

A CASE STUDY EXAMINING THE TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT OF A CIVIL
DISCOURSE PROGRAM AT A MIDWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Doctor of Education

by:
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

**A CASE STUDY EXAMINING THE TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT OF A CIVIL
DISCOURSE PROGRAM AT A MIDWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY**

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a candidate for the degree of doctor of education,

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Horton family. My prayer is that this research adds to the legacy of our family's perseverance, love, and service to others. I also dedicate this work to those who serve as bridge builders and peacemakers in times of conflict. May you be comforted in knowing that, as mentioned in Matthew 5:9, peacemakers shall be called "children of God."

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ABSTRACT

Adopting the first five phases of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018) as a framework, this study examined the impact of a Midwestern university civil discourse program on participants' transformative learning. The study sample included participants who attended the Talk Together program over multiple sessions since its inception in fall 2015. The participants were surveyed or interviewed. Findings revealed survey participants at least agree or slightly agree with experiencing the first five phases of transformative learning, evidenced by responses to items connected to the transformative learning framework. Most interview participants also experienced the first five phases of transformative learning. While transformative learning was undetermined from the observation data, findings led to recommendations that impact the facilitation of the Talk Together program, which, subsequently, impact potential transformative learning for future participants.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION-IN-PRACTICE

Background

In 2014, during a moment of racial unrest around the United States, particularly in Missouri following the police shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown in the city of Ferguson (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), college campuses across Missouri saw several demonstrations (Mitchell, 2014). Brown's death would be one in a series of police shooting deaths where massive protests followed (BBC News, 2021). A unique opportunity was presented for campuses to address issues involving race relations with their student body. One university in the Midwest, which we will give the pseudonym State Regional University (SRU), developed a two-hour, town-hall-style forum called Speak Up (Cook, 2014), where hundreds of students gathered to start a dialogue on race relations following protests on the SRU campus. This and other forums were created with the specific intention of providing space for students to gather, discuss, and support one another staying at SRU, while their desire may have been to return to the Greater St. Louis / Ferguson, Missouri area to support family, or take part in the protests related to Brown. The following year, in 2015, SRU launched a campus-wide dialogue initiative that we will call Talk Together. Initiated by a group of concerned SRU faculty, staff, administrators, and students, Talk Together was created to give members of the campus community a place to interact with others offering "diverse perspectives" (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016).

Public colleges and universities are considered "public forums" (Ojalvo, 2017). An argument could be made that a campus allowing the free exchange of diverging thought helps in maintaining the republic and creates informed citizens. While institutions of higher learning support efforts to facilitate discourse related to

controversial or sensitive topics, this discourse may not result in transformative learning opportunities for participants. Chen and Lawless (2018) posited, “certain conversations have a tendency to be absent, silenced, and/or censored – whether by self and/or others – in the mainstream communication classroom” (p. 375). Because of this, opportunities for dialogue resulting in critical reflection and the challenging of perspectives have become threatened – as the need for critical dialogue has increased due to the divisive political climate in America. Ross and Tartaglione (2018) posited:

Politically, we have formed ourselves into camps that are more separate geographically, socioeconomically, educationally, and in other ways, than they were before. Because of this segregation, the perspectives that we hold start to become more like religion: sacred and absolute. (p. 52)

While, initially, Talk Together was aimed at hearing student concerns stemming from the events in Ferguson, as of 2022, the Talk Together forum series has facilitated conversations on several topics, including but not limited to racism, religious freedom, gun control, dating violence, the COVID-19 pandemic, terrorism, climate change, and mental health. Talk Together is held monthly during the fall and spring semesters – with some sessions held during the summer semester. Oftentimes, impromptu Talk Together forums are offered in response to current events.

Statement of the Problem

Efforts to facilitate civil discourse programs on college campuses that create a transformative learning opportunity can fall short, either due to the lack of time allowed for inquiry, reflection, and follow-up – or because opportunities for dialogue are not created consistently. Attempts at having critical conversations on campus can also result

in experts merely giving talking points and the forum just serving as a sounding board for participants to air out grievances. Werman, Adlparvar, Horowitz, and Hasegawa (2019) argued students need to “challenge their own biases, values, and beliefs” (p. 252) to develop critical consciousness.

Existence of Gap in the Literature

While much has been written on intergroup dialogue from multiple lenses (Allport, 1954; Bruening, Fuller, Cotrufo, Madsen, Evanovich, & Wilson-Hill, 2014; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Gurin-Sands, Gurin, Nagda, & Osuna, 2012; Jackson, 2020; Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Troop, 2008; Seate, Joyce, Harwood & Arroyo, 2015; Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin, & Maxwell, K. E., 2009; White, Miles, Frantell, Muller, Paiko, & LeFan, 2019); a gap in the literature exists studying the impact of the Talk Together initiative on participants’ transformative learning on college and university campuses – particularly in the context of a politically and racially-divided climate in America.

Purpose of the Study

So often, people attend civil discourse programs, such as Talk Together, aimed at bringing diverse groups together to understand one another. It is very possible that after attending such a program, a person leaves without, at least, having a strongly held belief challenged.

The purpose of this study is to examine the Talk Together program’s impact on participants’ transformative learning. The aim is not just to see if transformation is evident, but to examine to what degree transformation is evident. This research fills a gap

in knowledge related to the study of civil dialogue programs, using a transformative learning lens.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are informed by the first five of ten phases of transformative learning from Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018). The research questions ask in what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest the first five transformative learning phases among participants:

- RQ1: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest a disorienting dilemma?
- RQ2: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest self-examination?
- RQ3: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest a critical assessment of assumptions?
- RQ4: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest the recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation?
- RQ5: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest an exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action (Mezirow, 1994; 2009; 2018)?

Theoretical Framework

Transformative Learning Theory

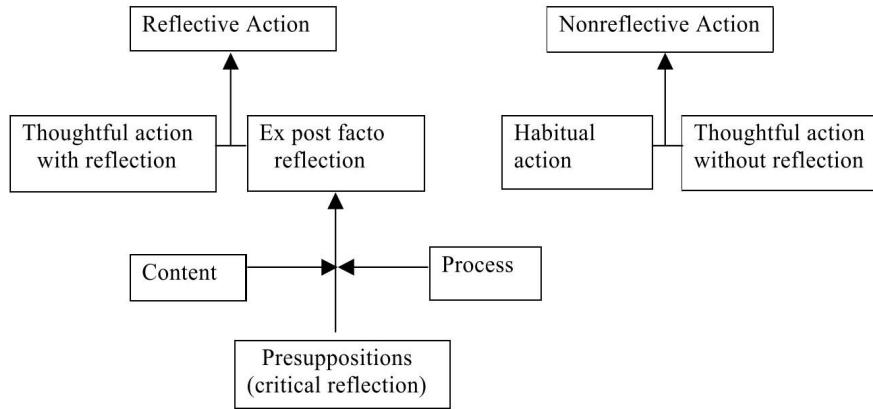
The guiding framework for this research is Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018), a framework widely used when studying adult learners. Transformative learning, also referred to as perspective transformation, is “the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2018, p. 116). According to Mezirow (2009), transformative learning can take place in various contexts and requires a person to operate with a certain level of autonomy (Mezirow, 1997):

Autonomy here refers to the understanding, skills, and disposition necessary to become critically reflective of one's own assumptions and to engage effectively in discourse to validate one's beliefs through the experiences of others who share universal values. (p. 9)

Mezirow (1994; 2009) explained transformative learning is complemented by discourse, which serves as a vehicle for validating our contested beliefs, through critical reflection. Mezirow (1990), in his work examining how critical reflection triggers learning, explained a differentiation (see Figure 1) between “thoughtful action” (p. 6), where one merely draws on prior knowledge or habits, and “reflective action” (p. 6), which involves “acting reflectively to critically examine the justification for one's beliefs” (p. 6):

Figure 1

How Critical Reflection Triggers Learning



Note. (Mezirow, 1990, p. 7).

The origin of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998, 2009; 2018) involves the research of women taking part in community college re-entry programs in the 1970s, as they considered re-entering the job market following a hiatus. (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978). After a period of critical reflection, the women became transformed learners when they realized how "environmental influences and cultural expectations limited their beliefs and personal development" (p. 15).

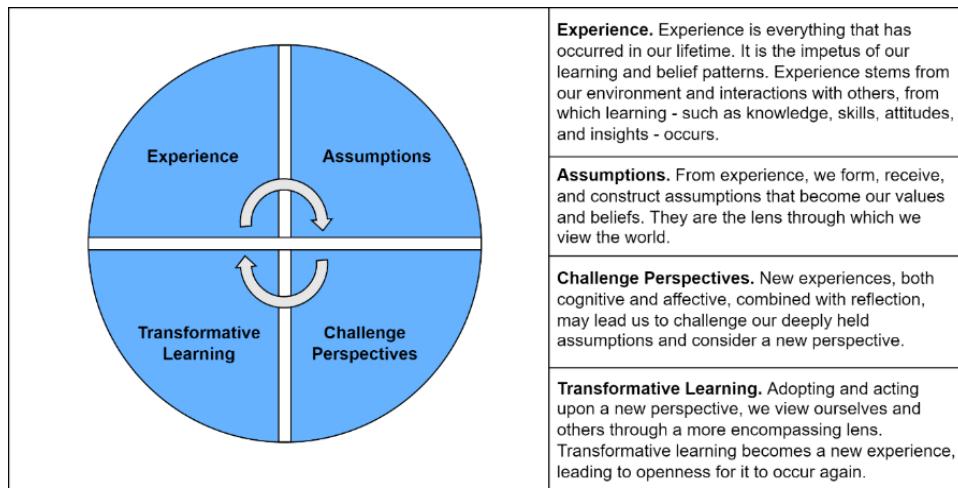
Mezirow (1994; 2009; 2018) identified ten phases of learning that become clarified in the transformative process. These phases of transformative learning start with (a) having a disorienting dilemma, followed by (b) self-examination and a (c) critical assessment of assumptions. The fourth phase is (d) the recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation, with the fifth phase being (e) an exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action. The remaining five phases of transformative learning start with (f) planning a course of action, followed by (g) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing a plan. The eighth phase is (h) the

provisional trying of new roles. The ninth phase involves the (i) building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. The tenth and final phase involves the (j) integration of new roles, relationships, and action into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective. In an analysis of the ten transformative phases, Roberts (2006) argued learners may not experience transformation in this exact order, and learners "can also experience more than one phase of the process simultaneously" (p. 101).

Nerstrom (2014), in research on transformative learning, developed a model (see Figure 2) that condenses Mezirow's (1994; 2009; 2018) ten phases into four main segments: "(a) having experiences; (b) making assumptions; (c) challenging perspectives; and (d) experiencing transformative learning" (Nerstrom, 2014, p. 327):

Figure 2

Nerstrom's Transformative Learning Model



Note. (Nerstrom, 2014, p. 328).

The following is a summary of Mezirow's (1994; 2009; 2018) first five phases of transformative learning:

Phase 1: Disorienting Dilemma

A disorienting dilemma could be described as an emotional or triggering experience. It involves a situation or observation that “does not fit within an individual’s pre-existing meaning structure” (Chen, 2014, p. 413). Mezirow (1990) argued a dilemma may be triggered by an “eye-opening discussion, book, poem, painting” (p. 14), or anything that challenges a person’s preconceived notions. To understand a disorienting dilemma in the context of transformative learning, it is important to discuss epistemology. An epistemology is, essentially, how a person knows what they know. Mezirow (1997) posited frames of reference are developed partly from how we assimilate into society and by the influence of those who have raised us. Mezirow (2009) also points out a distinction in how we learn things; instrumentally versus communicatively. With instrumental learning, an environment is controlled, while communicative learning involves learning what others mean – through discourse (Mezirow, 2009). During the act of discourse, which involves critically reflective thinking (Mezirow, 2009), a frame of reference can become dismantled or, at least, threatened by a competing idea, creating a disorienting dilemma. A disorienting dilemma can feel like a crisis, where the current framework is suddenly outdated and does not resolve the dilemma:

A disorienting dilemma can have many different effects on learners depending on their personality, experience, age, status, personal issues that they are coping with at the time, the nature of the disorienting dilemma...and the methods used to foster or facilitate transformative learning. (Roberts, 2006, p. 101)

When the assumptions that once formed a person’s reality are now in question, a conflict is created that must be resolved – between the old knowledge and the new reality.

As Roberts (2006) explained, there are things in life we hold as sacred, and when our beliefs, our values, and our assumptions are questioned, we tend to become angry and defensive. During this first phase, the learner can either cling tighter to an eroding belief system or start the process of examining the unfamiliar. As Mezirow (1994) suggested, a disorienting dilemma serves as a trigger for reflection.

Phase 2: Self-Examination

Following a disorienting dilemma, the self-examination process encourages critical reflection. Mezirow (2009) explained the most significant transformation is the critique of premises involving oneself, or what he refers to as a “painful reappraisal of our current perspective” (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978, p. 12). Referring to Mezirow and Marsick’s (1978) research involving women, community college re-entry programs, and the self-examination process, there was a point where the participants’ unexamined cultural assumptions and attitudes were brought into critical consciousness (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978), or where they started to become fully aware of their current frame of reference. Mezirow (2018) noted this phase can also come “with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame” (p.117).

Phase 3: Critical Assessment of Assumptions

Mezirow and Marsick’s (1978) earlier research regarding transformative learning mentioned assumptions related to sex [gender] roles. This definition has, since, been expanded to refer to a wide range of assumptions. An assumption can be defined as a fact or statement that is assumed to be true (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Assumptions are developed over time and can change based on new information. A person can develop an assumption regarding a personal matter, or something within the external environment.

Mezirow (1998) also noted the role past emotional experiences play in transformative learning, by sending signals that cause us to remove certain assumptions and validate others. Students in this critical assessment phase of transformative learning start to investigate whether some of their assumptions were incorrect.

Phase 4: Recognition of Connection Between Discontent and Transformation

During this recognition phase, a person starts to understand their change in perspective is linked to their transformative process, causing “dissatisfaction” (Nerstrom, 2014 p. 326). This dissatisfaction initiates a desire to make a life change. Mezirow (1994) also noted at this stage, a person begins to recognize that other people have “negotiated a similar change” (p. 224). In reference to adult development, Mezirow (1994) explained that it signals a period when an adult completely understands their capacity and understands it as a “guide to action” (p. 226).

Phase 5: An Exploration of Options for New Roles, Relationships, and Action

Mezirow and Marsick’s (1978) research suggested perspective transformation is a process where adults start to recognize “culturally-induced dependency roles and relationships and take action to overcome them” (Mezirow & Marsick, p. 17). He explained acting on transformed meaning structures can lead to a new approach to relationships (Mezirow, 1994). In other words, an exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action can result in a personal change; not necessarily one geared toward addressing a larger social context.

Research Methods

Design

The researcher utilized a qualitative case study design. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argued for research to be considered a case study, there should be “one particular program or one particular classroom of learners (a bounded system)” (p. 38). In the case of this research, the participants in the Talk Together program served as the bounded system or unit of analysis. Yin (2009), in outlining the qualities that make a case study, noted participant behaviors will not be manipulated, unlike with an experiment. In addition, a case study relies on multiple sources of evidence, including evidence from “observations of the events being studied, and interviews of the persons involved in the events” (p. 11). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also suggested some case studies “employ both qualitative and quantitative methods” (p. 37). This study utilized a mix of data from interviews, surveys, and observations. In addition, participant behaviors in this study were not manipulated.

On the topic of qualitative research, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is socially constructed, versus preexisting – which is more of a constructivist understanding. Since this study sought to illuminate the personal journey of transformative learning, qualitative interviews were needed to capture the context of certain expressed feelings. Participant survey data, while able to capture additional data, presented limitations with regards to understanding the meaning behind participant feelings.

Setting

The setting was State Regional University (SRU), a four-year public institution in the Midwest. It has a campus enrollment of over 20,000 students, according to 2021 data (State Regional University website, 2021). At the site university, Talk Together took place in a variety of locations – including but not limited to the following: meeting rooms within the campus student union, the campus library auditorium, empty classrooms, and via web conferencing (i.e., Zoom). During Talk Together in-person sessions, participants set together as a large group – either in a linear fashion or in a 360-degree circle. Participants would face the facilitator, who either facilitated discussions alone or with a co-facilitator. Sessions were typically held for one hour during midday.

Participants

The population included roughly 880 current faculty, staff, and students at the site university who attended Talk Together, as well as those who graduated or relocated since Talk Together's inception in 2015. The findings were based on a sample size of 53 participants.

Demographic data captured during the study included level of education, race, religion/spirituality, ethnicity, age, and gender identity (see Table 1; Table 2 of Appendix J). This data helped the researcher understand the nature of the sample and the degree to which findings can be generalized. In terms of gender identity, 58% of respondents identified as a female, woman, or cis woman; 37% identified as male; and 5% identified as gender nonconforming or nonbinary. In terms of race and ethnicity, 80% of participants identified as White; 16% as Black or African American; and 5% as Asian. Nine percent of respondents claimed Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. In terms of age,

20% were between the ages of 18 and 24 and 18% were between 65 and 74 years old. In terms of religion/spirituality, 40% identified as Christian. Thirty-five percent earned a master's degree as their highest level of education. Regarding Talk Together attendance, 69% of participants attended three or more sessions.

The researcher used a mix of “purposeful” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and “snowball” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) sampling. The researcher’s goal was to target participants who attended Talk Together at least three times since the program’s inception. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to “discover, understand, and gain insight” (p. 96) into how participants were specifically impacted by Talk Together. The researcher also used “snowball sampling” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), where current university faculty, staff, and students that attended Talk Together helped to recruit other participants who also attended Talk Together.

Recruitment

On four separate dates, SRU’s division of diversity, equity, and inclusion sent an email (see Appendix A) to a list of participants who previously attended Talk Together – including an anonymous survey link. The survey (Appendix H) ended with an optional request to take part in an interview, where participants provided their email addresses to be contacted by the researcher. Additional recruitment efforts involved the researcher making in-person requests for participants to complete the survey following the Talk Together observations using a sign-up sheet (see Appendix B).

Data Collection

Data were collected from the following sources:

- Fifty or more artifacts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; see Appendix C)

- Two observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; see Appendix D)
- Fifty-three surveys (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; see Appendix H)
- Twelve interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; see Appendix I)

Artifacts

Artifacts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 180) included more than 50 peer-reviewed journal articles, news articles, social media posts, and unpublished manuscripts related to the Talk Together program. A wide variety of artifacts were readily available due to how Talk Together was marketed across campus and online. Most of the social media posts were produced by the site university's DEI division, advertising the date and time of each Talk Together session, along with a summary of each session's topic. News articles were mainly from site university's student newspaper. Unpublished manuscripts were from previous program evaluations conducted on the Talk Together program, conducted either by faculty of the site university or by an outside consultant. The journal articles were all peer-reviewed with most relating to some aspect of intergroup dialogue or transformative learning. A sample of the journals included (a) *Administrative Theory and Praxis*; (b) *Communication Teacher*; (c) *Communication Studies*; (d) *European Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*; (e) *Journal of Social Psychology*; and (f) *Journal of Transformative Learning*. Artifacts were analyzed using an "artifact analysis guide" (see Appendix C) and organized using a digital reference management program: Mendeley. Artifacts helped the researcher address a knowledge gap regarding how this study fits into existing scholarship.

Field Observations

Written permission was granted by the Talk Together coordinator to conduct observations during two sessions at SRU. The researcher used an observation protocol tool (see Appendix D) to take notes during the two observations. These observations were also audio-recorded and transcribed for later review. In addition to documenting information related to the setting, the researcher actively listened for keywords and phrases which connected to the research questions. For the first observation, the researcher assumed the role of “complete observer” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 144). The researcher was not hidden from the group but was in public view. The researcher did not answer any questions from the facilitator or contribute to the dialogue in any way. During the second observation, the researcher assumed the role of “observer as participant” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 144). In this role, the researcher asked a few questions to participants, using transformative learning as a framework. Following both observations, the researcher provided a sign-up sheet (see Appendix B) for participants who wanted to voluntarily take part in a survey.

The initial goal of the field observations was to monitor or capture behaviors consistent with transformative learning. Since the transformative process is primarily an emotional and intimate journey, the researcher was not able to determine whether transformative learning was apparent – as themes such as self-reflection and assumption questioning may have happened internally. However, observation data was used to determine how the learning environment may or may not have been supported for participants – either by observing the condition of the environment or by observing the Talk Together facilitator’s method of operation.

Surveys

Based on the estimated population size of 880 participants, the ideal sample was 63 – when considering a 90% confidence level, an estimated population size of 900, and a 10% margin of error (Qualtrics, n.d.). A total of 62 surveys were opened, but since nine participants opted not to complete any of the survey items, their surveys were excluded. Therefore, the final sample size was 53, which represents respondents who either fully or partially completed the survey.

The researcher used a self-administered, online survey (see Appendix H). The researcher used Qualtrics as the survey medium. The survey started with a section for informed consent (see Appendix G), followed by a mixture of Likert-type and open-ended items. The survey also captured demographic data: level of education, race, religion/spirituality (see Appendix J, Table 1), ethnicity, age, and gender identity. The survey ended with a request to take part in an interview, followed by a prompt to leave an email address if they answered “yes” to the previous question. No compensation was offered for taking part in this survey.

The survey items were informed by the five research questions. The open-ended items allowed participants to expound on their overall sentiments of the Talk Together sessions and express feelings related to transformative learning; this allowed for a better understanding of the impact of the sessions on participants' transformative learning.

Interviews

Of the survey respondents, twelve consented to a follow-up interview (see Table 2 of Appendix J). Based on research from Hennink and Kaiser (2022) on qualitative data collection, saturation was reached. They explained qualitative studies can reach saturation

at small sample sizes, “9-17 interviews or 4-8 focus groups” (p. 8). For ease of scheduling, and being sensitive to COVID-19 protocols, interviews were conducted either via Zoom or in person. In-person interviews were recorded using a smartphone voice memo app. The interviews lasted no more than one hour, which helped to keep the data manageable and not serve as a discouragement for those considering taking part in the interviews. Interview questions (see Appendix I) were “semi-structured” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 109) and tied back into the five research questions related to transformative learning. The interview and survey instruments captured demographic data: level of education, race, religion/spirituality, ethnicity, age, and gender identity (see Table 1; Table 2 of Appendix J). While participant identities should not lead to assumptions about their position on any given topic, some participants partly attributed their survey/interview responses and values to their identities.

Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis process was to determine the appropriate data analysis method. For the interview and observation data, the researcher primarily utilized in vivo coding (Manning, 2017), where the emphasis was placed on the actual spoken words of participants. According to Manning (2017), in vivo coding is championed by many researchers for how it honors the voices of participants in a particular culture or microculture. Following a period of reflection on the meaning of each code, the researcher began “analytical coding” (p. 206), where codes were grouped into categories.

Coding was both inductive and deductive – with the researcher initially allowing the data to illuminate initial codes, but later rescanning the data with pre-determined codes derived from the transformative learning framework (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994;

1997; 1998; 2009; 2018). All Likert-style survey responses were analyzed with an online survey tool (Qualtrics XM). Open-ended survey data was not coded for theme generation, but to contribute to descriptive statistics.

Qualitative data were organized and transcribed with the assistance of an online, speech-to-text transcription application: Otter.ai. Since the software did not pick up certain words from the participants, the researcher revisited the transcription and made manual edits for clarity. Once the transcription process was completed, the researcher coded the data multiple times. The coding process involved the use of two web-based text tagging tools for qualitative data analysis: Delve and Tagouette. The researcher's goal was to "focus on patterns and insights related to the research purpose and questions – guided by the theoretical framework" (p. 208). Ultimately, following the inductive and deductive coding processes, themes and relationships among the themes emerged from the data, which were connected to the transformative learning framework (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018).

The researcher coded data through a constructivist epistemological lens, where the focus was on how "people construct knowledge and make meaning" (p. 207). To guard against bias during the coding process, the researcher created reflective memos as a journal to detail personal thoughts related to the findings. The researcher relied on multiple pieces of data to ensure content from the reflective memos did not influence the data analysis.

Efforts to Support Quality of Research

Consent, Confidentiality, and Disclosures

This research received exempt review IRB approval from the University of Missouri (see Appendix F) and SRU, with the risk determined to be no greater than minimal. In keeping with IRB guidelines, all participant identities were kept confidential and given pseudonyms. All participants agreed to consent via a consent form (see Appendix G). Although interview participants initially agreed to consent during the survey, the researcher received additional verbal consent from each interview participant, which included consent to be recorded. Raw qualitative data was kept on a secure, password-protected hard drive to safeguard participant information. Upon completion of this research, audio and video recordings were destroyed.

Due to the sensitive nature of the questions, twenty-three out of 24 survey items were set to request response, versus force response. Request response alerts the respondent to continue the survey without answering if they choose. This response setting was chosen to allow participants to skip questions they found to be too sensitive. The only survey item set to force response was the first item regarding consent. In addition, interview respondents were informed they could skip any questions they found to be too uncomfortable before the interview.

Transferability

To increase the chance of the findings “transferring” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 256) to another setting, this qualitative study included “rich, thick descriptions” (p. 256) of the study setting, as well as the participants in the study, with the researcher including “quotes from participant interviews... and a detailed description of the findings” (p. 256).

Credibility

To ensure credibility, data were triangulated in this study using multiple data collection methods as outlined in the data collection section. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), triangulation is the “best-known strategy to shore up the internal validity” (p. 244). Since interviews were conducted via Zoom, the researcher clarified statements with participants during the interviews to avoid misinterpretation. Due to technical issues with the transcription software, the researcher manually corrected certain parts of the completed transcription for clarity.

To further ensure credibility, one-page “reflective memos” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 196; see Appendix E) were prepared, detailing researcher reflections and “explicit biases” (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.) with the given session topic during and after the observation of a Talk Together session. The reflective memos served as an “audit trail” (p. 252), which aimed to ensure credibility. Reflexivity can aid in clarifying one’s position about the research process (Holmes, 2020).

A “positionality statement” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 62) was prepared to highlight the researcher’s background, privileged statuses, and biases going into the research.

Researcher Positionality

I am a cis-gender, African American man, raised in the South in an all-Black, middle-class household – to two college graduates. I identify as Christian and politically moderate. Based on results from an “Implicit Association Test” (Harvard University, n.d.), I have a moderate automatic preference for Black people over White people. In terms of background, I have had mostly African American K-12 classmates, attended two

HBCUs (Historically Black College or University), and have a wife and daughter that are both African American. These test results create the propensity for me to fall into “in-group favoritism” (Banaji, Bazerman, & Chugh, 2003).

I have served as an instructor of journalism with SRU university since the fall of 2013 and have experience fostering discussion around controversial topics, which can be triggering for some students. In addition, I have attended Talk Together sessions since the program’s inception; both as a participant and a co-facilitator.

In terms of the research paradigm and role as an instructor, I often teach current events using more of a critical (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; see Table 4 of Appendix J) epistemological perspective like critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), especially with current events involving marginalized groups, or where there is a stark contrast in “social power” (French & Raven, 2005) between participants. However, my journalistic background prompts the consideration of the underlying backstory that caused someone to arrive at a particular destination, regardless of their power position. For that reason, I am more likely to frame a dilemma through a constructivist (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 13; see Table 4 of Appendix J) lens. Constructivist theories focus on the processes by which learners build their mental structures when interacting with an environment. (Wenger, 2018). As a trained journalist in the traditional sense of the word, and not the opinionated, cable news sense, my goal is to be objective and to consider multiple sides of a story, gather as much information as possible, and let the audience decide what the truth is in each matter – acting more as an archivist, and less as an advocate. I believe in documenting moments in time, with those moments not becoming altered by my opinion. As a scholar, I will follow that same action.

A potential bias or weakness related to this research was my inclination toward persuasion and my connection to the Talk Together facilitator. When analyzing qualitative data, I needed to have safeguards in place to ensure persuasion did not bias the findings. Also, as a close friend of the Talk Together facilitator, I needed to ensure my relationship with him did not cloud or supersede my ability to stay honest with my observations and insights.

Significance of the Study

This research is valuable to institutions of higher education looking to facilitate a culture of constructive engagement through listening, learning, and growth. This study adds to the body of literature examining how the transformative learning framework can be applied to practice – within the context of critical dialogue in higher education. Findings from this research will provide leaders in higher education a baseline to measure the impact of similar programs aimed at facilitating civil discourse on college campuses.

Definition of Terms

Action: Action refers to the accomplishment of a thing usually over some time, in stages, or with the possibility of repetition (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Assessment: An assessment is the action or an instance of making a judgment about something, or an appraisal. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Assumption: An assumption is a fact or statement that is assumed to be true (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Autonomy: Autonomy refers to “the understanding, skills, and disposition necessary to become critically reflective of one’s assumptions and to engage effectively in discourse

to validate one's beliefs through the experiences of others who share universal values" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 9).

Civil: To be civil means to be courteous and polite (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Connection: Connection refers to a contextual relation or association (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Consciousness: Consciousness is the awareness or perception of something by a person (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Conversation: A conversation is an informal talk involving two people or a small group of people (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Conviction: A conviction is an idea that is believed to be true or valid without positive knowledge (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Critical: The state of being critical involves careful judgment or judicious evaluation. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Dialogue: A dialogue is a cooperative, two-way conversation, where the goal is for participants to exchange information and build relationships with one another (Angel, 2016).

Dilemma: A dilemma is a situation in which a difficult choice must be made between two or more alternatives, especially equally undesirable ones (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Discontent: To have discontent refers to having a lack of satisfaction with one's possessions, status, or situation: lack of contentment (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Discourse: A discourse is a style of communication that is one way, to deliver information from the speaker/writer to the listener/reader (Angel, 2016). The act of discourse also involves critically reflective thinking on the part of the listener (Mezirow,

2009). “Discourse is a special kind of dialogue in which we focus on content and attempt to justify beliefs by giving and defending reasons and by examining the evidence for and against competing viewpoints” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 225).

Disorienting: The term, disorienting, refers to something causing a feeling of confusion (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Diversity: Diversity refers to the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Explicit bias or conscious bias: This is a type of bias where the person is clear about his or her feelings and attitudes, and related behaviors are conducted with intent (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.).

Exploration: Exploration involves the analysis of a subject or theme (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Implicit or unconscious bias: This is a type of bias that operates outside of the person’s awareness and can be in direct contradiction to a person’s espoused beliefs and values (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.).

Intersectionality: Intersectionality describes how systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and other forms of discrimination “intersect” to create unique dynamics and effects (Center for Intersectional Justice, n.d.).

Recognition: Recognition refers to the knowledge or feeling that someone or something present has been encountered before (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Relationship: Relationship refers to the relation connection or the binding of participants in a relationship (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Role: A role is a socially expected behavior pattern usually determined by an individual's status in a particular society (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Self-examination: Self-examination is a reflective examination (of one's beliefs or motives) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Transformation: Transformation is the act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Whereas a formative process is one of socialization and learning adult roles, a transformative process, in adulthood, involves alienation from those roles, reframing new perspectives, and re-engaging life with a greater degree of self-determination (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978).

SECTION TWO: PRACTITIONER CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

Historical Context

State Regional University's (SRU) division of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (State Regional University website, 2021) evaluates campus climate through climate surveys (Diversity Works, 2015), and supports initiatives that tie into the university's long-range plan (State Regional University website, 2021). One of those initiatives is the Talk Together program; a partnership between SRU's division of diversity, equity, and inclusion and the department of sociology and anthropology. One goal of Talk Together is to create a space where differences in values are acknowledged and perspectives are shared on a variety of topics not discussed, collectively, in other spaces. The idea is for those who enter the Talk Together space to be transformed by what they have learned, rather than leaving the same way they arrived.

The following section outlines the practitioner context for this study, which examines the Talk Together program through the framework of transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018).

Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

At SRU, an emphasis is placed on teaching cultural competence. Levesque-Bristol and Cornelius-White (2012) argued, "Cultural competence begins with cultural self-awareness" (p. 698). To help students gain that self-awareness, SRU's website stated one of its goals is for students to recognize and respect "multiple perspectives and cultures" (State Regional University website, 2021). SRU reinforces cultural competence with annual conferences held on campus and through its first-year experience course for incoming freshmen.

SRU's DEI division is charged with developing a university-endorsed inclusive community (State Regional University website, 2021). The division focuses on four critical institutional areas:

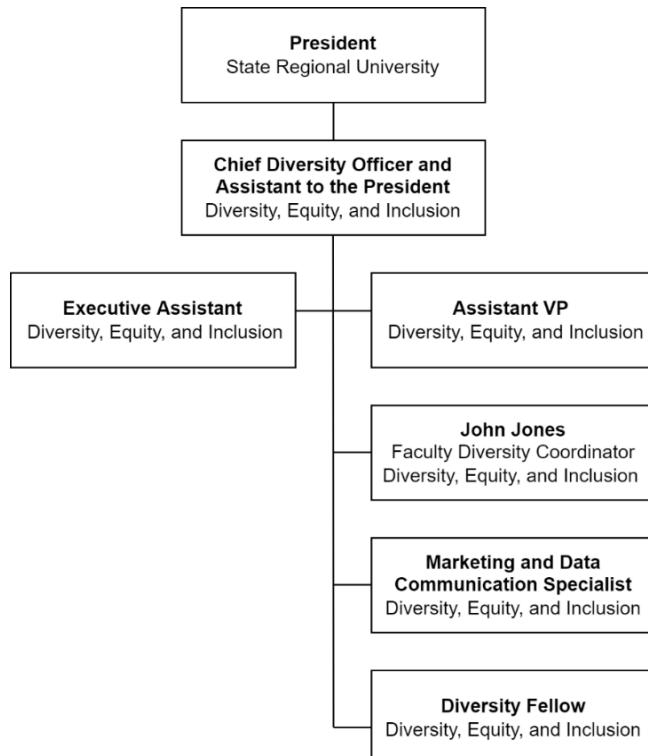
- access, success, and equity
- learning and development
- campus climate
- institutional leadership and commitment (State Regional University website, 2021)

Figure 3 displays an organizational chart of SRU's DEI division as of fall 2021.

The chief diversity officer reports directly to the university president, allowing for a seamless flow of communication involving issues related to DEI:

Figure 3

Organizational Chart of SRU's Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion



Campus and Community Climate Reporting

In the 1980s, climate was used to describe “perceptions and experiences” (Diversity Works, 2015, p. 4) that students, faculty, and staff may have on campus:

Words like ‘chilly,’ ‘uncomfortable,’ ‘hostile,’ ‘inclusive,’ and ‘warm’ were used as adjectives to characterize the climate in higher education for culturally diverse students, like women and African Americans, for example, is predominantly White and male colleges and universities (i.e., sciences, technology STEM fields) (p. 4).

To investigate SRU’s diversity climate, the campus – along with the Community Climate Study Project (CC CSP) – created a committee of university and community stakeholders. Among the benefits of a campus climate research project is that it shows an institution’s “commitment to equity,” (p. 4) and whether it “engages the campus community” (p. 4) in DEI-related matters. In addition, a climate study helps a university determine if benchmarks are being met regarding diverse student enrollment and retention. Coordinated through the Office of the Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the CC CSP consisted of

- climate survey instruments and focus groups for both students and employees,
- informal interviews of administrators, faculty, and staff, and
- community interviews and discussion groups (p. 4).

Among the recommendations, researchers noted that since students on campus tended to segregate themselves, SRU needed more campus programs and initiatives that encouraged “intercultural interactions” (p. 67).

Long-Range Plan

SRU's public affairs mission is part of the university's 2021-2026 Long-Range Plan (State Regional University website, 2021). Within the plan, inclusive excellence is listed as one of the major themes. SRU noted it is committed to being a culturally conscious leader (State Regional University website, 2021). SRU further noted it values inclusiveness, fairness, equity, and social justice (State Regional University website, 2021). As for the future focus, SRU aims to "weave inclusion and equity through the fabric of campus" (State Regional University website, 2021). In addition, as part of the SRU's future focus:

Members of the campus community will feel a sense of belonging, support, and value Faculty, staff, and students will strengthen their awareness of cultural consciousness and civility through day-to-day interactions and intentional measures that cultivate: (a) a deepened understanding of self-awareness, (b) an appreciation of other viewpoints and perspectives, (c) mindfulness, and the ability to be present in opportunities to learn and understand, (d) and the capacity to embrace and celebrate differences. (State Regional University website, 2021)

Organizational Analysis

The genesis of the Talk Together program came from classroom discussions and students saying they wanted a safe environment to interact with one another and discuss topics that "classroom syllabi don't always allow" (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016). The program's creation also followed racial unrest in Missouri and across the country following the police shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown in the city of Ferguson (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021) and subsequent demonstrations

(Mitchell, 2014) on SRU's campus. At Talk Together, students are exposed to a variety of viewpoints. The facilitator sets ground rules designed to invite participation, explain the importance of civility, and emphasize that this is a "no holds barred conversation" (J. Howard, personal communication, September 28, 2017).

During the 2015-2016 academic school year, a program evaluation (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016) was conducted of SRU's Talk Together program by a higher education consultant. As part of the evaluation, a survey was given to 188 participants and received a 24% response rate. Eighty-four percent of respondents attended between 1-3 Talk Together sessions, while the remainder had attended four or more sessions. There were two research questions:

- 1) How do participants experience Talk Together dialogues?
- 2) What do they perceive as the impacts of participation?

Among the results, 30% of respondents somewhat agreed that Talk Together brought them in contact with people whom they would have had a difficult time approaching in another context. Eighty percent responded Talk Together helped them develop strategies for approaching topics that are typically avoided in public discussions, and 66% of respondents said it was extremely likely they would attend a future Talk Together session. While this evaluation notes positive feedback from participants, there are other areas where evaluators noted the program could improve. For example, the program could benefit from having additional facilitators which would help create smaller group sessions. Evaluators explained having many participants in the room created too much distance, and that distance creates a situation where people are uncomfortable speaking in

such a large group. In other words, having too many people is “counterproductive to the dialogue” (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016).

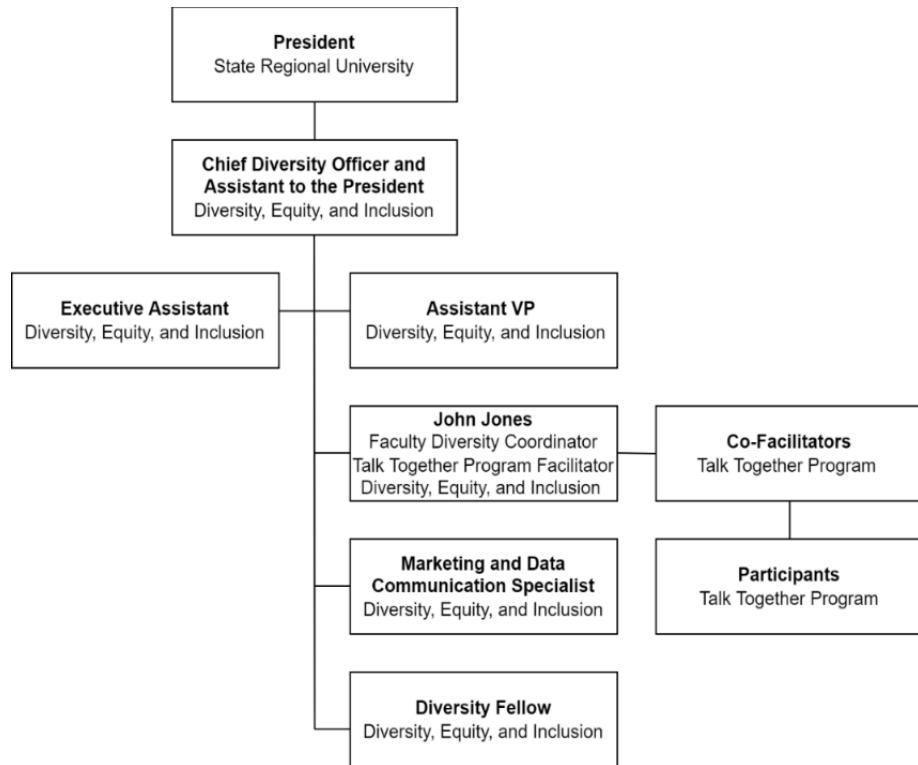
Using a multiframe (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 20) approach, I will provide an analysis of the Talk Together program through the following frames: structural (p. 43), human resource (p. 113), political (p. 179), and symbolic (p. 235). As Bolman and Deal (2017) argued, reframing allows you to think about a problem from more than one perspective, which helps you to create “alternative diagnoses and strategies” (p. 6).

Structural Frame Analysis

According to Bolman and Deal (2017), the structural perspective argues for “putting people in the right roles and relationships” (p. 47). SRU’s Talk Together program is led by an assistant professor in SRU’s department of sociology and anthropology. For this research, we will give this assistant professor the pseudonym John Jones. Jones also serves in SRU’s DEI division as the faculty diversity coordinator. Because of Jones’s role as Assistant Professor of Sociology at SRU, and “his involvement with diversity, community, and business-related activities outside of the university setting” (Temple, 2018), he can provide context on a large array of topics. While Jones gains support for Talk Together through SRU’s Department of Sociology and Anthropology, he also serves within SRU’s DEI division, which assists in facilitating and promoting monthly Talk Together sessions (see Figure 4):

Figure 4

Organizational Chart of SRU's Talk Together Program



Talk Together sessions are typically held during the fall and spring semesters, both in person and virtually. Oftentimes, impromptu Talk Together forums are held in response to current events. These forums are advertised via email, flyers, social media, and SRU's webpage. Each session has a theme or pre-determined topic. Session topics tend to coincide with current events. So, while there may be a bit of planning with regards to monthly sessions, topics may be adjusted so that conversations are timely. One of the keys to keeping Talk Together relevant is that conversations align with current news events and address sentiments shared by the public at a given moment in history. While some Talk Together sessions are facilitated by Jones and a co-facilitator, many are facilitated solely by him. Co-facilitators are usually faculty or staff chosen by Jones and have, likely, attended a Talk Together session before. These sessions have mixed

attendance, with varying attendance totals. During a 2016 evaluation of the Talk Together program (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016), several sessions were standing room only, with some attendees sitting on the floor. Attendance of 40 to 50 participants was not uncommon and campus staff and administrators also began to participate. Participant demographics vary in age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and academic status. Since most sessions are between 12:30 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. CST, they coincide with the lunch hour. Because of this, Jones will usually provide pizza or light refreshments. Once Jones starts the session, he asks a prompt question related to that topic and allows participants to answer. Sessions take place within a classroom or meeting room setting. Everyone, including the facilitator, is usually sitting down. The seats are arranged where the participants can see one another, either in a 180-degree or 360-degree fashion – depending on the number of attendees. Participants respond verbally. If no one is willing to give a response to the prompt question, Jones will either make a statement to move the conversation along or pick a participant at random to answer the question. This style of moderation goes on for about 50 minutes until the last 5-10 minutes when Jones offers closing remarks on the current topic and announces other housekeeping items related to future meetings. In terms of topic duration, a Talk Together session topic tends to begin and end on one day, versus expanding a topic over several days.

As stated earlier, a challenge noted in the program evaluation was the “lack of trained facilitators” (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016) needed to help the program grow. Evaluators noted a need to expand the capacity of this program to provide smaller sessions. A trained facilitator could be a faculty member, but based on

the nature of some topics, the Talk Together facilitator would need to have some general knowledge of current events, and knowledge of issues about DEI. For example, having a general knowledge of definitions related to gender identity and the LGBTQ+ community would aid in the facilitator's ability to provide context within certain conversations. It would also be beneficial if a facilitator was knowledgeable in issues surrounding mental health. If a facilitator were not adequately trained in certain areas related to Talk Together topics, that person would need to have access to resources and speakers that could give context during a discussion. The program evaluation did note that, at some point, training would be employed to provide more facilitators and create smaller session sizes. However, there was no ideal session size noted.

Human Resources Frame Analysis

The human resource frame centers on what organizations and people do “to and for one another” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 113). Talk Together represents a safe space on campus where “commonly avoided topics can be discussed within a productive manner” (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016). Depending on the nature of the sessions, some participants may find Talk Together to be affirming. Connecting back to SRU’s campus and community climate study conducted in 2015, Talk Together addresses a finding that there were “‘not enough’ opportunities for mixing and interaction among diverse students” (Diversity Works, 2015, p. 48). While many college classrooms create opportunities for a diverse group of students to offer perspectives on a range of topics, the opportunity for those students to have meaningful dialogue around controversial topics may not exist, due to the nature of the course and time restrictions.

The 2016 program evaluation noted, following the completion of the session surrounding the police shooting deaths of several Black men, and the shootings of Dallas police officers, researchers observed participants “crossing the room to contact and provide comfort to other participants who had expressed deep emotion and sadness” (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016). This example exemplifies how, if allowed, Talk Together forums can be more than a place of dialogue; they can also serve as a space for healing, reconciliation, and transformation. Drawing on other theories in program planning and dialogue, Talk Together evaluators offered a list of “outcomes and potential impacts of a sustained and well-developed Talk Together program” (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016) which ties back into the human resource frame (Bolman & Deal, 2017). As outlined in Figure 5, an output of the Talk Together program theory is the regular intergroup dialogue piece. The consistency and constant availability of such a forum allow participants multiple opportunities to engage in civil discourse outside of the normal classroom setting. This constant engagement is also happening across a series of news cycles which could have a direct impact on campus sentiment. A highlight noted among potential impacts is the idea of participants having a greater sense of belonging and experiencing persistence to graduation. Relating to the human resources framework (Bolman & Deal, 2017), participant-students who are engaged in conversation around difficult topics are, in a sense, connected to a conversation, versus disconnected and isolated:

Figure 5

Emergent Talk Together Program Theory

| Inputs | Activities | Outputs | Outcomes | Potential Impacts |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Facilitator Time and Emotional Investment | Advertising Communication Sourcing Funds Data Tracking Topic Selection Email Follow-up | Regular Intergroup Dialogue Sessions about Current Events | Students and Staff Met People They Perceived as Different from Themselves | Greater Sense of Belongingness Leads to Persistence to Graduation |
| Admin. Assist. Time | Org. Food and Space Data Tracking | Opportunity for Meeting 'Other' | Participants Heard Perspectives of Those Not Like Themselves | Increased Self-Awareness in Participants |
| Facilities | Space for Sessions | Opportunity to Hear Lived Experiences of 'Other' | Small Group of Participants Form Sense of Belongingness with One Another | Increasingly Complex Thinking about Diversity Among Participants |
| Funding | Refreshments and Materials for Sessions | | | |

Note. (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016).

Oftentimes, discussions during Talk Together can serve as a trigger for participants having experienced trauma. Because Jones's background in community engagement, he is aware of services and support for participants and will make recommendations as needed, such as mental health and domestic violence services. For those who facilitate a Talk Together forum, having a contact list of resources readily available for participants would prove to be a valuable tool in helping participants feel supported. In more critical cases, it may be helpful for a facilitator to partner with a representative of SRU's counseling center to offer support and guidance during a Talk Together session when possible.

An area of concern for some Talk Together participants is a perceived lack of privacy experienced when speaking to others regarding sensitive topics. Logistically, there may be a way to have more sensitive conversations during private, virtual, or in-

person breakout sessions. However, to accomplish this, there may need to be more time allotted for the sessions.

Political and Symbolic Frame Analysis

Allport (1954) is credited with developing intergroup contact theory. A lot of his research centers on an idea that intergroup contact – under certain conditions – can reduce prejudice between in-group and out-group members. An in-group is defined as a group of people “who use the term ‘we’ with the same essential significance” (p. 31-32). A central question Allport asks is “whether one’s loyalty to the in-group automatically implies disloyalty, or hostility, or other forms of negativism, toward out-groups” (p. 41). In the context of Talk Together, in-group members will be tied to one another “symbolically” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 235) or come with a “political” (p. 179) agenda of wanting to influence a civil dialogue. Not understanding language, symbols, and meaning can cause attempts at civil discourse to fall flat, with a facilitator facing a proverbial brick wall when attempting to broker dialogue. Bolman and Deal (2017) noted, “in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity, symbols arise to help people resolve confusion, find direction, and anchor hope and faith” (p. 242). For a facilitator of a Talk Together forum, especially during times of campus unrest, it would be helpful to know how an in-group is symbolically connected. In the “political frame” (p. 179), “politics easily becomes a cynical self-fulfilling prophecy, reinforcing conflict and mistrust while sacrificing opportunities for rational discourse, collaboration, and hope” (p. 323). Within civil dialogue, participants must be willing to place “conflict, power, and self-interest” (p. 304) aside.

Leadership Analysis

Due to the nature of Talk Together, anyone attempting to facilitate a session should have “emotional intelligence” (Northouse, 2019):

Emotional intelligence has to do with our emotions (affective domain) and thinking (cognitive domain), and the interplay between the two.... The underlying premise suggested by this framework is that people who are more sensitive to their emotions and the impact of their emotions on others will be more effective leaders. (p. 92)

A Talk Together session, in one instance, can be extremely calm. In another instance, a dialogue can spiral out of control. If a facilitator cannot read the room and pick up on distress cues from participants, that facilitator can lose control of the conversation, causing participants to become hostile or shut down.

Maintaining control of the dialogue and ensuring participants feel heard and respected is an important leadership component of the Talk Together experience.

While a facilitator may not know each participant personally, all parties are best served when the facilitator centers dialogue expectations within the framework of “transformational leadership” (Northouse, 2019, p. 359), versus “transactional leadership” (p. 359). Northouse (2019) argued, “The transactional leader does not individualize the needs of followers or focus on their personal development” (p. 360). Transformational leaders, on the other hand, make room for “individualized consideration” (p. 356) – providing a supportive climate and listening to followers. In the case of Talk Together, a transactional leader may be too contractual in their approach – with participation in the dialogue dependent on some incentive for both parties. In

addition, the motivation to listen to participants may be absent. A transformational leader, however, will have more of an investment in the outcome of the dialogue as well as the well-being of participants. A transformational leader will have a desire for Talk Together participants to “grow through personal challenges” (p. 356).

Furthermore, drawing on path-goal theory (Northouse, 2019), the behaviors of the Talk Together facilitator can have a direct impact on the behavior of participants. “Path-goal theory puts much of the onus on leaders in terms of designing and facilitating a healthy and productive … environment to propel followers toward success” (p. 256). When the Talk Together facilitator exhibits, for example, civil behaviors, it may cause the participants to mirror those behaviors, setting a tone of civility during the session. However, if the leader of the session shows behaviors that are uncivil or unprofessional, participants may interpret those behaviors as permission to become contentious during the dialogue.

Another important leadership consideration with Talk Together is for a facilitator to be aware of explicit or implicit biases they may have toward a respective topic or group of participants. As Kahneman, Lovallo, and Sibony (2011) noted, “Recognizing and acknowledging biases demands that we abandon our faith in our objectivity and our ability to be fair” (p. 116). Since Talk Together sessions are framed around current news events, discussions can span the political spectrum. Before entering a scheduled Talk Together session, a facilitator could create a positionality statement to acknowledge biases before starting the session. This statement would not have to be shared publicly; it would rather serve as an exercise of self-evaluation before entering the session, where participants will offer an array of perspectives. To that end, the facilitator should also

consider completing the Implicit Association Test (Harvard University, n.d.), which helps reveal unconscious beliefs by using a series of tests related to positive or negative connotations. Implicit or explicit bias from a Talk Together facilitator can impact the nature of the questions asked of participants, how participants are selected to answer questions, and the overall direction of the dialogue. Unconscious bias could also impact how a facilitator listens to participants when they are sharing their stories – using frames that may be discriminatory.

Summary

Through its public affairs mission and focus on ethical leadership, cultural competence, and community engagement (State Regional University website, 2021), SRU is attempting to create a culture of civil discourse among faculty, staff, and students. This effort is enhanced through its DEI initiatives. The Talk Together initiative, born in response to a need for greater understanding between groups and individuals discussing controversial topics, provides a framework for participants to see one another's humanity. Speaking from a “structural” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 43) lens, there are several ways to create an in-person environment conducive to facilitating a Talk Together session, including online formats. The challenge for a successful session, however, rests on the facilitator. A person facilitating such a dialogue must be willing to address their own biases, be a great listener, and be willing to learn the terminology that allows for discussions and participant responses to have greater context – while creating an environment conducive to the sharing of diverse viewpoints.

This research aims to evaluate the impact of the Talk Together program on participants adopting part of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018). This research examines the extent to which transformation occurs. The findings of this research have implications not only within academic settings but in any space where civil discourse occurs.

SECTION THREE: SCHOLARLY CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

The act of civil discourse serves to find common ground on controversial and complex issues, promote understanding, or move policy forward. Mungi Ngomane, the granddaughter of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, posited, “Talking to those with opposing views” (Ngomane, 2020, p. 50) is what the Tutu Foundation in the UK, founded in 2007, encouraged people to do through a program called Conversations for Change. In this program, Ngomane (2020) explained the goal was to create an opportunity for people, who may have been connected geographically but not socially, to have dialogue. The Tutu Foundation’s values are based on the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. According to Ngomane (2020), her grandfather explained the essence of Ubuntu with the following quote: “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours” (p. 13):

Ubuntu encourages us to drop our judgments and embrace compassion and understanding. It invites us to turn down the volume of our own (often) self-righteous inner voice and start asking questions on behalf of the other person. Only then can we understand what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

(p. 47)

A large part of dialogue involves hearing and considering dissenting opinions. Crowley (2006) argued when people feel their opinions are not considered, they may “lose their desire to participate in democratic practices” (p. 2). According to the American University’s Project on Civil Discourse (2022), our existence as American citizens depends on us being able to have dialogue and eventually deciding on a course of action. Castellanos and Cole (2015), when discussing the challenges of the 21st century, said the changing ethnic and racial landscape, coupled with economic challenges around the globe, “necessitate considerable attention to differences among nations, groups, and

individuals” (p. 794). Meanwhile, Crowley (2006) pointed out a key barrier to constructive civil discourse is the conflict between “liberalism and Christian fundamentalism” (p. 2).

While the act of dialogue has served as a way for participants to share diverse perspectives and critically analyze emerging dilemmas, it has not always resulted in transformative learning, where there is critical reflection resulting in action. Werman et al. (2019) argued, “The development of critical consciousness requires students to challenge their own biases, values, and beliefs” (p. 252). The purpose of this literature review is to highlight emerging trends and frameworks related to group dialogue. The aim is to show how scholarship has been applied, practically, in fostering dialogue among diverse groups of people involved in difficult conversations. The review of literature starts with the definition of several types of conversations. Next, various frameworks will be discussed showing how dialogue has been applied as a means of problem-solving among diverse groups; those frameworks include “joint fact-finding” (Karl, Herman, Susskind, & Wallace, 2007) and the “charrette process” (Hughes, 2017). From there, we will explore the elements used in facilitating civil discourse within higher education; unpacking concepts like “brave spaces” (Arao & Clemens, 2013) and “cultural proficiency” (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009). Next, we will highlight theoretical frameworks used to understand dialogue: “intergroup contact theory” (Allport, 1954), and intergroup dialogue theory (Jackson, 2020). We will end with a look at the guiding theoretical framework informing this study: transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018).

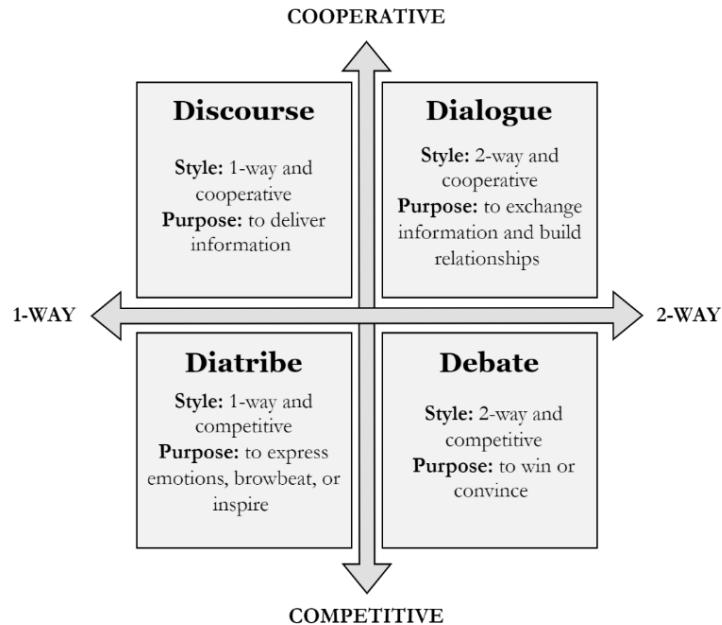
Defining a Conversation

A conversation is an “informal talk involving two people or a small group of people” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). According to Cooney, Boothby, and Lee (2021), engaging in the act of conversation … might be the “closest people come to truly know the thoughts of another person” (p. 2). Kumar, Mahdian, and McGlohon (2010) described conversations as “information cascades – phenomena in which an action or idea becomes adopted due to the influence of others” (p. 554). Following conversations, people tend to remember their conversation partners – recalling their stories, advice, and “replaying their criticisms” (Cooney et al., 2021, p. 1).

Angel (2016) made a distinction between several types of conversations. Figure 6 defines four conversation styles that progress from one-way to two-way communication and can be categorized as competitive or cooperative.

Figure 6

Four Types of Conversations



Note. (Angel, 2016).

According to Angel (2016), discourse is a style of communication that is one way, to deliver information from the speaker/writer to the listener/reader. Discourse is cooperative since someone must be willing to be on the receiving end of it. Akin to discourse is a diatribe, where someone is standing on their proverbial soapbox. The purpose of the diatribe is to express emotions, browbeat those that disagree with you, or inspire those that share the same perspective (Angel, 2016). A debate is a competitive, two-way conversation. The goal is to win an argument or convince someone, such as the other participant or third-party observers (Angel, 2016). A debate may or may not involve actively listening to the other party. Finally, a dialogue is a cooperative, two-way conversation, where the goal is for participants to exchange information and build relationships with one another (Angel, 2016). While conversation, discourse, and dialogue are used interchangeably as terms in this study, Mezirow's literature uses discourse as the operative term. According to Mezirow (1994), discourse refers to a "special kind of dialogue in which we focus on content and attempt to justify beliefs by giving and defending reasons and by examining the evidence for and against competing viewpoints" (p. 225).

Dialogue Using Joint Fact-Finding

Joint fact-finding (JFF) provides a framework for involving those affected by policy decisions "in a continual process of generating and analyzing...information" (Karl et al., 2007, p. 23). JFF is a multistep process that includes

- understanding the issues and interests,
- determining whether JFF is appropriate,
- scoping the JFF process and defining the precise questions to be addressed,

- determining the most appropriate methods for producing helpful technical inputs into political decision making,
- agreeing on how the JFF results will be used, and
- reviewing the preliminary results of the JFF process (and their policy implications) any final decisions are made (p. 23).

Each step involves established consensus-building techniques. One case study using the JFF model involved the Guadalupe River Flood Control Project Collaborative's assessment of alternative management strategies (Karl et al., 2007). While stakeholders had trouble during the JFF process due to knowledge gaps between engineers and policy experts, they were able to "avoid adversarial legal proceedings and jointly agreed upon project objectives and performance criteria" (p. 26). Having a "trusted and non-partisan facilitator, clear process guidelines, and the value of scoping a conflict beforehand" (p. 29) were factors that led to success in this case study.

The Charrette Process

A charrette (Hughes, 2017) offers a model for developing an academic discourse that stimulates productive interactions between learners and educators. This 19th-century French term was originally used in an architectural context and refers to an intense final effort to collaborate on a project or design (Hughes, 2017). "Ideally, the charrette is led by a skilled facilitator who is not part of the stakeholders' community" (Hughes, 2017) – only serving as moderator to keep stakeholders on task. Also, the idea is to create a space where the participants themselves are the designers and not just the recipients of a design. Therefore, the charrette method benefits by having participants from a wide range of disciplines and varying socio-economic statuses.

The 2019 feature-length film entitled, “The Best of Enemies” detailed an example of how the charrette framework was used in a true-life story based in Durham, North Carolina in the early 1970s. The charrette, which “provides a participatory environment for exploration” (Hughes, 2017), was held among Black and White community leaders to determine “whether Durham schools would desegregate” (Wood, 2019) following a fire at the majority Black school. In the film, the lead facilitator appointed someone to represent each opposing group, and group leaders had to appoint five or more voting members. As a body, the entire group spent several days debating and creating school policy recommendations. In the end, each policy recommendation needed to receive a majority vote of the entire body to pass.

Charrettes have been used in several educational settings related to curriculum planning, policy development, school construction, and the crafting of mission statements (Carlson, Craig, Hoontis, Jaffe, McGee, & Sayegh, 2021). Carlson et al., (2021) studied the effectiveness of the charrette model when examining perceptions of equity and inclusion at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), The City University of New York (CUNY) when considering gaps in graduation and retention rates between ethnic and gender groups. While charrettes have been applied to practice in several settings, researchers have noted challenges related to diversity, where participants feel other stakeholders “cannot understand their perspective” (Carlson et al., 2021). Another challenge points to “a lack of skilled facilitators” (Carlson et al., 2021).

Facilitating Civil Discourse in Higher Education

McGowan and John-Finn (2021) described classroom discussions as opportunities for students to wrestle with ideas but noted that the topic of race can serve as a hindrance

to dialogue by “influencing the overall classroom dynamic” (p. 223). To promote civil discourse in the classroom, United States Courts (U.S. Courts, n.d.) offers a collection of educational materials through its outreach program. One of those programs is a national initiative called Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions that invites students to take part in legal proceedings at federal courthouses. There, students get to witness cases where they could, potentially, find themselves involved (U.S. Courts, n.d.). Among the educational resources is a set of ground rules developed by students in the program aimed at providing a framework for civility:

- don’t interrupt
- listen for content
- find common ground
- follow the direction of the discussion
- ask questions
- don’t embarrass yourself or disrespect others
- differentiate between facts and opinions (U.S. Courts, n.d.)

The overall goal of the educational outreach initiative is to stimulate the critical thinking and civil discussion skills of future jurors and invested citizens. This civility program is catered to high school and college students.

To facilitate civil discourse among honors students at the University of Central Arkansas, a student-led program called “Tough Talks” (Horton, Corbitt, & White, 2021) was implemented, targeting freshmen students. These talks, led by student mentors, happened once a month. Each Tough Talk centered on a different theme. “Issues such as race, religion, politics, gender, and sexual orientation are carefully curated to help

students practice and hone their dialogue skills outside the classroom where grades are not a factor” (p. 109). Participants followed a set of ground rules where they agreed not to engage in “verbally pounding other students for expressing unpopular ideas” (p. 111). Another part of this Tough Talk program was the moral reflection, where students were able to ask questions they were curious about, “but felt they couldn’t ask or were scared to ask” (p. 111). Using a brave space (Horton et al., 2021) rather than a safe space framework, students were recognized for their willingness to be uncomfortable and vulnerable. As Murphy, Soyer, and Martinez-Cola (2021) posited, “Risk and discomfort are inevitable in discussions of inequality, and instructors have a responsibility to create spaces that support authentic, structured conversation” (p. 7).

From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces

Horton et al. (2021) explained that safe spaces allow students to express their values without fear of confrontation. A central question, posed by Flensner and Lippe (2019), is whether a safe space can be open to a variety of opinions, particularly those that are not mainstream - and still be considered safe.

In research involving student resident assistants and diversity training for an upcoming school year, Arao and Clemens (2013) found that following certain activities in the training, some participants gave critical feedback which appeared to be “largely dependent on the social identities of the participants and the degree to which their target or agent group identities held salience for them” (p. 137). Arao and Clemens (2013) further discovered:

The simple act of using the term brave space at the outset of a program, workshop, or class, has a positive impact in and of itself, transforming a

conversation that can otherwise be treated merely as setting tone and parameters. (p. 142)

Brave space ideology also supports moving from agreeing to disagreeing, to controversy with civility (Arao & Clemens, 2013). As Love, Gaynor, and Blessett (2016) explained, creating spaces where students can engage their reality in reflective ways ... is important in facilitating difficult dialogues around topics like privilege and oppression.

Cultural Proficiency and Conditions for Change

Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2009) posited creating an atmosphere for personal and structural change starts with knowing the landscape. This is a key tenant within the “cultural proficiency model” (p. 4), where the focus is “values-based and behavioral” (p. 4). Lindsey et al. (2009) further explained at the organizational level, culturally proficient leaders help to create an environment for effective interactions, which includes supporting and creating policies and practices that inspire cultural awareness.

When establishing a middle school learning unit around social justice, Gilmour (2021) suggested social identity is a starting point for students discussing race and social justice, regardless of their identities. Gilmour (2021) further explained, “Personal and social identity... provides a foundation for in-depth explorations and analysis of society” (p. 1). Aside from having context of the landscape and one’s identity, Byrners and Hillis (2018) suggested, “A barrier to confront is one’s resistance to change – tackling the question, ‘Why would I want to change?’” (p. 38)? To address that question, they cited research from Wong (2017) who wrote that self-compassion encourages the acknowledgment of flaws and limitations. Like Wong, Sibbett (2016) suggested there

should be a focus on “wholeheartedness” (p. 8), which comes from a person’s desire to care. Wholeheartedness also speaks to a willingness to act in good faith and actively listen “to those perspectives that contradict our views” (p. 8).

Instruction Versus Action-Oriented Learning

Hinton and Grim (2021) argued using case studies as part of teaching and learning has been a widely used approach. Furthermore, Howard-Hamilton (2000) stated case studies, particularly when used in small group discussions, can “evoke moral dilemma decision making” (p. 51). Hinton and Grim (2021) expanded on the use of case studies in student learning by stressing the importance of being “action-oriented” (p. 19). While students have traditionally gained knowledge through lectures and “banking” (p. 19), where “students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 2005, p. 72), Hinton and Grim (2021) argued the best framework is one that is action-based and gives students and teachers a platform to “heighten their sense of inquiry and transformation” (p. 19). In contrast to action-oriented learning, Freire (2005) explained that banking education hides or overshadows reality. Freire (2005) further discouraged the banking teaching method, noting that it “resists dialogue” (p. 83).

Barr and Tagg (1995) argued in favor of the learning paradigm as one that is more holistic – where students are “active discoverers and constructors of their own knowledge” (p. 21). To present a roadmap for the learning paradigm, Hinton and Grim (2021) noted, “Coursework can often involve simulated environments through collaborative, experimental, dialogue, and other active learning techniques” (p. 19). This is particularly important today as institutions of higher education grapple with ways to

address changing demographics which often comes with an “unleashing of suppressed voices on college campuses ...” (p. 17). Barr and Tagg (1995) further explained:

To build the colleges we need for the 21st century - to put our minds where our hearts are and rejoin acts with beliefs - we must consciously reject the instruction paradigm and restructure what we do based on the learning paradigm (p. 14).

Intergroup Contact Theory

Allport (1954) posited if there is an in-group, a corresponding out-group always exists. Allport’s research laid the foundation for what is known as intergroup contact theory, the idea that, under certain conditions, prejudice can be reduced between majority and minority group members. To this end, four key conditions are necessary for effective intergroup contact (Bruening et al., 2014, p. 36):

1. There should be equal status among group members within the contact situation.
2. Group members involved in the contact situation should engage in focused interdependent activities toward the pursuit of common goals.
3. The contact situation should occur in an environment that fosters cooperation rather than competition between group members.
4. The contact situation should have the proper approval and support of any relevant authorities.

According to Pettigrew and Tropp (2008), when there is intergroup contact or close cross-group friendships, there is great potential for members to empathize with one another’s concerns – contributing to improved intergroup attitudes and a “reduction of prejudice” (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008, p. 923). For example, in research involving a group

of American missionaries and their volunteer contact with Mexicans... Ridge and Montoya (2013) found, "Missionaries experienced a general reduction in prejudice toward Mexicans whether ... their interactions were carried out in English or Spanish" (p. 476). The same finding could be true for individuals serving in the military. Time spent serving together could lead to a reduction in prejudice among a diverse group of soldiers.

In examining causal conditions for positive interaction, Seate et al. (2015) inquired about what was necessary for making intergroup contact "an effective prejudice reduction technique" (p. 136). Their research aimed to understand causal conditions for producing "positive attitudes toward illegal immigrants" (p. 147). Their findings revealed that while certain combinations of conditions for contact are enough to produce positive attitudes toward social group members, "there are no necessary causes" (p. 135).

A more contemporary example of an initiative using intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) in the context of facilitating civil discourse was highlighted in a *60 Minutes* news story from January 2022 entitled, "Bridging America's political divide with conversations, 'one small step' at a time" (O'Donnell, 2022). In the report, author and radio producer Dave Isay, founder of StoryCorps – an award-winning initiative that aims to record stories and conversations around the country of everyday citizens – referenced contact theory as the basis for his initiative: One Small Step (O'Donnell, 2022):

The focus of One Small Step is to capture conversations with people across the political divide. One Small Step pairs strangers with different beliefs for a 50-minute conversation about their lives – not about politics.

Each conversation is archived with the Library of Congress. A small

number of interviews are edited into short audio and animated stories that showcase the impact of One Small Step. Participants are selected and matched with an interview partner after filling out a questionnaire on the StoryCorps website. One Small Step is based on contact theory, which states that meaningful interaction between people with opposing views can help turn ‘thems’ into ‘us-es.’ (StoryCorps, 2022)

Isay noted that when you take two people at odds with one another and allow them to talk with each other under certain conditions “that hate can melt away” (O’Donnell, 2022). Isay further explained that based on his research, there is an “exhausted majority in America” (O’Donnell, 2022); they are scared, they are tired of the divisions in America, and they “want to figure a way out” (O’Donnell, 2022).

Intergroup Dialogue Theory

In higher education, Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) follows a critical-dialogic model (Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin, & Maxwell, 2009). Intergroup dialogue theory (IGD) “brings together … different social identity groups who ‘share a history of contentious relationships with each other or have lacked opportunities to talk in meaningful ways’” (Nagda et al., 2009, p. 46). Critical-dialogic IGD involves four stages:

1. In the first stage, facilitators help build relationships and create a climate where participants can have meaningful dialogue. Guidelines and norms are established, and participants talk about the meaning of dialogue (as opposed to debate or discussion).
2. In the second stage, commonalities and differences are explored.

3. The third stage entails dialoguing about contentious social issues (e.g., racial bias in policing in a race dialogue).
4. Finally, the fourth stage focuses on coalition building and social action planning (White et al., 2019, p. 181).

In a study examining the experiences of doctoral students who facilitated IGD as part of their counseling program, White et al. (2019) found that while some participants “identified shifts in their behaviors and thoughts that moved them toward ally identities, with internalized social justice values (p. 186), “Some participants described a lack of self-efficacy in IGD facilitation” (p. 185), where facilitators believed they could have done more to produce a positive outcome. In addition, participants expressed concern about how their choices could have impacted the group, “feeling that they could have made different choices to foster deeper dialogue” (p. 185).

Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018) draws on a “constructivist perspective about how we humans make meaning of our experience” (Fisher-Yoshida, 2009, p. 4). According to Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger (2015):

Mezirow’s theory...argued every individual has a particular view of the world. The worldview may or may not be well articulated, but it is usually based on a set of paradigmatic assumptions that derive from the individual’s upbringing, life experience, culture, or education. (p. 11)

Referencing Mezirow’s philosophy of what it takes to create a disorienting dilemma, Christie et al. (2015) noted, “Particular points of view can become so

ingrained that it takes a powerful human catalyst, a forceful argument or what he calls a disorienting dilemma to shake them” (p. 11). Experiencing this disorienting dilemma is the first of ten phases of learning that become clarified in the transformative process:

- a disorienting dilemma
- self-examination
- a critical assessment of assumptions
- recognition of a connection between one’s discontent and the process of transformation
- exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
- planning a course of action
- acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan
- provisional trying of new roles
- building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- a reintegration into one’s life based on conditions dictated by one’s new perspective (Mezirow, 1994; 2009; 2018)

Christie et al. (2015) conducted a critical analysis of three case studies where Mezirow’s theory was used as a framework for practice. Among the research methods used was a “values survey” (p. 26) which helped to trigger disorienting dilemmas. Research methods also included interviews and focus groups. Their analysis concluded:

Courses and workshops that are constructivist in nature can reveal the way all knowledge in all fields are social constructs and offer participants an opportunity to reconsider their own worldview and critique the

assumptions that underlie that view. If they decide that some of those assumptions are invalid, they have the possibility to change both their beliefs and their behavior. (Christie et al., 2015, p. 22)

Desapio (2017) determined that while Mezirow's theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 2009; 2018) has been widely "analyzed, tested, critiqued, and embraced" (p. 56), current scholarship is centered more on defining transformative learning, rather than "implementing a transformational learning program in a given context" (p. 58).

Summary

There is a wealth of literature examining the importance of civil dialogue to a democratic society. In the context of higher education, current scholarship has placed a growing emphasis on the use of brave spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013) as a key to allowing participants the freedom to conduct, and the vulnerability to process difficult conversations – as opposed to safe spaces. As research has expanded on the frameworks of intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) and intergroup dialogue (Jackson, 2020), there remains a great opportunity to examine how transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018) is applied to practice, particularly in the context of civil discourse within higher education.

SECTION FOUR: CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

To be presented to:
Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL)
State Regional University

Executive Summary

Life-Changing Conversations: A Look at How One Civil Discourse Program at a Midwestern State University Impacts the Transformative Learning of its' Participants.

By Leonard B. Horton, III

Problem Statement and Purpose of the Study

Efforts to facilitate civil discourse programs on college campuses that create transformative learning opportunities can fall short, either due to the lack of time allowed for inquiry, reflection, and follow-up – or because opportunities for dialogue are not created consistently. The purpose of this study is to examine the Talk Together program’s impact on the transformative learning of its participants. The aim is not just to see if transformation is evident, but to know to what degree transformation is evident.

Theoretical Framework

The guiding framework for this research is Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2018), a framework widely used when studying adult learners. Mezirow defines transformative learning as “the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (p. 116).

Research Questions

This research draws on the first five phases of transformative learning theory. The research questions ask in what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest the first five transformative learning phases among participants:

- RQ1: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest a disorienting dilemma?
- RQ2: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest self-examination?
- RQ3: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest a critical assessment of assumptions?
- RQ4: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest the recognition of a connection between one’s discontent and the process of transformation?

- RQ5: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest an exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action (Mezirow, 1994; 2009; 2018)?

Study Design

The researcher utilized a qualitative case study design. The setting was State Regional University (SRU), a four-year public institution in the Midwest. It has a campus enrollment of over 20,000 students. The population included roughly 880 current faculty, staff, and students at the site university who attended Talk Together, as well as those who graduated or relocated since Talk Together's inception in 2015. The sample size was 53 participants, recruited using a mix of "purposeful" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and "snowball" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) sampling. Data collection included two field observations of Talk Together sessions, 12 interviews, an online survey, and a collection of articles and other artifacts pertaining to the study. In addition to Likert-type and open-ended items, the survey also captured some demographic data: level of education, race, religion/spirituality, ethnicity, age, and gender identity. This data helped the researcher understand the nature of the sample and the degree to which findings can be generalized.

Findings

Findings suggest 10 out of 12 interview participants experienced the first five phases of transformative learning as evidenced by responses given, which connected to the research questions adapted from the transformative learning framework. Meanwhile, 25% of survey respondents reported a range of emotions consistent with experiencing a disorienting dilemma, with at least 30% of survey respondents agreeing or slightly agreeing to experiencing self-reflection, an assessment of assumptions, a connection to transformation, and an exploration of new roles, relationships, and action – evidenced by the open-ended and Likert-type item responses connected to the five research questions – adapted from the transformative learning framework. While transformative learning was undetermined from the observation data, findings led to recommendations that impact the facilitation of the Talk Together program, which, subsequently, impact potential transformative learning for future participants.

Implications for Practice

- This research benefits the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning in its effort to highlight effective teaching practices that improve student learning.
- Civic and non-profit sectors could benefit from this research by using the Talk Together model to facilitate civil discourse programming for members and volunteers.
- The private sector could utilize the Talk Together model to help increase employee motivation, satisfaction, and healthier workplace culture.

- The Talk Together model could be used to better understand and facilitate dialogue between groups that use symbolism as part of their identity, and where that symbolism may create a conflict (e.g., gangs).

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the low survey response rate, which can, partially, be attributed to surveys being sent near the end of the academic school year, survey fatigue, and the researcher targeting a very specific demographic – those who attended the Talk Together program. Another limitation relates to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the demographic makeup of the sample – which mirrors the demographic makeup of the city where the site university is located.

As it relates to the sample, the researcher did not capture specific details in the surveys which could have provided more context for the study (e.g., role at the site university; how long participants were connected to the site university; the current geographical location of participants). The researcher opted not to collect certain data due to an effort to protect participant confidentiality. Collecting this data, however, could have given readers a better sense of how time and place impacted participants' transformative learning. This data was, however, revealed during the interviews.

While a total of 12 interviews creates saturation for a qualitative study (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), additional time would have created an opportunity for the researcher to obtain more interviews. In addition, while conducting 11 of 12 interviews via Zoom served as a convenience for the participants and the researcher, there were times when participants were frustrated with the technology, or when parts of the interviews were hard to hear. Because of this, the researcher clarified statements with participants during the interviews to avoid misinterpretation.

A final limitation relates to participants' willingness to undergo transformation. Having a current frame of reference challenged can be disorienting – triggering a wide range of emotions. Therefore, transformative learning is initiated when there is a willingness by the learner to take a risk. While some learners go through the motions of questioning, reflection, and discussion... they may, ultimately, not undergo any significant change because of a “deeply seated need to hold onto their truth” (Santalucia & Johnson, 2010, p. 3). As Wong (2017) implied, participants may not have the self-compassion needed to acknowledge their flaws and limitations, which leads to transformation.

Opportunities for Future Research

There is potential for research

- exploring the Talk Together model using a “multiframe” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 20) approach,
- looking at the impact of religion/rules on transformative learning,
- evaluating outcomes from specific Talk Together topics, and

- studying this program in the context of identity – looking at outcomes based, specifically, on those who identify as a certain gender, religion, race, or ethnicity.

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PowerPoint Presentation

Life-Changing Conversations

A Look at How One Civil Discourse Program at a Midwestern State University Impacts the Transformative Learning of its' Participants

by

Leonard B. Horton, III

Life-Changing Conversations

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B a c k g r o u n d

Police Shooting Death of Unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown

Purpose of the Study

To Examine the Program's Impact on the Transformative Learning of its' Participants

Research Questions

In what ways does the Talk Together program manifest the following:

1. A Disorienting Dilemma
2. Self-Examination
3. A Critical Assessment of Assumptions
4. A recognition of a Connection Between One's Discontent and the Process of Transformation
5. Exploration of options for New Roles, Relationships, and Action

Theoretical Framework

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory

Jack Mezirow, Sociologist (1923 - 2014)

- Transformative Learning is “the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference” (Mezirow, 2018, p. 116)
- “Formative vs. **Transformative**” (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978)
- 1978 women’s college re-entry study provided the foundation for the theory of transformative learning. Over 1,000 women interviewed from different socio-economic classes
- This framework is widely used when studying adult learners

Disorienting Dilemma

A disorienting dilemma can feel like a crisis, where a person's current framework is suddenly outdated and does not resolve the dilemma. Mezirow (1994) noted a disorienting dilemma serves as a trigger for reflection.

Examples: Race-related traumatic experience, death, divorce, health diagnosis, dialogue, poem, painting

Self-Reflection

A painful reappraisal of your current perspective

This phase can come with "feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame" (Mezirow, 2018, p. 118).

Critical Assessment of Assumptions

During this phase, a person starts to investigate whether some of their assumptions were wrong

Recognition of Connection Between Discontent and Transformation

A person begins to understand there change in perspective is linked to the transformative process... causing "dissatisfaction" (Nerstrom 2014, p. 326) and a desire to change.

Exploration of New Roles, Relationships, and Action

This change can be personal or one geared toward addressing a larger social context.

Design and Methods

Design, Setting, Sample, Data Collection, Data Analysis and Confidentiality

Setting and Sample

Design

- Qualitative case study

Setting

- State Regional University (SRU)
- Located in the Midwest
- Enrollment of 20,000+ students across multiple campuses

Sample

- Population of approximately **880** students, faculty, and staff who attended the Talk Together program
- Final survey sample of **53** (initially 62, but 9 surveys discarded due to non completion). The ideal sample size is 63 (considering a population size of 900; confidence level of 90%; and margin or error of 10%)
- Purposeful and Snowball sampling

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

- 50 or more artifacts (peer-reviewed journal articles, news articles, social media posts, and unpublished manuscripts)
- 12 interviews (11 Zoom and 1 in-person interview)
- 2 field observations
- 53 surveys (Likert-type and open-ended items)

Data Analysis

- Transcription
- In vivo and open coding
- With 3 rounds of coding, process was both inductive and deductive
- Deductive coding involved themes created from the first five phases of Transformative Learning Theory

F i n d i n g s

Summary of Findings

F i n d i n g s

Five Themes Connected to Transformative Learning Theory

THEMES

- Shock and Awe
- House of Mirrors
- Wake-up Call
- Beauty from Ashes
- Giant Steps

F i n d i n g s

Greatest Theme Dominance: 2 and 5

- Findings

House of
Mirrors

(Self-reflection)

Giant
Steps

(Exploration of new roles,
Relationships, and action)

F i n d i n g s

Findings Suggest (Summary)

10 of 12

- Interviewees experienced phases 1-5 of transformative learning

25%

- Survey respondents reported emotions consistent with a disorienting dilemma

At least 30%

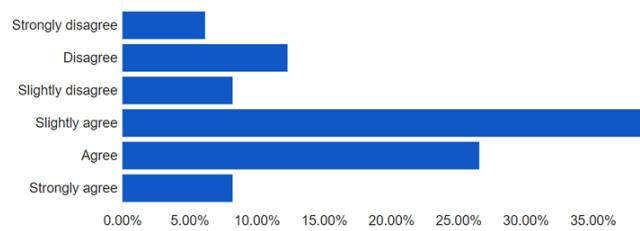
- Survey respondents agree or slightly agree with experiencing phases 2-5

F i n d i n g s

Theme 3

Response to Survey Item 9 – After attending [Talk Together], you started to feel or think differently about your strongly held beliefs.

49 Responses



**Wake-up
Call**

(Critical Assessment of
Assumptions)

F i n d i n g s

Theme 1

“Randall” recalled the beating of a young Black man 40 years ago.

**Shock
and Awe**

(Disorienting dilemma)

F i n d i n g s

Theme 4

“Pauline” felt determined to address her biases related to African Americans.



(Dissatisfaction and Connection to Transformative Learning)

L i m i t a t i o n s a n d D i s c u s s i o n

A Discussion of Insights Discovered from the Research

Implications for Practice

Application of Research to Other Areas

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SECTION FIVE: CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

To be submitted to *Communication Research*

Submission-Ready Journal Article

Life-Changing Conversations: A Look at How One Civil Discourse Program at a
Midwestern State University Impacts the Transformative Learning of its' Participants

by

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A. Leslie Anderson

Tracey Glaessgen

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Abstract

Adopting the first five phases of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018) as a framework, this study examined the impact of a Midwestern university civil discourse program on participants' transformative learning. The study sample included participants who attended the Talk Together program over multiple sessions since its inception in fall 2015. The participants were surveyed or interviewed. Findings revealed survey participants at least agree or slightly agree with experiencing the first five phases of transformative learning, evidenced by responses to items connected to the transformative learning framework. Most interview participants also experienced the first five phases of transformative learning. While transformative learning was undetermined from the observation data, findings led to recommendations that impact the facilitation of the Talk Together program, which, subsequently, impact potential transformative learning for future participants.

Keywords: Civil discourse, intergroup dialogue, political climate, transformative learning theory

Background

In 2014, during a moment of racial unrest around the United States, particularly in Missouri following the police shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown in the city of Ferguson (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021), college campuses across Missouri saw several demonstrations (Mitchell, 2014). Brown's death would be one in a series of police shooting deaths where massive protests followed (BBC News, 2021). A unique opportunity was presented for campuses to address issues involving race relations with their student body. One university in the Midwest, which we will give the pseudonym State Regional University (SRU), developed a two-hour, town-hall-style forum called Speak Up (Cook, 2014), where hundreds of students gathered to start a dialogue on race relations following protests on the SRU campus. This and other forums were created with the specific intention of providing space for students to gather, discuss, and support one another staying at SRU, while their desire may have been to return to the Greater St. Louis / Ferguson, Missouri area to support family, or take part in the protests related to Brown. The following year, in 2015, SRU launched a campus-wide dialogue initiative that we will call Talk Together. Initiated by a group of concerned SRU faculty, staff, administrators, and students, Talk Together was created to give members of the campus community a place to interact with others offering "diverse perspectives" (J. Wiley, personal communication, September 1, 2016). While, initially, Talk Together was aimed at hearing student concerns stemming from the events in Ferguson, as of 2022, the Talk Together forum series has facilitated conversations on several topics, including but not limited to racism, religious freedom, gun control, dating violence, the COVID-19 pandemic, terrorism, climate change, and mental health. Talk Together is held monthly

during the fall and spring semesters – with some sessions held during the summer semester. Oftentimes, impromptu Talk Together forums are offered in response to current events.

Public colleges and universities are considered “public forums” (Ojalvo, 2017). An argument could be made that a campus allowing the free exchange of diverging thought helps in maintaining the republic and creates informed citizens. While institutions of higher learning support efforts to facilitate discourse related to controversial or sensitive topics, this discourse may not result in transformative learning opportunities for participants. Chen and Lawless (2018) argued, “Certain conversations have a tendency to be absent, silenced, and/or censored – whether by self and/or others – in the mainstream communication classroom” (p. 375). Because of this, opportunities for dialogue resulting in critical reflection and the challenging of perspectives have become threatened – as the need for critical dialogue has increased due to the divisive political climate in America. Ross and Tartaglione (2018) posited:

Politically, we have formed ourselves into camps that are more separate geographically, socioeconomically, educationally, and in other ways, than they were before. Because of this segregation, the perspectives that we hold start to become more like religion: sacred and absolute. (p. 52)

Statement of the Problem

Efforts to facilitate civil discourse programs on college campuses that create a transformative learning opportunity can fall short, either due to the lack of time allowed for inquiry, reflection, and follow-up – or because opportunities for dialogue are not created consistently. Attempts at having critical conversations on campus can also result

in experts merely giving talking points and the forum just serving as a sounding board for participants to air out grievances. Werman, Adlparvar, Horowitz, and Hasegawa (2019) argued students need to “challenge their own biases, values, and beliefs” (p. 252) to develop critical consciousness.

Existence of Gap in the Literature

While much has been written on intergroup dialogue from multiple lenses (Allport, 1954; Bruening, Fuller, Cotrufo, Madsen, Evanovich, & Wilson-Hill, 2014; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007; Gurin-Sands, Gurin, Nagda, & Osuna, 2012; Jackson, 2020; Nagda & Zúñiga, 2003; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Troop, 2008; Seate, Joyce, Harwood & Arroyo, 2015; Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin, & Maxwell, K. E., 2009; White, Miles, Frantell, Muller, Paiko, & LeFan, 2019); a gap in the literature exists studying the impact of the Talk Together initiative on participants’ transformative learning on college and university campuses – particularly in the context of a politically and racially-divided climate in America.

Purpose of the Study

So often, people attend civil discourse programs, such as Talk Together, aimed at bringing diverse groups together to understand one another. It is very possible that after attending such a program, a person leaves without, at least, having a strongly held belief challenged.

The purpose of this study is to examine the transformative impact of the Talk Together program on its participants. The aim is not just to see if transformation is evident, but, to what degree is transformation evident. This research fills a gap in

knowledge related to the study of civil dialogue programs, using a transformative learning lens.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are informed by the first five of ten phases of transformative learning from Mezirow's transformative learning theory. The research questions ask in what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest the first five transformative learning phases among participants:

- RQ1: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest a disorienting dilemma?
- RQ2: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest self-examination?
- RQ3: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest a critical assessment of assumptions?
- RQ4: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest the recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation?
- RQ5: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest an exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action? (Mezirow, 2018)

Theoretical Framework

Transformative Learning Theory

The guiding framework for this research is Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018), a framework widely used

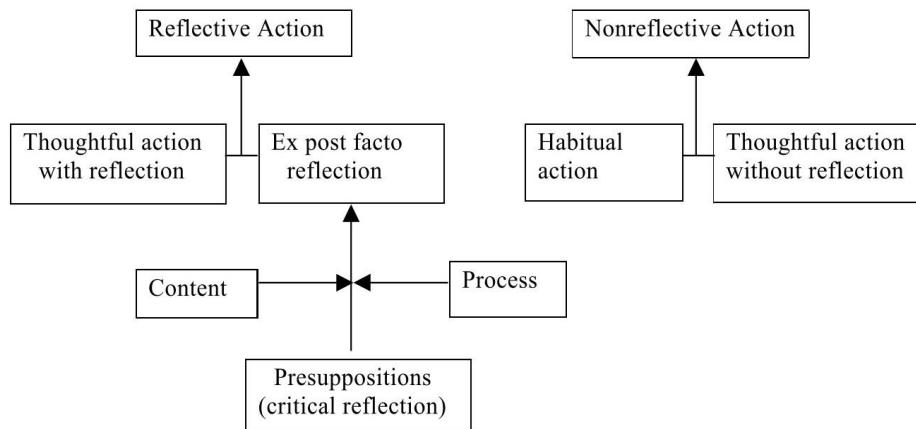
when studying adult learners. Mezirow defines transformative learning as “the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2018, p. 116). According to Mezirow (2009), transformative learning can take place in various contexts and requires a person to operate with a certain level of autonomy (Mezirow, 1997):

Autonomy here refers to the understanding, skills, and disposition necessary to become critically reflective of one’s own assumptions and to engage effectively in discourse to validate one’s beliefs through the experiences of others who share universal values. (p. 9)

Mezirow (2009) explained transformative learning is complemented by discourse, which serves as a vehicle for validating our contested beliefs, through critical reflection. Mezirow (1990), in his work examining how critical reflection triggers learning, explained a differentiation (see Figure 1) between “thoughtful action” (p. 6), where one merely draws on prior knowledge or habits, and “reflective action” (p. 6), which involves “acting reflectively to critically examine the justification for one’s beliefs” (p. 6):

Figure 1

How Critical Reflection Triggers Learning



Note. (Mezirow, 1990, p. 7).

Mezirow (1990) argued a dilemma may be triggered by an “eye-opening discussion, book, poem, painting” (p. 14) or anything that challenges a person’s preconceived notions. The origin of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 2009; 1998; 2018) involves the research of women taking part in community college re-entry programs in the 1970s, as they considered re-entering the job market following a long hiatus. (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978). After a period of critical reflection, the women became transformed learners when they realized how “environmental influences and cultural expectations limited their beliefs and personal development” (p. 15).

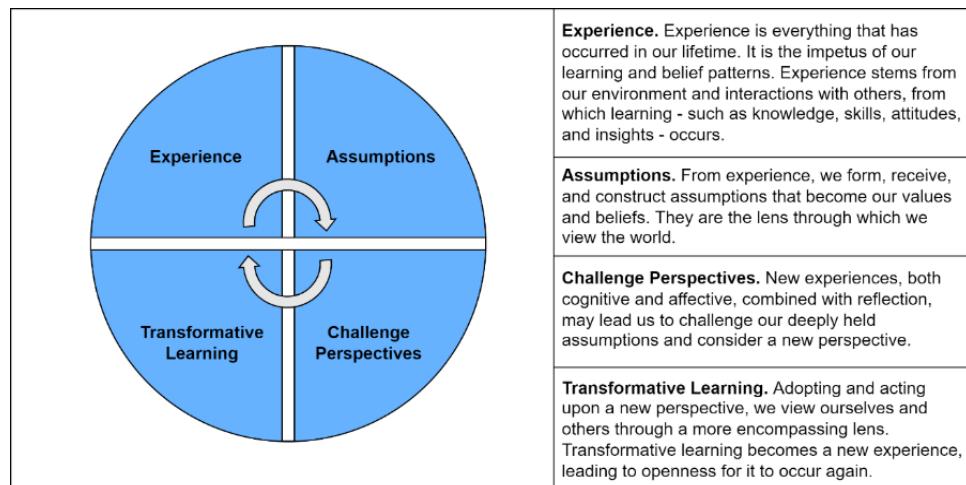
Mezirow (1994; 2009; 2018) identified ten phases of learning that become clarified in the transformative process. These phases of transformative learning start with (a) having a disorienting dilemma, followed by (b) self-examination and a (c) critical assessment of assumptions. The fourth phase is (d) the recognition of a connection between one’s discontent and the process of transformation, with the fifth phase being (e)

an exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action. The remaining five phases of transformative learning start with (f) planning a course of action, followed by (g) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing a plan. The eighth phase is (h) the provisional trying of new roles. The ninth phase involves the (i) building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. The tenth and final phase involves the (j) integration of new roles, relationships, and action into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective. As an analysis of the ten transformative phases, Roberts (2006) argued that learners may not experience transformation in this exact order and that learners "can also experience more than one phase of the process simultaneously" (p. 101).

Nerstrom (2014), in research on transformative learning, developed a model (see Figure 2) that condenses Mezirow's (2018) ten phases into four main segments: "(a) having experiences; (b) making assumptions; (c) challenging perspectives; and (d) experiencing transformative learning" (Nerstrom, 2014, p. 327):

Figure 2

Nerstrom's Transformative Learning Model



Note. (Nerstrom, 2014, p. 328).

The following is a summary of Mezirow's (1994; 2009; 2018) first five phases of transformative learning:

Phase 1: Disorienting Dilemma

A disorienting dilemma could be described as an emotional or triggering experience. It involves a situation or observation that “does not fit within an individual’s pre-existing meaning structure” (Chen, 2014, p. 413). To understand a disorienting dilemma in the context of transformative learning, it is important to discuss epistemology. An epistemology is, essentially, how a person knows what they know. Mezirow (1997) posited frames of reference are developed, partly, from how we assimilate into society and by the influence of those who have raised us. Mezirow (2009) also points out a distinction in how we learn things; instrumentally versus communicatively. With instrumental learning, an environment is controlled, while communicative learning involves learning what others mean – through discourse (Mezirow, 2009). During the act of discourse, which involves critically reflective thinking (Mezirow, 2009), a frame of reference can become dismantled or, at least, threatened by a competing idea, creating a disorienting dilemma. A disorienting dilemma can feel like a crisis, where the current framework is suddenly outdated and does not resolve the dilemma:

A disorienting dilemma can have many different effects on learners depending on their personality, experience, age, status, personal issues that they are coping with at the time, the nature of the disorienting dilemma...and the methods used to foster or facilitate transformative learning. (Roberts, 2006, p. 101)

When the assumptions that once formed a person's reality are now in question, a conflict is created that needs to be resolved – between the old knowledge and the new reality. According to Roberts (2006), there are things in life we hold as sacred, and when our beliefs, our values, and our assumptions are questioned, we tend to become angry and defensive. During this first phase, the learner can either cling tighter to an eroding belief system or start the process of examining the unfamiliar. As Mezirow (1994) suggested, a disorienting dilemma serves as a trigger for reflection.

Phase 2: Self-Examination

Following a disorienting dilemma, the self-examination process encourages critical reflection. Mezirow (2009) noted the most significant transformation is the critique of premises involving oneself, or what he refers to as a “painful reappraisal of our current perspective” (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978, p. 12). Referring to Mezirow and Marsick’s (1978) research involving women, community college re-entry programs, and the self-examination process, there was a point where the participants’ unexamined cultural assumptions and attitudes were brought into critical consciousness (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978), or where they started to become fully aware of their current frame of reference. Mezirow (2018) explained this phase can also come “with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame” (p.117).

Phase 3: Critical Assessment of Assumptions

Mezirow and Marsick’s (1978) earlier research regarding transformative learning connected assumptions to sex [gender] roles. This definition has, since, been expanded to refer to a wide range of assumptions. An assumption can be defined as a fact or statement that is assumed to be true (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Assumptions are developed over time

and can change based on new information. A person can develop an assumption regarding a personal matter, or something within the external environment. Mezirow (1998) also noted the role past emotional experiences play in transformative learning, by sending signals that cause us to remove certain assumptions and validate others. Students in this critical assessment phase of transformative learning start to investigate whether some of their assumptions were incorrect.

Phase 4: Recognition of Connection Between Discontent and Transformation

During this recognition phase, a person starts to understand their change in perspective is directly linked to their transformational process, causing “dissatisfaction” (Nerstrom, 2014 p. 326). This dissatisfaction initiates a desire to make a life change. Mezirow (1994) also noted at this stage, a person begins to recognize that other people have “negotiated a similar change” (p. 224). In reference to adult development, Mezirow (1994) explained it signals a period when an adult completely understands their capacity and understands it as a “guide to action” (p. 226).

Phase 5: Exploration of Options for New Roles, Relationships, and Action

Mezirow and Marsick’s (1978) research suggested perspective transformation is a process where adults start to recognize “culturally-induced dependency roles and relationships and take action to overcome them” (Mezirow & Marsick, p. 17). He argued that acting on transformed meaning structures can lead to a new approach to relationships (Mezirow, 1994). In other words, an exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action can result in a personal change; not necessarily one geared toward addressing a larger social context.

Significance of the Study

This research is valuable to institutions of higher education looking to facilitate a culture of constructive engagement through listening, learning, and growth. This study adds to the body of literature examining how the transformative learning framework can be applied to practice – within the context of critical dialogue in higher education. Findings from this research will provide leaders in higher education a baseline to measure the impact of similar programs aimed at facilitating civil discourse on college campuses.

Definition of Essential Terms

Action: Action refers to the accomplishment of a thing usually over some time, in stages, or with the possibility of repetition (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Assessment: An assessment is the action or an instance of making a judgment about something, or an appraisal. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Assumption: An assumption is a fact or statement that is assumed to be true (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Connection: Connection refers to a contextual relation or association (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Critical: The state of being critical involves careful judgment or judicious evaluation. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Dilemma: A dilemma is a situation in which a difficult choice must be made between two or more alternatives, especially equally undesirable ones (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Discontent: To have discontent refers to having a lack of satisfaction with one's possessions, status, or situation: lack of contentment (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Discourse: A discourse is a style of communication that is one way, to deliver information from the speaker/writer to the listener/reader (Angel, 2016). The act of discourse also involves critically reflective thinking on the part of the listener (Mezirow, 2009). “Discourse is a special kind of dialogue in which we focus on content and attempt to justify beliefs by giving and defending reasons and by examining the evidence for and against competing viewpoints” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 225).

Disorienting: The term, disorienting, refers to something causing a feeling of confusion (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Exploration: Exploration involves the analysis of a subject or theme (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Recognition: Recognition refers to the knowledge or feeling that someone or something present has been encountered before (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Relationship: Relationship refers to the relation connection or the binding of participants in a relationship (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Role: A role is a socially expected behavior pattern usually determined by an individual's status in a particular society (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Self-examination: Self-examination is a reflective examination (of one's beliefs or motives) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Transformation: Transformation is the act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Whereas a formative process is one of socialization and learning adult roles, a transformative process, in adulthood, involves alienation from those roles, reframing new perspectives, and re-engaging life with a greater degree of self-determination (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978).

Research Methods

Design

The researcher utilized a qualitative case study design. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argued for research to be considered a case study, there should be “one particular program or one particular classroom of learners (a bounded system)” (p. 38). In the case of this research, the participants in the Talk Together program served as the bounded system or unit of analysis. Yin (2009), in outlining the qualities that make a case study, noted participant behaviors will not be manipulated, unlike with an experiment. In addition, a case study relies on multiple sources of evidence, including evidence from “observations of the events being studied, and interviews of the persons involved in the events” (p. 11). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also suggested some case studies “employ both qualitative and quantitative methods” (p. 37). This study utilized a mix of data from interviews, surveys, and observations. In addition, participant behaviors in this study were not manipulated.

On the topic of qualitative research, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is socially constructed, versus preexisting – which is more of a constructivist understanding. Since this study sought to illuminate the personal journey of transformative learning, qualitative interviews were needed to capture the context of certain expressed feelings. Participant survey data, while able to capture additional data, presented limitations with regards to understanding the meaning behind participant feelings.

Setting

The setting was State Regional University (SRU), a four-year public institution in the Midwest. It has a campus enrollment of over 20,000 students, according to 2021 data (State Regional University website, 2021). At the site university, Talk Together took place in a variety of locations – including but not limited to the following: meeting rooms within the campus student union, the campus library auditorium, empty classrooms, and via web conferencing (i.e., Zoom). During Talk Together in-person sessions, participants set together as a large group – either in a linear fashion or in a 360-degree circle. Participants would face the facilitator, who either facilitated discussions alone or with a co-facilitator. Sessions were typically held for one hour during midday.

Participants

The population included roughly 880 current faculty, staff, and students at the site university who attended Talk Together, as well as those who graduated or relocated since Talk Together’s inception in 2015. The findings were based on a sample size of 53 participants. The researcher used a mix of “purposeful” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and “snowball” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) sampling. The researcher’s goal was to target participants who attended Talk Together at least three times since the program’s inception. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to “discover, understand, and gain insight” (p. 96) into how participants were specifically impacted by Talk Together. The researcher also used “snowball sampling” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), where current university faculty, staff, and students that attended Talk Together recruited other participants who also attended Talk Together.

Recruitment

On four separate dates, SRU's division of diversity, equity, and inclusion sent an email to a list of participants who previously attended Talk Together – including an anonymous survey link. The survey ended with an optional request to take part in an interview, where participants provided their email addresses to be contacted by the researcher. Additional recruitment efforts involved the researcher making in-person requests for participants to complete the survey following the Talk Together observations using a sign-up sheet.

Data Collection

Data were collected from the following sources:

- Fifty or more artifacts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
- Two observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
- Fifty-three surveys (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
- Twelve interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

Artifacts

Artifacts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 180) included more than 50 peer-reviewed journal articles, news articles, social media posts, and unpublished manuscripts related to the Talk Together program. The journal articles were all peer-reviewed with most relating to some aspect of intergroup dialogue or transformative learning. A sample of the journals included (a) *Administrative Theory and Praxis*; (b) *Communication Teacher*; (c) *Communication Studies*; (d) *European Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*; (e) *Journal of Social Psychology*; and (f) *Journal of Transformative Learning*. Artifacts

helped the researcher address a knowledge gap regarding how this study fits into existing scholarship.

Field Observations

The initial goal of the field observations was to monitor or capture behaviors consistent with transformative learning. Since the transformative process is primarily an emotional and intimate journey, the researcher was not able to determine whether transformative learning was apparent – as themes such as self-reflection and assumption questioning may have happened internally. However, observation data was used to determine how the learning environment may or may not have been supported for participants – either by observing the condition of the environment or by observing the Talk Together facilitator's method of operation.

Surveys

The researcher used a self-administered, online survey. The researcher used Qualtrics as the survey medium. The survey items were informed by the five research questions. The open-ended items allowed participants to expound on their overall sentiments of the Talk Together sessions and express feelings related to transformative learning; this allowed for a better understanding of the impact of the sessions on participants' transformative learning.

Interviews

Of the survey respondents, twelve consented to a follow-up interview. For ease of scheduling, and being sensitive to COVID-19 protocols, interviews were conducted either via Zoom or in person. In-person interviews were recorded using a smartphone voice memo app. The interviews lasted no more than one hour, which helped to keep the data

manageable and not serve as a discouragement for those considering taking part in the interviews. Interview questions were “semi-structured” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 109) and tied back into the five research questions related to transformative learning. The interview and survey instruments captured demographic data: level of education, race, religion/spirituality, ethnicity, age, and gender identity. While participant identities should not lead to assumptions about their position on any given topic, some participants partly attributed their survey/interview responses and values to their identities.

Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis process was to determine the appropriate data analysis method. For the interview and observation data, the researcher primarily utilized in vivo coding (Manning, 2017), where the emphasis was placed on the actual spoken words of participants. According to Manning (2017), in vivo coding is championed by many researchers for how it honors the voices of participants in a particular culture or microculture. Following a period of reflection on the meaning of each code, the researcher began “analytical coding” (p. 206), where codes were grouped into categories.

Coding was both inductive and deductive – with the researcher initially allowing the data to illuminate initial codes, but later rescanning the data with pre-determined codes derived from the transformative learning framework (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018). All Likert-style survey responses were analyzed with an online survey tool (Qualtrics XM). Open-ended survey data was not coded for theme generation, but to contribute to descriptive statistics.

Qualitative data were organized and transcribed with the assistance of an online, speech-to-text transcription application: Otter.ai. Since the software did not pick up

certain words from the participants, the researcher revisited the transcription and made manual edits for clarity. Once the transcription process was completed, the researcher coded the data multiple times. The coding process involved the use of two web-based text tagging tools for qualitative data analysis: Delve and Tagouette. The researcher's goal was to "focus on patterns and insights related to the research purpose and questions – guided by the theoretical framework" (p. 208). Ultimately, following the inductive and deductive coding processes, themes and relationships among the themes emerged from the data, which were connected to the transformative learning framework (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018).

The researcher coded data through a constructivist epistemological lens, where the focus was on how "people construct knowledge and make meaning" (p. 207). To guard against bias during the coding process, the researcher created reflective memos as a journal to detail personal thoughts related to the findings. The researcher relied on multiple pieces of data to ensure content from the reflective memos did not influence the data analysis. To ensure that my findings were aligned with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, I compared open-ended survey responses and interview statements with several articles written by Mezirow where he described feelings and actions associated with the various phases of transformative learning.

Efforts to Support Quality of Research

Consent, Confidentiality, and Disclosures

This research received exempt review IRB approval from the University of Missouri and SRU, with the risk determined to be no greater than minimal. In keeping with IRB guidelines, all participant identities were kept confidential and given

pseudonyms. All participants agreed to consent via a consent form. Although interview participants initially agreed to consent during the survey, the researcher received additional verbal consent from each interview participant, which included consent to be recorded. Raw qualitative data was kept on a secure, password-protected hard drive to safeguard participant information. Upon completion of this research, audio and video recordings were destroyed.

Due to the sensitive nature of the questions, twenty-three out of 24 survey items were set to request response, versus force response. Request response alerts the respondent to continue the survey without answering if they choose. This response setting was chosen to allow participants to skip questions they found to be too sensitive. The only survey item set to force response was the first item regarding consent. In addition, interview respondents were informed they could skip any questions they found to be too uncomfortable before the interview.

Transferability

To increase the chance of the findings “transferring” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 256) to another setting, this qualitative study included “rich, thick descriptions” (p. 256) of the participants in the study, with the researcher including “quotes from participant interviews... and a detailed description of the findings” (p. 256).

Credibility

To ensure credibility, data were triangulated in this study using multiple data collection methods as outlined in the data collection section. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), triangulation is the “best-known strategy to shore up the internal validity” (p. 244). Since interviews were conducted via Zoom, the researcher clarified statements

with participants during the interviews to avoid misinterpretation. Due to technical issues with the transcription software, the researcher manually corrected certain parts of the completed transcription for clarity.

To further ensure credibility, one-page “reflective memos” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 196) were prepared, detailing researcher reflections and “explicit biases” (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.) following the two Talk Together observations. Three reflective memos were also created during the coding process. The reflective memos served as an “audit trail” (p. 252) which aimed to ensure credibility. Reflexivity can aid in clarifying one’s position about the research process (Holmes, 2020).

A “positionality statement” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 62) was prepared to highlight the researcher’s background, privileged statuses, and biases going into the research.

Researcher Positionality

I am a cis-gender, African American man, raised in the South in an all-Black, middle-class household – to two college graduates. I identify as Christian and politically moderate. Based on results from an “Implicit Association Test” (Harvard University, n.d.), I have a moderate automatic preference for Black people over White people. In terms of background, I have had K-12 classmates that were mostly African American, attended two HBCUs (Historically Black College or University), and have a wife and daughter that are both African American. These test results create the propensity for me to fall into “in-group favoritism” (Banaji, Bazerman, & Chugh, 2003).

I have served as an instructor of journalism with SRU university since the fall of 2013 and have experience fostering discussion around controversial topics, which can be triggering for some students. In addition, I have attended Talk Together sessions since the program's inception; both as a participant and a co-facilitator.

In terms of the research paradigm and role as an instructor, I often teach current events using more of a critical (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) epistemological perspective like critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), especially with current events involving marginalized groups, or where there is a stark contrast in "social power" (French & Raven, 2005) between participants. However, my journalistic background prompts the consideration of the underlying backstory that caused someone to arrive at a particular destination, regardless of their power position. For that reason, I am more likely to frame a dilemma through a constructivist (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 13) lens.

Introduction to Findings

This research study includes data collected from 50 or more artifacts, two field observations, 12 participant interviews, and 53 online surveys. The following section will begin with a summary of demographic findings, followed by a summary of the emergent themes and a narrative of how the findings tie into each of the five research questions. Artifacts were used, primarily, by the researcher to give context to the findings. Observation data did not directly connect to the research questions. The data did, however, reveal perceptions regarding the overall facilitation of Talk Together which impacts transformative learning for future participants.

Demographics

Demographic data helped the researcher understand the nature of the sample and the degree to which findings can be generalized. In terms of gender, 58% of respondents identified as a female, woman, or cis woman; 37% identified as male; and 5% identified as gender nonconforming or nonbinary. In terms of race and ethnicity, 80% of participants identified as White; 16% as Black or African American; and 5% as Asian. Nine percent of respondents claimed Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. In terms of age, 20% were between the ages of 18 and 24 and 18% were between 65 and 74 years old. In terms of religion/spirituality, 40% identified as Christian. Thirty-five percent of respondents earned a master's degree as their highest level of education. Regarding Talk Together attendance, 69% of participants attended three or more sessions.

Emergent Themes

From the analysis of interview and observation transcript data, the following five themes emerged: (a) *Shock and Awe*, (b) *House of Mirrors*, (c) *Wake-up Call*, (d) *Beauty from Ashes*, and (e) *Giant Steps*.

The first theme, *Shock and Awe*, speaks to participants' experiences and feelings around some type of disorienting dilemma, originating either from an external event or an internal experience. Elements included within the second theme, *House of Mirrors*, includes experiences related to the initial self-reflection and the reaction to seeing themselves within a formative, or pre-transformative, context. The third theme, *Wake-up Call*, speaks to a negotiation, where participants had to choose to assess their assumptions. The fourth theme, *Beauty from Ashes*, reveals how participants accepted their newfound discovery and then linked that discovery to a process where the

“formative became transformative.” (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978, p. 12). The fifth theme, *Giant Steps*, relates to how those who have decided to move forward in the transformative process explored new roles, relationships, and action.

These five themes connect to the five research questions adapted from Mezirow’s transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018) framework. The following narrative of findings will explain further how themes are connected to the research questions and other data – including survey data and snippets from interview participants. To protect confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym. For readability, some interviewee language has been smoothed, in the case of vocal pauses. The researcher did not, however, alter the context of the interviewees’ statements. Therefore, the reader may see language considered vulgar to some. The researcher also capitalized Black and White when referring to race. According to Mack and Palfrey (n.d.), the lower case ‘b’ fails to honor the weight of this identity appropriately, keeping White lowercase ignores the way Whiteness functions in institutions and communities. In addition, the researcher may use the terms Black and African American interchangeably.

Narrative of Findings

Connection to RQ1

RQ1 examines how the Talk Together program manifests a disorienting dilemma. Theme one, *Shock and Awe*, connects to RQ1. Several interview participants described an emotional catalyst that initiated and/or complemented their transformative journey. This catalyst, most often, comes after having a triggering experience. From taking part in Talk Together discussions, several participants noted feeling “shocked,” “surprised,” or

“offended” by what they had heard from other participants. Most interview participants reported experiencing a disorienting dilemma from years ago. Mezirow and Marsick (1978) explained the source of the dilemma can be an external event – like the death of a spouse, a divorce, a financial crisis, or an internal subjective experience. Interview participant “Gloria,” who is White, lost her husband during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before his death, he was “disowned” from his church because of a previous marriage to an African American woman. Gloria said her husband’s previous pastor wrote a letter to him with remarks about race that explained, “It’s okay to have a child with one of those [Black] people, but you don’t marry them, and you certainly don’t admit that the child is yours.” Gloria noted that when her husband was alive, they both attended Talk Together, which she said, “was really helpful for him,” in terms of healing.

Survey item 4, connected to RQ1, was an open-ended survey item asking about feelings experienced because of attending Talk Together. Those who noted a range of emotions cited feelings that were both positive and negative. Responses indicated with the most frequency were “anger, discomfort, empathy, sadness, and hopefulness.” The disorienting dilemma creates an internal conflict that needs to be resolved. For interview participant “Randall,” Talk Together evoked painful memories from more than 40 years ago of a young Black man who was beaten in front of him by a group of young White men:

Neighbors began to chase the Black man, caught him, and beat him up....

They had him on the inside porch of the house, standing over him with baseball bats. And I said, ‘that’s enough.’ And they left. And I took the young man home. I probably should have taken him to a hospital. I don’t

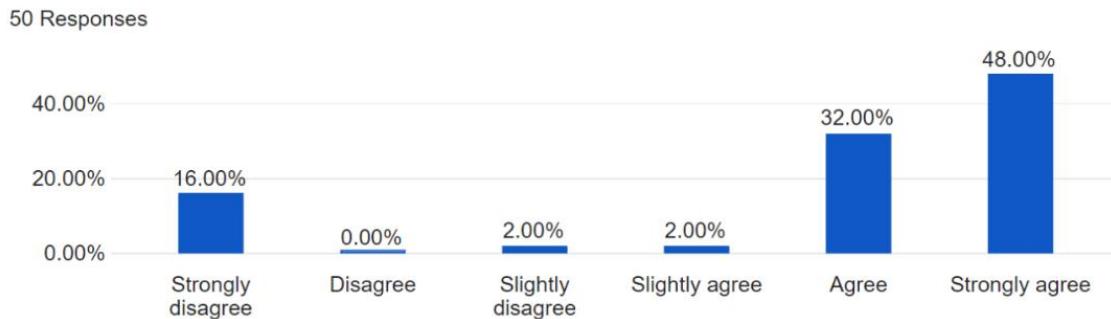
know his name. I don't remember where he lives. I don't know anything, but I'd like to talk to him again. He's probably 65 years old now. [Talk Together] helped bring that memory front and center.

This memory, for Randall, caused him to realize he carried around some "White guilt."

Survey item 5, also connected to RQ1, stated the following: Before going to [Talk Together], you were open to considering new ideas and perspectives. A respondent's level of openness relates to their willingness to move to the next phase: self-reflection. If there is not an openness to consider new perspectives and ideas, a participant may not experience a significant change because of the "deep-seated need to hold on to their truth" (Santalucia & Johnson, 2010, p. 3). Out of 50 responses, 48% strongly agreed, 32% agreed, and 16% strongly disagreed (see Figure 3):

Figure 3

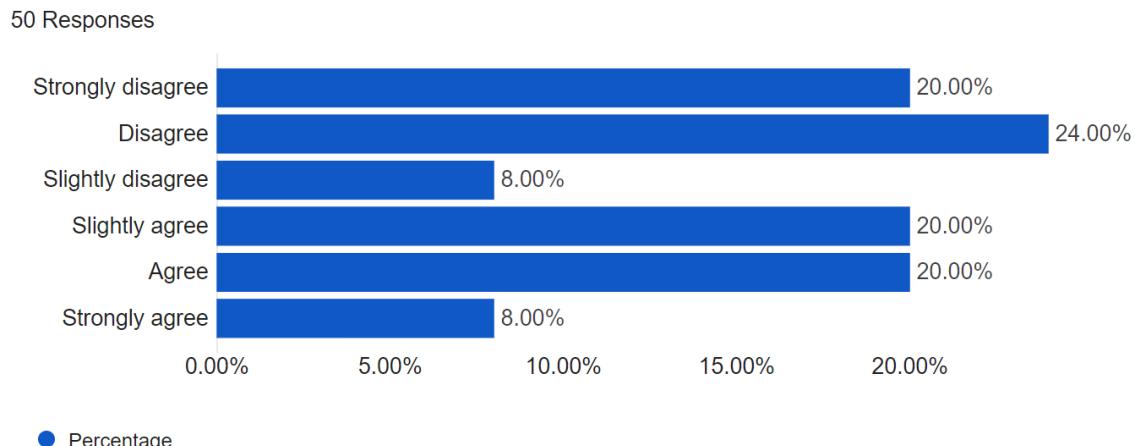
Response to Survey Item 5 – Before going to [Talk Together], you were open to considering new ideas and perspectives.



Survey item 6, which connected to RQ1, asked about the participants' level of discomfort while attending Talk Together: At any point during [Talk Together], you became uncomfortable because you heard an idea that contradicted your views (see Figure 4):

Figure 4

Response to Survey Item 6 – At any point during [Talk Together], you became uncomfortable because you heard an idea that contradicted your views.



While 24% disagreed with becoming uncomfortable at hearing an idea that contradicted their views, 20% of respondents either agreed or slightly agreed. Interview participant “Mark” said while he was rarely ever angry when attending Talk Together sessions, he admitted that his blood pressure seemed to go higher when listening to some of the other participants. At times, Mark was “surprised” by what he had heard, and other times, “offended.” Interview participant “Jeff,” a White man, experienced a disorienting dilemma during a Talk Together session when he was confronted by a group of “combative” Black participants. From this triggering event, Jeff began to offer the following disclaimer before speaking at future sessions: “I’m your worst nightmare. I am a middle-aged, redneck White guy!”

Connection to RQ2

The second theme, *House of Mirrors*, connects to RQ2 – which explores how the Talk Together program manifests self-examination. Self-reflection follows openness. If a participant has self-imposed barriers or rules, created either from their framework or an

external framework like religious affiliation or loyalty to someone, they may be resistant to self-examination. Several participants drew painful connections between their childhood and current frames of reference.

Interview participant “Isabella,” who identified as a White (Hispanic) woman, described the process of self-reflection as one that is not “magical:”

[The Talk Together program] opened my consciousness to things I have not thought of in a while. [It] taught me that we have to go and learn. And it should be our responsibility as citizens to continue learning. Nothing is static.

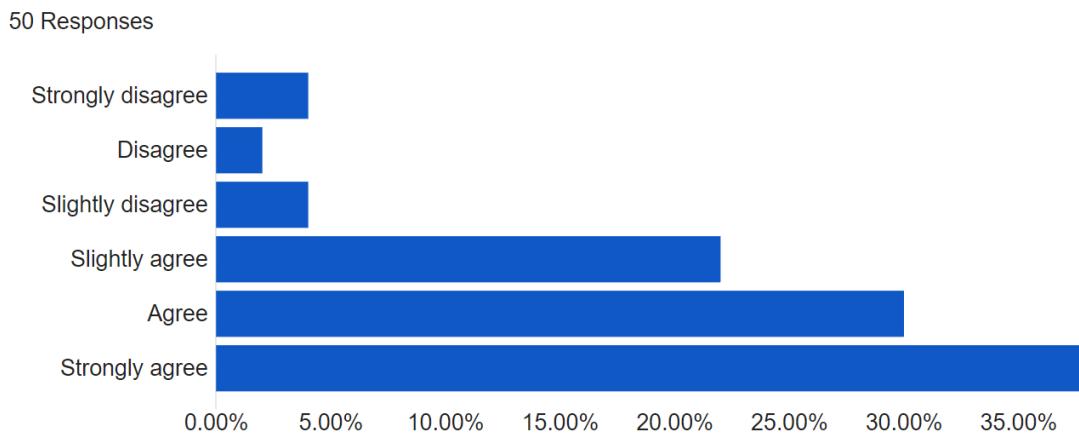
Interview participant “Deborah,” a Black woman raised in predominantly White spaces, noted self-reflection during and following Talk Together sessions were “eye-opening,” – allowing her to recognize biases she held against her own race:

My initial reaction was my dad never talked about race, he never talked about race. And then suddenly, this phrase came into my head, ‘I expect you to be whiter than White.’ And then I started realizing how many times and how often that was said, and I never viewed that as racist.

Survey Item 7 connected to RQ2: In what ways, if any, does the [Talk Together] program manifest self-examination? Thirty-eight percent of respondents strongly agreed Talk Together caused them to self-reflect or do soul searching, 30% agreed, and 22% slightly agreed. Only 2% disagreed (see Figure 5):

Figure 5

Response to Survey Item 7 – Attending [Talk Together] caused you to self-reflect or do “soul searching.”



Survey item 8, which asked participants whether they had strongly held beliefs before attending Talk Together, is also connected to RQ2. Forty-six percent of respondents agreed that they had some strongly held beliefs, compared to only 4% who disagreed. An example of a participant who admitted to having negative strongly held beliefs was Isabella. She expressed previously held biases that the Black community was “acting based on their history,” and because of this, members had “not moved forward.”

Connection to RQ3

The third theme, *Wake-up Call*, is connected to RQ3, which deals with the critical assessment of assumptions. On one end of the spectrum, you have what participants describe as “thankfulness” and “appreciation.” On the other end, you may have participants who experienced “guilt.” Mezirow (1998) noted the role past emotional experiences play in transformative learning, by sending signals that cause us to remove certain assumptions and validate others; herein lies the negotiation and a choice to be made on whether to proceed to the other phases of transformative learning. After

completing the self-examination phase of transformative learning, this critical assessment phase is where you start to investigate whether some of your assumptions were incorrect (Mezirow, 1998). Interview participant “Xavier,” a Black, self-proclaimed Christian, said he felt differently about a strongly held belief in the nuclear family after an encounter with a transgender student during Talk Together:

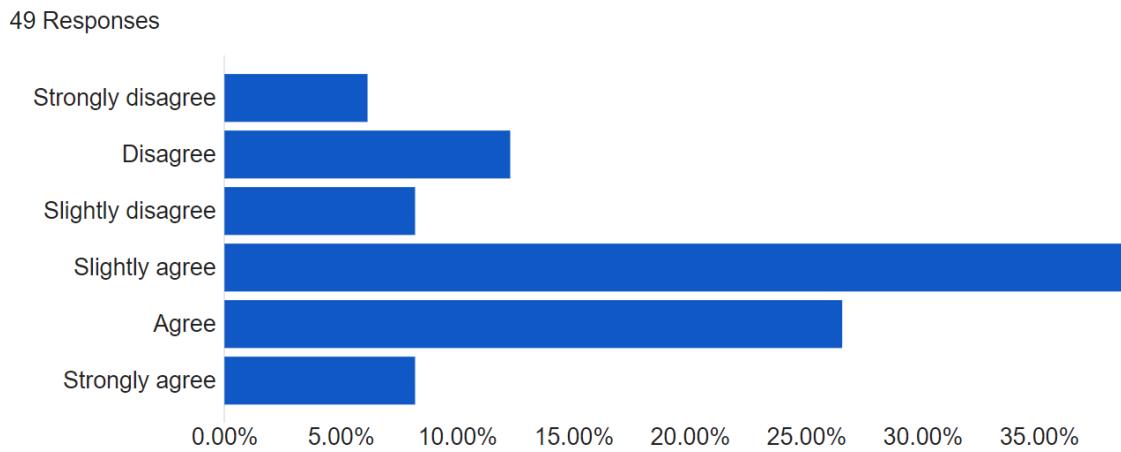
Love has all different colors. Love has all different shapes. Love is love. If a person is gay, and a male loves a male, why would I limit that? And so, I really had to sit back and take that in. Love is love, and it's not for me to judge anyone.... So, I had to go back to my Bible and realize that if someone was outside of that realm of what I've learned ... I was judging them, and that's not in line with my faith.

Interview participant “Pauline,” who had an implicit belief that “White was superior,” noted having an “oh shit” moment when she learned the concept of cultural consciousness. She credited her experience in Talk Together with “opening the windows to her soul.”

Survey item 9, connected to RQ3, asked the following: In what ways, if any, does the Talk Together program manifest a critical assessment of assumptions? After attending Talk Together, 39% slightly agreed they started to feel different about their strongly held beliefs, compared to 12% who disagreed (see Figure 6):

Figure 6

Response to Survey Item 9 – After attending [Talk Together], you started to feel or think differently about your strongly held beliefs.



Connection to RQ4

RQ4 connects to the fourth theme: *Beauty from Ashes*. This theme speaks to ways in which participants recognized discontent and connected it to the process of transformation. This phase of transformative learning takes a participant from recognizing certain beliefs that may have been incorrect, to now becoming moved to a point of action. Mezirow (1994) noted at this stage, there is also “a recognition that others have negotiated a similar change” (p. 224). Outside of discontent, this desire to change was observed by the researcher as emotionally freeing for some participants, with feelings tied to exhilaration, appreciation, and validation. Randall, a White man, noted using his dissatisfaction as motivation for addressing a newfound purpose connected to social justice:

You know, one of the things that I am becoming more and more aware of, and perhaps [Talk Together] did this... I don't need to talk to Black people

about racial justice, I need to talk to White people about racial justice. That's my big challenge.

Meanwhile, Isabella noted it was her responsibility to “investigate, research,” and “take responsibility for understanding hard topics.” Pauline, after originally carrying biases related to African Americans and stereotypical behaviors, expressed feeling determined to address her biases:

I definitely had some perspectives, some ideas that were erroneous and wrong that, you know, through [Talk Together], I was able to address and try to bring up to the surface and like... look at it, deal with it, and sit with it and recognize that while it's not great, I'm not going to let it stop me from learning or trying to become a better person.

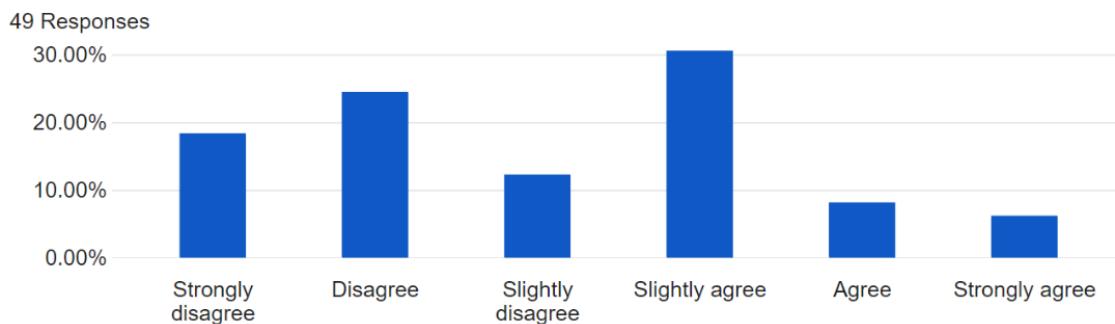
Likewise, interview participant “Dana” credited Talk Together with being able to put a voice to what she said was “lost” regarding her own ethnic identity due to her stepfather, who she referred to as a “racist asshole” while parenting:

It's so interesting how something as simple and as meaningful as [Talk Together] had such a profound effect on me taking back and reclaiming ... parts of myself that I had just kind of resisted for a long time. I just wasn't as comfortable sharing out, you know, in private ... in my personal relationships.

Survey item 10 inquired whether participants were dissatisfied or discontent with themselves because of what they heard or experienced at [Talk Together], and then decided to change. Just over 30% slightly agreed, while 25% disagreed (see Figure 7):

Figure 7

Response to Survey Item 10 – You were dissatisfied or discontent with yourself because of [Talk Together], and then decided to change.



Connection to RQ5

The fifth theme, *Giant Steps*, connects to RQ5 and examines the exploration of new roles, relationships, and action. The codes connected to this theme related to participants experiencing growth or considering some type of action. To some degree, this growth or action-taking requires humility on the part of the participants since they are operating out of their comfort zone and interacting with others using their newfound frame of reference. Pauline, for example, said she would like to investigate ways of supporting marginalized groups through an intersectional lens:

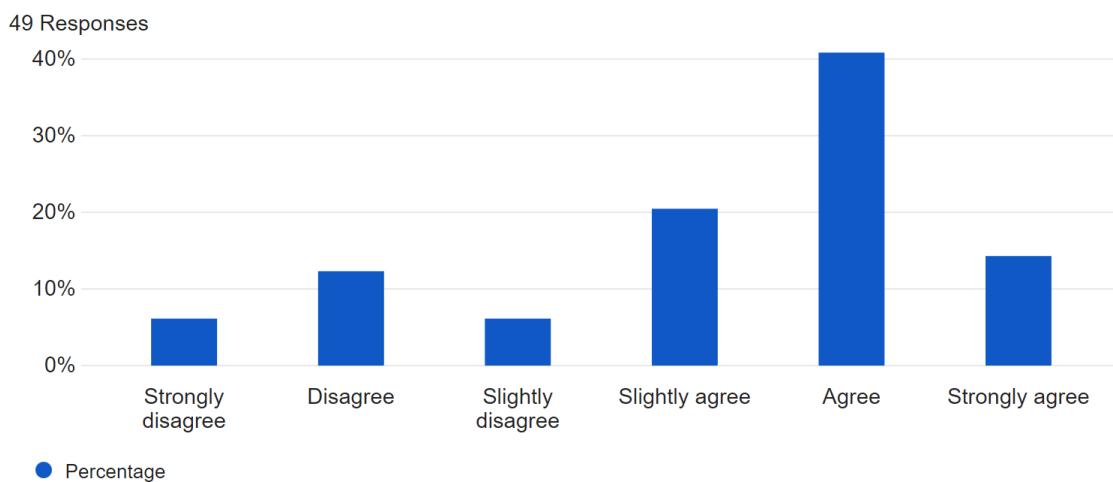
I'd love to, you know, talk more about how we can change the culture
when it comes to how we view persons with disabilities, for example, and
that intersectionality piece where you have a person who's a member of
the LGBTQ community, but who also has a disability and are also, maybe,
Hispanic.

Four different survey items, 11, 12, 15, and 16, are connected to RQ5. Survey item 11 asked participants whether, following their involvement with [Talk Together], they considered exploring any roles, either personally or professionally.

Just over 40% of respondents agreed and 20% slightly agreed, compared to 12% who disagreed (See Figure 8):

Figure 8

Response to Survey Item 11 – What you experienced during [Talk Together] prompted you to explore new roles, either personally or professionally.



Survey item 12 also inquired about exploration, but for relationships. More than 30% of respondents agreed and 29% slightly agreed, compared to 14% who disagreed. Survey item 13 asked whether [Talk Together] resulted in participants doing something new. Forty-three percent of survey respondents slightly agreed and 38% agreed, compared to only 4% who disagreed.

Survey items 15 and 16 prompted participants to answer whether [Talk Together] prompted them to make some type of personal change in their lives. Thirty-four percent slightly agreed, while 32% agreed, and 20% strongly agreed. Only 9% disagreed. For those who responded slightly agree or higher on survey item 15, item 16 asked them to explain the type of personal change they made. A range of responses was offered from survey respondents, from “forgiveness” to becoming more “open-minded.”

- “I decided to reach out to African Americans and try to establish friendships with new friends.”
- “I often consider how I may incorporate what I have learned into the workplace.”
- “I found myself speaking up more in situations where I felt like colleagues/family/friends were engaging in language I felt could be construed as harmful, as perpetuating harmful cultural stereotypes, or at the very least offensive or misinformed.”
- “I have engaged in more critical thinking when observing or acting on a situation.”
- “It prompted me to be more vocal about my personal and professional experiences as a person of color in this community and it also led me to be more vocal and visible in the supportive spaces where I could be an ally or champion to those who need and deserve support. It also allowed me to understand that I do not have to have relationships with those who are not supportive, and it helped me understand what healthy boundaries I needed to implement in my life and the ways I could engage others in these conversations without the emotional labor aspect.”
- “I have shown forgiveness toward a family member with different values. I am more open to ‘agree to disagree.’ I’m also more mindful about how my body language might send signals to others, like in elevators and such.”
- “I don’t have to agree with someone’s opinion, but I will respect it.”

Summary of Findings

Findings suggest 10 out of 12 interview participants experienced the first five phases of transformative learning as evidenced by responses given, which connected to the research questions adapted from the transformative learning framework. Meanwhile, 25% of survey respondents reported a range of emotions consistent with experiencing a disorienting dilemma, and at least 30% of survey respondents agree or slightly agree to experiencing self-reflection, an assessment of assumptions, a connection to transformation, and an exploration of new roles, relationships, and action – evidenced by the open-ended and Likert-type item responses connected to the five research questions – adapted from the transformative learning framework.

From the analysis of data, five themes emerged that were connected to the research questions. In terms of theme dominance, all five themes were found to be supported, with the second and fifth themes showing greater dominance. Feelings expressed by participants related to childhood memories support evidence for the disorienting dilemma in the *Shock and Awe* theme and Mezirow and Marsick's (1978) observation of formative versus transformative learning. However, not all dilemmas were created during childhood. Findings support the *House of Mirrors* theme, as most interview participants and all survey participants confirmed self-reflection which, for interview participants, resulted in feelings related to “fear, anger, guilt, or shame” (Mezirow, 2018, p. 117). This also aligns with Mezirow’s (2009) observation that transformation is a “highly emotional passage” (p. 28). While interview participants noted assessing their assumptions, they did not say, specifically, whether their assumptions were wrong. Instead, different language was used to support the *Wake-up*

Call theme in the interview data, as in participants “realizing” an error in judgment. The *Beauty from Ashes* theme was supported by the survey and interview findings, but not in a way anticipated by the researcher. More evidence of participant feelings related to happiness and relief was noted, a contrast to discontentment. The survey and interview data also greatly support the *Giant Steps* theme, where interview participants noted an exploration of life changes and actions connected to their recent transformative process. Some were community-focused actions, while others were more personal.

Results of the field observation data analysis were not included within the narrative of findings since there was no connection to the research questions or to transformative learning, which is a more internal process and is difficult to observe. The observation data does, however, present opportunities for future research or program evaluation.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the low survey response rate, which can, partially, be attributed to surveys being sent near the end of the academic school year, survey fatigue, and the researcher targeting a very specific demographic – those who attended the Talk Together program. Another limitation relates to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the demographic makeup of the sample – which mirrors the demographic makeup of the city where the site university is located. In addition, since the transformative process is primarily an emotional and intimate journey, the researcher was not able to determine, from the field observations, whether transformative learning was apparent – as themes such as self-reflection and assumption questioning may have happened internally.

As it relates to the sample, the researcher did not capture specific details in the surveys which could have provided more context for the study (e.g., role at the site university; how long participants were connected to the site university; the current geographical location of participants). The researcher opted not to collect certain data due to an effort to protect participant confidentiality. Collecting this data, however, could have given readers a better sense of how time and place impacted participants' transformative learning. This data was, however, revealed during the interviews.

While a total of 12 interviews creates saturation for a qualitative study (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), additional time would have given more opportunities for the researcher to obtain additional interviews. In addition, while conducting 11 of 12 interviews via Zoom served as a convenience for the participants and the researcher, there were times when participants were frustrated with the technology, or when parts of the interviews were hard to hear. As a result, the researcher clarified statements with participants during the interviews to avoid misinterpretation.

Another limitation relates to participants' willingness to undergo transformation. Two out of twelve interview participants did not report evidence suggesting they experienced transformative learning. Having a current frame of reference challenged can be disorienting – triggering a wide range of emotions. Therefore, transformative learning is initiated when there is a willingness by the learner to take a risk. While some learners go through the motions of questioning, reflection, and discussion... they may, ultimately, not undergo any significant change because of a “deeply seated need to hold onto their truth” (Santalucia & Johnson, 2010, p. 3). As Wong (2017) implied, participants may not have the self-compassion needed to acknowledge their flaws and limitations, which leads

to transformation. A final limitation relates to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Talk Together session scheduling. While sessions were eventually moved to Zoom in March 2020, some sessions were canceled, creating fewer opportunities for participants to attend additional sessions.

Discussion

The transformative learning journey was different for each participant. Any transformative learning impact was based on what each participant identified as their strongly held belief or formative frame of reference. It was difficult, at times, for the researcher to parse out which feelings or emotions aligned with a particular transformative level. Some feelings or emotions may have been connected to more than one level simultaneously. According to Roberts (2006), phases of personal transformation are not always experienced in sequential order and one phase can be experienced more than once. This was found to be evident in the findings of this study. The researcher was unable to tell exactly when, or for how long, a phase was experienced. The researcher attempted to use participants' own words to determine where a specific transformative phase might have taken place. Findings from survey data, based on research questions created from the transformative learning framework (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018), provided a more accurate indication of the transformative learning level, except for questions about feelings.

An interesting observation from this study is how participants came to receive their disorienting dilemma, which is connected to the first phase of transformative learning. Mezirow and Marsick (1978) explained the catalyst could either be from an external event or an internal, subjective feeling. An argument could be made that the civil

discourse experience during a Talk Together session, alone, is enough of a catalyst to create a dilemma, but the data suggests more powerful, external reasons are needed for participants beginning the process of reflection – some reasons dating back to a participant's childhood and adolescence. Mezirow and Marsick (1978) argued, "Because the externally caused dilemma is likely to be less negotiable and to be more intense, it will more frequently lead to a perspective transformation" (p.13). While the Talk Together program provided tools and language for transformation, an outside emotional catalyst motivated the change. The dilemma is what creates the separation between what Mezirow (1978) described as threshold learning versus conventional learning.

Due to the overwhelming and personal nature of a disorienting dilemma, certain research instruments are better suited for determining when a dilemma is experienced. Interviews are a great method for capturing the context of certain expressed feelings. Participant survey responses, while able to capture additional data related to feelings, may not give the researcher enough confirmation of where those feelings should be placed on the transformative learning spectrum.

Findings from interview data showed several participants expressing feelings related to joy – an opposite feeling of discontent. But joy could follow discontentment if a participant makes a connection between their discontent and transformation. In other words, participants may feel as if a burden has finally been lifted. In addition, recognizing the change in others may also inspire hope. Seyle (1974) connected disorienting dilemmas to stress and anxiety. Likewise, Roberts (2006) explained disorienting dilemmas often lead to distress such as sickness and disease. So, it would

make sense that participants, before deciding to explore new roles, relationships, and action, would experience feelings related to happiness or relief.

One variable not investigated by the researcher is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants who attended Talk Together. While some participants attended in-person sessions, others attended virtually, beginning in 2020. According to some participant interview responses, the COVID-19 pandemic may have created an emotional catalyst. The pandemic may have also served as a hindrance to some participants experiencing a transformation – as evidenced by one participant who partly blamed the pandemic on him not receiving enough face-to-face interaction.

Implications for Practice

Ross and Tartaglione (2018) posited, “We are living in a time of increasing political segregation that threatens to tear us apart as a unified society” (p. 4). This is causing us to become tribal and escape to “echo chambers in which we hear our beliefs reinforced and those of others demonized” (p. 4). In the context of Talk Together, there is tremendous value in understanding how this type of program can create opportunities for civil dialogue within institutions of higher education and other settings – that also encourage critical reflection and transformative learning:

- Civic and non-profit sectors could benefit from this research by using the Talk Together model to facilitate civil discourse programming for members and volunteers.
- The private sector could utilize the Talk Together model to help increase employee motivation, satisfaction, and healthier workplace culture.

- The Talk Together model could be used to better understand and facilitate dialogue between groups that use symbolism as part of their identity, and where that symbolism may create a conflict (e.g., gangs).

Findings show 9 out of 12 interview participants connected race matters to their disorienting dilemma. This is an important consideration for the facilitation of current civil discourse programs because of the racial climate in the United States. The way discussions around race matters are approached within a civil discourse program can either support transformative learning or serve as a hindrance. Gilmour (2021) argued for using social identity as a gateway for participants to discuss race and social justice. Based on the interview findings, it appears race discussions should also be intra-racial, where minority group members facilitate nuanced race discussions amongst themselves. To lead these complex discussions, leaders should be culturally proficient. Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2009) suggested, “At the organizational level, culturally proficient leaders foster policies and practices that provide the opportunity for effective interactions among students, educators, and community members” (p. 4).

Findings related to participant exploration of roles, relationships, and action can have a huge impact on community involvement in non-profit organizations that serve marginalized communities, as well as the private sector. One survey respondent said, “I often consider how I may incorporate what I have learned into the workplace.” This statement speaks to how businesses, as well as non-profit organizations, can not only support civil dialogue but encourage the incorporation of outcomes into policy.

Conclusion

Mezirow (1994) argued one option to establish validity or justification for our problematic beliefs is through “rational discourse” (p. 225). During a time when Americans are politically divided and discourse is hindered by a need to protect and defend one’s values, conversations that prompt transformative learning will be a key to people having a greater understanding of their motivations, and the motivations of others. Civil discourse that impacts participants’ transformative learning can lead to personal revelations or practical steps toward action – creating life-changing experiences.

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Notes

This article is based on a dissertation, *A Case Study Examining the Transformative Impact of a Civil Discourse Program at a Midwestern State University*, completed by the author at the University of Missouri in 2022.

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Leonard Horton is an assistant professor of journalism at Missouri State University with a research interest in interpersonal communication between diverse groups.

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Letter to the Editor

Leonard B. Horton, III
Primary Investigator


August 15, 2022

Dear Editor,

I wish to submit an original research article entitled “Life-Changing Conversations: A Look at How One Civil Discourse Program at a Midwestern State University Impacts the Transformative Learning of its Participants” for consideration by *Communication Research*.

I confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

In this paper, I show that a particular program aimed at facilitating civil discourse among faculty, staff, and students at one university in the Midwest has been shown to impact participants’ transformative learning. This is significant because of the need to understand what types of discourse encourage self-reflection, assessment of assumptions, and subsequent action. I believe this manuscript is appropriate for publication by *Communication Research* because it meets the journal’s editorial goal of creating reflection and change in the new millennium.

This research is valuable to institutions of higher education looking to facilitate a culture of constructive engagement through listening, learning, and growth. This study adds to the body of literature examining how Mezirow’s transformative learning framework can be applied to practice – within the context of critical dialogue in higher education. Findings from this research will provide leaders in higher education a baseline to measure the impact of similar programs aimed at facilitating civil discourse on college campuses.

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Please address all correspondence concerning this manuscript to me at
 Thank you for your consideration of this manuscript.

Sincerely,
Leonard B. Horton, III

SECTION SIX: SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

Dissertation Influencing Practice as an Educational Leader

This dissertation process has greatly influenced my practice as an educational leader. This journey has offered me an invaluable exercise in listening. It has given me a greater appreciation for the use of data in decision making and has prepared me to lead during a time when leaders are being called to mend a divided nation. As a scholar, I have learned to place as much importance on analyzing data as on collecting it. I also understand that my research must advance the current conversation surrounding an area of study, which, in my case, is the impact of a civil discourse program on transformative learning.

The Impact of Listening

During some of the interviews, participants were initially hesitant to expose the full weight of their biases. They, first, needed to know that I would not violate their trust by criticizing their beliefs; that I would listen and not judge. They also needed reassurance I would protect their identities. Some of my participants were high-ranking current and former members of the site university, and some of their views, if exposed, could have negatively impacted their employment and current relationships. Although given the opportunity to skip questions they felt made them uncomfortable, each interview participant completed the interview questions – allowing me into very intimate spaces of their lives – some of which were filled with past trauma. Because I listened and developed trust, these participants were able to share parts of themselves that may have been too painful or embarrassing to share with others. The impact of listening as an educational leader carries over into the classroom and other spaces where decisions are made. Lawrence and Paige (2016) asserted, “Listening to others’ stories also helps us to

understand ourselves as we identify with their experiences. In addition, listening to stories around difference helps to promote empathy and understanding, particularly between people of different cultures” (p. 66). During a presentation given by me in one of my doctoral courses, I invited an educational leader to join me as a guest speaker. This person was the co-founder of an organization aimed at providing resources to members of the Hispanic community. She offered wonderful insight into what it means to be an adult learning leader in the 21st century. When asked about the most important skill needed by an adult learning leader, she replied, “the ability to listen.” She was critical of how potential donors come to her organization and tell members what they need – making lots of assumptions.

Following the act of listening, an academic leader should challenge their epistemology, rejecting the notion that their way of “knowing” (Holmes, 2010) is the only way. It also helps if you can identify the “paradigm” (Creswell, 2014) from which a person is speaking. One of the most impactful things I learned on my doctoral journey was the various research paradigms (see Table 4 of Appendix J), and how each paradigm represents the way people conceptualize the world. According to Holmes (2010), epistemological perspectives should not be “compared, judged or rank-ordered.... A more useful strategy calls for the examination of different patterns of construing knowledge and knowing in light of cultural practices... and institutions” (p. 289). This allows for a certain “openness” (Priskill & Brookfield, 2009) regarding classroom dialogue. “If leaders are able to encourage climates or structures that allow expression of new ideas and unfamiliar perspectives, opportunities for learning abound” (p. 25). On more than one occasion, interview participants credited the Talk Together facilitator for

creating an atmosphere that was safe for them to express certain thoughts and feelings.

Creating a safe space for participants to share is an important component of facilitating transformative learning.

Data-Driven Decision Making

This doctoral program and dissertation process reinforced the idea of “data-driven decision making” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Considering data is also a form of listening; you are listening to those voices behind the data. My survey results offered a glimpse into what people like about the Talk Together program, what they disliked, and how they would like to see the Talk Together initiative evolve. The survey responses were extremely important because they allowed me to develop recommendations based on years of participation from a diverse group of individuals. The alternative would have been to create program recommendations based on my assumptions and limited experience with the program. By making recommendations for a program solely on assumptions, I open the door for those recommendations to be filled with personal bias and a lack of context. In addition, more data allows for decisions to be made considering multiple frames. “Multiframe thinking requires moving beyond narrow, mechanical approaches for understanding organizations” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 21). In many cases, only using one frame will produce the same results and is not ideal for working through complex problems. Incorporating the use of data in my decision making will complement my strengths as an educational leader; providing greater insight into how to best serve a changing demographic with complex educational needs. In my current role as a journalism faculty member, I have trained students to use data as part of their news-gathering process. However, I could use data to better assess student needs. For example,

during the COVID-19 pandemic, I could have relied more on data to understand the impact the pandemic had on student mental health and progress towards degree completion. Post-pandemic, I can use data to help facilitate student outcomes upon graduation. As someone who teaches and advises first-generation college students, data can help me advocate more effectively on their behalf – making the case for additional resources to help these students who often come from underserved communities.

Teaching with Frameworks

I recently gave a presentation to a summer class of adults on the topic of financial literacy. When preparing the presentation, I found myself being very sensitive to frameworks. I have taught in higher education since 2009, and in that time, I have usually taught from my personal experience and some from textbooks. But I have never explained to students how a particular lecture fits within certain frameworks. Barr and Tagg (1995) posited, “Learning is revealed when... frameworks are used to understand and act” (p. 21). This dissertation process has taught me that whenever you are teaching a subject, whether it is to a diverse group of people or not, it is a good idea to explain the framework you are teaching from, as this provides the learner with greater context for understanding the subject matter.

Leadership During Crisis

This dissertation research, and my entire doctoral education, were conducted during what has been described as one of the most divisive times in American history. While we, as American citizens, are greatly connected and informed through technology and social media, we remain somewhat disconnected. We have become extremely tribal –

holding tightly to our values. As Ross and Tartaglione (2018) explained, “We are living in a society today that can feel at times like it is coming apart at the seams” (p. 1). The dividing line seems to be political, racial, or religious at times. At other times, the dividing line seems generational or based on socioeconomics. In any case, this dissertation process has provided me with a great opportunity to not only understand discourse, but how to best facilitate it where everyone feels valued, and where opportunities for transformative learning are cultivated. In many ways, encouraging discourse during these divisive times feels like a “wicked problem” (Jordan, Kleinsasser, & Roe, 2014). Shortly after being accepted into the EdD program, I learned that wicked problems have lots of entanglements and no easy solutions. Part of working through such organizational dilemmas is understanding “organized anarchy” (Manning, 2017), where participants maintain a level of autonomy and have opposing goals.

In my view, the goal of dialogue is for people to simply consider the opinion of others and to create a level of understanding. The next step is to take this understanding and attempt to create policies that everyone can live with. So often, barriers to group synergy occur due to concepts like “social power” (French & Raven, 2005) and “groupthink” (Janis, 2005), where members feel marginalized and afraid to speak up – resulting in a “culture of indecision” (Charan, 2001), or people defaulting to “paths of least resistance” (Johnson, 2018). Speaking as a journalism faculty member, this dissertation process will impact how I navigate discussions in class surrounding sensitive or controversial subject matter related to current events. It has enhanced my active listening skills and reinforced the idea of earning trust from participants, in addition to

reinforcing the idea of not judging a person because their point of view is offensive or different from your own.

Dissertation Process Influencing Scholarship

Through this dissertation process, I began to understand how the purpose of scholarship is to fill a knowledge gap, expose an inconvenient truth, establish a pattern, or support ideas and decision making that are “evidence-based” (Zettelmeyer & Bolling, 2014). I recall one of my doctoral professors referring to us students as scholars. This professor encouraged the idea that if we conducted a certain level of research on a specific topic, it makes us experts in the field. For a long time, I have had imposter syndrome when thinking of myself as a scholar. I have always reserved that mantle for those with long white beards and years of published research. Could I, with a limited history of understanding theoretical frameworks and applying those theories to my research, start considering myself a scholar? The short answer is “yes!” What I have learned through this dissertation is that it is not about how much research you have done, it is about undertaking the process itself.

Illumination Through Analysis

Every stage of the dissertation opened my eyes to the many layers of data analysis and how those layers can reveal something about your participants, and yourself. During my proposal hearing, one of my committee members was critical of my data analysis plan, and for good reason. My plan did not account for the time it would take to reflect on the data and allow it to speak. During my data gathering, it became extremely apparent this professor was correct in their assessment of my plan. During the doctoral classes, members of my cohort conducted several small research projects, but nothing on the scale

of a dissertation. Because of my background as a journalist, the data collection was simple. But as I entered the coding stage, I started to realize there was more time needed to listen to what the data was telling me. During my second round of in vivo and open coding, I closed my eyes for a moment and listened to the audio of the participants. This process of reading participants' words while listing to their voices allowed me to see a visual story. This second round of coding was much more interpretive and intuitive than the first round – allowing me to see participant connections to childhood and how they developed their rules or boundaries for living. Overall, I would describe the coding process as a very spiritual experience. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2018) described codes as “prompts or triggers for deeper reflection on the data’s meanings” (p. 64). Initially, coding just seemed like a lot of busy work. And on some level, you can feel extremely lost. Some researchers have described coding qualitative data in the context of “forests and trees” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Personally, coding feels like driving alone, cross country. You may have a map, but there are so many alternate county roads and highways that can serve as a huge distraction; I call these theoretical bunny trails. Having a framework to guide you is like having GPS; it lets you know if you are driving in the right direction.

Another scholarly process that seemed to create a roadblock for me as a novice researcher was the creation of themes. My initial theme creation came after sorting codes into categories, and then taking those categories and forming what I thought were decent themes. However, my doctoral advisor said my themes felt more like categories. Seidman (2019) noted, “The danger is that researchers will try to force the excerpts into categories and the categories into themes that they already have in mind, rather than let them

develop from the experience of the participants as represented in the interviews” (p. 135). Following a brief advisement session, my advisor permitted me to be more creative with my theme creation. One recommendation my advisor gave me was to start sorting codes by using my research questions as a framework or template. From there, I would need to simply trust the process and wait for the data to speak. My advisor also noted that any code that did not fit could be set aside as something that could be studied with further research. My third and final round of coding was deductive, where excerpts were matched with a theme created from the transformative learning framework (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018). Comparing both inductive and deductive coding, the inductive process was more of an adventure, while the deductive process felt more like matching pieces to a puzzle.

During my dissertation process, I learned a huge lesson in trust; trust with and from participants and trust also following the data. On two occasions, interview participants asked, “Can I tell the truth?” They asked this question before sharing something very personal. I interpreted this statement to mean, “Can I trust you?” While participants held strong biases toward certain segments of society, I remained open to what they had to share, while reserving judgment. I operated from a constructivist (see Table 4 of Appendix J) lens – understanding that “reality is developed through one’s interpretation of the world, and a denial of essences or universal qualities” (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006, p. 19). I think this is what made the interviewing process so fascinating. Each participant’s story was so different. There were also lessons learned related to this idea of openness. Openness is a key ingredient to permitting oneself to undergo a transformative learning process. According to Chen and Lawless

(2018), one factor contributing to a classroom with an agenda where privilege and power are shared is openness – “of both self and other(s) from multiple standpoints” (p. 379).

Another important lesson I learned is to keep giving more context. The words “give more context” were pinned above my computer while writing my dissertation. As a journalist, I am trained to keep things extremely brief. However, as a scholar, I need to keep asking why. I also need to show how what I am doing is connected to my theoretical framework and my research questions.

Continuing the Larger Conversation

One of my early challenges in the doctoral program was figuring out what conversation I wanted to take part in. During summer one, students within our cohort were made aware of the Dan Cockrell Dissertation of the Year award. As a first-year doctoral student, I had a vision of winning that award and conducting interesting research. Based on conversations I had with members of my cohort, many of us were not thinking about research as scholarly conversations and did not fully understand that our objective was to add to a larger discussion and not focus on doing something entirely off base. When I think back to that first year, I realize how silly that idea was. To come up with something unfamiliar to everyone else, you must also develop lots of theory to back it up; it would almost be like saying you have discovered a new planet in the solar system. For a dissertation, it is much easier to see what has been researched and analyze it from a different perspective, using an established theory. According to Mertens (2020), theories provide frameworks for considering the interrelationships of constructs. A lot of my overthinking, I believe, stemmed from insecurity. My doctoral process was overwhelming and foreign. While I have read the work of scholars, I do not have any

scholars in my family, so I navigated this process without an appropriate frame of reference as to what was normal. Even after I learned how to conduct research, I felt unworthy to cite another person's research, for fear that they would read it and criticize me for misinterpreting their theory. One thing that, eventually, put me at ease was seeing how my themes lined up with my research questions. This was the point where I felt like I had more control over what was happening. My dissertation advisor noted once to our cohort that research is about what you can defend. When things started coming together during the data analysis phase, I finally felt I had something I could defend.

Conclusion

This doctoral journey started in the summer of 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The concepts learned in this program transformed my thinking and prepared me for a world of uncertainty – where several foundations have been shaken and leaders are needed to help heal a divided nation. I am extremely grateful to have had this opportunity, and I am prepared for the challenge ahead of me as I embrace the ambiguity!

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL TEMPLATE

May 2, 2022

Re: [REDACTED] Survey

Good morning,

I am requesting your participation in a voluntary research study about [REDACTED] program and transformative learning. This research study is open to anyone who has attended [REDACTED] at [REDACTED]

Essentially, I am wanting to know if this program has had an impact on your life, and to what degree. This doctoral research is being conducted as part of a dissertation with the [REDACTED] / University of Missouri Cooperative Doctorate Program in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis.

Please complete the survey here:

[https://\[REDACTED\].co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bCRLVQ3Xhy7m7fo](https://[REDACTED].co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_bCRLVQ3Xhy7m7fo)

If you would like additional information about this study, please contact the Missouri State University Office of Research Administration at [REDACTED] or the MU Human Subjects Research Protections Program/IRB at irb@missouri.edu.

Respectfully,

Leonard B. Horton, III
Principal Investigator
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT SIGN-IN TEMPLATE

**Research Study Regarding [REDACTED] Program and
Transformative Learning / Sign-up Sheet**

I am requesting your participation in a voluntary research study about the [REDACTED] program and transformative learning. Essentially, I am wanting to know if this program has had an impact on your life, and to what degree. This doctoral research is being conducted as part of a dissertation with the [REDACTED] / University of Missouri Cooperative Doctorate Program in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis.

Please print your email address below to take a survey. You will be sent an anonymous survey link:

| | |
|-----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 11. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 12. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 13. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 14. _____ |
| 5. _____ | 15. _____ |
| 6. _____ | 16. _____ |
| 7. _____ | 17. _____ |
| 8. _____ | 18. _____ |
| 9. _____ | 19. _____ |
| 10. _____ | 20. _____ |

Again, your participation is completely voluntary. This research may be published, but your name will be kept confidential. Your overall time commitment will be less than one hour. Anyone who is a current student of Leonard B. Horton, III, the primary investigator, is excluded from this research, due to conflict of interest. This research would include your participation in one or all the following: interview, focus group, or online survey. Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in learning more about this University of Missouri (MU) Institutional Review Board-approved project. My email address is [REDACTED]
Respectfully,
Leonard B. Horton, III
Principal Investigator

APPENDIX C: ARTIFACT ANALYSIS GUIDE

1. Does this artifact relate to my research study?
2. What is the history of the document?
3. How did it come into my hands?
4. What guarantee is there that it is what it pretends to be? Is the document complete, as originally constructed?
5. Has it been tampered with or edited?
6. If the document is genuine, under what circumstances and for what purposes was it produced?
7. Who was/is the author?
8. For whom was the document intended?
9. What were the maker's sources of information?
10. Does the document represent an eyewitness account, a secondhand account, a reconstruction of an event long before the writing, and interpretation?
11. What was or is the maker's bias?
12. To what extent was the writer likely to want to tell the truth?

APPENDIX D: RESEARCH OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Researcher Observation Protocol

Researcher's Role (check one) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 144)

- Complete participant
- Participant as observer
- Observer as participant
- Complete observer

| Descriptive notes | Reflective notes |
|-------------------|---|
| | <p>Draw a diagram of the observation environment:</p> |

APPENDIX D: RESEARCHER OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

1. What time of day is it?
2. What is the room setting?
3. Is this session being conducted virtually or in person?
4. How many participants are in attendance?
5. How many facilitators are there?
6. What is today's topic?
7. How long did this session last?
8. Are there any moments that stand out from today's session?
9. Was this session interrupted in any way (fire drill, etc....)?
10. Were there any outside media brought into the setting (video, news reporter, etc....)?
11. Quotes from participants?
12. Were there any words or phrases that alluded to Mezirow's first five phases of transformative learning?
13. How much did the researcher participate in today's session in the role of observer as participant?
14. What are some details regarding how the facilitator/s led today's session?

APPENDIX E: REFLECTIVE MEMO INSTRUMENT

Researcher: Leonard B. Horton, III

Place:

Purpose:

Date/Time:

Reflective memo:

APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVAL NOTICE



Institutional Review Board
University of Missouri-Columbia
FWA Number: 00002876
IRB Registration Numbers: 00000731, 00009014

310 Jesse Hall
Columbia, MO 65211
573-882-3181
irb@missouri.edu

April 04, 2022

Principal Investigator: Leonard Horton (MU-Student)
Department: Educational Leadership-EDD

Your IRB Application to project entitled A Case Study Examining the Transformative Impact of a Civil Discourse Program at a Midwestern State University was reviewed and approved by the MU Institutional Review Board according to the terms and conditions described below:

| | |
|---|--|
| IRB Project Number | 2090742 |
| IRB Review Number | 375480 |
| Initial Application Approval Date | April 04, 2022 |
| IRB Expiration Date | April 04, 2023 |
| Level of Review | Exempt |
| Project Status | Active - Exempt |
| Exempt Categories (Revised Common Rule) | 45 CFR 46.104d(2)(ii) |
| Risk Level | Minimal Risk |
| HIPAA Category | No HIPAA Informed Consent & Assent - Consent (Exempt Studies Only): #589337 Other Study Documents - Instruments (i.e. surveys): #588486 Other Study Documents - Instruments (i.e. surveys): #588489 Other Study Documents - Instruments (i.e. surveys): #588490 Other Study Documents - Instruments (i.e. surveys): #588491 Other Study Documents - Instruments (i.e. surveys): #588493 Other Study Documents - Interview Questions: #588488 Recruitment Materials - Recruitment Letter: #589338 |
| Approved Documents | |

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
2. All changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation utilizing the Exempt Amendment Form.
3. Major noncompliance deviations must be reported to the MU IRB on the Event Report within 5 business days of the research team becoming aware of the deviation. Major deviations result when research activities may affect the research subject's rights, safety, and/or welfare, or may have had the potential to impact even if no actual harm occurred. Please refer to the MU IRB Noncompliance policy for additional details.
4. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date to keep the study active or to close it.
5. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.

If you are offering subject payments and would like more information about research participant payments, please click here to view the MU Business Policy and Procedure: http://bppm.missouri.edu/chapter2/2_250.html

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the MU IRB Office at 573-882-3181 or email to muresearchirb@missouri.edu.

Thank you,
MU Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX G: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION / CONSENT FORM

Project Title: A Case Study Examining the Transformative Impact of a Civil Discourse Program at a Midwestern State University

Researcher: Leonard B. Horton, III

Advisor: Dr. Cynthia MacGregor

Institution and Program: [REDACTED] / University of Missouri;
Cooperative Doctorate Program, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

BRIEF SUMMARY

You are invited to take part in a research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time. The purpose of this research project is to examine the transformative impact of [REDACTED] program on its participants. As a participant, you may be asked to take part in some or all the following research elements: interviews, focus groups, observations, and online surveys. Your participation should last no longer than one hour.

RISKS

Participants might experience some discomfort in discussing sensitive topics.

BENEFITS

You will not directly benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation in this study may contribute to the understanding of how those who take part in the Tough Talks program are transformed through their participation.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The information you provide will be kept confidential and only the research team will have access.

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

Participants should not incur any costs for participating in this study. There is no compensation for taking part in this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact:

Leonard B. Horton, III (Primary Investigator), [REDACTED]

Office phone: [REDACTED] / E-mail: [REDACTED]

Dr. Cynthia MacGregor (Advisor), [REDACTED]

Office phone: [REDACTED] / E-mail: [REDACTED]

We appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. You can ask the researchers to provide you with a copy of this consent for your records, or you can save a copy of this consent if it has already been provided to you.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information, offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish:



MU Human Subjects Research Protections Program/IRB:
573-882-3181
irb@missouri.edu
Office of Research
310 Jesse Hall
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65211

APPENDIX H: SURVEY ITEMS

Note: Q1 was set to force response. The remaining questions were set to request response.

Q1. Do you agree to participate in this survey and have read and understood the consent information?

- Yes
- No

Q2. Approximately how many [REDACTED] sessions have you attended?

- None
- 1
- 2
- 3 or more

Q3. Why did you attend [REDACTED] Why did you go again?

Q4. What are some of the feelings you experienced because of attending [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Q5. Before going to [REDACTED], you were open to considering new ideas and perspectives:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q6. At any point during [REDACTED], you became uncomfortable because you heard an idea that contradicted your views:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q7. Attending [REDACTED] caused you to self-reflect or do “soul searching:”

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree

- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q8. Before attending [REDACTED], you were aware that you had some strongly held beliefs:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q9. After attending [REDACTED], you started to feel or think differently about your strongly held beliefs:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q10. You were dissatisfied or discontent with yourself because of [REDACTED], and then decided to change:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q11. What you experienced during [REDACTED] prompted you to explore new roles, either personally or professionally:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q12. What you experienced during [REDACTED] caused you to explore new relationships:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree

- Strongly agree

Q13. What you experienced during [REDACTED] resulted in you doing something new:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q14. Following your participation in [REDACTED], you felt moved to reconcile with someone or have a conversation with someone outside of the session (friends, family members, co-workers, etc.):

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q15. Overall, your experience in [REDACTED] caused you to make some type of personal change:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Slightly agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q16. If you answered slightly agree or higher on question 15, please explain what type of personal change you made:

Q17. What is your highest level of education?

- GED
- High school graduate
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate or another terminal degree

Q18. Race:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American

- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

Q19. Ethnicity:

- Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin
- Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin

Q20. How do you identify in terms of gender?

Q21. How do you identify in terms of religion/spirituality?

Q22. Age:

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75 or older

Q23. Would you be willing to take part in an interview?

- Yes
- No

Q24. If you answered yes to #23, what is a good contact email address?

Thank you for taking this survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When did you attend your first [REDACTED] session?
2. Approximately how many [REDACTED] sessions have you attended?
3. Why did you attend your first [REDACTED] session? Why did you go again?
4. What are some of the feelings you experienced because of attending [REDACTED]
(Connected to RQ1)
5. Before you started attending [REDACTED], how would you describe your openness to considering new ideas and perspectives? (Connected to RQ1)
6. At any point during [REDACTED], did you become uncomfortable because you heard an idea that contradicted your views? If so, please tell me about that. (Connected to RQ1)
7. Did attending [REDACTED] cause you to self-reflect or do “soul searching?” If so, please tell me about that. (Connected to RQ2)
8. Before attending [REDACTED], were you aware that you had some strongly held beliefs? If so, what were these strongly held beliefs? (Connected to RQ2)
9. After attending [REDACTED], did you think or feel differently about your strongly held beliefs? (Connected to RQ3)
10. Were you ever dissatisfied or discontent with yourself because of [REDACTED], and then decided to change? (Connected to RQ4)
11. Has anything you have heard or witnessed during [REDACTED] prompted you to explore new roles, either personally or professionally? If so, please tell me about that. (Connected to RQ5)
12. Has anything you have heard or witnessed during [REDACTED] caused you to explore new relationships? If so, please tell me about that. (Connected to RQ5)
13. Has anything you've heard or witnessed during [REDACTED] resulted in you doing something new? (Connected to RQ5)
14. Following your participation in [REDACTED], did you feel moved to reconcile with someone or have a conversation with someone outside of the session (friends, family members, co-workers, etc...)? If so, please tell me about that. (Connected to RQ5)

15. As a result of your experience with [REDACTED], in what ways are you different?
(Connected to RQ5)

16. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

17. How do you identify, in terms of race?

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

What is your ethnicity:

- Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin
- Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin

18. How do you identify, in terms of gender?

19. What is your highest level of education?

21. What is your age:

22. How do you identify in terms of religion/spirituality

APPENDIX J: TABLES

Table 1

Participant Demographic and Attributes of Interview and Survey Participants (N=53)

| Demographic factors | | Count | (%) |
|--------------------------------|---|--------------|------------|
| Gender (n=43) | Male | 16 | 37.00% |
| | Female | 25 | 58.00% |
| | Gender nonconforming/nonbinary | 2 | 5.00% |
| Age (n=45) | Under 18 | 0 | 0.00% |
| | 18-24 | 9 | 20.00% |
| | 25-34 | 7 | 15.56% |
| | 35-44 | 7 | 15.56% |
| | 45-54 | 7 | 15.56% |
| | 55-64 | 8 | 17.78% |
| | 65-74 | 6 | 13.33% |
| | 75 or older | 1 | 2.22% |
| Educational level (n=46) | GED | 1 | 2.17% |
| | High school graduate | 3 | 6.52% |
| | Associate degree | 3 | 6.52% |
| | Bachelor's degree | 14 | 30.43% |
| | Master's degree | 16 | 34.78% |
| | Doctorate or other terminal degree | 9 | 19.57% |
| Race (n=44) | American Indian or Alaska Native | 0 | 0.00% |
| | Asian | 2 | 4.55% |
| | Black or African American | 7 | 15.91% |
| | Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | 0 | 0.00% |
| | White | 35 | 79.55% |
| Ethnicity (n=45) | Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin | 4 | 8.89% |
| | Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin | 41 | 91.11% |
| Religion / Spirituality (n=43) | All | 1 | 2.30% |
| | Agnostic | 3 | 6.98% |
| | Anglican | 1 | 2.30% |
| | Atheist | 1 | 2.30% |
| | Baha'i faith | 2 | 4.65% |
| | Comfortable | 1 | 2.30% |
| | Catholic | 1 | 2.30% |
| | Catholic (progressive) | 1 | 2.30% |
| | Christian | 13 | 30.20% |

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|-------|
| Christian/Episcopalian | 1 | 2.30% |
| Christian/Pentecostal | 1 | 2.30% |
| Christian/Spiritualist | 1 | 2.30% |
| Erulaitälä | 1 | 2.30% |
| Humanist | 1 | 2.30% |
| Jesus follower (no label) | 1 | 2.30% |
| Muslim | 1 | 2.30% |
| N/A | 1 | 2.30% |
| Nondenominational | 1 | 2.30% |
| Non-religious | 1 | 2.30% |
| Not religious or spiritual | 1 | 2.30% |
| Not sure | 1 | 2.30% |
| Protestant | 1 | 2.30% |
| Random beliefs | 1 | 2.30% |
| Spiritual | 1 | 2.30% |
| Spiritual, but not religious | 3 | 6.98% |
| Taoist | 1 | 2.30% |

Note. Although the sample size is 53, numbers represent the total survey responses for each survey item.

APPENDIX J: TABLES

Table 2

Summary of Interview Participants (N=12)

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Race | Religion | Status | Education | Sessions |
|-----------|------------------|-------|------------------|------------------------|------------------|--------------|----------|
| Gloria | Female | 45-54 | White | Christian | Current Staff | Master's | 10+ |
| Patrick | Male | 65-74 | White | Christian | Current Faculty | Doctorate | 8-10 |
| Xavier | Male | 35-44 | Black | Christian | Current Staff | Bachelor's | 10-15 |
| Isabella | Female | 45-54 | White (Hispanic) | Catholic (Progressive) | Former Student | Master's | 20-30 |
| Arlo | Male | 75+ | White | Taoist | Current Student | H.S. diploma | 5+ |
| Mark | Male | 55-64 | White | Nonreligious | Current Staff | Associate | 20+ |
| Deborah | Female | 55-64 | Black | Christian | Former Staff | Bachelor's | 10+ |
| Jeff | Male | 55-64 | White | Nonreligious | Current Staff | H.S. diploma | 8+ |
| Greta | Nonbinary | 65-74 | White | Catholic | Current Staff | Bachelor's | 5 |
| Dana | Female | 45-54 | White (Hispanic) | Christian | Community Member | H.S. diploma | 8+ |
| Randall | Male | 65-74 | White | Bahá'í faith | Community Member | Bachelor's | 15-20 |
| Pauline | Mostly cisgender | 45-54 | White (Italian) | Nonreligious | Community Member | Master's | 8+ |

Note. Status is in relation to the site university. Sessions refer to the total number of Talk Together sessions attended by interview participants.

APPENDIX J: TABLES

Table 3

Response to Survey Item 4 – What are some of the feelings you experienced because of attending [Talk Together]?

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Acceptance (1) | Emotional awareness (1) | Hopeless (2) | Positive (1) |
| Affirmation (1) | | Horror (1) | Quiet (1) |
| Anger (6) | Emotionally drained (1) | Inadequacy (2) | Relief (2) |
| Angst (1) | | Indifferent (1) | Respected (1) |
| Appreciated (1) | Empathy (5) | Informed (2) | Sadness (8) |
| Ashamed (1) | Empowered (1) | Insightful (1) | Safe (1) |
| Awareness (3) | Encouraged (3) | Insignificance (1) | Satisfaction (2) |
| Challenged (1) | Engaged (1) | Involved (1) | Seen (1) |
| Comfort (2) | Enlightenment (1) | Joy (4) | Solidarity (1) |
| Compassion (3) | Enthusiasm (1) | Kindness (1) | Strength (2) |
| Concern (1) | Exasperation (1) | Motivated (1) | Struggling (1) |
| Confirmation (1) | Excitement (3) | Nervous (1) | Surprise (1) |
| Confusion (1) | Frustration (3) | Open to talk (1) | Sympathy (1) |
| Curiosity (1) | Gratitude (1) | Opportunity to learn and grow (3) | Troubled (1) |
| Desire to go deeper / do more (2) | Guardedness (1) | Outraged (1) | Uneasiness (1) |
| Discomfort (5) | Guilt (2) | Overwhelmed (2) | Unwelcomed (1) |
| Disgust (1) | Happiness (1) | Passion (1) | Validated (1) |
| Disappointment (1) | Heard (2) | | |
| Embarrassed (1) | Helplessness (1) | Perplexity (1) | |
| | Hopeful (9) | | |

Note. The numbers in parentheses indicate how often terms were noted among survey respondents.

APPENDIX J: TABLES

Table 4

Labels Commonly Associated with Different Paradigms

| <i>Postpositivism</i> | <i>Constructivist</i> | <i>Transformative</i> | <i>Pragmatic</i> |
|---------------------------|--|--|------------------|
| Experimental | Naturalistic | Critical theory | Mixed methods |
| Quasi-experimental | Phenomenological | Neo-Marxist | Mixed models |
| Correlational | Hermeneutic | Feminist theories | Participatory |
| Causal comparative | Symbolic interaction | Critical race theory | |
| Quantitative | Ethnographic | Freirean | |
| Randomized control trials | Qualitative Participatory action research | Participatory Emancipatory Postcolonial/indigenous Queer theory Disability theories Action research | |

Note: This table is adapted from Lather (1992) and Guba and Lincoln (1989; 2005).

VITA

Leonard B. Horton, III teaches college students pursuing careers in multimedia journalism. With more than 20 years of broadcast industry/teaching experience, Horton's mentorship has helped students secure opportunities in top news markets across America. His primary focus is assisting students with job/internship placement, and salary negotiation. Horton resides in Missouri with his wife and daughter.