiential education, and transformation." The results of this search yielded a much

narrower field of study. Embodiment learning/ cognition, experiential education, and transformative learning offered me around sixty-five results to sift through in addition to the thousands from my first search.

### **The Literature**

Upon reading the literature on experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment in education, it was abundantly clear to me that experiential and embodiment-based pedagogies result in many positive outcomes, including increased knowledge production, critical thinking, improved learning outcomes, increased understanding of physics, mathematics, computational coding, increased mental health, and agency. Furthermore, experiential learning modalities are transformational, increase civic awareness and engagement, promote positive attitudes toward students with disabilities, and are inclusive and humanizing (Adams & Beauchamp, 2021; Damianakis et al., 2020; Gupta, 2021; Hung et al., 2015; Johnson-Glenberg et al., 2014; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Payne et al., 2020; Shilling, 2017; Singh & V., 2021; Strange & Gibson, 2017; Sung et al., 2017; Tomkins & Ulus, 2016; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015). Everything in the literature spoke to the learning depth and benefits of experiential learning, transformational learning, and embodiment. However, there are also specific criticisms and questions regarding the level of experience, embodiment, difficulty in implementation, and student and teacher discomfort within the literature.

### **Article Themes**

One main distinction I discovered while sifting through the research was that more articles discuss experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodied cognition than there were research studies that delved into these topics together. In addition, I found several articles to be extremely helpful in establishing that Western education has privileged one form of

learning, cognitive conceptual learning, over other forms of learning that engage the whole person (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Lipson Lawrence, 2012; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015). This finding echoes the above argument that primary education models presume humans are intellect/minds inhabiting corporeal bodies. One constant theme that emerged in the articles in the literature is that by approaching learning from a conceptual, cognitive framework only, we ignore human complexity, socio-historic context, and the physically embodied nature of people's humanity. In short, education that only speaks to one pathway of human learning is dehumanizing because it ignores the whole person. (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Lipson Lawrence, 2012; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015).

A common thread in some of the literature was the mention of the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty regarding the origins of embodiment theory and cognition (Gupta, 2021; Shilling, 2017; Singh & V., 2021; Thorburn & Marshall, 2014; Tomkins & Ulus, 2016). Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment and the lived body provides a systematic counter-voice to the Western dualism and mind-superiority that has been an essential part of philosophy and cognitive theory. Merleau-Ponty placed the lived body as the locus of knowledge and knowledge generation. The lived body is, for Merleau-Ponty, the inseparable unity of the body and mind. In fact, consciousness (which would be classically associated with reason) is the result of embodied situational experience and occupies a pre-reflective nature. Perception, consciousness, extension, and intentionality are all expressions of a composite embodied unity. Merleau-Ponty's lens is a constructivist lens that recognizes that the variety of being and knowing in the world has everything to do with being a body in a situated environment and physical place. Merleau-Ponty places human cognition and learning upon the lived- body immersed in the world of experience

(Gupta, 2021; Shilling, 2017; Singh & V., 2021; Thorburn & Marshall, 2014; Tomkins & Ulus, 2016). The body becomes a locus of being, knowing, and world consciousness.

One compelling theme from the article-based research literature highlights that social injustices are implicit in cognitive, educative, and human theory that ignores multiple ways of learning and knowing. The Eurocentric "mind-supremacist" modality, which has been the dominant educational methodology for millennia, diminishes the human subject, emotions, and non-formal ways of being and knowing. It has also marginalized women and minoritized groups and declared indigenous epistemologies as primitive and unacademic. As such, experiential, context-based, embodied ways of learning coincide with indigenous, minoritized, and marginalized ways of knowing and being in the world. They are decolonizing pedagogies because they demonstrate epistemologies and ways of knowing that are not rooted in the dominant Western White male narrative (Singh & V., 2021; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015). The literature highlighting the socially oppressive, euro-centric, objective nature of the dominant mind-supremacist all referenced the works of Paulo Freire (Singh & V., 2021; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015). I found this interesting because Kolb categorized Freire's experiential model as on the more radical side of experiential learning. The only difference between traditional experiential education and the "radical" school is that Freire sought to explore the intersection of ideas and the world, thoughts in actions, and, unfortunately, the reality of power and oppression.

### **Study Findings: A Tale of Two Schools with Some Exceptions**

A pattern of two schools of thought emerged when reviewing the research studies on experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment. First, a pattern of studies cast in the positivistic, neo-liberal, Piagetian Western theoretical paradigm quickly emerged. These studies were focused on how experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment

could help increase learning outcomes, retention, test scores, and the mastery of complex concepts through experience and embodiment (Cuddy-Keane, 2010; Glenberg, 2021; Hung et al., 2015; Johnson-Glenberg et al., 2014, 2014; Kosmas & Zaphiris, 2018; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Malinverni & Pares, 2014; Payne et al., 2020; Sung et al., 2017). The second approach included researchers who understood education's historic predilection of mind over body. These researchers focused their studies on the embodied subject, contextual social environment, inclusionary transformative nature, and broader community of benefits associated with experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment (Coyer et al., 2019; Gardner, 2021; Intolubbe-Chmil et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2020; Singh & V., 2021; Thorburn & Marshall, 2014; Tomkins & Ulus, 2016; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015). These studies cultivated a form of critical consciousness rooted in a constructivist epistemology that recognizes embodied humans are responsible for knowledge generation and meaning-making. They also highlighted the importance of multiple streams of knowledge and being in the world that can challenge traditional mind-supremacist education's monolithic, detached, dehumanized nature.

Within the literature, it was evident that the age-old education as social reproduction, creating a good workforce or performing on a competitive assessment-based objective measure is still alive and well in the educational research paradigm. It was evident that educational research views learning as a process of liberation and self-actualization at the service of a more socially just world. I refer to the former style as mind-supremacist research and the latter as transformative or critical practice research (CPR). There were far more mind-supremacist studies than transformative and CPR within the pool of studies examined. Within the transformative literature, there were even fewer that I would characterize as explicitly transformative and CPR

(Singh & V., 2021; Strange & Gibson, 2017; Tomkins & Ulus, 2016; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015)

### **Mind-Supremacist: Detached and Disembodied**

A significant number of the research studies are representative of the detached academic paradigm, discussing experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment as a positivistic, neo-liberal pedagogical tool that can be studied to serve the current academic status quo better (Cuddy-Keane, 2010; Glenberg, 2021; Hung et al., 2015; Johnson-Glenberg et al., 2014, 2014; Kosmas & Zaphiris, 2018; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Malinverni & Pares, 2014; Payne et al., 2020; Sung et al., 2017). However, I uncovered an irony within these studies; the majority recognize the Western predilection of mind over body, the Cartesian dualism, and its hold on Western education as something that needs to be remedied. However, the focus and design of these studies fell in line with the objective, neo-liberal, mind-supremacy paradigm that experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment cognition seek to expand (Cuddy-Keane, 2010; Hung et al., 2015; Johnson-Glenberg et al., 2014; Kosmas & Zaphiris, 2018; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Malinverni & Pares, 2014; Sung et al., 2017). These studies explored the efficacy of experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment regarding learning outcomes. Embodiment studies in this paradigm highlighted that embodiment helped generate more considerable learning gains in a shorter time (Hung et al., 2015; Johnson-Glenberg et al., 2014; Sung et al., 2017). A common distinction in these studies was between High-Level versus Low-level embodied experiential learning activities (Johnson-Glenberg et al., 2014; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Sung et al., 2017). High-level experiential learning and embodiment yield more significant overall learning outcomes.

### **Positivistic Outliers**

Two studies in the more positivistic paradigm that have unique focus and findings included one on embodied learning in mixed reality (a virtual reality context) and another about a Body Mind approach to help patients who have Medically Unexplained Symptoms self-manage (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Payne et al., 2020). The study on embodiment and mixed reality findings was holistic and reflected an educational deep learning model. Some findings were that body-based learning 1) benefits everyone 2) creates opportunities for collaboration, 3) has a real-world implementation, and 4) requires a revision of traditional assessment (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013). The study on the body-mind approach used transformative learning to help patients self-manage their medically unexplained symptoms by bridging the body through critical learning. Focusing on a four-fold layers approach that highlighted structure (context), agency, reflexivity, and self-regulation, patients could transform their relationship to their symptoms from panic to control. Structure accounts for understanding the context of the symptoms. Agency accounts for a patient's ability to recognize that they can change things. Reflexivity or self-awareness and critical self-efficacy are an individual's belief in the ability to influence their condition. Finally, self-regulation is the patient's ability to exert control over their medically unexplained symptoms. Utilizing transformative learning and an embodied context-based critical self-awareness to help improve the quality of agency and the quality of life for patients is a real-world applied practice.

### **Transformative CPR: Humanizing, Liberating, and Contextualizing**

The authors of the second category of studies recognize the historical, reductive, conceptual, dualistic, and mind-supreme preference of traditional education. These studies seek out context-based, experiential, embodied ways of knowing and establish multiple ways of

generating knowledge, learning, and knowing. The authors use constructivist thinking to further the reality that humans create meaning and generate knowledge through the living body immersed in the world. These studies focused on the transformative, lived experience of students and teachers participating in experiential learning programs, transformative learning, and embodiment pedagogies. This style of inquiry was more focused on how experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment help foster inclusivity and civic responsibility. Students' growth through EL programs increases their ability to embrace others while exploring and embodying otherness (Thorburn & Marshall, 2014). Critical reflection through dialogue, mindfulness exercises, and journaling are excellent ways to foster transformative learning about oneself and others and the importance of context and body (Gardner, 2021). Global learning and service-learning programs cultivate a deeper understanding of global civic responsibility through connecting with others and engaging in learning within the community (Coyer et al., 2019; Intolubbe-Chmil et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2020).

This style of inquiry sought to foster a sense of self-actualization and civic responsibility, as well as help students realize privilege and power dynamics in the world. It aligns with a more transformative and critical research practice paradigm (Kress & Amorim, n.d.; Kress, 2011; Mezirow, 1997, 2018). Focusing on how learning and education help us to become more fully human to create more significant, more connected communities is essential to becoming more fully human. Education that can recognize inequality and oppression and work to change the unjust distributions of privilege and power is critical, liberatory, and humanizing. An educational process that is more liberatory, context-based, and humanizing is why more scholars, academics, and researchers should adopt a critical practitioner research lens. (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994; Kress & Amorim, n.d.; Singh & V., 2021; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015).

## **The Benefits of Experiential Learning**

All the literature reviewed framed EL, TL, and embodiment as educational assets that yield only positive results when employed. EL, TL, and embodiment education were helpful and transformative for traditional conceptual learning and critical, transformative, liberatory education. Experiential learning practices yield several positive results, including: 1) increasing learning outcomes and computational/ conceptual thinking, 2) helping students learn better or faster, 3) helping students process problematic notions in physics, 4) increasing students' sense of self, 4) fostering students' openness to others, 5) generating students' sense of connectedness to nature and the environment, and 6) fostering students' sense of community and community responsibility (Coyer et al., 2019; Cuddy-Keane, 2010; Gardner, 2021; Glenberg, 2021; Intolubbe-Chmil et al., 2012; Hung et al., 2015; Johnson-Glenberg et al., 2014, 2014; Kosmas & Zaphiris, 2018; Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013; Malinverni & Pares, 2014; Payne et al., 2020; Sung et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020; Singh & V.H.N, 2021; Thorburn & Marshall, 2014; Tomkins & Ulus, 2016; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015).

## **Concerns**

Experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment education can be uncomfortable for practicing teachers and participating students. An essential part of transformative learning is embodied/cognitive dissonance, which can be unsettling and painful (Adarlo et al., 2019; Coyer et al., 2019; Damianakis et al., 2020; Gardner, 2021; Intolubbe-Chmil et al., 2012; Payne et al., 2020). Experiential learning programs are challenging to replicate and measure because of the specificity of context, time, place space, and participants (Gardner, 2021; Johnson-Glenberg et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2020; Sung et al., 2017; Tomkins & Ulus, 2016). The constructivist lens appreciates the conditional nature of knowledge and meaning generated

through experience, context-based, time, place, and space. However, in the more Piagetian, positivistic, conceptual paradigm, the inability to measure and replicate these kinds of learning models are limitations that must be accepted and overcome.

### **Conclusions**

Very few studies have examined the lived experience of students of experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment programs. All of the programs in these studies took place over no more than six months. The average program duration in these studies was fifteen weeks or one college semester. Only a select few studies focused on the inclusive nature of experiential learning, transformative learning, and embodiment of the student's experience. Moreover, no studies explored students' experience of self as a total lived body, a sense of Cartesian duality, their sense of embodied mind, immersion in lived experience, or feelings of detachment from the world and body. Only one study included an examination of one's personal classroom practice through studying student projects, nurturing an element of practitioner/researcher (Gardner, 2021; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015). Finally, few articles and studies explicitly utilized a critical practice research design or a transformative theoretical lens (Gardner, 2021; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015).

### **Suggestions**

While there is a growing knowledge base about experiential learning, more studies should be conducted about experiential learning, embodiment education, transformative learning, exploring inclusive possibilities, deep learning capabilities (fostering high-level critical thinking and analysis), and civic engagement. Because of the context-based, immersive nature of experiential learning modalities, nontraditional students who benefit from multiple ways of learning and knowing should thrive; however, there is not enough literature to substantiate this

assumption. Deep learning, referring to critical consciousness, self-actualization, and becoming more fully human, should be a fundamental goal of education and educational research, and diving deeper into the student experience with experiential learning can begin to fulfill this goal.

Think here of Johnny Cash's song "What is Truth," where he paints a picture of how older folks sometimes do not understand younger people and choose to ignore or silence them. In the song, the narrator declares that if younger people are searching for meaning and answers, it is because the meaning and answers provided by those before them (their elders) did not suffice. The narrator concludes that the older folk should work to understand and dialogue with the younger folk, knowing that what they think and accept will be understood and accepted in the future. The abstract question of "What is truth?" is best answered practically, understood, and applied in dialogue and action. Cash's song echoes Dewey's focus that having humanized open dialogue is the cornerstone of a free and democratic society.

To bring us back to the request of the Roshi, "Show me an open mind." What good is philosophy if we cannot use it to help us solve actual problems? What good is education and educational research that is so detached that it ceases to be practically understood and relevant? Philosophy that is practically applied and utilized as a critical process has a profound use; think of all of the sciences born out of philosophy's desire to solve real-world questions. Education and educational research that seeks to develop, define, and dialogue with our full humanity in and with the world is profoundly useful and needed.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study's research design and method evolved as my interest in experiential learning and humanizing modalities deepened. I begin chapter three with a quick story of my first research experience and encounter with an Experiential Learning Academy, followed by a detailed description of my methodology, research design, procedures, and analysis.

It was a beautiful Friday in September 2021. The sun was shining, and the temperature was quite hot when the sun was out. I was joining Dr. Who and one of his experiential cohorts at the beach for a walk session at the Experiential Academy. I arrived and met eight students and three professors. Everyone was in good spirits. Both students and professors displayed high energy levels because of the beautiful surroundings and the excitement of the students' first real experiential outing. The students enjoyed themselves in nature as they ran up the dunes, took pictures, and were silly together. The formal content for that day was to learn about and write descriptive poetry and explore photography. The students walked down to the inlet, where they learned about descriptive poetry, reviewed some photography tips, and then took pictures of themselves and nature. The students talked, played, learned, and bonded with each other, all while they walked along the beach. I had the opportunity to speak with and interview two students during this walk. The students were open, energized, communicative, and in high spirits until our journey came to a quick halt when one student felt dizzy and exhausted. We all took a moment to breathe, relax, talk, and play to allow the student time to catch his breath. The professors gave the student a small snack and some water and coaxed him to his feet to continue the walk. After about ten yards of walking, the young man sat back down and was too exhausted and dizzy to walk. At that point, the professors are at a loss for what to do. The majority of the

class wanted to run and play, and yet everyone was standing there waiting for one student. Dr. Who turned to me and said, “What should we do?” I could not help but laugh; there I was, an outside observer doing cursory research, and my friend, colleague, and coordinator of the Experiential Learning Academy was asking me what we should do. Responding to the situation was not difficult for me. In addition to my other roles in my life, I am an ocean lifeguard who always loves to snap into action to help someone in physical distress. I also have been driving legally on Long Island beaches in a Mitsubishi Montero since 1994. The lifeguard in me immediately knew what to do, and the 4x4 enthusiast had a backup plan.

I told Dr. Who I was going to walk back to the main parking lot and look for park police or state park employees who could bring a vehicle on the beach to pick up the young man who was suffering from a mild form of heat exhaustion in order to spare him the return walk. And, if I could not find an official, I would take my Mitsubishi Montero onto the beach and pick up the student myself. One professor stayed with the exhausted student, and the other professors continued the walk with the energized cohort. I began my journey back to the parking lot. It took me at least a few minutes to figure out where I needed to walk to find the lot, and it was a long and hot walk back. I remember being frustrated that I was losing time to observe and interview the students while on this goose chase, but I enjoyed the task because I knew that others were counting on me to resolve the dilemma. When I arrived in the parking lot, I did not find any park police or state employees, so I got in my truck and drove on the paths of the state beach. The second my truck touched the sand, I began smiling ear to ear. I opened the windows and relished the ‘mis’opportunity I had to “legally,” “officially-necessarily,” drive onto the beach to “rescue” a student. Despite my smile, I felt incredibly awkward, but I picked up the student and professor carefully, cautiously, and without issue. On my way back to the parking lot, I picked up another

four students, who, at this point, were happy but exhausted from the walk. I dropped everyone off safe and sound. The young man who had not been feeling well was feeling much better, and we all walked away with the memory of an incredibly fun experience. On my way home, I could not help but marvel at the organic fun of experiential learning and how insightful, cool, and enjoyable research can be.

This was my first experience as a researcher and my first encounter with Experiential Learning Academy. As stated above, as I was driving away from the event, I was taken by the responsibility, the privileged role of a researcher, and the organic and unforgettable nature of experiential learning. I was also amazed at how much fun I had despite the “bump in the road” of having to stage a rescue for a heat-exhausted student. Since this was my first attempt at research, I did not bring any recording tools or even a pen. I showed up and immediately felt foolish and unprepared. I was afraid I would forget important details and what students had to say about the program. I was amazed because the experience was so organic, rich, and full-bodied. I remembered much of what the students had shared with me in the short time I spoke with them. When writing up the experience and findings for my research internship course, it became apparent that I was interested in learning more about experiential learning and educational modalities that are more liberating, humanizing, context-based, fun, and relevant.

Through fully immersive, embodied, practical, contextual, and educational experiences, profound, transformative learning can emerge. Human beings are physical creatures, and our physical comforts, access to resources, physical support networks, and physical conditions directly impact how we learn, what we come to know, and our ability to grow. An example of this connection is the simple reality that if a child is hungry, they will struggle with focusing and learning, which prompted guaranteed breakfast and lunch programs in many schools. We treat

students as disembodied minds that can unnaturally sit for hours at attention and learn as teachings ramble on with decontextualized theory (Ace Staff, 2012b; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015).

This chapter will describe my methodology to learn more about students' experiences with embodied learning in the EA. I will reiterate the purpose of the research, detail the questions that guided this study, and discuss my worldview and methodology, combining the two into one Postformal study. I will then explicate the study's design, population, data collection tools, and analysis. The ethics and trustworthiness of the study and researcher will be discussed, along with a description of the study's limitations. Finally, the chapter will end with a brief conclusion and foreshadowing of the findings in chapter 5.

### **Purpose**

This study aimed to describe the transformative learning experiences of the students (and myself) who have participated in the Experiential Learning Academy. A transformative learning experience would be exemplified in a memorable learning experience(s) that challenges a student's frame of reference regarding meaning and understanding and fosters a personal change in thought and action. This study explores what personal, collective, or social educational transformations students describe experiencing through the EA and what contextual elements, practices, methods, and pedagogies within EA helped facilitate a humanized transformative learning environment.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided this inquiry:

RQ1: How do students in the Experiential Learning Academy describe their transformative learning experiences?

Sub 1. What contextual elements do students describe as contributing to a transformative experience and understanding of themselves, others, and the world?

SUB 2. What contextual elements, teaching practices, methods, and pedagogies within the experiential learning model (EA) do students describe as helping facilitate a more embodied, humanized, transformative learning environment?

### **Transformative, Postformal Critical Praxis Research**

This research study was informed by a postformal, social constructivist lens and a transformative paradigm. As Creswell (2018) explains, social constructivism recognizes that humans develop personal meaning through experiences. Subjective understandings develop through a myriad of individual experiences and reflection on meaning. This study highlights how the dominant approach to education creates an unjust bias that disproportionately benefits particular learners while marginalizing and discouraging more contextual learners. This academic duality divides humans and society into those who know and those who do not, those who are college-worthy and those who are not. This divide can and does divide people into projected career paths and socioeconomic achievement, adding to the social injustice that plagues American society. The transformative paradigm allowed me to explore these power structures and more humanized and diverse approaches and narratives to challenge the monolithic approach to education and learning. Nature tells us that context, diversity, and adaptation are the keys to life and evolution, yet the current ecological, educational environment is a 'one size fits most' approach. If we are serving only some of our students, then education as we know it is unequal and unjust. There is an unfortunate disproportionate financial benefit to those who can achieve higher in academia as well as a social control benefit to keep people from

knowing too deeply the context and conditions in which they live (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kozol, 1991; Love, 2019).

A postformal epistemology will be utilized as it offers a counter-narrative to the cartesian duality that approaches knowledge and learning as a mind detached from a body. The Cartesian model believes that the social, historical, and geophysical location and space where students are immersed should not impact the mind's learning ability. A postformal epistemology opens a fuller field of vision, recognizing the reductive nature of objective reason and rationality and exploring the diverse and multiple knowledge landscapes traditionally silenced by the dominant Western worldview. Ignoring human heteronomy, the myriad of cultural ways of knowing, experiencing, and forcing a system of knowledge rooted in a Platonic/ Cartesian intellectual duality is an epistemological bias, which is dehumanizing and unjust (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993).

Postformal thinking is established in part as a refutation to the formalism of the Cartesian-Newtonian mechanistic worldview that assumes everything can be understood in cause and effect, deductive and reductive rational terms (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993). Postformalism pushes back against the Piagetian understanding of cognitive theory, which is linear, universalized, and reduced to formal operations. This formal thinking is partly responsible for establishing education rooted in tests and standardization. This education assumes that thought is the highest form of human cognition and seeks ways to instill and measure this form of cognition. Postformalism seeks to get beyond the universalization and detachment of formal thinking and understand human knowledge as generated in context. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (1993) point out, Cognitive development is not a static, innate dimension of human beings; it is always interactive with the environment, always in the process of being reshaped and reformed.

The experience I shared at the beginning of chapter three when I visited a Buddhist monastery, is an excellent example of learning as a context-based process that can transcend the normal limits of linear progress. My current educational experiential environment and context have shaped, reformed, and reinterpreted the meanings and understandings I learned from an educational experience twenty years ago. Learning is a context-based process, and human meaning and understanding of the world can change within different times, spaces, and contexts.

The postformal lens can bend the boundaries of space-time, utilizing the notion of *kairos* over the more linear notion of *chronos* (chronological time) to open up multiple dimensions and pathways. Time, which in the traditional sense of chronology (*chronos*) represents a linear metric of progress documenting growth and decay, things like length, speed, and duration (Matias, 2021). Kress and Lake (2021) point out:

*Kairos* allows for thinking not just about metrics or progress but rather about how events are linked to connections of other events in historical timelines across different geographical locations. While *chronos* has a linear trajectory of forward movement, *kairos* is multidimensional, like a spider web that interconnected lines and spirals...The linearity of *chronos* mirrors formalist research's singular path toward discovering universal truths, while *kairos* mirrors the spiraling, multidirectional, multidimensional postformal method. (p.263)

This notion of time allows us to reach beyond different geographical space-times within a present and specific geo-temporal place. The way a song written in the 1960s, 1970s, and even the 1570s can speak to our lived experience and affect our embodied experiences at this very moment is an example of *kairos*. Alternatively, my understanding of my experience with a Roshi in 1997 could be revisited and recollect from the vantage point of 2022. When I recall the

original space-time, place, and experience from the vantage point of a different time, place, and lens, new understandings are created, new pathways are cleared, and new knowledge can be formed. It is important to note that our understanding of events that have happened to us in the past affects our present, as well as future, folding the theoretical linearity of time into the lived-body, the humanistic reality of Kairos (Kress & Lake, 2021).

Postformalism can also expand the landscape of what is considered and included as sophisticated thought. As the horizon of different ways of knowing and developing are opened, "we find that those who were excluded from the community of intelligence seem to cluster around exclusions based on race (the non-white), class (the poor), and gender (the feminine)"(Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993, p. 298). Postformalism challenges the fixed, formal, modernistic view of intelligence, arguing that some people are intelligent, and others are not. Postformalism's interest in explicating context, etymology, process, and patterns works to uncover unjust social-political -historical, and present power dynamics that undergird much of the seemingly objective conclusions of formalized thinking. Formalism's reductive universals, abstract grounding, and exclusionary process practices ignore the contextual nature of human knowledge and cognition and, by extension, marginalize, ignore, and negate anything that cannot present itself within the bell curve of normalcy.

Postformalism is not just a theoretical lens that will frame and interpret the various elements of this study, but Postformalism will be the same method of this study itself. Kress and Lake (2021) present Postformalism as a method and offer guidance in a context-based inquiry using Kincheloe's four constructs: etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization. Postformalism, as the method, is not a linear endeavor. Instead, all four constructs will be in a constant dialogic dance, with all of the data being acquired and collected, trying to contextualize,

deconstruct, and recontextualize in search of patterns that may emerge. As Kress and Lake (2021) explain, applying the four constructs of etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization can lead to an uncovering and understanding of how structural hegemony functions, revealing an understanding and recognition of structures of systemic oppression. This Postformal study recognizes that the dominant nature of the Piagetian, Cartesian, and Newtonian epistemologies is reductive, exclusionary, and dehumanizing, reducing learning to detached formal intellectual operations (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Matias, 2021). This study explores the students' experience of the EA program and its potential to be humanizing and transformative, repairing the fabricated divide between the body and mind, theory, and practice.

### **Design**

My research approach was qualitative because I wanted to explore stakeholders' educational experiences, personal growth, and transformation experiences. In addition, I was interested in understanding how students' personal transformative growth was related to the process and social context of the Experiential Learning Academy. Because of my interest in students' personal/ collective experiences, the meanings derived from experience, and the flexible inductive nature of my methods, a qualitative approach was the natural fit (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981; Luttrell, 2000).

The chosen research design was a Postformal autoethnography. My relationship with academia is so long and layered that my personal experience and insights needed to become part of the study. I can testify to the personal transformations I have experienced as a student in college at both the undergraduate and doctoral levels. This study explored EA's conditions, context, and structure that foster applied knowledge and personal growth and yield a transformation in education. This postformal autoethnographic study analyzed the data through

guiding categories of etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization to make sense of the lived experience of the students participating in EA. Postformal methodology allowed me to design a study that intentionally sought to conduct untraditional research to help explore undiscovered avenues of the human web of reality.

### **Population and Recruitment**

Any student who participated in the Experiential Learning Academy was eligible to participate in this study. I also was a research participant in addition to being a researcher. The Experiential Learning Academy is comprised of students who have been marginalized and sidelined by traditional educational modalities. These students were picked for this program because they were identified as struggling in a traditional classroom setting. The program is going into its fourth year and is composed of cohorts of roughly 15 students. I used a single-stage recruitment procedure because I had direct access to the students in the program. I used a sampling of convenience, interviewing students who were willing and available to be recruited into the study. This study recruited seven students to participate in an individual interview and a dialogue group that evolved into a car karaoke session. Because of the two-year nature of EA, I limited the sample to students in their second year or students who had already completed the program.

I explained the ethical considerations of this study, like participant anonymity, consent, and member checking to the participants. My transparency hopefully fostered a collegial environment for the participants to feel comfortable. I encouraged participants to choose pseudonyms for the study to change the power dynamic and cultivate participant autonomy. Having the participants choose their pseudonyms initiated a co-creative opportunity to demonstrate the centrality of the participants and foster humanization. Then, I invited them to an

interview and asked them to bring in an artifact, picture, keep-sake, or something that reminded them of the significance or importance of their time in the EA. We brainstormed ideas for our follow-up dialogue group during the interview process with all participants. It was clear that everyone preferred to do something more experiential than merely meeting in a room together, sharing music, and having a discussion. The idea for car karaoke was our co-created context for our final dialogue group.

## **Methods**

This study began with semi-structured individual interviews, which included artifact elicitation. I asked the participants to share an artifact, project, or memento about their educational experiences in EA. Having a student explain their experiences and identity through something they created with the EA's assignments was a more humanizing and contextualizing way to help the students reflect tangibly on their experiences. It also flipped the researcher-subject power dynamic by empowering the subjects to actively present their educational experiences, transformations, knowledge generation, and story (Beer, 2013; dos Santos & Wagner, 2018; Hwang & Roth, n.d.; Levell, 2019; Roth, 2009; Rovetta Cortés, 2020).

I sought rich and detailed descriptions from the participants regarding their educational experience in EA and how their understanding of themselves, others, and the world was challenged, changed, or transformed. The interviews were recorded through Zoom and Rev; some were transcribed through Rev. I kept all the data on a secure program that records, stores, and transcribes audio content. After the primary interview, I briefly discussed the possible contexts and places to meet for our dialogue group. I asked them to reflect on their educational experiences and choose 1-3 songs representing their educational experiences and the EA. I then collected the songs the participants shared and put them into a playlist to be experienced and

shared in the dialogue group (to view the playlist, see Appendix A). I had the opportunity to interview six students and scheduled five for the dialogue group; however, two students pulled out on the day of the event due to a recent health issue. Six students were interviewed, and three participated in the car karaoke dialogue session.

Through collective brainstorming, the dialogue group became a car karaoke session. The participants and I wanted to go somewhere outside (experiential and embodied) to share our songs rather than in a sanitized, cold classroom. Most of the participants live near the school, so to make getting to the event more accessible, I shuttled and picked everyone up, and took them to a park for our dialogue group. Once everyone was on board to be picked up for a second session, I thought I would take them to a 4x4 beach, grab some milkshakes and fries along the way, play our songs in the car, and share some dialogue in the vehicle. I inquired if this was an acceptable context/ experience for our follow-up session; everyone was excited and looking forward to the event. After completing the event, I asked the group what they thought of our car karaoke/ research study group session, and everyone smiled and exclaimed that they had fun.

During the car karaoke session, we discussed common themes generated from the individual interview transcripts. The discussion probed personal and collective thoughts regarding the student's educational experiences and participation in EA that emerged in a shared, safe, and embodied space. We listened to and experienced the collective playlist; we utilized an activity to promote an embodied approach. We collectively experienced, recollected, and reflected, eliciting a deep collective contextual authentic response. The students were comfortable with each other and me and unafraid to share their thoughts and feelings. As Briar would say, we were all vibing as we drove and listened to music. Music can tap into embodied knowledge and help express feelings and experiences in a profound contextual way (Beer, 2013;

dos Santos & Wagner, 2018; Levell, 2019; Rovetta Cortés, 2020). The car karaoke session was recorded on a GoPro and stored in a secure file.

### **Data Analysis**

I created multiple data streams utilizing individual interviews, artifact sharing, music sharing, an embodied car karaoke session, and a researcher's journal. The data layering is intentional in a Postformal paradigm to attempt to capture the interwoven nature and complex web of embodied human experience, reflection, reaction, action, and meaning-making. All interviews and transcripts were recorded, transcribed, and secured using REV. Each participant's data and analysis were stored in a secure password-protected folder.

The postformal data analysis consisted of a layered approach. First, the data from the interviews, artifacts, dialogue group, and songs were analyzed thematically and codified. Then, I examined and analyzed the data according to the four post-modern tenets of etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization:

1. I thematically analyzed the individual interviews and artifacts, examining the discourse and paying attention to patterns of embodiment elicited by the artifact presentation.
2. I thematically analyzed the dialogue group and songs, again examining narrative themes, song themes, and their embodied responses elicited from the shared musical experience.
3. All data were analyzed using Kress and Lake's four-fold Postformal categorical framework (2021). Utilizing the scaffolding of etymology, patterns, process, contextualization, and researcher humility, interviews and artifacts, dialogue groups and songs artifacts, playlists, and research journals were studied, analyzed, and codified into a coherent autoethnographic collage (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993; Kress & Lake, 2021).

The flexibility of postformal research allowed me to be immersed within a lens and method that utilized etymology, pattern, process, and context to reveal the process of human knowing and meaning-making.

In the next stage of the analysis, I created a tactile artifact of the data for me to not only reflect on but also to touch and see the various participants, experiences, themes, and categories and examine how they are connected, interconnected, parallel, and/or intersecting through Postformal wayfinding. It was essential to create a tangible artifact to assist me in the coding process as a way to imagine more contextual and creative ways to do analysis and coding. I took a blank blue canvas and represented each participant and myself as islands within a great blue ocean. I began connecting the islands with “trade routes” that represented the emerging themes. See image 2. I was inspired by stick charts, an indigenous wayfinding tool for the Micronesian people who used such techniques to sail to and inhabit the Marshal Islands as early as 2000 B.C.E. (Aveni, 2006; Gartner, 2008). The Meto navigational chart showed Micronesian wayfinders how several individual islands were connected and the dominant water currents around each island, granting them a navigational picture that shaped their culture and world (Aveni, 2006). This Postformal analysis method was inspired by the ancient wayfinding chart technique to give the analysis its own space and dimension. Postformalism as a method recognizes that there is no form without matter, nor ideas without the world, so through the final four-tenet analysis of etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization, I intentionally utilized a reflective space-time and created a tactile incarnation of the emerging themes. See the image below.

I will take a moment to briefly explain how I approached the tactile coding artifact in the image below. The seven small islands represent six students I interviewed and one I had

interviewed in my cursory research (Leo) who was not in this postformal study. Because Leo surfaced in all of the participant's narratives, I felt inclined to include him as an island. The Islands are Jeb, Briar, Abby, Luna, Frank, JoAnn, and Leo. The center island represents the Experiential Academy as well as myself. The different colors and dotted lines represent different connections and connecting themes of the participants. The white line represents how often I connected with these students. As you can see, I only met Leo once. I connected with him in a quick interview during my cursory research into experiential academy while taking a research internship class (so one dotted line). Briar and I connected three times: one line represents me knowing her in high school, one represents our interview, and the other represents when we met for the car karaoke session. The following color line in the key was labeled for professors because all of the students of the EA accredited much of their positive experience and transformation to the loving and supportive professors. Leo, Luna, Briar, Frank, JoAnn, and all agree that the Experiential Academy was amazingly loving and supportive professors who made everyone feel welcome and inspired them to 'show up' and 'grow up.' The themes shared by all of the participants and my own transformative educational experiences are loving professors, getting beyond a binary way of thinking, being more open, being able to dialogue, experiencing personal growth, and a feeling of more hopefulness. Upon a deeper analysis, humanizing, wholeness, dialogue, and openness emerged as the all-encompassing categories of the student's themes.

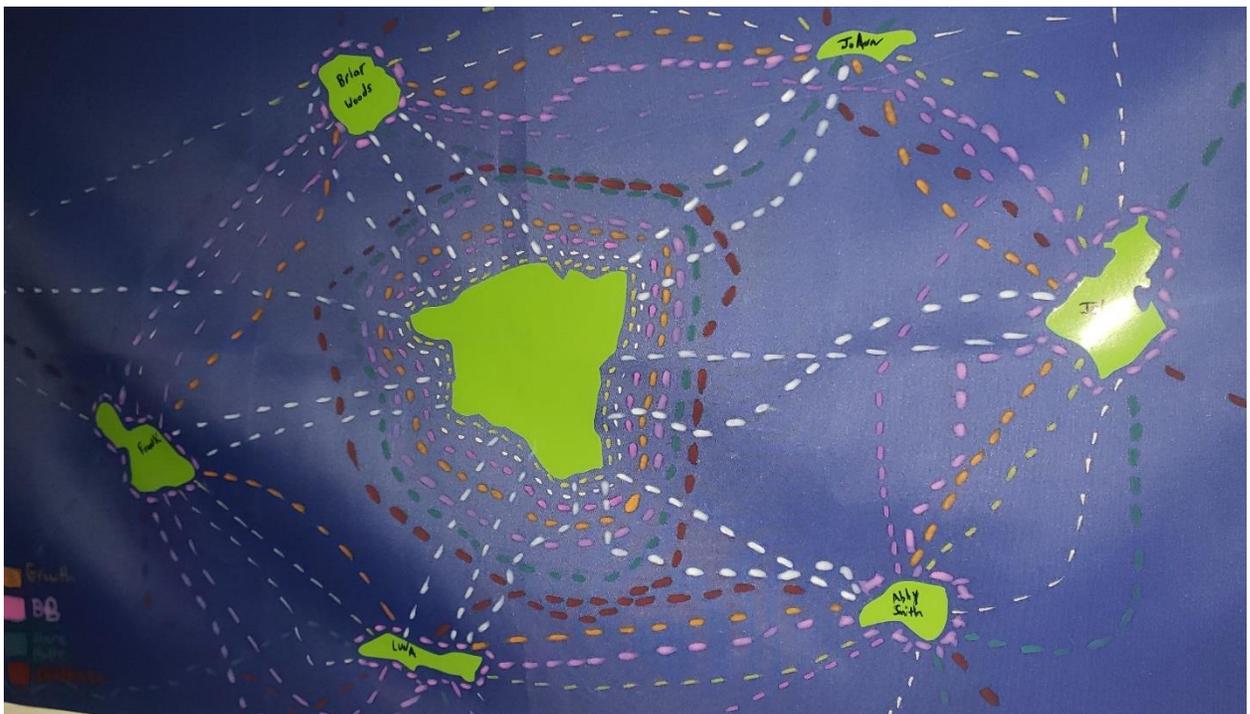
Image 2: "Trade Routes" Representing the Emergent Themes



Image 3: "Trade Routes" Representing the Emergent Themes Key



Image 4: Additional Perspectives of “Trade Routes” Representing the Emergent Themes



The analysis was written as an autoethnographic narrative of all the participants, including myself, within the context of experiential education. The findings were woven through the narratives of various participants of the Experimental Academy. All of the participants' narratives (and mine) bear testimony to experiential learning as a humanizing context that fosters transformative learning and a deepening understanding of self and others in the U.S. educational ecosystem.

### **Research Quality**

Layered data streams (triangulation) and layered member checking were employed to ensure the quality of this Postformal research study. The layered, multi-streamed data sources of individual interviews, artifacts, dialogue groups (car karaoke), songs, and research journals ensured a comprehensive picture of the student's educational experiences. I explored the thoughts and personal transformations of the students who participated in the EA (Patton, 1990). Member checking was integral to data collection to safeguard against researcher bias, miscategorization, or misunderstanding. Interview analysis and themes, dialogue group analyses and themes, and the four-category Postformal analysis narratives were member-checked before progressing to the study's next step.

Recognizing that a Postformal autoethnography presumes that no research can ever be free of researcher interest and bias is essential. Researchers must include their experiences, reflections, and worldviews, be forthright and transparent about their histories, contexts, thought processes, and patterns, and establish integrity through the transparent process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Chang (2008) highlights that just because autoethnographies focus on the self, there is still a need to approach all human subjects with complete ethical considerations, as in any social scientific study. With this in mind, this Postformal study operates within the framework of

constructivist research or "fourth-generation evaluation," as presented by Guba and Lincoln (1989). Considering this study is rooted in a Postformal lens and methodology, it utilized Lincoln and Guba's (1989) Authenticity Criteria and aimed at achieving fairness.

Fairness is accomplished by striving for ontological, educative, catalytic, and tactical authenticity. I created an audit trail to document stakeholders' positions, constructions, and viewpoints throughout the process. This audit trail is a secondary reference for evaluating ontological and educative authenticity. First and foremost, the stakeholders' investment is essential. From verifying personal constructions to negotiating over what was revealed and learned, I strove to create an equal position of power between all stakeholders and the researcher when negotiating recommendations of misconceptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Ontological authenticity seeks to gauge if there was an individual or group expansion of conscious awareness of themselves in the world. Individual or group consciousness expansion can be gauged through testimony and seeking a progressive, more physical, and conscious subjectivity. Educative authenticity ensures that stakeholders have the opportunity to be exposed to the subjective constructions of others. We grow as humans through the exchange of various worldviews and constructions. Catalytic authenticity seeks to see what actions are stimulated and encouraged through the evaluation process. Finally, tactical authenticity moves beyond the responsive actions surrounding the study but seeks to understand to what degree stakeholders are empowered to act (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This study increased fairness and authenticity when it preserved the autonomy and input of all stakeholders, seeking constant consent throughout the process and layered member checking for the accuracy of transcripts and themes.

## **Limitations**

No research study is perfect nor all-encompassing; it is essential to openly discuss the limitations of this study (Marshall et al., 2021). Because this study focused on the subjective experiences of the students in EA and my educational experiences (both as a teacher and a student), there is little to no outside lens. This study does not include the voices of the professors of the EA or the parents of the program's students. The only teacher lens included was my thoughts, recollections, and experiences from 20 years of experience as a high school teacher and a college professor. However, it is essential to note that my teacher's lens is not an actual 'outside' lens.

This study is difficult to replicate because of the specific context-based nature of the EA, students, and the surrounding community. Due to time, resources, and coordination, the time spent individually and collectively with the participants of the EA program interviewing students was limited, which could diminish the breadth and depth of the study's conclusions. Regarding generalizability, this qualitative autoethnography is limited to offering environmental conditions necessary to foster transformative humanizing learning. Therefore, this study does not accommodate generalizable conclusions; however, transferability is possible (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The study's structure, methodology, design, and inquiry are replicable and could be transferable to other times, places, spaces, and studies.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored how experiential learning, according to EA students, can repair the divide between theoretical and applied knowledge, the academy and the world, and the body and the mind. There is a disconnect between what is taught in a classroom and what is remembered or relevant to students' lives. Much of what is done in classrooms today is mindless

memorization, dehumanizing tests and standardized tests, much busy work, and transactional banking education. Students have been crying for decades, "Why do we need to know this? What is the purpose of all this detached, busy work?" In my experience, Advanced Placement students are typically the first to call out all of the disconnected, un-contextual busy work they experience. What is the point of all of this useless information? Why are we filling and drilling minds with little concern about the real world, transformative, and deep learning?

We need to make education relevant, transformative, and liberating. Education and learning must be immersed in and reflect its ontological roots, namely, experience and the body. This study was unique in that the overwhelming concern was bridging the gap between theoretical categorical knowledge and the world of applied knowledge and experience. Humans, in all of their complexity, are physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual beings immersed in a web of cultural context. To approach education and to learn from only one intellectual channel is an unjust and dehumanizing epistemological bias. The educational system mired in a Cartesian dualistic intellectualism in practice is elitist, reductive, hierarchical, discouraging, and dehumanizing. Experiential learning, in contrast, is situated, context-based, natural, organic, empowering, and humanizing. In the next chapter, my participant's stories assist me in returning learning to its organic natural roots by illustrating what it means to be an experiencing body in the world, reflecting in community in open dialogue.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS

This postformal autoethnographic study has been an incredibly humanizing process and an exercise in openness and dialogue, from forming my dissertation topic to discovering the theory and method. My thoughts and ideas have changed over time through educational opportunities and the opportunities this study has created. I have enjoyed profound learning experiences that have fostered openness through physical exchange, dialogue, and interaction. This study sought to explore experiential learning's context and humanizing potential to help bridge the mind/ body divide prevalent in education. I wondered if experiential learning could repair the Cartesian mind/body divide when I started this research study. This chapter begins with a narrative of my personal wholeness achieved through educational experiences in openness and dialogue. To be a human being is a complexity, an irreducible agape, a wonderful whole that envelops the classical Western dichotomy of body and soul, and so much more.

My educational experience has been an arduous journey, inextricably tied not only to my intellect/ mind but to my totality, my being, all of me as a thinking, feeling, imagining, mind, and body. For example, I have spent countless hours sitting in front of a computer reading, typing, and editing the six chapters of this dissertation. Prior to and during this journey, I had two emergency back surgeries on my lumbar spine, one in 2007 and the other in 2019. When I sit for long periods of time and neglect my core workouts, my body endures more physical pain. The sad reality is that throughout my academic pursuit, I have inadvertently neglected my physical being to pursue a more humanized experiential research study and become a Doctor of Education. While experiencing back pain, I was in dialogue with my own body, and it was saying I needed to stretch, exercise, and loosen up a bit. Unfortunately, my response was to

ignore my body's request and tell it to be quiet, sit down, and write, and then my body had more to say.

Two days before this study's car karaoke study session was scheduled, my back 'went out on me.' My lower back went into muscular spasm, and I could not stand up straight or move without experiencing debilitating pain. I could not go to work as a teacher because I was in constant pain. Nevertheless, I was entertaining doing the second half of my data collection because I needed to finish my research. Perhaps I should have tried rescheduling our second session until I was better. However, five of my six participants were scheduled to participate in our car karaoke session in two days. Nothing, not even my physical pain and immobility, would stand in the way of me hosting and completing our car karaoke session. How ironic it was that while I was immersed in an educational experiential research study whose method was designed to repair the synthetic divide between body and mind, I was ignoring my own body for academic pursuits of the mind. Perhaps this is because my doctoral degree is associated with academia and was established by Plato to cultivate the mind in superiority to the body.

As a result of my physical pain on the day of the car karaoke session, my ability to be my usual high-energy self was slightly diminished at first. I was noticeably stiff and uncomfortable. Still, I took the participants to Cedar Beach 4x4 access road, one of the bumpiest roads I know. Driving offroad is undoubtedly not suitable for someone suffering from painful muscular spasms. Still, from the start of our session until I dropped off Briar at the end, I did not feel any significant discomfort or pain during the two-and-a-half-hour adventure. I had even stopped and grabbed milkshakes and French fries for the group, and I was relatively more mobile than I had been earlier in the day. Perhaps this was because of my physical and mental immersion in the moment. I was enjoying my time with Briar, Frank, and Luna, and I could focus on my totality

rather than a mere part of me that was experiencing pain. Of course, the pain relief afforded by the positive energy of the group was only temporary, and as soon as I was on my own again, my inflamed back (just a part of my whole) occupied my mind on the way home. This story reminds me that people are bodies/minds, inseparable from our experiences. Where we are, who we are with, and what we are doing significantly affect how we feel and our openness to learning and growing. Overcoming my pain for that small stretch of time is an example of my body/mind repairing to wholeness, which I hoped to discover at work in the students' experiences in the Experiential Academy. When people are immersed in humanizing learning experiences that are safe, dynamic, open and accepting, exciting and enjoyable activities, they find themselves made whole, a totality, and are organically engaging in dialogue and openness with others and the world.

In this chapter, I turn my attention to what the findings of this study show about the students' transformative experiences and the merits of experiential learning for repairing the dichotomous divide of classical education. First, through student testimonies, I explore what a pedagogy of wholeness and humanization looks like and how the Experiential Academy creates such an environment for the students. Then, I will describe my theoretical understanding of openness and dialogue and the relationship between these concepts. Next, I explore through the students' experiences how openness is cultivated through dialogue as well as the converse, dialogue fostering openness. I demonstrate how a whole-person approach to learning through dialogue and openness can help foster a greater sense of wholeness, bridging the synthetic divide between mind and body. Lastly, I conclude with a brief criticism of the limits of language regarding wholeness and the necessity for embodiment.

## **Experiential Learning for Humanization and Wholeness**

The importance of humanizing education can be traced back to Paulo Freire and his insistence that banking education, a traditional education that forces students to memorize and recite, is inherently oppressive and dehumanizing. As I described in Chapter 3, banking education is an extension of the allegory of Plato's cave, where social reproduction and coercion are actualized when people passively sit and absorb reality from the expert in the room. When people act as if humans are primarily intellects, minds that learn sitting at a desk, and that people all learn the same way they focus on only one part (the brain) and only one method, which is dehumanizing. In contrast, humanizing pedagogies teach the whole person, mind, body, soul, spirit, and emotional wellspring and recognize that humans are individual, social-historical complexities that are constantly becoming (Salazar, 2013). Humanizing pedagogies are liberatory and empowering, as they focus learning on the student's own social-historical contexts, experiences, and abilities to engage, synthesize, and generate their own meaning and knowledge (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Humanizing classrooms approach students as "subjects who actively make meaning of their own lives and the world around them, rather than objects who passively receive content knowledge from teachers" (Jennings & De Matta, 2009, p. 217).

Much of people's environments determine what they are exposed to, what they are surrounded by, and what they often become through example. If people live in a dichotomous world that compartmentalizes existence and speaks of and imagines humanity as a body separate from the mind, then people will reproduce the same kinds of dichotomies. Considering the whole of people's humanity requires recognizing people's symbiotic relationship with the environment and natural world (Kress & Lake, 2021). Paulo Freire's understanding of power and oppression was codified in his first-hand experiences living in poverty in Jabotão and watching the

deterioration of the river due to upriver industry. He witnessed how the wealthy and powerful left ruined landscapes for the poor who lived in and with deteriorated environmental and health conditions (Kress & Lake, 2021). Wholeness, as a goal for education, requires teaching and learning that recognizes people as immense complexities, physical, psychological, emotional, social-historical, terrestrial beings, who cannot be understood apart from context.

An educational pedagogy of wholeness is humanizing. It does not seek to reduce, dominate, or classify students in any way. Instead, a pedagogy of wholeness focuses on a whole-person approach rooted in part in Freire's understanding that education is more than academic or technical training. Education involves fully developing a person's social, emotional, political, spiritual, physical, and intellectual well-being (Salazar, 2013). When educators create humanized classrooms that approach the whole person, wholeness can be achieved. Wholeness is understood on a personal level when the totality of the person is being immersed and engaged in the present moment, and no one part of the whole is allowed to take control of the moment or conversation. As an example, this experiential research study allowed me to enter into learning in a more whole and complete way. The part of myself that was in pain did not dominate the conversation while I was hosting and participating in our car karaoke adventure.

Wholeness can be understood as a way of healing a divided self that has been dehumanized through word and world, through classrooms, movies, magazines, and social structures. The divided self only views itself as a part or in part. The phrases, I am what I think I am, I am what you say I am, and I am what I feel I am, are examples of a partial sense or divided sense of self. When my eleven-year-old daughter calls herself stupid because she struggles with her math work and tests, she experiences a dichotomous understanding of herself, which echoes the educational word and world's description of a student. You are either smart or stupid or a

good or bad student. The Experiential Academy created a humanized environment that fostered a sense of wholeness for the students in the program. All the students I interviewed had a transformative healing experience. Often, the student's language was not explicitly about healing; however, it was apparent that a divided/ partial sense of self was made whole and more complete due to their experiences in the EA. As discussed in Chapter 4, in this study, I asked the students to tell the story of their transformation or something they learned during their time participating in the EA by sharing with me an artifact or memento that held meaning for them. I specifically asked them to use an artifact to help elicit their stories and contextualize, situate, and embody their response to my questions. I found that the artifact elicitation portion of the interview coincided with their stories of personal growth and wholeness. In the following analysis, I will demonstrate students' experiences of wholeness as they were represented through their artifacts, illuminating their stories of transformation and healing.

When Frank shared his Experiential Academy artifact with me, he held up a set of mala beads, also known as meditation beads. A mala is a beaded circle traditionally composed of 108 beads. It is used in mediation and mindfulness practices to help the person focus on the relationship between the inner and outer environment. Frank spoke about having made the mala in class as part of a tactical, creative art project that was an extension of the lessons on meditation and mindfulness practices taught at the beginning of the experiential classes. He went on to say that he chose the mala beads as his memento because it was through mindfulness and meditation that he could find a way to shut down his nervousness and anxiousness and quiet surrounding noise to center himself in the moment.

Frank showed me a traditional one-hundred-and-eight-bead mala and a much smaller twenty-bead mala bracelet he always wears. Frank stated, "I didn't think I would take to this so

hard, but the mala beads and a mantra really, really help me center myself when I want to focus. When I hold the beads, I think of all I have learned, all the experiences, the people, how far mala beads have taken me.” Frank’s story of the mala beads is an example of wholeness cultivated and achieved through a humanizing and holistic learning environment. Using meditation and mindfulness to cultivate a whole-person approach to learning fostered a deep sense of personal wholeness for Frank. He made the mala beads to connect the often dichotomized interior and exterior, in this case, his internal anxiety and physical place, his body and mind. When I asked Frank to summarize his transformative experience, he explained that after his time in the EA, he had learned to take control over his mind and himself by grounding the moment as a physical whole utilizing mediation.

Luna’s memento elicited an experience of wholeness similar to Frank’s. As stated in Chapter 2, Luna struggled with severe social anxiety, which often manifested in her feeling physical symptoms that would prevent her from seeing friends and attending class. She explained that if she felt physically unwell in the morning, she would pull out her oximeter and typically find several reasons why attending class was an impossibility. An oximeter is a medical device placed on the tip of a person’s finger to read their pulse, oxygen levels, and blood pressure. Luna recounted,

I kept this in my bag with me everywhere I went [gesturing to the oximeter she was holding] because I was convinced that at any moment, I was going to have a heart attack or my lung was going to collapse, like every day was something that I was worried about. In freshman year, I was a slave to this thing [gesturing to the oximeter]; it sucked so bad because I really wanted to be there [referring to being in class with her cohort].

This quote highlights Luna's divided self: part of her wanted to be in class with her peers and professors, but part of her thought she was not physically well enough to participate. Clearly, she did not feel like a unified whole. Luna mentioned her supportive and caring professors, whom she felt she was letting down when missing class; she spoke of her classmates encouraging her to attend class/ events and participate, even when she was not feeling up to it. Luna credited Frank for helping her relax, breathe, meditate, and center herself. When she felt herself fixating on arm pain, an elevated heart rate, or what she now understands as general anxiety, she would breathe and center herself.

Luna mentioned that the classes were so fun and interactive that she did not want to miss out. Everyone in the study spoke of how much they looked forward to class and truly enjoyed being with their peers and professors. Through her physical relationship with her cohort, Luna experienced various humanizing factors that supported, encouraged, and helped her to grow personally. Luna was driven through a humanizing community and a whole-person approach that helped foster a greater sense of personal wholeness. Luna has been liberated from her oximeter; she has been made whole, allowing herself to enter the present moment and cultivate a broader sense of self.

The memento elicitation was a successful tool for helping the students summarize their learning experiences, growth, and transformation in a tangible way. There was a direct relation between their detailed interviews and how the students summarized their experience through a personal artifact. It was an immersive experience for me as well to see the body language of the students as they shared their mementos. I felt privileged to see their tactile, personal artifacts. The other three participants shared as their mementos the personal book that was a major project in their first year at the Academy. As explained in Chapter 2, the first year of the EA focuses on

personal creativity and reflection, culminating in a book project that serves as a personal creative, reflective manifesto. The students created a hardbound fifty to one-hundred-page book comprising their personal creative reflections, poems, philosophies, art, and photography. Their books were tangible, textured, and complex reflective views of themselves.

Abby, Jeb, JoAnn, and Briar were incredibly proud of their books. They saw the program, their experiences, and the creative process as insightful and transformative. Jeb carries an electronic copy of his book to check in and see his “real-time novel.” Jeb said,

This is something that I never thought I would ever make, and I am glad that I did; the writing came from the journals we were doing every week. I could have written anything in here, and pretty much I went with what was on my mind, hence the title “Real Time Novel.”

He spoke about how he fell in love with animation and shared some of his early comics, art, and even stories of personal pain. As I described in Chapter 2, Jeb struggled with social connection and social anxiety, which manifested in an inability to communicate what was on his mind, which would cause further isolation. Through the EA, he spent a year in an encouraging, welcoming community while cultivating his ability to be comfortable in the room with himself and others. He also cultivated mindfulness and meditation. Fostering weekly personal reflection through art and creative writing helped Jeb communicate what was on his mind more easily. The process of creatively putting his thoughts on the page in words or art was an activity of wholeness, a way of being in the moment for Jeb and expressing his human complexity.

JoAnn shared her personal book and explained that it was a wonderful exploratory project that helped foster a more whole reflective look at the self. She explained,

I like to look back at it, even though I wrote this a year ago. I am such a different person now...I can look back today and say I might not think like this anymore, but this is a perfect representation of who I was at that time. I think that that is crucial and has a lot of self-reflection that goes along with it.

JoAnn has gained an understanding of her “self” as in process or becoming, that her “self” is not fixed but changes through time, experience, reflection, and context. This coincides with a more whole humanized understanding of the self that is broadened and expanded through a critical looking back.

Briar agreed that the book project was a creative and impactful way to foster personal reflection through collecting, rereading, and anthologizing one’s personal and creative productions from the EA. Briar stated,

You are putting yourself out there, you are reading it back to yourself and say, “Oh wow, I felt that way in my life at that point,” a reflection of who you are or who you were if you are different now. It was fun to explore what you like, want, and express yourself in different ways, using art, words, photography, or to write about yourself in new and different ways.

Briar emphasized that in ‘reading it back,’ re-reading her initial creative reflections, she gained a deeper, more whole view of herself. Briar spoke of being surprised by how dark some of her reflections were, as well as coming to grapple with her bisexuality, OCD, and general anxiety. Briar titled her book project “My Aesthetics.” Appropriately, it examined the beauty in all its forms that help constitute and surround Briar. Briar’s experience of wholeness reminds me of Freire’s critical consciousness growing through a critical reading of the self and world in a

mutual transformation, coming to a more whole and human understanding of the self as a historical being in context and process (Freire).

Creating a more whole and humanizing classroom environment, such as the ones the students from the EA experienced, cultivates a broader sense of self, humanity, and wholeness. The students were approached as the complex social, historical, physical, and emotional beings they are. Their professor incorporated mindfulness, meditation, creative writing, art, and music-based projects into their courses. These activities allowed the students to feel more human and whole while flourishing. An environment of wholeness and humanization is the backdrop of liberatory education. In the next section, I will describe the EA's pedagogy or process of liberation. The students experienced wholeness and transformation through openness and dialogue.

### **Openness and Dialogue**

The etymology of open means “allowing passage,” “view through,” “exposed,” and “without restriction.” Dialogue comes from *Dia*, meaning “through,” “across,” and “point to.” Drawing from its root meanings, an open dialogue can be understood as allowing passage and looking through, crossing over (through across), with words, reason, and pattern. Open dialogue involves a physical presence with others, allowing passageway through and across, exposing one's reasoned patterns and words. One can be open to oneself, others, and the world, as well as in dialogue with oneself, others, and the world. Paulo Freire understood words as situated in both action and reflection. A word that is not situated, not engaged in the world, is detached, an empty verbalism, and an alienation (Freire, 2018). Dialogue is a dynamic interaction between the word and the world. Dialogue cannot happen apart from the world, just as words that are not rooted in action and reflection of the world are empty abstractions. Dewey also understood dialogue as

two-fold, involving speaking and active listening. For Dewey, dialogue is necessary for learning and is the foundation of democratic, pluralistic societies. As stated earlier, cultivating genuine dialogue in today's social-political climate is essential to continue the success and progress of a democratic society. Dewey was an American pragmatist, which means he assumed a philosophical position that argued polarized and dichotomous ways of thinking and being are not helpful for human progress and flourishing. The ability to compromise, find consensus, dialogue, and listen is foundational for democratic societies (Heilbronn et al., 2018).

Freire (2018) further distinguished that dialogue, an essential reading of the word and world that is deeply rooted in experience and context, cannot be genuinely achieved without faith, hope, love, humility, and critical thinking. Freire understood that "genuine dialogue" cannot be achieved unless the corresponding physical, mental, and emotional human preconditions are cultivated and present. Freire's five-fold scaffolding of dialogue translates into what I have classified as openness in this study. Freire (2018) believed that love is the foundation of genuine dialogue. He explained, "love is an act of courage, love is commitment to others" (p. 89). Love is an openness to the human family and a commitment to loving others as ourselves. Humility is essential for dialogue because one cannot truly listen if one is arrogant. For Freire (2018), arrogance is a closed stance that does not allow free passage. Conversely, humility is a position of openness to learning and listening to the world and others. The humble person recognizes their incompleteness. As Freire (2018) further explains, "Faith in people is a prior requirement for dialogue; the 'dialogical man' believes in others even before he meets them face to face" (p. 91). Faith is an openness to the inherent goodness of our human family. Lastly, dialogue requires hope, which is rooted in the incompleteness of our becoming. When people are hopeful and accepting of their incompleteness, they are open to the possibility of growing,

learning, and becoming more whole and human. Dialogue, for Freire (2018), requires critical thinking that.

Discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits no dichotomy between them- thinking which perceives reality as a process, as transformation... not separate from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. (p. 92)

Critical thinking is an openness to the recognition that reality is itself a transformative process of humans experiencing and making meaning in and through the world. Freire saw the necessary conditions, orientations, and attitudes of love, hope, faith, humility, critical thinking, and regard for self, others, and the world for genuine dialogue. I simplify all of these conditions by using the term “openness.”

Dialogue and openness are in a constant recursive relationship; they are in an inextricable dance with one another, as humans are in an inextricable dialogue and dance with the self, others, words, and world. For the purpose of this analysis, the two concepts can be theoretically separated; however, one does not exist without the other in the same way that there is no pure abstract objective reality apart from the grounded reality of people’s shared lived experiences. For the purpose of this study, I will describe through the students’ stories how the Experiential Academy fostered openness and dialogue and, in doing so, reinforced wholeness and humanization.

### **Openness through Dialogue**

Throughout the data, the participants of this study described experiences of openness, which can be understood as taking four general forms: openness to others, openness to themselves, openness to opportunities, and openness to adults. The participants describe

openness through actions such as growing less judgmental, seeing beyond simple binaries, and discovering nuance. Through their acts of openness, they also demonstrated what Freire (2018) described as love, faith, hope, humility, and critical thinking in action. Dialogue was manifested through stories of personal growth, relationships with fellow students, relationships with teachers, and how the participants transformed their relationship with the world through experience. In the following sections, I describe the transformative openness that emerged for the students of this study.

I asked Jeb what he thought was the winning formula that made the Experiential Academy successful. In response, he referred to the learning process in the EA as simply getting various individuals together and just chatting. JoAnn agreed that having difficult discussions and open conversations were lessons learned through the EA. She stated,

I realize that there is a point to having a discussion, and there is a way to have a civil discussion with people, and there are ways to change your mind about things. I have learned to have discussions with people that, even if I don't agree with, or even if someone just has a different point of view, I am able to actually reflect on that rather than shut down and stop listening. And I think it is an important life skill to be able to communicate with people even if they see things differently.

I inquired how the EA fostered an openness to others and other viewpoints. JoAnn responded that a trusting class community centered around talking cultivated openness to other viewpoints.

JoAnn explained that she is more open because of her time in the Experiential Academy, and when I asked how openness was taught and fostered in the program, she made the case that it was openness through dialogue. Openness was encouraged by allowing others to genuinely express their thoughts and feelings while listening and learning from each other's perspectives

and experiences. The students' descriptions illustrate how experiential learning fostered openness through dialogue, and dialogue can be generated through openness in a recursive relationship. Openness and dialogue are always contextual and situated; they are not necessarily states in themselves. One has 'an openness towards something' and is in dialogue with something. The students' testimonies revealed the relational dimensions of openness and dialogue.

Luna's story of transformation followed the pattern of openness through dialogue. As mentioned previously, Luna is a creative young woman who struggles with health-related anxiety that prevents her from attending class and being fully present. After her time in the Experiential Academy, she overcame her health-related anxieties, developed genuine tools for coping with internal stressors, made lifelong friendships, and was more open to others and the world. This backstory came to life when Luna explained her song choice for the car karaoke session. Luna was taking an experiential art class in which students had to complete an assignment by bringing to class a song they liked and wanted to share with their classmates. One student named Leo came in and shared the song "Passion Fruit" by Drake (2017). Luna recounted that when "Passion Fruit" was playing, the entire class got out of their seats and started dancing to the song. Luna remembered wanting to get up and join the dance. However, she prevented herself from participating, with thoughts and fears of self-doubt and anxiety. After class that day, Luna returned to her dorm room and played Drake's "Passion Fruit" on her speakers, and she started dancing to the song by herself. At that moment, Luna realized she would no longer let her self-doubt or anxiety prevent her from participating in something she wanted.

This story is an excellent example of growth through openness and dialogue with self, others, and the world; uniquely, this dialogue uses no words per se. Luna's story demonstrates that being in physical relation with her classmates, watching them dance and enjoy themselves, wanting to do that, and feeling held back by herself is a form of dialogue. Returning to her room and dancing to the song by herself affirmed the reality that she liked and wanted to dance to the song, adding to the dialogue. Deciding never to allow an opportunity like that to pass without participation constitutes critical thinking and hope as an open dialogue with herself. It appeared Luna recognized her own incompleteness and hoped to be made whole as she critically challenged her primary and dominant emotion, thought, or feeling. She learned this lesson from a classroom full of her peers and a Drake song by being open to dialogue with others, infused with faith, humility, and love. Luna was able to have faith in the goodness of her cohort. Both her professors and classmates exuded an attitude of humility, and a foundation of love was cultivated in their ability to be open with each other. Finally, when Luna decided she would be sure to be part of any future opportunity the world offers, she demonstrated her awareness of a greater wholeness through openness and dialogue with the world. Choosing "Passion Fruit" as her car karaoke song was her way of sharing her "let's all get up and dance" vibe.

Like Luna, Briar spoke about overcoming a great deal of her social anxiety, opening up, and not being afraid to speak in class. Briar talked about not being afraid to ask her professors clarifying questions. In her words, "It's college; nobody gives a damn if I have questions or not." Briar's declaration that 'nobody cares,' referring to her classmates' thoughts on her asking clarifying questions about assignments, demonstrates an openness to human incompleteness (i.e., hope) and an openness to the goodness of her classmates (i.e., faith). I interpreted her thinking as 'We all have questions, and no one is going to judge me poorly because I am curious in a more

detailed way about what the professor wants for this assignment.’ All participants demonstrated an openness and transformative growth achieved through dialogue and an openness through acts of love, hope, humility, faith, and critical thinking.

Jeb spoke about suffering terribly from social anxiety around people, especially around new people, “I used to be a nervous wreck around people, especially when meeting people for the first time, but then again, who isn’t.” Jeb learned to open up through dialogue with his classmates. Through shared experiences and dialogue with his peers, he realized he was not the only person who struggles with their nerves in social situations. As a direct result of participation in the program, he considered himself to have dramatically improved, although he humbly saw himself as a work in progress. JoAnn also spoke of struggling with anxiety and internal restlessness. She improved her control over her anxiety with mindfulness practices taught in the program. Abby is yet another participant who spoke of overcoming a great deal of social anxiety and thriving as a direct result of the supportive and caring professors in the program.

Participants’ openness increased through dialogue with themselves, their cohort, and the world. In this section, I examined how, according to the students’ stories, openness is cultivated through dialogue. What Freire described as the conditions of openness that support genuine dialogue—love, hope, faith, humility, and critical thinking—seem to naturally exist in the experiential learning modality because of its whole person, humanizing, situated, and dialogical structure. Freire viewed these various forms of openness as essential to genuine dialogue. The inextricable connection between dialogue and openness seems recursive in the students’ stories. Openness is not only cultivated through dialogue, but dialogue can foster openness. In the next section, I will provide examples of this recursive relationship that emerged in the participants’ descriptions of experiential learning.

## **Dialogue Fostering Openness**

Dewey speaks of continuity and interaction as essential parts of experiential learning that intersect and unite in a lifelong process (hooks, 1994) (Dewey, 1990). Interaction is rooted in the constant stream of new experiences, and continuity has to do with the cognitive ability to expand one's frame of reference and create new knowledge. Continuity involves one's ability to dialogue with one's prior knowledge base and the new information being received to find a new sense of continued connectedness. The notion of interaction can be related to one's openness to experience and the experiences of others. This lifelong process of interaction and continuity can be seen as theoretical grounding to the recursive nature of dialogue and openness. Freire (2018) also brings attention to the recursive nature of dialogue and openness in that he saw openness as an essential condition to dialogue. One cannot be open if one is not in dialogue with the self, others, and the world, and conversely, one cannot dialogue with self, others, and the world if one is not open (Freire, 2018)

Frank told a great story highlighting experiential education's dialogical complexity and richness. Once a week during their second year of the program, the students would go into New York City to explore different parts of the city's five boroughs. The students would learn about the culture, architecture, art, history, and socioeconomic reality through an immersive experience. On one of their first trips to Manhattan, Frank was late getting to the train, and one of the professors called him out for being late and inquired if everything was okay. Or, as Frank put it,

I was a couple minutes late for the train, and the professor was giving me shit about it. I was like, whatever, and throughout the day, there were a couple more instances where he was calling me out for not keeping up.

Frank was irritated by his professor's tone. Frank felt he was back in high school, being disrespected, unnecessarily reprimanded, and reminded of a traditional power dynamic. As the above quote mentioned, later in the day, the same professor called Frank out for not keeping up with the group when crossing the street. Frank was also irritated by this exchange, so some tension was in the air. Later in the day, when everyone was meeting up again after lunch and had some free time to walk alone, the professor who had called out Frank was late to the rendezvous. When the professor finally arrived, Frank called him out in the same way and tone as the professor had earlier in the morning. This created an emotional response from the professor, and the two had an unpleasant exchange.

Toward the end of the day, when sharing some time in circle-style discussions, the group talked about the unpleasant exchange they had witnessed between the professor and Frank. The professor in question shared with everyone his thought process and perspective. This was the first time the professor led a group of students into the city, and he was very nervous about losing people and keeping everyone safe. Frank said he felt he was being treated differently and did not appreciate the professor's tone. Frank and the professor came to a mutual understanding of thoughts, emotions, and actions, and they established an even better relationship post-exchange. Frank believed everyone in the cohort learned a valuable lesson about the nuances of understanding and interacting socially with adults. He recounted,

It definitely was an explosive moment, and I'm sure everyone in the class learned an important lesson or some nuances of interacting with adults. We cleared everything up, and prior to this experience, the professor and I didn't have the best relationship and often butted heads because I wasn't always doing the work or paying attention. However, since

the incident, we have had a better relationship, and whenever I see him, it's all handshakes.

One lesson Frank and his cohort learned was that adults are people like everyone else with complex thoughts and emotions, and they do not always respond in the most effective and unifying ways. Ultimately, the professor was worried and concerned about his students' safety throughout their city experience; however (as stated by Luna), he was not choosing the best way to handle the situation and communicate those concerns. A misunderstanding and an unpleasant dialogue and exchange led to greater openness, cohort cohesion, professor/ student relationships, and an unforgettable humanizing learning experience with social and emotional depth.

This exchange is reminiscent of Christopher Emdin's (2016) book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y'all Too*, where he speaks about teachers admonishing students for being late, ignoring their contexts, and dismissing their humanity. He also highlights how teachers often escalate issues that, if unaddressed, would not have caused a conflict, like "you are late!" Emdin (2016) establishes what he calls reality pedagogy, which is a humanizing modality. Emdin (2016) created circle-like student groups he called 'cogens' to foster greater class participation and to learn how to create a better classroom environment for his students. Initially, students mentioned his defensiveness and how this can be off-putting; he immediately reacted to the critical comments. However, working with his students in time, he learned from them and grew as a person and teacher (Emdin, 2016). The professor of the EA was committed to a whole-person humanizing approach and, through de-escalation and dialogue, could learn from the experience.

Frank and the professor were not particularly open to each other at the beginning of their trip. Despite Frank and the professor's failure to connect with each other, the fundamental

environment of the EA was open and humanizing, which allowed for open dialogue about the negative exchange. The dialogue with the cohort created space for each student to explain how they viewed the exchange. It also required the professor to be humble and consider everyone's position, which fostered collective hope, love, faith, humility, and critical thinking. The dialogue fostered openness, which fostered dialogue; hence, dialogue and openness are recursively connected. Luna echoed this sentiment when she talked about how the Experiential Academy has helped her to be less judgmental and get past black-and-white thinking (i.e., binary/ dichotomy – right/wrong way of thinking). Luna's view of others has transformed into a more nuanced perspective, which has evolved beyond the good/bad, black/white binaries. Luna stated,

I struggle with black-and-white thinking; I think somebody is bad, or somebody is good. But that program showed me that people can do bad things but still be good people. And people can do good things and be bad people.

Luna learned a profound nuance through the humanized open dialogue of EA that views humans essentially as complicated social-emotional beings doing their best to navigate the complexities of life. This view was partly informed by the dialogue and knowledge generated from Frank's exchange with the professor. Luna felt that she grew in her ability to be more open and in dialogue with others, both friends and adults, beyond the EA.

During her interview with me, Luna recounted a story about when she went out for a birthday drink with her sister. She struck up a conversation with an older woman (someone more her mother's age) and made a deep personal and professional connection. The woman then allowed Luna to interview her at a future date and write a story about her. This example illustrates Luna dialoguing and practicing openness with a stranger, demonstrating hope, faith, love, humility, and openness to the humanity of another. Luna argued that her openness towards

others, even those considered adults, and her ability to have open dialogue with strangers and find opportunities in daily interactions is part of her transformative growth in the Experiential Academy. Luna's dialogue with her cohort's experiences (the world) translates into an openness with herself and an openness towards others. Experiential Academy helped foster a more nuanced, humanizing outlook of self, others, and the world through the recursive relationship of dialogue and openness. The Experimental Academy's humanizing, open, and dialogic formula nourished a more nuanced lens for its students and promoted a sense of wholeness for Luna and her peers. The students developed a more nuanced, humanistic outlook on themselves, others, and the world, including individuals' social-historical, physical, and emotional complexity. In the next section, I will describe how the program helped bridge the mind/body false divide and promote wholeness through experiential learning.

### **Wholeness: Bridging the Mind and Body**

When exploring and analyzing the students' testimonies, it became clear that a great deal of healing and being made more whole was prevalent through their participation in the EA. As I established earlier, whole-person learning involves approaching students and teachers as complex social-historical, physical, psychological, and emotional beings. In creating an environment of wholeness, a process of mutual humanization occurs, and the organic conditions for openness flourish. An environment of mutual humanization fosters a whole-person approach and creates communities of openness and dialogue that promote further dialogue, openness, wholeness, and humanization. The educational community's educators create, whether humanizing or dehumanizing, directly affects what students know and how they approach themselves, others, and the world. This is the fundamental assertion that people are shaped and learn from the ideas and people they experience in life and school.

I am reminded of bell hooks's understanding of herself and her passion for liberatory education rooted in her experience as a rural, Southern Black woman taught by Black educators. hooks's teachers viewed education as a civic responsibility to teach critical thinking to cultivate a form of cultural resistance in their students. Here, I also think of Standing Bear's experience and the Christians at the Carlyle School who used Western education to tame the Native American savage and force a Christian worldview onto the Lakota youth. What teachers expose their students to or fail to expose their students directly relates to their understanding and openness. This is why many politicians and parents are concerned about what books and themes are acceptable in today's schools. Many people wish to control what ideas and realities students can discuss and understand, knowing that what students are exposed to directly impacts their understanding of themselves, others, and the world. No one is born racist and sexist; these isms are taught.

JoAnn demonstrated this nuance when discussing how she has transformed and grown through her participation in the EA. While summarizing her growth from one way of being to a new way of being, she stated,

I guess I was a little judgmental because I came from a school that was very judgmental... and in a way that made me judgmental of other people. Because it was like people treated me bad, so why should I expect other people to treat me good. But being here, going through this program, meeting everybody, forming friendships, seeing the world outside of the classroom, and seeing that there is more to life than just school, and your friends do not just have to come from school, and people are humans, and everybody has their own "shit." Everyone views the world differently. It was just a very

eye-opening experience, and I became way more open-minded about a lot of different things.

JoAnn made the case that education in a closed and judgmental space will foster quick judgments and closed-mindedness. Conversely, an open and humanizing environment, like the Experiential Academy, helped make JoAnn more open-minded. For her, the physical space and the social environment had much to do with cultivating wholeness, humanization, openness, and dialogue. She explained that “being here, meeting everybody, forming friends, seeing the world outside, making friends beyond the classroom, and recognizing that people are all human” contributed to her transformation. In the end, JoAnn identified mutual humanization when she said, “Everyone has their own shit and views the world differently”; in other words, everyone is an irreducible human complexity.

Wholeness and connection between mind and body were apparent when Jeb spoke about having difficulty communicating what was on his mind in words before his time in the EA program. After the program, he had a much easier time expressing what was on his mind with the people around him. Jeb acknowledged the Experiential Academy’s open, humanizing, accepting environment and dialogic structure, which fostered his ability to express his thoughts and ideas more easily with others. This is a repairing of the dualistic divide and wholeness. Jeb described a disconnect between his wonderfully creative and curious mind and his ability to express his thoughts to others. He had difficulty bridging theory and practice, his intellectual and experiential life. Nevertheless, Jeb had no problem confiding in me and telling me precisely what was on his mind. Jeb said that without the Experiential Academy, he would not have been able to be interviewed nor express what he learned, felt, and gained to me. As Jeb put it, “I wasn’t the

best at conversations. Hell, I wouldn't be able to do this interview, and then Experiential happened, I got more social, I learned to say what's on my mind easier, and here we are now."

As detailed earlier, Frank and Luna attributed much of their wholeness to the mindfulness and meditation practices taught in the EA classes. Frank spoke of coming to define and understand himself more fully through his work and experiences in the EA. For Frank, understanding himself meant knowing his life's passions and determining the right actions to allow him to pursue those passions. This is an example of repairing the dichotomy of body and mind by connecting thought to action. Luna overcame her internal and health-related anxieties by practicing mindfulness and meditation. Luna stated,

I thought I was a lot weaker than I am; I'd let my mind get to me; I had no idea that I could meditate and that it would let me center myself. I didn't know I had that much control to be able to experience it, and I underestimated myself.

Luna alluded to wholeness when sharing that she learned not to allow a part of her mind to get the better of her; she experienced greater agency and self-control through mindfulness and meditation. Briar and Abby referenced the creative reflective projects as playing a role in helping them foster a deeper awareness of themselves. They also indicated that the projects were a byproduct of them having more agency. Briar recounted that while putting together her book project for the EA, it was fun but also painful and powerful. She explained,

Oh, this is great! It was nice, and in some places, it was nice to read, but it was also kind of dark because I was speaking from certain experiences and such. You have stories of how I discovered my bisexuality or how I came to realize I struggle with anxiety and OCD.

Briar gained a great deal of self-awareness and insight despite feeling as if she was in a stuck circle.

Abby said flourishing with art-based, creative assignments made her more outspoken and confident. Without the program, Abby would never have been comfortable sitting with a stranger and sharing private details of her life. All the students spoke of becoming more social and putting themselves out there after participating in the Experiential Academy. Abby and Jeb used the metaphor of coming out of their shells when referring to this ability to be more social. I thought this was an interesting metaphor because its language implies a duality. If we are coming out of our shells or putting ourselves ‘out there,’ the default position is in our shells and ‘in-here.’ Being in one’s shell implied the internal inward life of the mind, and coming out implied getting into the physical, real world, experiencing and interacting as a whole. Cultivating conditions that enable students to come out of their shells and put themselves ‘out there’ reinforces the idea that experiential learning can repair the synthetic division of the mind and body and help people heal and feel whole.

### **The Importance of Physical Space, Place, and People**

In *Experiential Learning*, Kolb makes the case that learning is a transaction between persons and their environment (Kolb, 1984). Dewey’s fundamental argument about experiential learning is that learning must be grounded in the physical, empirical world of experience. Practical knowledge and the practicality of knowledge are cultivated best in practice. Theory without the world is detached, decontextualized, and lacking “ecological validity” (Kolb, 1984, p. 35). Freire agreed that genuine learning is deeply connected to being a human in the world, for our physical world, place, and space determine our limiting agents and become the backdrop of our transforming the world (Freire, 2018).

It was quite interesting how central the role of the physical world was for the students' knowing and being, and yet it was also like the 'elephant in the room.' We danced around it in discussions but never explicitly spoke of embodiment or physicality. Here, I raise a final point and a new problem. My literature review established an education and epistemological bias of mind over body. In this Platonic/ Cartesian dualism, people approach and speak about the mind and body as separate entities. This historical bias can be seen in language, for example, in speaking of ourselves in terms of minds and our bodies as if they are secondary extensions. This creates a decontextualized, detached, and dehumanized view of humanity and the world. If people talk of experiences and ignore the physical dimension of the world, if they do not have enough language or fail to refer to something often enough in words, the concept becomes invisible, silenced, and overlooked. It is hard to avoid a hidden linguistic bias towards dualistic thinking. There is very little language used in this study that explicitly spoke about being a whole. Erich Fromm presents a notion of wholeness or at-one-moment, a.k.a. atonement (Fromm, 1976).

It is difficult to dialogue about something without the language and words to do so. If our vocabulary lacks a conceptualization of mind/body wholeness as intellectual, physical, social, and historical complexities, then social conceptual understanding of wholeness and those complexities are overlooked and ignored. I needed to excavate wholeness from the words and actions of the participants of the Experiential Academy because their language, as did my own, implied a Cartesian duality. I would argue that we need more language of wholeness and totality because our default verbiage perpetuates dichotomous dualistic thinking. The language of the students when referring to their movement towards wholeness was recounted in words like, "I

needed to get out of my head,” “I had to get out of my own way,” “I needed to get out of my mind.”

The elements of this study that focused on embodiment, asking students to share an artifact, asking students to share a song that highlighted a learned lesson or reminded them of the EA, and taking the students for an interactive, experiential research study and drive to the beach fostered embodied wholeness and an at-one-ment (Fromm, 1976). I could also examine and reflect on the relationship between their words, body language, and actions, granting me a much deeper experience that cultivated a more humanized wholeness. Together, we created a humanized environment of wholeness. We fostered openness and dialogue through an embodied experience. This study was meaningful, fun, and cultivated wholeness. I learned a great deal about the students and the experiential academy. These outstanding individuals shared themselves with me, cultivated a humanizing environment, and enjoyed organic learning, all through openness and dialogue with self, others, and the world.

Openness requires contextually situated dialogue, and dialogue needs contrary positions, words, and worlds, as in the etymology of dialogue. Through discussion with the self, others, and the world, through openness in hope, faith, love, humility, and a critical analysis of the word and the world, one can transform and be transformed (Freire, 2018). By bringing different people with different viewpoints and backgrounds together and getting them to open up and talk, educators can cultivate humanization and wholeness through open dialogue with the students. Teachers can take students into the world to experience things together, reflect, and discuss with themselves, others, and the world. People may not always have the right words or find the right words to say, nor are words always adequate representations of the totality of things; however, dialogue becomes more difficult without words. In today’s social-political world, creating

classrooms and educational programs that can help cultivate a more whole and humanizing environmental landscape where people can genuinely engage in open dialogue is precisely the kind of education needed.

Not only can a humanizing and a whole-person approach to learning help openness and dialogue flourish through words and the world, but it can also help people humanize and approach difficult situations and cultural opposition. Realizing that words will often fail us or only serve to escalate tensions, creating a whole person and humanizing environments where people can come together and find non-verbal ways of communicating, opening up, and humanizing one another are essential. The Experiential Academy used stories, songs, art, meditation, and other non-verbal ways of cultivating dialogue and knowledge. This is another benefit of experiential learning. It is a whole-person and humanized approach that creates an environment where we are open and talking even when words are lacking.

This postformal study showed that the environment, the physical place, professors, classmates, and many other tangible specifics made the Experiential Academy successful at fostering students' transformation. During the interview process, when I inquired about the students' favorite spaces/ places they explored while in the EA, the role of place was made more explicit. Luna spoke of her original disappointment with some experiential trips to Manhattan because she is from the city and lives there full-time. Luna looked forward to learning about the city's history but was not interested in visiting the tourist spots. When Luna found out that the class was going to High Line Park, she had no desire to go. She had been there before with some high school friends who loved the park, but Luna was not impressed. The day the EA was going to the High Line, Luna was going to skip the excursion, but she was encouraged by a classmate

to attend. Luna showed up and had the best time with her classmates from the EA. This was the first time Luna started talking to her classmates. She recounted showing up at the park,

I was not feeling it. I was ready to go home early, and it was the first time I started to talk to the people in my class, and I met everybody; I went to these places I hated, but now I love it, and I want to go back. I don't know; I got to experience it with the right people.

The High Line has become Luna's favorite park and place she explored with her EA peers and professors. Luna stated that perhaps she needed to experience it with the right people to make it a more meaningful space for her, thus reminding us that it is not just a physical place but a more ecological view involving the right time, people, and place.

The students praised their professors, the places, and the people they shared learning experiences with and acknowledged that their experiences were tied to the time, place, and space of the Experiential Academy. However, the physical demission of the program and their progress through the body, place, and space was never made explicit in interviews nor our experiential session. The role of place, space, and body was always implicit, for instance, when referring to physical places and moments with people or by referencing getting out of one's head or shell and allowing oneself to enjoy or enter the moment.

Dewey believed that education through experience creates an organic backdrop for human curiosity to grow through experience. When people reflect on new experiences, new information is gained, and new knowledge is generated when that new information is synthesized with prior knowledge. The ceaseless cycle of genuine learning is realized when this new knowledge is applied. Dewey views liberatory education as natural, experience-based, and essential for the continuation and proper function of pluralistic democratic societies(Heilbronn et al., 2018). Freire believed in learning through the word and world, problematized education

rooted in experience, critical consciousness, and dialogue with others to become more fully human (Freire, 2018). Without humans empowered to dialogue with the word and world, transforming the world and being transformed by it in a mutual humanization, humans dehumanize, oppress, and silence, often through violence (2018).

### **The Musical Digression**

I want to briefly share the music chosen by the students for the car karaoke session and my additions, and then I want to offer up a song that I think can summarize the study's findings. Jeb did not make it to the car karaoke session; however, at the end of our interview, I informed him that he would need to choose a song for our next session, and he immediately picked "My Way" by Frank Sinatra. For Jeb, the experiential learning academy and personal growth process were done "his way." Dr. Who also had all members sing "My Way" at a karaoke adventure in the city on one of the experiential trips. We laughed at the irony of making everyone sing "My Way" and "Their Way." Luna chose the song "Passionfruit" by Drake, which we heard about earlier, as an essential moment in her personal growth and wholeness. Briar chose the song "Sunflower" by Post Malone and Swae Lee; she chose this song because, like the "Sunflowers" in the song, she does not want to be left in the dust or left alone.

Frank Chose the song "On My Way" by Coast Modern; he chose this song because he would play it whenever he was on his way to visit Luna. However, he also thought it remarkably represented where he is now after the EA: he is "On His Way." I ended the car karaoke session with my song choice, "My Way" by Sid Vicious. I chose this song because it is the most punk rock cover ever and carries my own wild and carefree spirit with it. It is how I would imagine myself singing "My Way" if tasked with the challenge from Dr. Who. I also chose a punk rock version of "My Way" because I believe this postformal autoethnographic study was done "my

way,” and postformal research’s desire to challenge the traditional educational paradigms practices of exclusion and oppression makes it punk rock.

This song is not punk rock; however, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young’s “Teach Your Children” is an excellent example of what humanized, whole, open, and dialogic education sounds like in the song. The song lyrics speak on multiple levels to our problem and solution; however, for the sake of simplicity, I will focus on two lines, “Teach your children well” and “Teach your parents well.” These two lines remind us of the need for dialogue and openness and highlight the recursive and reciprocal nature of dialogue and openness. The song communicates that until we are open and honest and recognize that we are all humans making our way in the world, we are trying to “figure things out” and grow through and from our mistakes and avoid repeating them.

### **Conclusion**

I started this chapter by categorizing this research study and dissertation as a great humanizing learning experience through openness and dialogue. Even this chapter was a humanizing whole-person exercise in dialogue and openness. The daily dialogue between my need to sit and write, grade, and research, speaking to my physical back pain, and my need to stand, walk, swim, and exercise to keep myself healthy cannot be ignored. Doing so would be a personal dehumanization and an example of living the dichotomy of mind/body. I have come to the realization, from the back spasms I suffered in the spring that lasted nearly three weeks, that I cannot ignore or silence a part of myself (my body) at the service of another part (my academic mind). Doing so negatively affects the whole and is a dehumanization. My physical back pain inhibited my ability to do basic activities like sitting, standing upright, and walking, affecting my ability to think and focus on my work. As a testimony of symbiosis and wholeness, my physical

pain affected my intellectual focus and stamina. As a result of my experience this past spring, ignoring my body's request for activity and pushing through the pain to sit and write, I have learned to listen to my body when it requests some physical rejuvenation.

In contrast to my divided nature this past spring, so far this fall, I have kept a regiment of daily walks and a mile swim every other day. As a result, my ability to sit and write has increased. When I addressed the whole of my well-being, my general pain diminished, and my flexibility and mobility increased. I have even found that my productivity increases when I increase my physical activity and foster well-being and wholeness. When I swim and walk, I reflect on my work and this study; just because I am not at my desk does not mean I am not working, reflecting, and generating new knowledge and practice. I am stimulating my heart rate and blood flow and offering myself different mediums to reflect naturally, generating new insights, ideas, and perspectives. Learning and writing do not have to involve only sitting at a desk, static and focused, but rather can involve a pool, a beach, or a boardwalk. As an example of physical wholeness and productivity, in the last three weeks, I have written four chapters (one chapter had to be rewritten entirely) and have spent countless hours polishing and editing this document, a physically and mentally challenging task. I do not think I could have achieved this without cultivating wholeness. It seems that my words and ideas are more active, flexible, and mobile as my physical body is more active, flexible, and mobile. I am a symbiotic whole immersed in the world, transforming and being transformed by it.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

I was discussing my dissertation topic with a close friend from back high school. I briefly explained the educational problem, the detached, boring, decontextualized dominant banking model, and how it makes learning difficult, oppressive, painful, and dehumanizing. I then explained how I have come to see experiential learning as a solution to this problem. I was amazed when he recounted a recent ironic realization while talking with his bicycle friends. My buddy Tom and I are avid bicyclers, Tom much more than myself. I ride a road and mountain bike and have an old one for show. My buddy Tom rides BMX Street, BMX Park, BMX dirt jumps, hardtail mountain bikes, downhill bikes, and a rare beach cruiser when he feels like rolling on pavement. He is not a professional rider. However, all his bicycle friends he rides with in San Diego are. Tom recounted how he and his friends, driven by their love of bikes, often spent countless hours researching the geometry of bicycles and how various shapes of frames and handlebars directly relate to ride angles, capability, and comfort. Tom informed me that all of his friends' marvel at the fact that they research geometry when they all share a great distaste for education, especially when remembering their high school experiences. Tom continued,

Imagine if our high school teachers tapped into our love of bicycles and taught geometry in relation to something we all used, saw, and experienced every day instead of boring us to death with detached equations and shapes. It is funny because I had no desire to learn about geometry in class or spend even fifteen minutes doing homework; meanwhile, I can spend countless hours researching and discussing the geometry of bikes with my friends.

I was so happy after speaking with my friend Tom, and I told him that he had just made it into my dissertation by communicating in a quick living example the problems with banking education and the benefits of experiential learning.

Banking education is detached and dull, making students feel dehumanized and stupid. Rooting learning in experience, grounded in the world, humanizes and creates a platform where openness and dialogue are transformative agents. Tom did not enjoy high school, and as soon as he was finished with his twelve-year stint in the educational correctional system, he vowed never to return to the halls of oppression. I am being intentionally dramatic here, pushing an image that education in the detached banking modality can be quite punitive and maybe two steps down from prison. Despite Tom's negative high school experiences, he continues to be a man of learning, reading, dialoguing, and researching the world of experience. Geometry is relevant to Tom now because it is rooted in his physical experience and personal passions. With the desire to solve a problem, "Which is the best geometry for a bicycle?" Tom engages in a reading of the word and world.

### **Reading the World**

Considering the current educational headlines about book bans, governors dictating curriculum in state colleges and universities based on personal group ideology, and ignoring the rainbow of human opinions, behaviors, and political learning, it seems democratic society is under attack. It appears that many Americans demonize and, in so doing, dehumanize their fellow Americans with opposing opinions and ideas. Many choose to listen and speak only with those who agree with their personal, social, and political views, reinforcing their biases and deepening their echo chamber. This fearful and protectionist reaction circles the wagons, so to speak, and refuses to look, listen, or visit anyone or place that may challenge their personal

opinions. This is antidemocratic and can have severe consequences for the continued success of a democratic and pluralistic society. For example, when student groups at a majority liberal institution fail to invite or listen to conservative speakers or contrary voices, it is equally anti-democratic. We have forgotten that in a democratic, pluralistic society, education must cultivate diverse and pluralistic ideologies. Allowing students to understand various positions and viewpoints helps them locate themselves on the spectrum of human thoughts and behaviors. The greater the diversity of ideas, cultures, people, pedagogies, practices, and political leanings, the greater the diversity of human ideas, acceptance, and possibilities. We grow best when we learn through organic diverse experiences and diverse discussions; if we are only shown one view, or worse, a dichotomous view of either/or, good/bad, wise/ignorant, we are being persuaded or coerced. As Dewey presented it in the 1920s, experiential learning fosters and assists democratic society by cultivating diverse learning experiences, dialogue, and reflection. Paulo Freire equally sees the heart of a democratic, liberated, and more humanized society, where students read the word and world, are transformed by it, and actively transform the world through action.

Through its humanizing, accepting, and open dialogic formula, experiential learning gives educators an open structure to create diverse, captivating, and unforgettable learning experiences. EL can foster personal wholeness and healing, social openness, and the ability to dialogue with differences. It also promotes a hopefulness towards others and the world. Experiential learning is a research-proven modality that can return education to context and meaningful experiences and rejuvenate the educational system with practicality and relevance that has been lost in much of the modern banking educational paradigm(Singh & V., 2021). With these social issues in mind, I focus on reviewing this study's exposition of the Experiential Academy from the lens of the students who completed the program.

## Summary of the Study

In this postformal autoethnographic study, I explored the lived experience of the students who participated in Experiential Learning Academy through the Postform framework of etymology, context, pattern, and humility. In exploring their educational experiences through narratives, I was reminded of and explored my past and present educational experiences and stories. I recruited six participants for this study and interviewed all six, ranging from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. I hosted a follow-up dialogue group that morphed into a co-creative experiential learning car karaoke session with half the participants. It was vital in a postformal study to explore ways to bridge the synthetic divide of mind and body and promote wholeness. An embodied wholeness was considered regarding the techniques employed; the avenue explored, and data collection and analysis. Every part of this study was designed with a tangible embodied element. Utilizing artifact elicitation, songs, and incorporating an experiential car karaoke session were all very intentional steps to attempt to pay attention to embodiment and wholeness.

In my analysis, I created an art canvas inspired by indigenous wayfinding techniques to assist me in tangibly visualizing the data and codes emerging from the students' narratives (see appendix B). The analysis of the student interviews and car karaoke sessions were revisited and revisited numerous times over four months. As part of a postformal study, I intentionally reviewed the interviews, car karaoke sessions, and journals to analyze from a different vantage point in different times, places, and spaces. I often took walks, listened to the interviews, or played them on the radio during long drives. This technique yielded deeper insights than my initial and tertiary analysis and inclinations. I made it a point to spend time with the anomalies that emerged regarding specific student interviews or perspectives compared to my expectations

or initial impression of them. It was intentional and vital to not just sit with the data but to walk with it, drive with it, and reflect on the words and narratives in embodied motion in experience. Postformal theory and method assisted in analyzing and positing many findings, all documented in chapter five. I will run through a brief recap of the findings in the next section.

### **Major Findings**

This postformal autoethnographic study found that the Experiential Academy students experienced a more humanized, whole-person education that cultivated transformative growth through openness and dialogue. A humanizing and whole-person approach to learning considers that students are humans first and foremost; humans are complex social-historical, emotional, and physical complexities that cannot be reduced to mere brains on stems or our cognitive aptitude (Ali-Khan, 2011). A humanizing and whole-person approach to learning creates the conditions necessary for openness and dialogue to flourish, fostering transformative learning experiences.

Openness and dialogue are not abstract ideas or detached concepts but affections, actions, and reactions to our inclinations, others, and the world. The students of the EA cultivated openness through dialogue with themselves, others, and the world. Trust and active listening, or Freirean dialogue rooted in love, faith, hope, humility, and critical thinking, were foundational, modeled, and nourished. Through guided discussions, guided experiences, mindfulness meditation, and art and music-based projects, the students of the EA flourished. Experiential learning humanizes, liberates, and promotes wholeness, greater retention, agency, and embodiment. It was apparent that experiential learning was organic and fun; even when there were bumps in the road, students looked forward to their classes (educational experiences).

## **Openness and Dialogue**

Openness, as defined in Chapter Five, involves allowing passage through, allowing a view through (transparency), and being exposed without restrictions. People typically categorize openness as something they do internally. With people's minds, however, openness is always grounded and situated involving the whole. As in the definition, passage and viewing through, exposed, and without restriction all refer to the physical, contextual world. Student openness was tied to dialogue, and I define openness with Freire's criteria for genuine dialogue: love, faith, hope, humility, and critical thinking. The students of the Experiential Academy were more open to themselves by challenging their initial thoughts, fears, and anxieties. They demonstrated a greater openness to others in their relationships with their classmates and professors and have translated that openness to the world. Through a humanized environment and experience, through dialogue and openness, students experienced unforgettable educational transformation.

In very practical terms, openness translated into something particular for everyone; for some, it was discovering the source or contributing factors to their anxiety, and for others, it involved a strong sense of purpose and identity. Openness was manifested in students' ability to trust and communicate with others. The professors of the EA also did an excellent job modeling and cultivating openness between themselves and the students. The open atmosphere and the program's whole-person approach added to the EA's humanizing and liberating experience. This relates to Freire's notion of reading the world, that if we are open to the world, it becomes text, words, and something we can read. The students spoke of being told what the world is by their two-dimensional teachers in high school and then discovering the world for themselves with their human three-dimensional professors in the experiential academy. Their testimonies showed unmistakable echoes of banking education versus humanizing and liberating education. Of

course, one cannot just read the word and world; one must also be transformed and transform the world. All students were open to future opportunities and viewed the world as more positive than when they started. The students' openness to participating in my study and sharing themselves with me to help me acquire a doctoral degree was evidence of their openness to learning opportunities and strangers outside the classroom. The Experiential Academy's humanizing environment created conditions where the students began to speak with each other and dialogue with the world. This brings me to the following finding: Experiential learning was dialogic.

The etymology of dialogue highlights passing through or across a point-to-point complete talking through words, reason, and patterns. As in openness, dialogue is situated and contextual because it is always tied to an individual, others, and the world. Freire reminds his readers that dialogue is essential for genuine learning and cannot be actualized without openness (Freire, 2018). Students of the EA were in dialogue with themselves, their peers and professors, and the world, which was manifested in an openness to internal conflict, personal fears and anxieties, and practical patterns that isolated and separated participants from others. Dialogue with others was prevalent in personable and trusted discussions, respectful disagreements, and a willingness to listen to all sides of the argument and respect all viewpoints. Dialogue with the world was evident in the students' relationships to the city, the High Line Park, and their views that there is more to the world and people than they have been taught and more than they know, which situated all of these students in a position of hopefulness towards self, others and the world.

Two essential caveats are that dialogue and openness are in a constant recursive relationship and that a lack of words and dialogue around sensitive issues prevents social awareness, consensus, and more profound ways of understanding. On the other hand, it is essential to note that dialogue fosters openness and openness, dialogue. When students genuinely

dialogue with each other and the world, they are open to new narratives and knowledge.

Dialogue demonstrates a multitude of viewpoints, all of which are situated in personal time, place, and space. Recognizing the diversity of humanity and different viewpoints and accepting them out of respect for others cultivates a humanizing openness. Conversely, when students are open, they become more willing to listen to others' viewpoints and understand the social and historical contexts of the knowledge and lived experiences of others.

Everything cannot always be captured and expressed in words. Words often fail to represent the reality they are meant to reference. People also often lack the words and language to speak about sensitive or intentionally silenced issues. However, people have access to and are exposed to a great deal of unspoken dialogue daily. A lack of words can create a problem, namely, how can a person solve a problem or discuss an issue or emotional response they lack the words to express? One way around this issue is to create an environment where non-verbal forms of expression are utilized regularly. Experiential learning can facilitate dialogue without words through non-verbal forms of open dialogue like art, music, and photography projects to promote student expression. In the same spirit, this Postformal autoethnography utilized embodied and non-verbal communication and dialogue, namely artifact elicitation, music, and an embodied element to foster greater openness and dialogue. The postformal tools and design contributed to open exchange during our fun with beaches, bumps, and milkshakes.

### **Research Questions**

Organically and with great joy, the students helped answer this study's questions. I answer each question in this section using information from the study's findings.

**Research Question 1: How do students who have participated in an Experiential learning Academy describe their transformative learning experiences?**

All students interviewed for this study described their transformative experiences in the EA as humanizing and cultivated through openness and dialogue. Students were coming from their shells, getting beyond themselves or over themselves. It was through their humanizing cohort and experiences, through their openness and dialogue with peers and professors, that transformative learning was achieved. This opening and dialoguing with themselves, others, and the world prompted a new way of engaging with the world, a more whole and humanizing approach. Each student's story of transformation was different. However, in most cases, after their two years of experience, the students spoke of being completely different people compared to who they were at the onset of the Experiential Academy.

**Sub Question 1. What contextual elements do students describe as contributing to a transformative experience and understanding of themselves, others, and the world?**

The contextual elements that contributed to transformative learning for the students of the EA would be the humanizing and whole-person approach, which was tied to place, space, and people. Students would all agree that having the opportunity for the world to be their classroom, to get beyond the walls of an institution, and to learn through experience was undoubtedly a contributing factor towards their transformative experience. The setting, activity, and people were central to the meaningful experience in their transformative narratives. In every story of transformation, other specific students' actions or words played heavily in the transformation process. The students also expressed that they would never have become who they are today without certain professors (mainly referring to Dr. Who).

**Sub Question 2. What contextual elements, teaching practices, methods, and pedagogies within the experiential learning model (EA) do students describe as helping facilitate a more embodied, humanized, transformative learning environment?**

The experiential academy professors created an extraordinarily loving and supportive atmosphere between students and teachers. They were utilizing informal class settings, referring to professors using a first-name basis, allowing movement in the classroom, and fostering a more whole and humanized atmosphere. No one was forced to sit at desks or prevented from moving around the room. The professors cultivated much discussion and dialogue within the cohort, modeling and teaching openness and dialogue to the students. The discussion became second nature to the students. Jeb recounted that the primary tool of the experiential academy was “getting folks together and just chatting.” Mindfulness and meditation were taught in class to help facilitate a practice of embodiment where students were exposed to practicing wholeness or being a body/mind. Many of the students’ transformations came from the tools of self-agency they gained through meditation and mindfulness practices. Professors of the EA also utilized non-verbal ways of getting the students to express themselves and communicate complicated ideas. Students used art, music, photography, and artifact making, to name a few ways non-verbal embodied ways of learning and dialoguing were cultivated.

### **Discussion: Wholeness, Healing, Humanizing, Liberating Learning**

Experiential academy and experiential learning are pedagogical modalities that foster wholeness and an at-one-ment, healing the synthetic divide between mind and body. Creating context-based experiences supported by humanizing, deeply caring teachers and an accepting community where openness and dialogue can thrive is the core of experiential learning. Students not only enjoy learning, but they look forward to class. Through physically embodying openness and dialogue with the self (meditation, reflection), others (class discussions, listening, accepting), and the world (the world is the classroom- where everything is concrete and contextual), students learn, heal, and grow naturally and organically. Students could get out of their heads and come

out of their shells and actually discuss difficult issues, learn from each other, and demonstrate growth, self-mastery, and wholeness. There was a common threat of social anxiety that ran through this study. All students struggled to some degree socially, and the EA's humanized, open, and dialogic nature helped foster wholeness, enabling them to overcome much of their social anxiety. How can we expect to create meaningful, relevant, inspiring education without engaging the whole person? Furthermore, even more importantly, how can we expect to teach students who are struggling with anxiety and fear to be more human and whole in our classrooms when banking education's hierarchical dynamic adds to their social stress and anxiety? Teachers foster classrooms of healing and humanization by treating students as humans and showing themselves as human beings, not teaching machines (hooks, 1994, 2003).

Experiential learning is humanizing for the same reason it is healing. The context-based formula, caring, and open professors who foster open dialogue are acts of humanization that help bridge the mind-body divide. As JoAnn mentioned earlier, knowing that her professors genuinely cared about her thoughts and perspective motivated her to see her insights as valuable and, in turn, fostered greater participation. Fostering openness and dialogue and emphasizing the value of listening to everyone's personal experiences and viewpoints fostered deeper interpersonal understanding and mutual humanization. In the current age of partisan identity politics elected officials need to be open and honest, it is essential to teach students to dialogue and reach out beyond their personal affiliations and biases. Unfortunately, in the current political climate, elected officials are more likely to dehumanize their opponents and decontextualize social woes to confuse and diffuse the desire for social justice. Echoing Dewey's ideas of experiential learning and democratic education, it is hard to cultivate a democratic, pluralistic society if we do not produce a respectful and open dialogue with each other and the world. As Freire reminds

us, dialogue with the word and world is different for everyone. Yet, it is a fundamental condition necessary for the cultivation of critical consciousness and the pathway toward being more fully human. Those who are more fully human are more liberated, and humanization fosters liberation in that every human voice and experience is valid and matters.

Experiential learning's context-based, experience-based, open, and dialogic nature seems to be a less structured environment that promotes a liberatory educational model. The prisoners in Plato's cave were the metaphoric representation of banking education and social control; this model is anti-democratic, oppressive, and dehumanizing. To borrow the metaphor, experiential learning begins when the prisoners are unfettered and allowed to explore the natural world for themselves, taking with them, if you will, the lessons and shadowed wisdom of the cave (the traditional banking classroom) and applying it to the living world in which they are immersed. I see education as a practice of freedom and an incredible discipline that helps cultivate a healthy, humanized, and liberated world. In today's climate, politicians limit what books, clubs, and lessons are allowed in state-funded colleges, which is antithetical to democratic learning and a pluralistic state. By essentially extending banking education and social control into higher education, families, neighborhoods, and communities are deprived of the democratic freedom society is supposed to promote.

### **Limitations**

The sample size of this study is certainly a limitation. I interviewed about twenty-nine percent (28.5%) of the students who participated in the Experiential Academy. Although the sample size was a limiting factor it also allowed me to delve deeper into each student's personal story. There is the possibility there could be a sample bias in that all of the students I interviewed had volunteered to participate and share their memorable transformative educational experiences.

Because the students of the EA had such a profound love of the program and professors it was evident that their participation in the study, in part, was motivated by the desire to ‘give back’ to the community. I did not encounter any students who did not enjoy the Experiential Academy; however, I did not interview students who dropped out of the program, and there were a handful who did.

This sample size was small in part because the program was only in existence for two years and the over-all pool of eligible participants was composed of about twenty-one students. I took a sampling of convenience and was only able to reach out to students who had completed the program and were still at the same university, thus eliminating my ability to interview any student who was no longer in the program. I would suggest that future research should be done expanding the sample size to see if a broader student sampling of an experiential academy would mirror that of the smaller focused sample.

This postformal, autoethnographic action research study consisted of a small time-frame into the experiences of students who have participated in and completed both years of the experiential academy. The duration of this study is a limiting factor regarding findings. There would be a benefit of doing a more longitudinal study into an experiential learning program to see if the personal transformations and insights grew or diminished after their time as students of the EA. I regard my own personal autoethnographic insights as a form of longitudinal success with experiential learning modalities; however, again, we find ourselves looking at a tiny sample. I am interested in how the students continue to engage and dialogue with the word and world beyond their university years. It would be great to check in on the participants in a couple of years to see how they have grown and if the experiences and skills gained through EA still have a lasting and practical effect on their approach to themselves, others, and the world.

The situated and context-based nature of experiential learning modalities makes it challenging to measure or quantify. On the one hand, educational researchers should investigate new, more embodied, holistic ways of quantifying transformative, embodied experiences and the benefits of experiential learning. However, be cautioned that an unexpected consequence of quantification is decontextualization and dehumanization. Experiential learning programs allow students, professors, and researchers to stop reducing and decontextualizing and open themselves up to a more rich, contextual, situated knowledge that is pluralistic and kaleidoscopic.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

#### **For Researcher: Method and Modality**

Postformal research offers practitioners a creative and flexible method for reimagining research design and analysis. It was important to me to respect the time and insights the students were sharing with me; I felt compelled to give back to them somehow. By designing our research experience collectively, we created something to look forward to, fun research, and an experience we all would remember. In co-creating the car karaoke session, we also flipped the traditional power dynamic of the researcher/participants because of the agency students had in the design process. This study was humanizing by approaching participants as people, not data, breaking the conventional researcher-researched impartial divide.

Postformal research challenges the traditional scientific positivistic educational research that reduces people to data and talking points. This postformal study sought to discover and present a more whole portrait of the students' embodied transformative growth, highlighting the situated, contextual complexity of knowledge generation and the richness of human existence. Postformal research challenges the neoliberal paradigm that educational research should be about maximizing outcomes for students, reducing deeply contextual notions and people to generic

abstractions. Postformal research and this study are examples of approaching social research conscientiously, recognizing each student as a complex person irreducible to an overarching abstract label.

Postformal research challenges researchers to look at the whole person, not just what a participant responds to in interview questions, but what their body language is saying, what the behavior patterns reveal, and what music, art, or dance speaks of their personhood. Through artifact elicitation, music, and experiential immersion, this study fostered non-verbal dialogue to cultivate a more embodied whole-person response. This kind of humanizing research can serve communities and places needing healing where words and slogans have failed. When our ability to connect with words escapes us, perhaps some shared music, dance, or a collective art project could pull out insights, connections, and healing where traditional dialogue and research cannot.

Experiential learning's context and situatedness challenge the traditional research golden standard of generalizability and quantifiability. The specificity of people, place, community, and context makes pulling generalizable outcomes difficult. Some educational research camps would question the purpose and validity of conducting such research. The IRB process for this study was relatively easy. It was categorized as "not research" because it does not attempt to pull generalizable data. By traditional academic research standards, 'actions research' is not "real research." In postformal experiential research, as in experiential learning courses, we are reminded that knowledge generation is rooted in the dialogue and text of time, place, people, and space. In its search for objective universality, traditional research reduces people to data and measurable outcomes, missing the deeper, richer, more humanizing story of the students, schools, and the broader ecological community. Traditional research places things under the microscope, taking a sanitized and decontextualized focus, and misses the interconnectedness

and intersectionality of the web of human knowledge and reality. Postformalism challenges educational research to never lose sight of the meso-scope and the macro-scope that the micro-scope of traditional research studies ignore.

This postformal autoethnographic study reminds the broader educational research community that there is value in exploring and amplifying the individual voices of students, teachers, and researchers. There is value in exploring the lived experience of humans, believing that when we explore individuals' profound uniqueness and particularity, often shared patterns, processes, histories, and contexts will emerge. Most educational research is predominately rooted in a positivistic – Piagetian paradigm that is decontextualizing, dehumanizing, and reductive in search of objective universals. This paradigm research that is not sanitized and seeks to discover objective universals is considered “not-research” as is the case for this ‘action research’ study. We may not uncover objective universality; however, there is something profoundly universal about the kaleidoscopic web of human experience.

### **For Practitioners**

Experiential learning reminds teachers that students respond best when they feel loved, cared for, and respected, i.e., human. Even if educators cannot get outside or drive to the beach with their class, some transferable tools can be employed to help foster dialogue and openness, which are essential parts of the success of experiential education. Learning and student engagement happen naturally when teachers contextualize lessons and allow for open discussion. If educators are doing a chapter on the civil rights of the 1960s, it would naturally follow that a discussion on the most recent Black Lives Matter movement and its relation to the civil rights movement would be a natural contextualization. As I write these words, I know that some educators would shriek at the thought of having an open discussion about the civil rights

movement of the '60s and compare it to today's Black Lives Matter movement with a classroom full of middle schoolers, high schoolers or even college students. Still, how will these skills be learned if we cannot have respectful, challenging conversations in the classroom and cultivate active expression and listening? When teachers create whole classrooms that support students and cultivate collective acceptance and care, students will naturally be more open with each other and the teacher. Students will also have a higher degree of tolerance for one another because they realize what someone thinks is not fixed, nor is what someone thinks a complete representation of who they are, but a process of becoming through reading the word and world, meaning-making, and knowledge generation.

Be humble and human as a teacher. Consider how you would feel at your students' age in every given circumstance. Remember that no one knows everything; we all make mistakes, and sometimes we learn best from our mistakes. Let your students in behind the veil. I am not saying you need to share your innermost personal details; however, sharing your personal story of how and why you are a teacher is humanizing and meaningful. I have a friend and colleague who starts the school year by presenting himself to his students and telling them about his journey to becoming a teacher and his philosophy of life: "It is a good day to have a good day." On the second day of school, he has his students introduce themselves and talk a little about who they are at this point in their lives. My colleague starts with a personal humanization and humbling community-building exercise that situates him and his students as humans in the world working together to continue to grow individually and communally.

Incorporating non-verbal activities that can foster a feeling of wholeness and healing can go a long way to help create more community-centered humanized classrooms—taking five minutes at the beginning of class to allow students to rest or breathe. Perhaps using a mediative

song to help students quietly center themselves can help slow down the anxious business that often accompanies school settings. Finding ways to foster wholeness and healing can transform classrooms from places of academic detachment into places of embodied learning. Utilizing art, dance, music, and collective projects and sharing food or snacks are other ways to help encourage community-building and experiential learning modalities in a traditional classroom.

Experiential learning reminds teachers that student success and academic growth look different for everyone, and that student's strengths, interests, aversions, and weaknesses differ from case to case. There are students whose personal and social improvement in a school year can be pretty transformative but challenging to quantify in test and standardized test scores. Are we to consider the school year a failure? Or are they bad students? Are we to tell them after a year of hard work, above-average personal growth, and transformation that they are a failure? Is there another way to imagine our current educational paradigm where teachers understand the deep complexity of our human contexts and encourage learning? Is there a more whole way of viewing students, curriculum, and assessing growth?

### **For Policy Makers**

Why, in this evolving age of education, where we recognize that the same teaching methods and structures do not work for all students, are we still forcing students through the traditional banking machine? I am thinking of Frank's confession that high school was a place he was forced to go to for several years where he learned nothing and how, after two years in the EA, he has passion and purpose in his life and academic pursuits. I always ask people what percentage of their high school education they remember; most responses range from thirty to sixty percent. That means, in part, seventy to forty percent of what is taught in high school is

irrelevant and forgotten. Experiential learning makes learning fun and relevant and offers unforgettable learning experiences to all who utilize the modality.

The realization is that there are a great many nontraditional students and neurodiverse students who suffer under traditional baking educational models but thrive in experiential learning modalities. It is a sensible suggestion that all high schools and colleges should, at the very least, offer optional experiential educational tracks toward earning accreditation to accommodate and create more educational accessibility for all learners. I think of Jeb, who went from a small specialty high school for students needing academic accommodations and support to a self-possessed college student passionately pursuing his computer graphics and animation degree. Jeb should remind policymakers that many voters and contributing members of the US economy should have the same opportunity, a fair and equal opportunity for an education. It is not a one-size-fits-all educational model, but it can offer diverse choices to the various learning communities.

Why, when we know experiential learning, which has been proven study after study and time and time again to improve learning on all levels (Coyer et al., 2019; Intolubbe-Chmil et al., 2012; Johnson-Glenberg et al., 2014), has it not become the dominant educational modality? Why is it not the dominant way we cultivate education? John Dewey, Alexander Meiklejohn, and the first progressive education movement in the 1920s warned and reminded us at the beginning of the commoditization of education that learning, critical thinking, and social development work best when done in a fully immersed experiential and dialogic modality. Perhaps we should be moving away from standardization and tests and more towards context-based, situated, caring programs like Experiential Academy. Most of my students today want me to tell them the answers when working on problems and questions; I want them to examine, be critical, and come

up with their own answers and questions. If we do not cultivate contextualized, open, and dialogic experiential education, we will be at the mercy of what those in power tell us to think and believe.

### **Bumps, not Roadblocks**

Anyone who has spent time studying experiential learning can say there are some difficulties in employing this form of educational modality; it can be loud and disorderly, and it is more difficult to practice. It requires more work, energy, and effort from the teacher, and from a business and economic perspective, it may not be the most cost-effective modality.

I think of bell hooks, who validated my informal, loud classroom structure that has, over the years, fostered a welcoming, communal, and comfortable (sometimes too relaxed) student body (hooks, 1994). The experiential classroom is a classroom of open dialogue and will sometimes be chaotic. Teachers cannot control students' thoughts, words, and reactions; however, they can take the momentum generated from emotional reactions and find ways to learn from challenging experiences. I think of Nietzsche when he wisely exclaimed, "You must have much chaos in you to give birth to a dancing star." (Nietzsche, 1961). The quiet classroom is controlled and anesthetized, and the open and dialogic classroom is loud and vibrant. Some teachers prefer the quiet, controlled, anesthetized classroom, and the critical classroom is loud, animated, and vibrant.

Experiential learning is a more difficult modality to practice as a teacher. It demands passion, energy, and a full-bodied investment in participation. I recall watching the final sharing circle of cohort two. I was amazed at the professional skill mastery and effort the leading professor utilized to harness the students' passion, joy, and rantings. The professor found ways to connect feelings and ideas and transition from student to student lovingly and meaningfully. Dr.

Who once mentioned that he had never worked so hard as an educator but reciprocally never felt prouder about the progress and transformation of his students in the EA. In all seriousness, teachers are often overworked and underappreciated, so regarding effort, I understand why some educators may not want to participate in experiential learning modalities. However, many educators understand what is at stake, welcome the challenge, and look forward to seeing student's flourish.

Another possible challenge to creating more experiential learning programs could be cost. The experiential classroom typically translates into fewer students and more teachers, which works against most school budgets and the traditional business models—colleges and universities profit by getting as many students as possible in the room with one professor. Having fewer students in the room translates into less tuition, and having more professors translates into more teacher salaries. I think of the concept of co-teaching and how much the research supports how it enhances students' educational experience. Colleges and universities are slowly phasing it out because of cost-effectiveness.

The Experiential Academy is in its third and final cohort, and unfortunately, the university is not renewing the program. I am not entirely sure why the program, which has been a great success according to the students who have participated, will not continue transforming students at this Academy. The students who participated feel this is a massive loss for the university and future nontraditional students like themselves who have benefitted from the Experiential Academy. A high school senior recently asked me about the Experiential Academy and expressed interest in participating. He is an excellent student by traditional standards; however, he suffers from terrible anxiety that can be pretty debilitating. He is extremely sensitive and needs constant support and validation. He would benefit significantly from a two-year

immersion in the Experiential Academy. It broke my heart to tell him that they are not recruiting students and that the program will no longer exist.

## **Conclusion**

As I conclude, I return to my earlier story about my friend Tom and his discovery of a latent love of math and geometry as an avid bicyclist. As Tom mentioned earlier, it would have made learning more real and relevant if our high school math teachers incorporated lessons that contextualized geometry for us, like examining the geometry of bicycle design. I loved how my buddy, who works heavy machinery in the construction industry, quickly made a case for contextualized, experiential learning to make education real and relevant with a simple yet profound example. When Tom passionately discussed bicycle geometry with me, he explained that there is no perfect geometry for all bicycles. The ideal geometry of a bicycle is determined by a myriad of factors, like the desired use of the bicycle, the specific context of the terrain, and the specific size and shape (physical body) of the rider. This caveat struck me because it highlights the contextual, terrain-specific, rider-specific, time, place, and space-specific nature of the “ideal” bike. There is no ideal bicycle for everyone, but everyone can find an ideal bike for their particular needs. This brings me back to the lessons and value of experiential learning; there is no monolithic way to educate and no such thing as a one-size-fits-all educational modality. Experiential learning creates a context-based ecological field for students to explore their passions and interests. This is humanizing and liberating and encourages students to engage actively in analyzing and dialoguing with the world. To put it in the context of Tom’s example, Experiential education fosters learning where students can discern what kind of riding, they would like to do and what terrain they wish to explore and then discover what bicycle geometry will work best for their particular bodies in relation to their interests. Students learn through real

and relevant experiences and find ways of being open and dialoguing with themselves and the world, fostering a critical analysis.

Remember, it was the immersive experience at the beaches where the members of the EA and I had met, recreated, and researched experiential learning. It is in immersive, organic experiences where learning is transformed into a natural, contextual, and humanizing endeavor. Without a place to explore and center learning around, we are working with a decontextualized concept. We need beaches. As recounted earlier, the students who accompanied me on our 4x4 beach car karaoke adventure certainly enjoyed the bumps along our journey. The bumps and ups and downs needed to be experienced and negotiated to foster a deeper contextual understanding. To succeed while driving offroad and not damage your vehicle, one needs to understand the terrain, the speed, approach angles, and departing angles, which are the best approaches to overcome this obstacle. We grow and learn how to navigate different textures and terrains in the bumps. We need bumps. Lastly, it is through the milkshakes, through the mixing up of different ingredients, intermingling, and interacting, where new and delicious intersections of flavor are created. Milkshakes are our ability to create new knowledge, to mix it up, to generate new syntheses that are rooted in an open dialogue in the intersection of people, place, and the world. We need more milkshakes. As educators and humans in the world, I hope we create more opportunities to find some beaches, enjoy and navigate the bumps, and enjoy the power of creating unique flavors.

I end here with a musical note: Sam Cook's "Wonderful World:"

Don't know much about history; Don't know much biology, don't know much about a science book, don't know much about the French I took. But I do know that I love you and I know that if you love me too, what a wonderful world this would be.

Perhaps I am stretching a bit with this song. However, one does not need to know the specifics of biology, trigonometry, history, or geometry to be open, curious, and learn. All one needs to know, and feel is that they are welcomed and loved in a whole and humanized environment that will organically cultivate dialogue and openness and “what a wonderful world it could be.”

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**Appendix A: Beaches, Bumps, and Milkshakes playlist**

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7oEaAgKMglSRcLeew69Vqf?si=438d0c5e4fac4238>

Appendix B: "Trade Routes" Representing the Emergent Themes and Key

