

# On (Un)common Ground: Transforming from Dissonance to Commitment in a Service Learning Class

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*Through the lenses of transformative and experiential learning theory, this article describes South African psychology students' transformational journey while doing service-learning in a rural community. The reflection reports of five cohort groups (2006 to 2010), capturing students meaning making experiences and interpretations during community engagements, is analysed by means of a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive thematic analysis. Through the boundary crossings facilitated by service-learning, this research unpacks students' iterative transformational learning cycles towards more complex cognitive processes, more sophisticated perspectives of the self and society, deepened emotional realisations, and recommitment to act as, and challenge others to be, socially responsible citizens of South Africa. A contextual adaptation of the existing transformational service-learning process model is provided. Lastly, an argument is made for how service-learning and reflective practice provide ideal opportunities for the teaching of relevant and socially responsive psychology.*

To satisfy the demands of the 21st century, the focus of education should shift from the accumulation of knowledge to accompanying learners on a journey toward radically new ways of responding to life. Higher education should challenge students to develop their abilities to think abstractly and provide the skills to deal with complex conflicting information and ill-structured problems (Eyler, 2002a).

Transformative learning is a method that has won ground in this regard. First proposed by Jack Mezirow in the 1980s, it is a process where individuals develop through radical perspective transformation that encourages the realization that their worldviews and sense of self are based on an uncritical acceptance of culturally inherited perspectives, grounded in experience from contexts that are not universal. Individuals have to critically reevaluate the validity of their thinking schemes and frameworks, and to reassess and question the knowledge and assumptions they have accumulated over a lifetime. During this process, which usually entails both an intellectual and an emotional shift, individuals find novel ways of making meaning out of life. In accordance with the Freirian term *praxis*—action and reflection on the world to transform it (Freire, 1968)—transformational learning theory emphasizes that the expansion of worldviews and sense of self must be expressed in action (Mezirow, 1997, 2000).

Service learning (SL), a teaching strategy that involves students in the community, is recognized as an alternative pedagogy that supports the movement toward individual and social transformation (Saltmarsh, 1996). By integrating active experiential learning with community based scholarship, intellectual rigor, and holistic personal growth, SL has been found to be an effective pedagogical tool to “transform lives, to touch the heart as

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well as the mind” (Kretchmar, 2001, p. 9). Community engagement provides novel situations and experiences, creating doubt and confusion among students, and thus has the potential to instigate learning (Bingle & Hatcher, 1999). Facilitating this learning through critical reflective practice provides educational opportunities that expand learning and development beyond the typical outcomes. Numerous scholars in this field indicate that SL has the potential to enhance academic learning (increased understanding and application of curriculum content), personal growth (inter- and intrapersonal learning), civic development (a deeper appreciation of social responsibility), and the capacity to deal with a complex and unpredictable world (Bingle & Hatcher, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rubin, 2001). Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray (2001) provided an extensive overview of research related to students transformation during SL and referred to students’ personal development (i.e., sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development), interpersonal development (i.e., the ability to work well with others, leadership and communication skills), social outcomes (such as the reduction of stereotypes and improved cultural and racial understanding), and learning outcomes (such as the ability to apply understanding and cognitive development). Furthermore, SL is seen as a powerful tool in strengthening social and moral values, addressing societal issues, and stimulating theoretical and philosophical discourses toward critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, and a commitment to the public good (Ash, Clayton, & Day, 2004; Bingle & Steinberg, 2010; Collier & Morgan, 2002; Kiely, 2005; Reeb, Folger, Langsner, Ryan, & Crouse, 2010; Skilton-Sylvester & Erwin, 2000).

This article aims not only to understand the outcomes of transformative SL experiences but also to map the learning process. The

transformative processes that occur during SL are described via Kiely’s (2005) expanded view of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. In this discussion, I refer to the underlying learning theories (experiential, constructivist, situated learning) and how SL applies certain principles of effective learning. Thereafter, SL students’ transformational journey are described empirically in a case study.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This article concerns the central tenets of transformational theory: perspective transformation through deliberate problem posing, critical reflection, effective dialogue, and group processes (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). Five interrelated processes are referred to: contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalizing the other, processing, and connecting (Kiely, 2005).

The transformative process starts with *contextual border crossing*, which Kiely (2005) describes as a complex process involving not only crossing physical borders into unfamiliar environments (such as national borders during international SL), but also socially constructed borders related to the self, personal biography, culture, and social status. Mezirow’s (2000) theory calls boundary crossing a *disorienting dilemma* in which anomalies are not easily explained by existing knowledge and beliefs. Experiential theorists also view it as an effective start to a learning process. Both Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984) refer to “forked road situations,” the resolution of which provides excellent learning opportunities. Dissonant and perplexing challenges awaken curiosity and create a demand for the information needed to resolve the dilemma (Bingle, 2003).

During their everyday experiences, individuals create a worldview that determines their future behavior. According to Mezirow (1978), our contextual and psychological

experiences form the patterns of our daily lives, and so we often unwittingly relive our histories. Also, Piaget (1976) believes that individuals construct or invent an understanding of reality in relation to preexisting cognitive structures and expectations. Our socially constructed identities are thus products of the historical, social, political, cultural, and economic realities of our past and present and of the psychological experiences related to this (Kiely, 2005). These meanings are challenged by the dilemma, leading to further learning. Often unquestioned assumptions that were assimilated during acculturation and socialization are questioned only when one is confronted with a dramatically different reality (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). A boundary crossing (a movement out of comfort zones and familiar social networks) thus provides an opportunity to critically examine issues of power, privilege, human rights, and quality of life that would not be evident while living one's routine life (Kiely, 2005). According to Kiely (2005), this crossing is framed by four factors: personal (personality traits, values, learning styles), structural (relating to race, class, gender, culture, ethnicity, nationality), historical (political history), and educational/programmatic factors. Each factor, as well as the interplay between them, determines how this initial border crossing is experienced and sets the tone for the rest of the transformative process.

Dissonance between the student's pre-existing frame of reference and the contextual factors of the present experience is the next dimension of the transformative learning process (Kiely, 2005). It can assume various forms: historical, environmental, physical, social, cultural, linguistic, economic, political, and spiritual.

Making meaning of our experience is a basic part of being human (Mezirow, 2000). This corresponds with Piaget's (1976) idea

that individuals strive toward an active balance with the environment and organize their mental structures into coherent patterns (schemes) accordingly. Dissonance results when existing worldviews and beliefs (or Piaget's term, *schemas*) are inadequate to explain puzzling or surprising experiences. Dissonance and disequilibrium motivates individuals to employ self-regulatory processes of adjustment. Increased experience results in more and increasingly complex schemas that facilitate adaptation to novel situations. Piaget (1976) regards dissonance, perplexity, and disequilibrium as the instigators of learning.

The intensity and duration of dissonance are the keys to true transformative learning (as envisioned by Mezirow). According to Kiely (2005), low-intensity dissonance (e.g., practicalities regarding language and safety) leads to short-term, instrumental, and communicative adaptations. High-intensity dissonance (e.g., being confronted with human rights issues) leads to intense emotions, the questioning of the self and society, and long-term adaptations. Thus, high-intensity dissonance facilitates true transformative learning (termed *emancipation* by Habermass).

*Personalizing the other* relates to the "human face" of learning where the individual's personal response is in the foreground. Confronted with themselves, students start to reevaluate their positions in life. This often entails an emotional response involving self-examination, soul searching, and an assessment of their own internal strengths and weaknesses (Kiely, 2005; Mezirow, 2000). During this stage of personalizing the other, a personal connection with the lives of community members is made (Neururer & Rhoads, 1998) and students start to put faces and names to previously abstract concepts, such as poverty. Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby (2006) report that recent research in the field of cognitive psychology and neuroscience has

highlighted the central role that emotions play in the thinking and learning process. They criticize many scholars' inattention to emotion and suggest that the interplay between the intellectual and the emotional should be emphasized. Kiely (2005), too, mentions the necessity of focusing more on the affective aspects of learning to enhance the transformative dimensions of learning. This echoes the pioneering work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997), who propose the perspective of connected knowing where empathic understanding is emphasized. Also Baxter Magolda (2004) reiterates the importance of contextual knowing (where the ideas of others are considered as relative to the context) in students' journeys toward self-authorship.

SL aims to connect the multiple dimensions of human development and is described as a wholehearted affair. During SL the personal and intellectual are connected more and stronger than usual (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996, p. vii) witness the power of intellectual and personal transformation during SL, in what they term the "Aha! moments." Slimbach (1996) remarks that SL and reflection can help bridge the gap among head, heart, and hands to create the link needed for a holistic approach to learning.

*Processing* entails actions toward understanding and finding deeper meaning. It concerns cognitive and rational processes of questioning, connecting theory to practice, debating, analyzing, searching for causes of and solutions to the problems and issues, and developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills (Kiely, 2005). Through various reflective and discursive processes, it facilitates change on instrumental (managing the environment), communicative (understanding others), and transformative levels. Furthermore, it explores options for new roles, relationships, and action, and the

knowledge and skills for implementing new strategies are acquired in this stage (Mezirow, 2000). Both individual reflective learning and social learning are at play here.

Piaget (1976) describes development as the progression from concrete to abstract ways of thinking. According to Perry (1981), students move from dualistic thinking to an acceptance of relativism and to the capacity to make warranted judgments of complex information and to act in the context of ambiguity. Also, Belenky et al. (1997) describe the perspectives of silence, received and subjective knowing, and procedural and constructed knowing. In relation to this, Baxter Magolda (2004) proposes four stances in the evolution of students' ways of knowing, from absolute knowing to transitional and independent knowing and finally to contextual knowing. Ultimately, students reach a position of commitment in relativity—an affirmation, choice, or decision made in awareness of relativism. The implications of these commitments, as well as the resulting challenges, lead to continued experiences of committing and recommitting in the process of making meaning of experiences. As their personal identity develops, students reveal advanced levels of thinking and make committed decisions (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Perry, 1981).

SL provides real-world opportunities that often highlight students' moral dilemmas, which challenge and contradict their value systems. Values guide decisions and, if discussed, explored, clarified, and altered to accommodate new challenges, new knowledge is acquired and behavior can be modified. This leads to personal development. Because students do not always automatically connect the service experience with a deeper understanding of community issues and social responsibility, these value issues need to be addressed deliberately during reflection.

Through posing questions, discussing uncomfortable ideas, and clarifying values, reflection explores issues deeply and critically and examines alternative ways of thinking not considered previously (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Thus, if used correctly, reflection can be an effective mechanism to stimulate cognitive processing and relate to complexity (Eyler, 2002a; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

However, a delicate balance is needed between challenging (posing tough questions and uncomfortable points of view) and creating a safe space (being ready to support and nurture when needed). In this regard Kiely (2005) emphasizes group reflection as a way of building solidarity, support, and trust. In a nurturing, affirming, and supportive atmosphere, challenge will be experienced as more positive and will yield more effective results (Eyler et al., 1996). This resonates with the emphasis of feminist epistemologies on learning as a social practice, based on participation in a community of practice (Neururer & Rhoads, 1998). In addition, believing in human-mediated constructivist learning, Vygotsky (2004) emphasizes the role of collaborative learning and socialization practices. Students seek models, not for knowledge but for the courage to affirm their commitment in the full awareness of uncertainty (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Perry, 1981).

*Connecting* happens in both the affective and behavioral domains. Through suspending judgment and taking care not to over-intellectualize, students reach an affective understanding through relationships with the community, peers, and faculty. In the connecting stage, boundaries truly disappear through active, intuitive, and visceral modes of sensing, sharing, feeling, caring, participating, relating, and listening (Kiely, 2005).

With terms such as *democratic community* and *associated living*, Dewey maintains that

education is a social process of connecting the “I” to the “we” (Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 16). Just as in the case with SL scholars, Dewey strongly supports the overcoming of social divisions and the transcendence of the dualism between self and society (Saltmarsh, 1996). During SL, through collective and diverse inputs from all partners, egalitarian connections and interaction, and the successful crossing of boundaries (of race, ethnicity, and class), students realize their own responsibility toward social reform. Also, they reach a broadened sense of self: an integrated and interdependent individuality and a relational self. Freire (1968), too, emphasizes the importance of engagement with others and with the world, based on the values of love, humility, faith, hope, mutual trust, fellowship, and solidarity.

Philosophically grounded in a participatory worldview, feminist epistemologies, and situated learning theories also propose that learning should be part of connected life (Noddings, 1984). Skilton-Sylvester and Erwin (2000) refer to the importance of caring and sharing as a vehicle to enhance the border crossing (from the self to others) that is often needed during SL experiences. According to Noddings (1984, p. 201), to “meet the other in caring” is the pinnacle of learning during service. Feminist worldviews would claim that SL is an act of caring to bridge the tensions between the self and the other, the ethic of care and the ethic of justice, and the ideals of individualism and community life (Neururer & Rhoads, 1998).

## THE SERVICE LEARNING SETTING

Strongly linked to the South African national educational policy directives of increased participation, greater responsiveness, and increased cooperation and partnerships is the challenge inherent in the praxis of community

psychology: the quest and commitment toward social transformation (Seedat & Lazarus, 2011). Being context- and action-oriented, community psychology focuses on the relationships between individuals and their social systems, emphasizing social priorities, community well-being, and quality of life. This SL community psychology program aims to equip students with the competence to plan, implement, and evaluate community counseling interventions that address contemporary psychosocial issues identified within a local community in South Africa. Interventions are focused on the joint (meaning the student together with partnered youth) development of skills related to studies, careers, and life.

In groups of four to five, postgraduate students (approximately 20–30 per year) visited partner schools (Grades 8–12) once a week during the academic year (9–10 months). After conducting situational analyses with the various role players, students developed and presented workshops, interactive discussions, and individual counseling sessions addressing the identified priorities. The program included components of experiential learning, such as active experimentation in the community, abstract conceptualization of community psychology theory, and reflective interaction and dialogue. To articulate their learning, students complete structured reflection reports every week. As the academic supervisor, I participate in the community engagements, facilitate weekly reflection sessions, act as mentor, and engage with the partner schools' staff to maintain a sustainable partnership.

## METHOD

To gain more in-depth contextual information on the processes and outcomes of change during SL, this article describes the meaning that students attribute to their transformative

experiences during the course of an SL program. Working from a constructivist paradigm that assumes relativist ontology, I acknowledge that individuals have unique ways of constructing reality through experience. I used a single case study approach to analyze and describe the students' rich, experience-based interpretations of their engagements.

This specific case (the SL program involving postgraduate psychology students) was deemed appropriate to provide rich information about transformative SL experiences (Patton, 2002) due to the fact that it had grown steadily since its inception more than a decade ago, was established in a sustainable partnership, lasted for a full academic year, and specifically used critical reflection for transformative learning. Five cohorts of postgraduate psychology students participated in the SL program from 2006 to 2010 (in total, 72 students participated in this 5-year period). These psychology students formed part of a specialized postgraduate psychology program aimed at preparing students to become community counselors. The majority of the students were women in their early 20s, with nearly equal numbers of Black (predominantly Sesotho-speaking) and White (predominantly Afrikaans-speaking) students. At the onset, I gained informed consent from all participants and ensured them of the anonymity of the results.

My primary source of information was individual reflection reports written by students after each community engagement (stretching over a period of 9–10 months, this entailed about 24 reports per student). In these reports, students were challenged to articulate their learning in specified fields, namely academic enhancement, personal development, and social responsibility (core themes identified by Ash et al., 2004). This primary source of information was corroborated with information from field observations and focus

groups. The focus groups that were conducted were semistructured in nature and consisted of 6 to 8 students each. In these focus groups, students were afforded the opportunity to discuss their SL experiences interactively. All focus groups were transcribed verbatim.

I analyzed the documents using a hybrid approach to thematic analysis proposed by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). Theirs is a flexible and recursive approach of reading and rereading the texts. Initially, the focus was on capturing the essence of the students' interpretations. I read their reflection reports, using open coding to identify common themes and patterns emerging directly from the texts. Next, the tenets of transformative learning theory framed the corroboration of discoveries. These intertwined processes were repeated to cluster interconnected themes until a point of saturation of categories and emergence of regularities was reached.

Various measures were incorporated to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. I documented the process with detailed reflections, records, and notes. In reporting the results I have attempted to place student voice in the foreground and provide context via quotes from student narratives. Prolonged engagement (the students could reflect on learning over a whole academic year and also the use of cohorts over 5 years) also adds to the credibility of the results.

In this study I acted simultaneously as a program coordinator, facilitator for reflection activities, and investigator. Although this provided an opportunity for active involvement and total immersion in the process, I acknowledge the cautionary comments made by other researchers in this field. For example, Eyler (2002b) refers to the problems inherent in analyzing journals of one's own classes—students learn to tell what they think educators want to hear. Despite the educational climate of trust and respect created with descriptive

and not prescriptive reflective communication (Bingle & Hatcher, 1999), I realize that, as Palmer (1997) remarks, there are limits in creating an authentic community (between teacher and learner), when the teacher is the one giving the grades. Furthermore, research decisions (e.g., the choice of program, sampling of students, the use of reflection reports as the primary source of information, and preferred theoretical frameworks and habits of mind) could have filtered the findings (Mezirow, 1997). During the research process, I was aware of the importance of interviewer practices and characteristics and practiced self-reflexivity as proposed by Pezalla, Pettigrew, and Miller-Day (2012).

My personal involvement in this program (not only as an observer, but as a participant) over an extended period (during community engagement and in class reflection sessions) allowed me to immerse myself in the process and to reflect on and in action (Schön, 1990). My personal reflections, as well as my position as lecturer and coordinator of the program, sensitized me to specific themes regarding civic education, student learning, and development. Open dialogue during interactive reflection sessions was useful to test my hunches and gain feedback from students. In this, the research process became an educative, inclusive, and reciprocal opportunity where students are empowered to voice their views, confirming or opposing my hunches. I attempted to ensure authenticity in the process through employing active and reflective listening skills, within a safe emotional space and in a relationship of trust.

## RESULTS

As mentioned before, my aim was to map transformative processes that occur during SL using Kiely's expanded analysis of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Kiely, 2005). In the next section I share the results of this

process in terms of the similar tendencies, but also contextual differences, between the present study and Kiely’s model.

From a metaperspective, during the initial stages of my analysis it soon became evident that the change processes described by the students occurred not in a linear and sequential form, but rather in iterative cycles—a developmental process Tatum (2003) describes as a spiral staircase.\* Attending to the time of the year that statements were made, I found that students reached certain learning outcomes at different times in the progression of the program. I also noted how the same student often revisited certain spaces, processes, and outcomes. I did, however, observe certain distinctive general tendencies, which are depicted in Figure 1.

### Dissonance through Boundary Crossings

In congruence with various proponents of experiential and transformative learning (Dewey, 1938; Kiely, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2000; Piaget, 1976), students initially emphasized the prominence of forked-road situations and boundary crossings. It was interesting to note students’ choice of language in describing their initial experiences: “outsider,” “eye-opening experience,” and “getting lost” (literally and figuratively). The following statement (after the first community visit) captures the boundary crossing experience: “I learned about adjusting to change. . . . Obviously it was not easy to relocate. . . . I felt lost, left out and clueless.”

\* Note that the term *student* refers to university graduates registered for the SL program. The term *learner* refers to the pupils at the high schools (Grades 8–12).

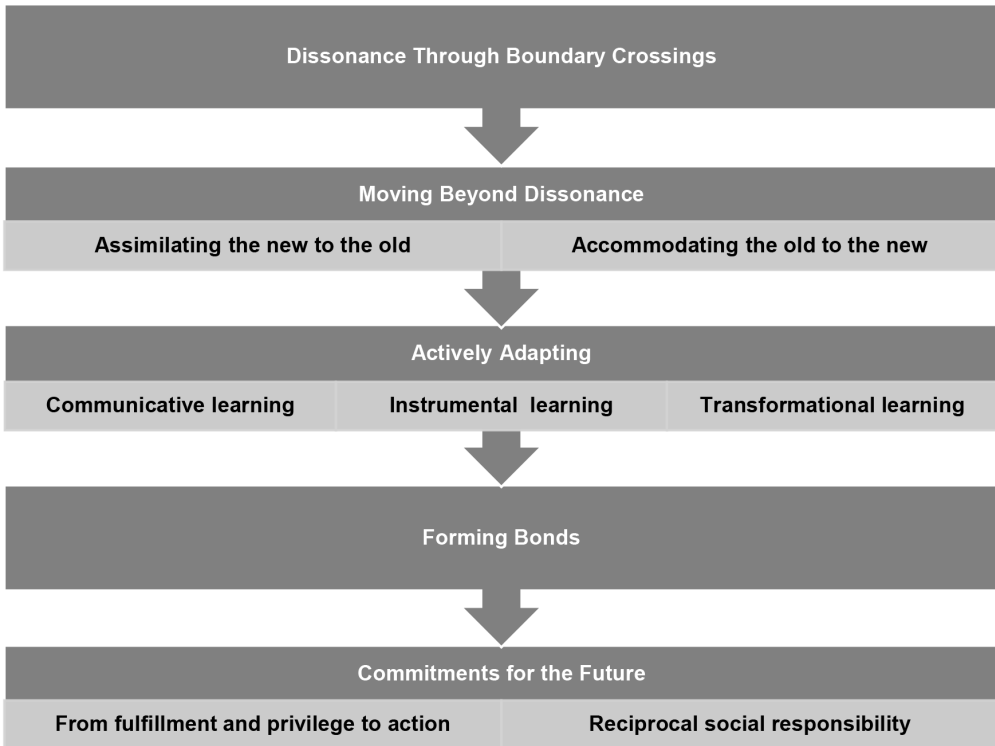


FIGURE 1. Revisited Transformational Service Learning Process Model



The diversity in students' initial reactions (from sheer shock to enthusiasm) illustrated how each approached a new situation with a unique set of perceptions—what Mezirow (1997, p. 5) calls “habits of mind” and Kiely (2005) dubs as personal, structural, and historical.

Students first focused on the uncertainty of the context. The first meeting with the community partner required various boundary crossings (a new physical environment, a new community/culture, new roles and responsibilities, new linguistic requirements). Many expressed fear and skepticism and felt overwhelmed. Other challenges related to students' lack of confidence in their skills to approach learners and staff, to speak in public, and to stand facing a class. Many students had never entered the specific community setting before and were fearful of their personal safety in a crime-ridden area. In addition, despite my preparatory briefings, I realized the impact of first impressions: “You see how the school looks from the outside and then you think: ‘Oh no!’ . . . and then you think: ‘Oh gosh, what have I let myself into?’”

In contrast to the shock experienced by some students, others seemed to have expectations that were more severe than the reality they encountered. These students expressed surprise and unexpected enjoyment—some were even bold enough to start having fun and expressed their excitement and enthusiasm: “The Black areas I am used to . . . are really cruel and if you go in there you will really pick up some trouble. So I was really skeptical and then so amazed about how welcoming everybody was” and “was absolutely thrilled and amazed at the fact that I enjoyed the group so much. It was one of the best things this year by far.”

I was interested to see in some students' statements that, sometimes, one encounter was enough to create awareness of their

misconceptions, to challenge existing paradigms and create new ways of understanding oneself: “I felt very anxious because I thought of myself as someone who is totally incapable of leading/facilitating a group. . . . I am stunned at how much one hour can do to your perception upon your own abilities.”

However, I recognize that deeper forms of transformation require time and critical reflection. During the initial stages, many students were unprepared to move beyond their own expectations of the engagement. Some were self-focused, with less interest in understanding the situation, for example, in emphasizing their own fears of not being accepted and their personal disappointment when things did not go according to their own plans. Both the students and the learners also still viewed the situation from a distance: “At first they were wary of our presence” and “the class [of learners] still feels somewhat unenthusiastic but are definitely warming up—slowly but surely.” It was evident that not only the students, but also the learners were taking time to feel safe before trusting this new experience.

### Moving Beyond Dissonance

People strive for a balance with their environment. Anomalies and dilemmas, such as those described above, make them adapt to and reappraise the situation (Mezirow, 1978; Piaget, 1976). In my research, students attempted in various ways to “digest” their experiences and restore their balance. Upon careful reflection I found two complementary processes for adapting to dissonance. They might be best described by the Piagetian terms *assimilation* (integrating new information into preexisting schemes) and *accommodation* (creating new schemes).

According to Piaget (1976), adapting is an active process of assimilating the new with the old and accommodating the old to

the new. I want to emphasize the qualitative difference between assimilating (a deeper or fuller understanding of preexisting knowledge and realities) and accommodating (a more active phase of searching for new and more encompassing schemas and answers), although they are intertwined. I explain these in the following sections.

*Assimilating the New with the Old.* Piaget describes assimilation as the process whereby the individual copes by incorporating new elements into existing structures. Various students' statements illustrated how they gained deeper insight. While retaining their existing schemes of the self and the other, students attempted to reflect deeply about the self and to find "the human face" in the other. This resembles Kiely's (2005) conceptual process of personalizing: engaging in self-examination, soul searching, and the assessment of strengths and weaknesses and putting faces and names to abstract concepts such as poverty.

New experiences challenge humans to be more self-conscious (Mezirow, 1978). I found ample examples of students' critical self-reflection, confirming that SL gives them the opportunity to learn more about themselves (their qualities, challenges, and interests). Reflecting on action and in action, students recognized in themselves existing personal strengths and rediscovered previously developed personal competence. Although this might give the impression of being a "selfish" goal, its value becomes clear when one acknowledges self-efficacy as an essential element toward civic mindedness (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). Students mentioned, "I bring about positive change in people," "I have an optimistic outlook on life and it rubs off on others," "I feel competent as a speaker," "I feel really good about myself," "I'm really starting to believe in myself," and "I also discovered that I have good motivational skills that can

turn a rock into a star."

Valuing perplexity as an instigator for learning, I appreciated how students were prompted to assess themselves when confronted with challenging (problematic) situations: "facing uncertainty," "keeping calm in difficult situations," "managing challenging teenagers," "being bold when the situation requires it," "managing pressure," "finding humor in difficult situations," "persisting in unpleasant situations," and "handling disruption." During the critical incidents students expressed a need to develop their knowledge, skills, and attitudes: "I am a very short tempered person more especially when it comes to learners asking stupid questions. I'll do my level best to control my temper."

I recognized the personal and structural differences that individuals bring to higher education situations when the same skills and traits some students highlighted with confidence emerged as challenging to others. Some students, for example, assessed themselves as open-minded, able to talk about sensitive topics, able to prevent their own values from dominating a conversation, and tolerant of difference (during the initial reflections students often used the term *tolerance*). However, with statements such as "struggling with relevant examples," "not enough knowledge about learners life circumstances," and "not sensitive enough about cultural differences," many students admitted difficulty in coping with diversity. Many students referred to situations where their value systems were challenged (e.g., being faced with homosexuality, sexually active learners, and females [mostly] choosing to stay in abusive relationships) and recognized the need to find broader views. They admitted that they struggled to manage sensitive topics, felt naïve regarding certain spheres of life, and found it difficult to stay neutral when they held strong personal beliefs.

Authentic interaction gave students firsthand experience of the reality of the learners' daily lives. They started giving learners names and faces, and their challenge was "forming a picture of every child, like a puzzle!"

Strong themes were the reality of poverty ("Poverty is sticking to them"), crime ("Crime is thus not a social problem to them because it's part of their daily lives"), violence, social problems (e.g., exposure to alcohol and drugs, teenage pregnancies, HIV and AIDS), and neglect ("Seems like society has turned a blind eye").

Students remarked on learners' physical realities (sickness, disease, abuse) and gained a better understanding of the difficulties arising from worries about where to get food, water, and electricity, eating healthily when faced with poverty, the absence of playgrounds, having to walk far to school, and pollution. They were especially vocal about the lack of role models in the community and the absence of stimulation, as well as the absence of positive recreation and opportunities to be creative. The severity of domestic violence and broken families as well as the immense impact of having to take care of siblings were mentioned. Students also realized the educational challenges the learners face in unmotivated teachers, undisciplined environments, and a demotivating atmosphere of low pass rates, labeling, and corporal punishment: "I feel the frustration of dedicated teachers and students who have to deal with a system and social mind-set that does not value responsibility and empowerment."

In the reactions of the learners, students learned much about the value of education and access to information. They experienced the learners as hungry for information, eager to discover, and open to new experiences, with big dreams and aspirations to create better lives for themselves: "They all have different ambitions and they all have future plans. Doctors, singers, accountants etc. . . .

They feel responsible to create better lives for themselves" and "remarkable is the will power and determination towards success."

However, students also found evidence of learned helplessness, despondence about the future, and lack of motivation for schoolwork due to a perceived absence of hope.

[Because of] how the cycle of poverty and social problems are maintained and what a big role hopelessness, anger, and poor sense of self-worth play, people most often seem to live "lives of quiet desperation"—they give up trying to change their circumstances in seemingly hopeless conditions.

A prominent theme was the awareness of inequality: "I am now much more conscious of the realities in South Africa and the different challenges that our country's people are facing."

Although these assimilatory processes are surely not the "epiphanic, or apocalyptic, cognitive event" of transformative learning (Brookfield, 2000, p. 139), I recognize that without linking new knowledge to existing schemes, change may result in a lack of integration of the self and the sheer imitation of others (Piaget, 1976).

*Accommodating the Old to the New.* An important characteristic of the assimilatory schema just discussed is the tendency toward repeated application. Once constituted, it will be repeated and continue to assimilate aspects of the environment. When assimilation prevails over accommodation, it implies that the individual concentrates on only aspects that are consistent with what is known. When assimilation is not accompanied by adequate accommodation, the person does not acquire new perspectives (Piaget, 1976). Accommodation thus entails the tendency to change in response to the environmental demand, by transforming or modifying his or her schemas. Mezirow (1978) agrees that certain dilemmas cannot be solved by learning more

of the same. The required change is qualitative in nature. True development requires the structural reorganization of perspectives of the self and the world (Mezirow, 1997).

In the assimilation phase explained before, students' reflections were dominated by the experience of difference. In the phase of accommodation, students actively searched for the information they needed to explain their experiences (cf. Kiely's ideas on processing). In many instances students turned to their disciplinary field, psychology.

It was interesting to note that students identified various prominent physical, cognitive, and psychosocial developmental themes typical of adolescence as being alternative and more nuanced explanations of behavior of students initially labeled "naughty, disruptive, disrespectful, and rude." They mentioned the preoccupation with physical appearance, body consciousness (especially among girls), rapid bodily and hormonal changes, interest in sex, and struggles with differences in physical maturity rates. Relating to learners' cognitive and moral development, students witnessed the emergence of ideological views (a sign of formal operational thought), the development of personal value systems, and concerns about career choices. Psychosocial development was mentioned vis-à-vis identity confusion and formation (questions about who they are and what they want, the struggle for a place in society, identifying with music and a "look"), the importance of peers (pressure, approval, friendships, and dating), the testing of boundaries, and conflict with authority figures and parents' values.

The following is an example of how a student refrained from judging by explaining learners' behavior as part of the adolescent experimental phase (cf. Erikson, 1980): "Young adults use drugs and alcohol because the negative effects are in the distant future concerning their health. They take a gamble:

'what does not hurt me now, I will deal with in the future.'"

Another finding relates to students' realization of systemic influences. According to Tatum (2003, p. 103), "The view of oneself as an individual is very compatible with the dominant ideology of rugged individualism and the American myth of meritocracy." She continues by explaining that viewing behavior individualistically neglects the importance of the impact of systemic and structural inequalities in life. In my students' reflections I recognized how they began to perceive people in context, to reflect on society, and to understand interconnectedness—thus finding systemic explanations for behavior they might previously have attributed to personal dispositions: "Apartheid in SA played an immense role in the psychology of this community. . . . It is important to do a proper holistic analysis" and "I am always made aware of how the various systems interact—poverty, family problems, social problems, personal dispositions, school management—all interact to create a situation where most of these learners really have to struggle to break free from the cycle."

### Actively Adapting

This phase introduces a stronger behavioral component, where emotional and cognitive realizations are put into action. The following sections outline these adaptations by referring to the communicative, instrumental, and transformational learning patterns Mezirow (2000) used to describe perspective transformation.

*Communicative Learning.* Mezirow (2000) sees communicative learning as the processes involved in finding meaning in (and behind) messages, by deciphering subtexts, challenging conventional wisdom, and uncovering implicit assumptions. Students frequently referred to language barriers and how messages were

“lost in translation”—an immense challenge in a country with 11 official languages. Apart from the opportunity to improve their English (their second or even third language), students reported growing competence in public speaking and active listening. They also learned to share knowledge by linking principles to learners’ developmental and life experiences and by using a relevant lexicon, with metaphors and nonverbal support—described by one as the “community vocabulary.”

I witnessed students with various home languages being united through English (the medium of communication in the program). Being sensitive to the fact that learners felt more comfortable to express themselves in their home languages, the students were dependent on each other for translation.

*Instrumental Learning.* Students learned various task-oriented and practical lessons to manage their environment by thinking on their feet and keeping their composure in challenging situations. Examples included adjusting to time challenges (most frequently mentioned); realizing the importance of thorough situational analyses, preparation, and backup plans; and using creative activities and edutainment to bring a message across (e.g., going outside, using music and other props). Other more general forms of instrumental learning concerned interpersonal skills: mediating conflict, using humor, respecting others’ opinions, adjusting to the group, setting boundaries, coping with ambiguity, connecting, and distancing. Students also learned the importance of recognizing their own feelings, of staying objective, and of managing their anger. Many felt that their ability to be sensitive, attentive, and patient improved.

An aspect that deserves special mention is students’ remarks about the value of group work. Although not without challenge, students valued group work, especially safety in

numbers (“I was not alone”), relief in sharing the work load, and power in diverse strengths and views (in later statements students used appreciation and not tolerance as in the beginning). Through group work and the interdependence it facilitates, students learned to trust and depend on each other. They were also open to confront/motivate those who did not do their share:

That was also a nice experience for me, because in my group we have different personalities. There’s one person in the group that doesn’t talk at all, but is very good with the background work and the other person in the group is more the dominant character. She would like to approach things and like to lead and so on. There’s the one that talks a lot in the group. So I also had to learn how to work in a group, come up with ways to pick up our strengths.

*Transformational Learning.* All the previous processes mentioned laid the foundations for the next phase relating to personal growth and true transformation.

Students entered this program either for altruistic reasons or because it was a curriculum requirement and were thus often surprised by the personal benefit gained. One of the core principles of SL is that of reciprocity to all partners involved: “At the beginning . . . I believed that my group and I will make a contribution to the development of the learners. However, I did not anticipate the development that would happen in myself.”

As aptly mentioned by Dewey, “We learn in the process of living” (Saltmarsh, 1996, p. 16); many students realized how they benefitted by learning to practice what they preached:

While I was telling the pupils about developing a positive attitude, I realized that I also had a negative attitude toward some of my courses. I also realized that I was not motivated to study because. . . .

I thought it was pointless. It was a bit challenging for me to stand in front of these pupils and tell them that they must develop a positive attitude towards their schoolwork, when I also had a negative attitude towards my studies. I also had to change my attitude.

I saw a powerful perspective transformation in students' appreciation of diversity, their awareness of their own value systems and subjectivity, the dangers of judging others' value systems, and the importance of open-minded and realistic views on life:

I learned about myself that I have very strong values and beliefs and that sometimes I tend to expect people around me to have the same opinions. This topic [relationships and intimacy] grounded me a lot, I learned to become sensitive of other people's point of views and in general I learned a lot about other people's opinions. And I now respect other people's opinions.

One of the most frequent remarks was how, despite the exposure to challenging circumstances, most students left with a message of resilience and hope:

I am always humbled by their perseverance, courage and positive attitude, even though they live lives so deprived from all the luxuries we often take for granted. . . . I have come home after each and every session energized and inspired. I have a great deal of respect for the many students who really strive to achieve more than their environment provides for them.

Another student mentioned,

And really, if you will one day leave me there and say "find your way here," it will be a terrible experience for me. And they [the learners] just go on. And they come to school and it is not that they sit there and be depressed or something. They sit there with smiles, they are just ordinary children. They look for what ordinary children want. They want to learn in

their way. They want to get excited about things and become involved with things and make friends.

Heartening to me were the various statements reflecting new hope for the country: "It is wonderful to see so many children, hungry for knowledge and eager to learn—it gives me new and even more optimistic hope for our country and its future."

I also realized that there is so much potential and talent in South Africa (specifically the talent and potential amongst the students). If the students can just get to a place of believing in themselves and take responsibility over their lives, pursue their dreams, they too can make a positive impact and give back to their families, schools and their community.

## Forming Bonds

Through the processes described in the previous sections students moved from a stance of us versus them to the realization of sameness and shared values, paving the way for the next phase: forming bonds. Students illustrated how they related to learners by referring to their own challenges (rape, leaving school, making a career choice). In the learners, they also recognized their own fears and shared likes and dislikes. Strong emotional bonds were seen in statements relating to care and a sincere interest in learners' well-being and future: "The students (some of them) asked me if they can regard me as a friend—that is really special" and "I always talk about them at home. I call them my kids."

Although I detected a focus on self-interest in students' initial statements (referred to during the dissonance phase), later statements illustrated that, for the students, it was "not so much about me anymore." I found a particular form of bonding in students' connecting with specific learners. For example, on hearing

that a learner had been orphaned, a student replied, “I don’t have a mother too and I don’t have a father and I don’t have a sister. So you’ll be like me.”

At the end of the program students mentioned how difficult it was to end the relationships and emotional attachments that had been formed and to say goodbye. They also referred to the importance of preparing to end the relationship. They used photos, videos, presents, picnics, songs, and invitations to school functions as ways of easing the termination of the relationship:

I felt extremely sad and in a way it felt like I was abandoning them. However, the emotional response we received from them made me feel proud. Throughout the program I have learned how easy it is for people to grow on you and the special bond you share in your interactions which makes it difficult when you have to leave.

Interestingly enough, some students expressed dissonance and conflicting until the end: “I was relieved, but also sad leaving the school today for the last time. Although this project was hard work, I enjoyed the sense of fulfillment I received on leaving [the school] every Monday.”

## Commitments for the Future

Mezirow (2000) asserts that true transformative learning includes a mindful choice to act. In this phase, the last, students indicated their intention to continue on the journey of social action started in the SL program.

*From Fulfillment and Privilege to Action.* A strong precursor to students’ commitments was that they felt empowered to make a difference. This corresponds with the beliefs of Reeb et al. (2010) that a sense of agency and community service self-efficacy (confidence in one’s capacity to contribute meaningfully to one’s community) are central to civic engagement and participation in civil society.

Students’ sense of fulfillment (“someone has faith in me”; “I can be of assistance and of value”) indicates their willingness and responsibility to contribute to change:

I really enjoy it when a plan comes together. I get a lot of satisfaction by watching how the learners engage in our planned activity and how they learn from it. It makes me feel a sense of meaning when I can add to the lives of others. I am starting to view community involvement more as a personal responsibility—like a duty to fulfill.

Closely related to their sense of fulfillment was the realization of privilege, which led to guilt, discomfort, and gratitude, and inevitably to the responsibility to act: “I feel guilty for not appreciating everything I have. The learners make me realize how much I have to be thankful for. It also makes me realize that I have a responsibility.”

Another important instigator for future commitment was the realization of the limited impact of one SL program. Most students expressed their frustration with the limitations they experienced in addressing the vast amount of community priorities. A positive outcome of these limitations was that students reflected on the importance of autonomy, individual responsibility, and empowerment: “knowing the power lies in their hands now, all we have done will and can only be of value if they use it and work hard.”

Being sensitized, students affirmed the call for lifelong commitment to social justice by investing in schools, the youth, and the community: “I want to remain conscious of the difference I can make in someone’s life,” “have sparked up some enthusiasm in working with the community,” and “to run an extra mile in order to take responsibility and be the voice.”

*Reciprocal Social Responsibility.* An interesting finding was that students saw future responsibility not as an individual process but

as a collective endeavor with the community —“making a difference together.” Many students regarded this as so important that they incorporated involvement in social justice issues as one of the final sessions with the learners:

They were also challenged towards taking responsibility as individuals, students, members of a community and as citizens of a country. We made them realize that just becoming good students doesn't just affect them and their families positively (microsystem); it also gives the school a good reputation (mesosystem). Conscientious, hardworking students often become very productive and effective employees and employers (exosystem); this in turn may reduce the level of unemployment [in the] community. The students were taught that they can impact the macrosystems by becoming great leaders and ambassadors of the country by impacting future generations to come.

## DISCUSSION

This research described students' iterative transformational learning cycles toward more complex cognitive processes, more sophisticated perspectives of the self and society, deepened emotional realizations, and recommitment to participate actively in society (cf. Tatum's, 2003, metaphor of a spiral staircase) through the boundary crossings facilitated by SL. In line with transformative and experiential theorists, the students' experience of the learning processes moved from dissonance, via assimilating and accommodating, to adapting, forming bonds; and, finally, to a pledge to be socially responsible citizens, challenging others to do so too.

Reflecting on the nationally recognized critical cross field and developmental outcomes for education (Department of Education, 2002), I was reminded of the power of SL

as an educational activity. The students' reflections described above provide ample examples of opportunities to demonstrate various outcomes, such as to identify and solve problems using critical and creative thinking; work effectively with others; understand the world as a set of related systems by recognizing that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation; and participate as responsible citizens in the lives of local, national, and global communities.

As aptly demonstrated by these students, it is clear that the principles of SL (e.g., real-life experiences, partnerships, and reciprocity) provide the ideal opportunity to teach a relevant and socially responsive psychology. I witnessed how this SL program stimulated a critical examination of issues relating to psychology. This provides an excellent environment for learning the context of psychology, as it gives psychologists the opportunity to be directly involved in societal change, experiencing the application of psychological concepts (Bingle, 2003). In addition it prepares future psychologists and in particular community psychologists to make a valuable contribution to South Africa.

Future programs should stress the importance of interactive dialogue. Neururer and Rhoads (1998) refer to the complexity of the multiple and conflicting agendas that students bring to the experience. Reflecting on the diverse personal, structural, and historical dynamics students bring to the SL experience (Kiely, 2005), I realize the value of interactive forms of dialogue—the powerful learning that can take place when learners share expectations and ideas. I thus agree with Vygotsky (2004), who emphasized the role of collaborative learning and socialization practices. This concurs with Naudé's (2011) empirical findings that support the value of group reflection and reiterate the importance of dialogue and group interaction. By actively



involving students in group reflection, multiple viewpoints and insight are shared, understanding refined, and development facilitated. Through group dynamics and the related negotiations, students think in terms of groups, not only as individuals. Group reflection also provides a space for the implementation of effective instructional tools such as modeling, scaffolding, explication, and critical analysis (all part of social constructivist approaches; Collier & Morgan, 2002).

During this study, I also noted certain dynamics regarding reflection. My sources of information (reflection reports, focus groups, and field observations) supported each other with many of the emerging themes from the various sources overlapping. However, some qualitative differences were evident. While dealing with students in the field (e.g., in the car after a community visit), I observed that their immediate reactions to the SL experiences were less guarded—and maybe their impulsive remarks provided a truer reflection of their feelings. This confirms the importance of immediate and contextual reflection recommended by Eyler and Giles (1999). Students' reflections on their immediate responses might provide valuable insights. It seems that certain filters and defenses take effect when students enter the classroom. Their reflective writing (submitted to the educator) might even exacerbate this problem, as they might censor their statements. However, writing affords them the opportunity to process their thoughts. I saw evidence of cognitive processing, theoretical integration, and deep insight in the written products (reflection reports and summative assignments). More frank statements and reference to emotions were made during the focus group sessions—maybe because students felt safe to speak freely and openly. This emphasizes the importance of creating

safe spaces and multiple methods of reflection to accommodate different intelligences and learning styles (Kolb, 1984). The reflection reports utilized in this study were structured in nature (with open-ended prompting questions). Although structured reports aid students unfamiliar with the activity of reflection with scaffolding, they probably limit the articulation of visceral and transformative experiences. At worst they may steer feedback away from real experience.

This article reflects a one-sided view provided by one contingent in the SL partnership—the students—of their perspectives of themselves, their interpretation of the community they engaged with, and their perceived learning. I believe that the inclusion of more interfaces for reflection, such as the community voice, could add value (additional layers) to the findings. I acknowledge the limitations in students' ability to articulate all their learning and that various preconceptions are often not highlighted in reflection processes. The perspective of a more independent observer could illuminate areas beyond students' fields of observation and confirm students' perceptions of their newly developed competence.

This study reported on students' commitment to future social action. I concur with Reeb et al. (2010) that research should provide more information on how feelings of self-efficacy and intentions of civic action culminate in true future action and the challenge to act on social justice intentions (Kiely, 2005). Longitudinal follow-ups to investigate whether these intentions realized into actions will provide more information on the long-term value of perspective transformation during SL.

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