

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

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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 the fall of 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, impacts 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

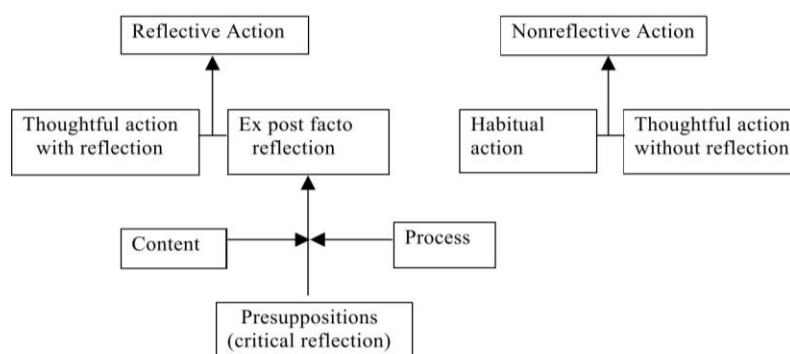
Transformative Learning Theory

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 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).

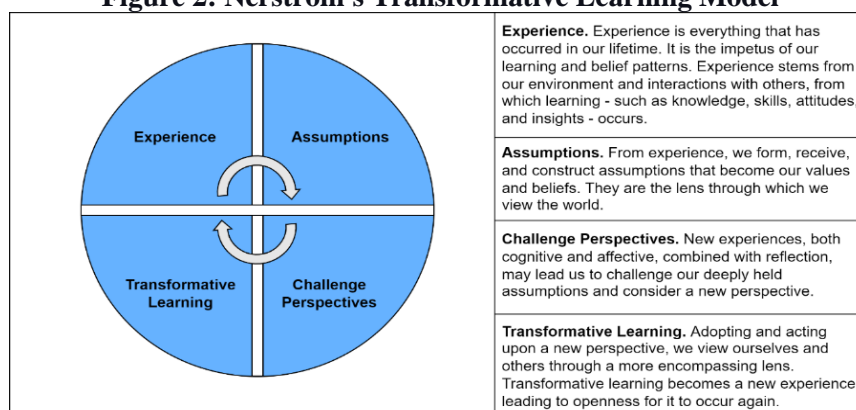
Mezirow (1990) argued a dilemma may be triggered by an “eye-opening discussion, book, poem, painting” (p. 14) or anything that challenges a person’s preconceived notions. The origin of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 2009; 1998; 2018) involves the research of 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) a 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 actions. 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 actions 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). Regarding 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 actions 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 with 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 an 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: 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 about 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 faculties, 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 Taguette. 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 a response, versus force response. Request response alerts the respondent to continue the survey without answering if they choose. This response set 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 actions.

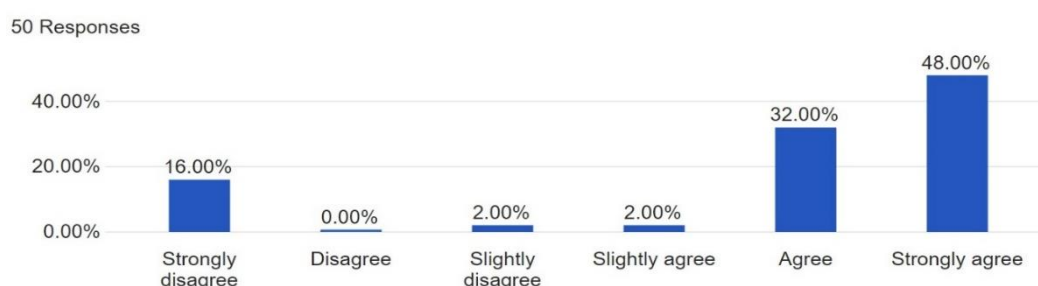
These five themes connect to the five research questions adapted from Mezirow’s transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 1994; 1997; 1998; 2009; 2018) framework. The following narrative of findings will explain further how themes are connected to the research questions and other data including survey data and snippets from interview participants. To protect the 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 lowercase ‘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

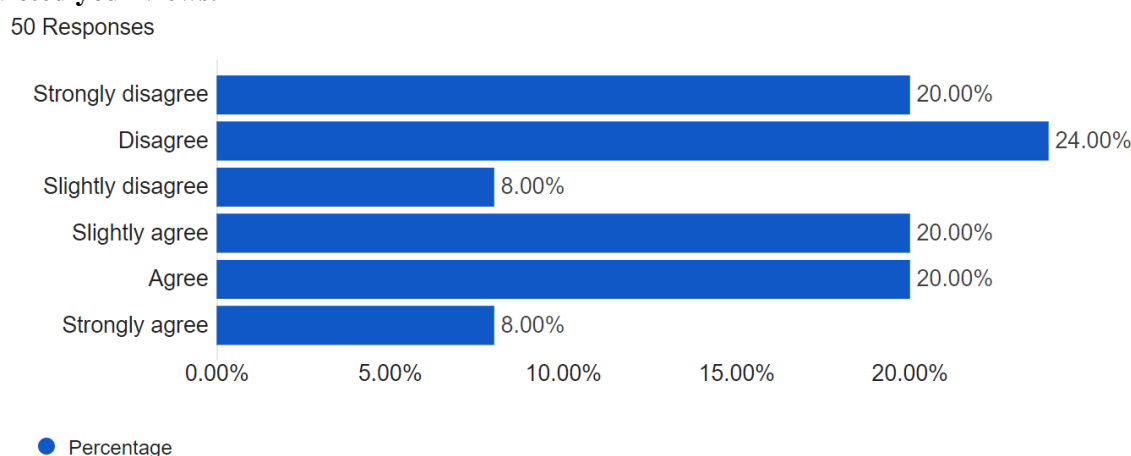
Figure 3: Response to Survey Item 5 Before going to [Talk Together], you were open to considering new ideas and perspectives.





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.”

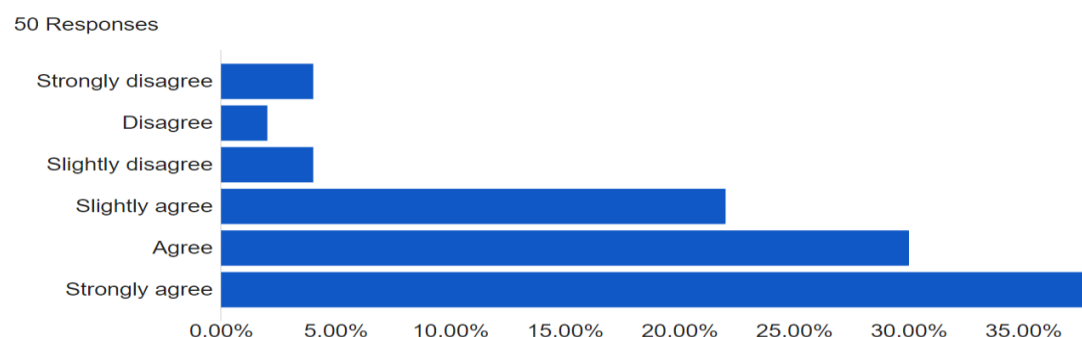
[The Talk Together program] opened my consciousness to things I have not thought of in a while. [It] taught me that we have to go and learn. And it should be our responsibility as citizens to continue learning. Nothing is static.

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 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 to 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.”



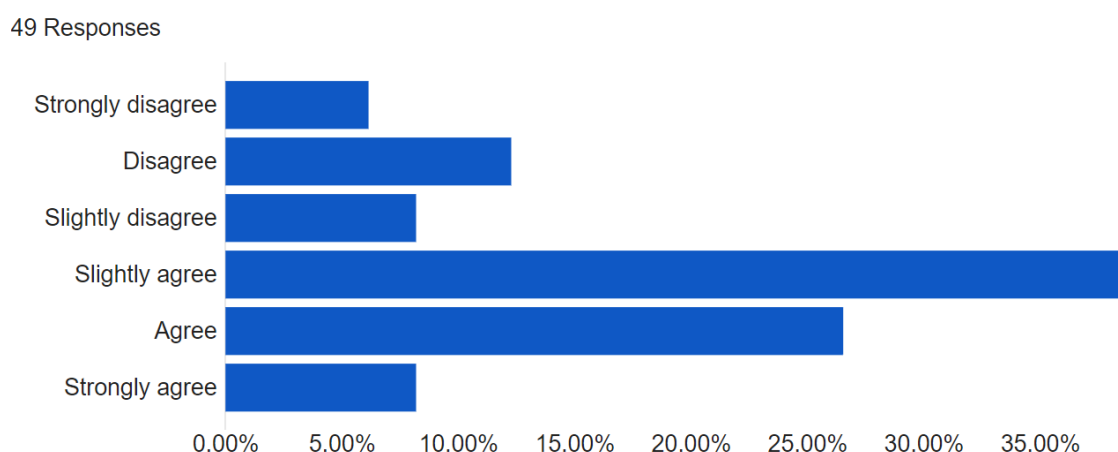


Survey item 8, which asked participants whether they had strongly held beliefs before attending Talk Together, is also connected to RQ2. Forty-six percent of respondents agreed that they had some strongly held beliefs, compared to only 4% who disagreed. An example of a participant who admitted to having 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,”

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:

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 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):

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 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,

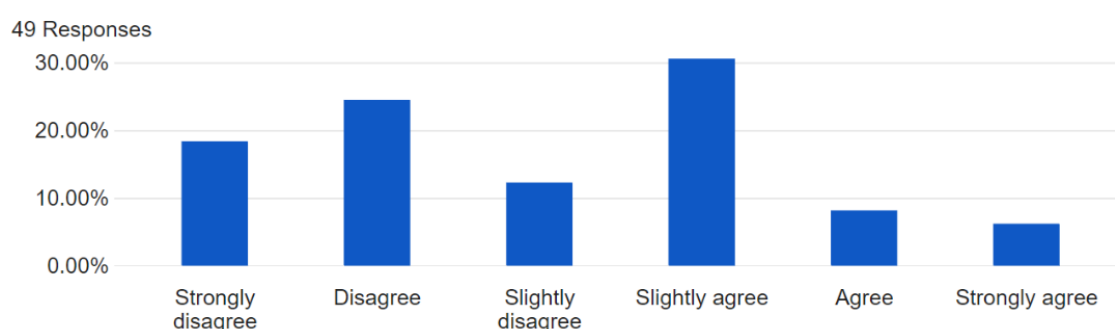


I'm not going to let it stop me from learning or trying to become a better person.

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

Figure 7: Response to Survey Item 10-You were dissatisfied or discontent with yourself because of [Talk Together], and then decided to change.

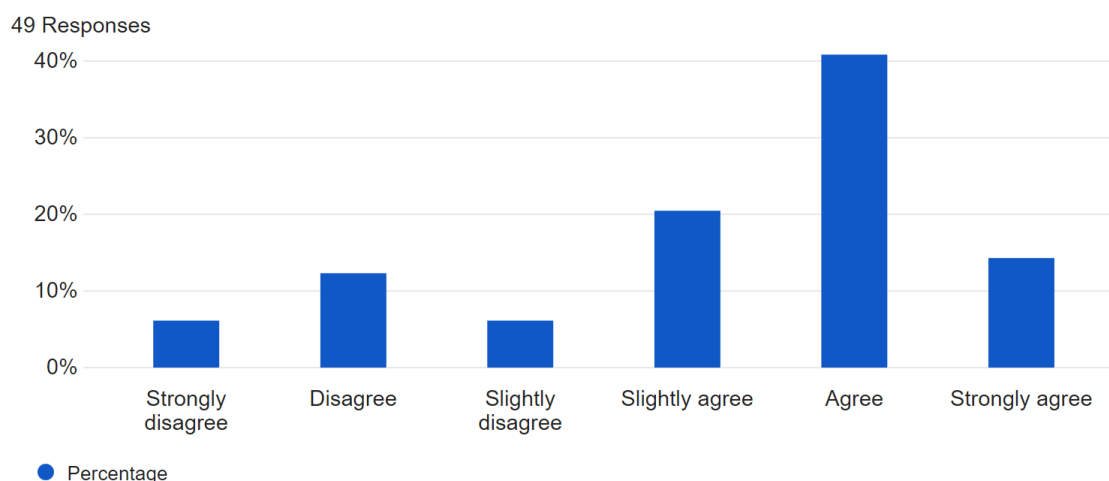


Connection to RQ5

The fifth theme, *Giant Steps*, connects to RQ5 and examines the exploration of new roles, relationships, and actions. 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

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

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 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):

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):

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 a 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 experience 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 have 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 transform. 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 to begin 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 actions, 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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