PEAK LEARNING EXPERIENCES: A GROUP BASED PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION AND DESCRIPTION

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to understand the experience of peak learning moments across a broad variety of terrain. To do so I used Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to gather the data through in-class interviews that resulted in over 1000 structural descriptors, or foundations of the experience. I applied the tenets of phenomenology to analyze the data that resulted in a synthetic description of peak learning. The structural elements of the experience revealed themes that cohere as the invariant constituents of peak learning. This final description was written in alignment with these themes which could be applied by educators to both determine the presence of peak learning in their courses and to serve as a foundation of the idea that may be extended through future research. Suggestions for how peak learning might be fostered are included.

Key words: peak learning, phenomenology, appreciative inquiry, management education
INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to understand experiences of peak learning (PL), when they occur and what, if any, themes are present across individuals. My concern is not focused on the content of the experience such as a particular activity, or topic in a course, or life experience. Instead, I am interested in the qualities of PL experiences across all domains. What characterizes PL experiences regardless of the content of that experience? As an academic I am also interested in the presence of these experiences in classrooms, if they are occurring, and the extent to which I can facilitate their emergence. To that end I have collected stories of PL using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and analyzed them using Moustakas (1994) phenomenological method which is grounded in Husserl’s work (1962).

AI is a method of inquiry used to understand human systems when they are most life giving, productive, and engaging. AI provided a focus to the inquiry that gathered the data from a strength based position. It is intentionally biased towards the positive. Peak learning seemed a logical domain to apply this approach rather than one more broadly situated and available to learning moments of any kind, or perhaps, even moments where no learning was occurring. Given the personal nature of these events in students’ lives phenomenology was an appropriate method to analyze and understand this human experience.

PEAK LEARNING

Bloom’s (1981), taxonomy of educational objectives (1956), revised by Anderson, Krathwohl, Airasian, Cruikshank, Mayer, Pintrich, Raths, and Wittrock, (2001), built on Maslow’s (1959) interpretation of peak experiences to include students’ peak experiences in classrooms. He described PL moments as those characterized by the loss of the sense of time and how other important issues in the learner’s life receded into the background. Bloom suggested
that PL experiences stand in contrast to the everyday “flatland” (1981, p. 198) of typical school based learning. Bloom called these “moments of truth” (Bloom, 1981, p. 195) where learning was worthy in its own right and was not simply learning that could be utilized instrumentally. Students were not involved in “classifying, organizing, or judging…the experience while it was happening” (p. 195). Bloom and others (Beard, Smith, & Clegg, 2007) described students’ experiences as “an extreme type of emotional reaction” where they had a “momentary loss of fears and anxiety, and their defenses and controls were suspended” (p. 195). This research suggested that PL is a transcendent form of experience outside the confines of the usual and routine, and one that is often accompanied with an intense emotional response. Related work by Beard, Smith, and Clegg (2007) also focused on the role of emotions, particularly related to the impact of the emotional content in teacher/student relationships.

Many authors have pursued a deeper understanding of what leads to the emergence of PL. Ewert, (1989a, b) and Hattie, Marsh, Neill, and Richards, (1997) found that PL was more likely to occur when one took a risk, experienced personal growth, improved one’s self concept, experienced leadership, or self-actualization. These examples aligned with work on experiential learning which happens virtually anywhere (Beard, & Wilson, 2006; Greenaway, 2007; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004). Nadler (1995) discussed edgework “which illuminates what is happening for the individual when they are at or close to their edge. The goal is to make this unconscious process conscious” (p. 53). Leberman and Martin (2004) suggested that peak learning was not confined only to those experiences which include risk. Flor (1991) and others discussed nonphysical activities (Gilsdorf, 1995; Robinson, 1992) and reflection (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993; Joplin, 1981) as outlets for peak learning. Dickson, Chapman, and Murrell (2000) discovered that risk may inhere in spiritual, psychological, or social experiences. Finally,
Matsumoto (2007) focused on peak learning of American college students learning the Japanese language.

Research by Mezirow (2000) focused on the related construct of transformational learning as that which occurred when existing meaning structures were transformed or newly created and when individuals interpreted and made meaning of their experiences. He defined transformational learning as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). While PL is a different experience than Mezirow’s transformational learning, his work figures into the appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) exercise used to gather the data for this work. It will be more fully discussed below as it relates to the students’ experience of that exercise.

The research reviewed can be summarized with the following propositions:

1. PL occurs when there is some risk involved.
2. PL can be marked by a change in consciousness regarding time and space
3. PL provides access to personal truth and knowledge that has internal utility
4. PL is marked by some emotional accompaniment
5. PL occurs in risky situations and may result in personal growth or change, and self actualization
6. PL is experientially based
7. PL can occur in reflective non-physical activity
8. PL may contain elements of the spiritual, psychological and social domains

This summary provides a perspective on the phenomenon and identifies some of the qualities, characteristics, and circumstances of its occurrence. However, it does so in a fragmented way
that leaves me asking for a more thorough statement of the phenomenon. As I consider this literature I am left wondering about the lived experience of PL and if there are timeless, foundational, human experiences that accompany it.

As educators it is likely that many of us have witnessed moments that could be described by some of the language above, however, I suspect that it is equally likely that these moments are uncommon. As a result, the focus of this research is to understand peak learning across multiple domains, not just classrooms, and to describe the contours of the phenomenon including its experiential components through the use of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). In so doing the definition of PL will become clearer regarding the characteristics of the experience regardless of the content of the learning that occurred and will reveal its invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). Another goal of this work was to introduce students to the ideas of phenomenology (Husserl, 1962, Moustakas, 1994) and make this more accessible as they consider their life experiences. Finally, are there elements that transcend context, including the classroom as studied by Bloom (1981) or the specific circumstances or environments noted by the authors above? If so can these provide a way forward that will guide learning based on the learner’s experience and offer a foundation for further research? In sum, the questions driving this study and my curiosity include but are not limited to the following:

1) How is PL defined? Can it be?

2) What are the elements of PL?

3) How is PL experienced?

4) How would I know if I am having a PL experience?

5) Is PL happening in my life/classroom?

6) If it is happening in my classroom, what are its characteristics?
These questions defy quick and handy responses, which impacts the method employed. For instance, it seems they would be poorly served by a survey which is likely to access the thin and immediately available elements without offering a deeper and more penetrating perspective of the experience. In contrast, appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005) is a framework that expands conversations in an exploratory fashion, unburdened by the pursuit of a single answer. This method was used to generate the data for the study. Once collected, phenomenology (Husserl, 1962; Moustakas, 1994) was employed to interpret and discover the fundamental essence of the various experiences that were shared by participants. This has resulted in a set of thematic experiences that are reflected in the phenomenological description below. Prior to its review, however, I will provide a fuller description of the two approaches noted here.

METHOD

Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005) is a research method focused on understanding experiences, organizations, people, and relationships when they are at their best, most life giving or most highly functional. It is not a method positioned along traditional positivist ideas of objectivity and a dispossessed posture by the researcher. It is a dialogic (Bushe, 2013) approach predicated on social constructionist roots (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004) shared images (Polak, 1973) and the Pygmalion effect (Livingston, 1969).

AI has been used to inquire into human experience in many domains including the various dynamics of learning environments. Yballe and O’Connor (2000) used AI to help students focus on their experience and how that could be incorporated into course management. They also identified six core values that could help educators understand appreciative pedagogy
O’Connor and Yballe (2007) used AI to develop classroom teams. Neilsen, Winter, and Saatcioglu (2005) used AI to explore the shared values in an organizational development class. Neville (2008) employed AI to guide classroom conversations about tacit assumptions contained in the dominant interpretations of business and society. Additional classroom application was pursued by (this author) who used AI in an exercise with students to collectively identify the most important elements desired by them for meaningful learning. Finally, the results of 10 administrations (this author) of an AI driven exercise were analyzed and established it as a valid means of accessing students’ learning experiences. This current work used AI as a scaffold for discovering the phenomenological structural elements of peak learning. To the extent that peak learning occurs in and out of classrooms it may appeal to those facilitating less conventional learning processes such as seminars, adventure or outdoor learning, leadership training, self-directed learning, or on-the-job training. All of these domains would be well served by learning that is meaningful and personally relevant.

Data was collected when teaching classes on organizational behavior, leadership, organizational development, and managerial decision making. Over 1500 students have participated in the activity and have ranged in age from 20 through 56 years. The gender distribution has been evenly split between men and women while approximately 70% of these students were graduate level and 30% undergraduates. The data was collected at three universities. Two were small (approximately 4,000 students) private universities, and the third was a large (32,000 students) publically funded state institution. All students were enrolled in the college of business.

The method begins with a brief review of its origins and process. (Slides used to facilitate the AI are in Appendix A.) This is followed by forming dyads or small groups, depending on
class size, to participate in the 4-D model (Mann, 2001; Ricketts & Willis, 2001) of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. The first D, Discovery, inquires into historical PL experiences and generates the horizons, (Moustakas, 1994) or unique individual experiential events, which are identified as PL moments for that student. The discovery of each student’s personal horizons of PL are facilitated through conversation starters which are prompts that initiate dialogue. While these are written in question form, they differ from questions in that they are not in search of an answer. Instead, they seek deeper inquiry to help uncover the essence of the experience. The Discovery step generated the data that was used in this paper. Since we were trying to discover the categories of peak learning we can only consider our experiences, or that which has transpired. This necessarily requires that we reflect retrospectively on past experiences. While we completed all four D’s of the AI activity (this author), the remaining 3 D’s of the 4-D method are future oriented and are, thus, irrelevant for the purposes of this paper given the retrospective phenomenological analysis process applied. As van Manen (1990) claimed “Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is a reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through” (p. 10).

The AI (Cooperrider, & Srivastva, 1987) activity (this author) used to collect the data occurred at the beginning of courses. It was preceded by some discussion of PL as learning that occurred in situations that called students to their learning edge. These situations could be a single event at a given moment, or an experience that developed over an extended period of time. Students’ examples included moving to new towns, new apartments, houses, or neighborhoods, starting or losing jobs, entering graduate school, challenging work or school assignments that stretched them in new and novel ways, getting married, new roommates, new romantic
relationships, a change in family structure, or dealing with a death. These stories contained elements of excitement, sadness, joy, happiness, threat, fear, novelty, and anticipation.

Discovery

In the exercise dyads/small groups were asked to reflect on their lives through a set of conversation starters and identify and discuss what they considered PL experiences. The stories and the attending characteristics that they thought reflected PL were the horizons of the experience. As the groups worked with these horizons they were asked to focus on the central and most compelling experiences that capture and reflect PL. These are the experiences that are nonrepetitive or overlapping, and stand as marker experiences of PL. Doing so required that they move from all experiences as horizons of the experience, to a select, yet representative few that now served as the textural cornerstones of the lived experience.

The Discovery step employed the following conversation starters:

In reflecting on your most memorable peak learning experiences please consider and discuss:

1. What happened?
2. What you did to make that happen?
3. What others did to contribute to that peak learning experience?
4. How that experience felt?
5. Key words you would use to characterize/describe it?
6. The characteristics of peak learning that were common to all the experiences you discovered and discussed in your group?

Conversations have ranged across a dizzying array of topics, content, and detail. The shared characteristics requested in #6 is where the exercise bridged to an inquiry into peak learning’s
essence. Question 6 encouraged group members to discover how their stories were connected and what was experientially common, or the foundational essence of the experience even when the details of each story were perhaps quite different. This process involved the application of “imaginative variation” (Moustakas, 1994) described below which helps discover “the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). This step moved beyond their unique horizons/textural identifiers to arrive at the structural foundations of PL. These are the elements that are characteristic of the phenomenon, transcending individual content, and what they were asked to bring back to the plenary to share. Were those factors something else, the experience would be something wholly different than the named phenomenon under investigation.

With this preview, I offer the following objectives of the study:

1. Discover and describe the essences of PL experiences.
2. Expose students to appreciative inquiry and phenomenology through their participation in the AI activity and the analysis of the data generated.
3. Provide a phenomenological description of peak learning that establishes a foundation for measurement and a point of departure for future research.
4. Provide outlets and sources for participating in learning environments that are likely to yield peak learning experiences.

By describing the contours of the phenomenon through the use of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) PL will become more clear regardless of the content of the learning that occurred. To this end I have crafted a description that accesses the phenomenon’s invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). Introducing students to phenomenology (Husserl, 1962; Moustakas, 1994) aspires to make the tenets of this frame more accessible as they consider their
life experiences. Phenomenology provides an interesting, albeit somewhat abstract interpretive frame for considering one’s experience and yet, with some exposure my hope was to stimulate some curiosity in students as they reflect on their work and lives.

**PHENOMENOLOGY**

Phenomenology is a meaning making process based on reflection on lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Frankl described phenomenology as “an attempt to describe the way in which man understands himself, in which he interprets his own existence, far from preconceived patterns of interpretation and explanation such as are furnished by psychodynamic or socio-economic hypotheses” (1988, p. 7). Further clarity comes from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

…phenomenology studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity (Smith, 2009, 1. What is Phenomenology? section, para. 2).

Phenomenology, then, is a reflexive practice (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Hardy & Clegg, 1997; Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg 2001; Harley, Hardy, & Alvesson, 2004; Marshall, & Rossman, 2011; Schipper, 1999; Schon, 1983) that introduces us to ourselves and how we understand our experience, free of theories or theories in the making (Schein, 1985).

But how? How can we identify and then relieve ourselves of Frankl’s “preconceived patterns?” Husserl proposed that we “return to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1962, p. 168). In his “return” we encounter the phenomenological reduction which includes the “epoche” where we doubt what is taken to be given (Fink, 1995). This confronts the established reality of human systems which tacitly share in constructed meanings that often remain hidden. Spiegelberg
described this confrontation as the “systematic suspension of our belief in the reality of these phenomena” (1975, p. 138) and a “return to the pristine innocence of first seeing” (Spiegelberg, 1960, pp. 656-657). I think of this as doubting what has been assumed to be true, a dis-integration of the psycho-social terra firma such that it can be held up for inspection resulting in the recognition of, and escape from, the prison of colluded knowing.

As the phenomenological reduction frees us from our unreflective consciousness, it introduces us to the transcendental attitude which supplants the natural attitude. The natural attitude was described by LeVasseur as “ordinary lack of curiosity with which most of life is lived…[and] the everyday assumption that things are only as they appear to our unreflective consciousness” (2003, p. 417). Weick’s “thought trials” (1989) considered as “Any device that short circuits memory, foresight, or preference in the generation of thought trials increases the independence of these trials” (p. 522) seems relevant. The reduction is just such a device. Its aim is to help us answer the question “How did the experience of the phenomenon come to be what it is” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98)?

In this work my aim was to unshackle students’ minds from the accepted notion, or natural attitude, that learning only happens in a class or around class related activities. This was accomplished through an opening lecturette and conversation about learning, including the various types of learning such as rote learning intended to acquire facts and ideas, personal learning that may have significant impact on one’s life, learning through experience, and tacit versus explicit learning. This conversation expanded our ideas of what learning is and helped liberate and expand our thinking which may have become unreflective due to the significant number of years we all have spent in classrooms. Our deep classroom experience is likely to have established a blind eye to what learning might be or the various forms that may resonate at
different levels of significance. The opening discourse was intended to rattle the natural attitude of learning free from its somnambulant state and bring it to the fore where we could inquire anew into its many contours, thereby introducing the transcendental attitude. As the point of initiating the exercise, we were now able to engage with the complex nature and varied forms that learning experiences take.

Reflecting on broad life experiences helped students explore the essentials of PL. This introduced students to phenomenology as researchers/practitioners as suggested by Merleau-Ponty who claimed the only way to understand and know phenomenology is to do it (1962). Aligned with Merleau-Ponty’s idea, and as a nod to earlier writing by (this author), doing phenomenology is part of the evolutionary process of becoming phenomenological. This process facilitated the budding growth and evolution of students who may now be considered nascent phenomenologists.

The “conversation starters” in the AI aided in opening our minds regarding what was relevant and helped us consider multiple life domains where we have experienced peak learning. The conversation starters facilitated the reduction so that we could see the phenomena “naively and freshly through a ‘purified’ consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). The phenomena now resided in a “bracket” that set it apart from “the biases of everyday knowledge” (p. 85) where individual horizons (Moustakas, 1994) could be explored. We then eliminated those horizons that were less relevant, repetitive, or overlapping. What remained were the textural (Moustakas, 1994) elements of the experience that best reflected the critical and central experiential characteristics of the lived phenomena. Working with the textural descriptors which contain the real and practical details of their experience, students arrived at the common, fundamental essentials regarding those various experiences. These comprised the structural bedrock of the
experience and revealed its invariant constituents (Husserl, 1962; Moustakas, 1994) regardless of particular content. These stood as the essential and timeless features of the phenomena; indeed, the essences that are consistent across their various stories. These are the group-based and identified, structural foundations which inform their experiences yet transcend the specific content of each individual story/experience.

This process has been conducted in over 82 management related courses and has yielded more than 1070 group based “structural” (Moustakas, 1994) elements of peak learning. Each class of students generated approximately 12-20 structural elements and these, over many semesters, sum to this total. This collection of structural descriptors of PL were then analyzed using Boyatzis’ (1998) thematic analysis which he claims is a viable method for use with multiple sources of data including “behavior samples from interviews, videotaped encounters, simulations, transcripts of speeches, memos, personal letters, or personal diaries” (p. 12). Three stages of thematic analysis were employed including: sensing themes among structural descriptors, establishing reliability by sharing these themes with two classes of students who had not participated in the AI to determine goodness of fit with their experiences, and developing codes of themes.

This process recognized the multi-layered and nuanced nature of human experience and resulted in the thematized essences that may inhere in PL which are reflected in the nine themes of PL described below. These descriptions are illustrated through select textural language from student’s unique tales that best illustrate the structural theme. These are the invariant constituents of the experience that stand beneath the content of individual stories.

THEMATICALLY BASED SYNTHESIS DESCRIPTION OF PEAK LEARNING
In accord with the phenomenological method, the description below is punctuated with textural statements of students’ experience which grounds the description in their life world. Maintaining the integrity of the descriptions by using students’ language ensured the authenticity of the phenomenal process and helped reduce abstractions or dilutions as might be furnished through interpretations by me. A sample of additional textural elements is contained in Appendix B.

I. **Stretch, novelty, discomfort, edge experiences**

Peak learning is often an experience that is not wholly comfortable. Indeed, there may be pain, suffering, and confusion that accompany this learning. Claims that I “found myself in the middle of the deep blue sea – adrift rudderless” with no orienting beacon to guide the way are common and reflect this on-the-edge sensation. While at the edge of the abyss, there is something unfamiliar and yet seductive, inviting, and palpable for the learner. The need to “see the big picture - times might be tough in the short term, but don't bail out” reflect discomfort and the absence of known responses at the ready. The presence of some vague, misty, unidentified threat or risk is alive for the learner in ways that both attract and repel her simultaneously. This creates a sense of both crisis and compulsion to persevere despite the potential uncertainty and possibility of failure. Even in their participation in the AI exercise students commented on the complexity of the conversation starters and that they were unsure of how to engage with them. The exercise confronted students with a learning experience that many later said was peak in the sense that they had never been asked to share their thoughts about how a course should be managed or what the focus should be. Here can be seen the very manifestation of the experience of peak learning that is simultaneously being inquired into. As we explored peak learning experiences we were also having one.
Peak learning experiences confront learners with the possibility of failure to understand, to comprehend, to access this new knowledge; they experience being on their learning edge with no response borne of previous experience available. The dissonance creating result of this is the threat that comprehension may unsettle all that has gone before in ways that require one to reconfigure what once was believed to be known. Learners feel as if they are peering into a chasm. There appears an insurmountable challenge at hand that seems to require herculean strength and yet they feel they must go on. On the other side of the experience is relief. Learners expressed a sense of satisfaction for having taken up the challenge of pursuing these learning experiences. They claimed that the unfamiliar was “painful but life changing.” In the wake of the experience it “made me proud of myself and very confident.”

II. Relational nature of peak learning

Relationships with others clearly accompany peak learning experiences. Peak learning is characterized by transcending given identities where we “got past egos and roles and operated from the same level.” Talk was genuine and authentic. The crisis, on-the-edge nature of peak learning described above invites learners into honest and authentic communication that requires shedding social artifice in service to the greater questions, challenges, and possibilities of those involved. Transparency among participants including “open communication with the professor” that moved past roles is at the heart of peak learning. There was a willingness to move beyond social convention and join together in open dialogue where “informal conversation among others” was the norm and this facilitated increased comfort given the novelty of the situation described above. Confronted with the confusing nature of peak learning situations, many participants’ experienced unexpected help and guidance from others. “Unexpected” and “enthusiastic” conversations emerged from unlikely outlets to float the efforts of the learners.
above any response they might muster independently. This resulted in learners claiming that they “had good back-up.”

Peak learning takes the learner out of her self. Being liberated from one’s social persona and role offers subtle invitations to relationships with others. One’s availability for these spontaneous conversations and contributions from unlikely sources punctuate the experience and remove it from the gray flatland in which most of life is lived. Support is the order of the day, not commands from others or superiors. This “supportive environment led to feelings of accomplishment and confidence.” “The experience fostered strong working relationships” that lived beyond the immediate and present work challenge. In this sense there was a shared human network that served all in the pursuit of this new learning. Full and open communication where one feels fully self expressed facilitates the development of relationships that ultimately serve in apprehending new knowledge.

As a special form of relationship, mentors often act as chaperones in the peak learning experience. These are people who have taken a special interest and who “saw something in me, some potential or spark.” They may provide a sense-making anchor, someone who can “set tone and direction” for the learner in ways that facilitate meaning. These relationships go beyond the limited demands of the immediate learning situation and often remain intact for periods of time creating “a mutually satisfying relationship” where there was shared “passion for the topic.” When the “Professor asked what I think” she realized that she had gone beyond the traditional and ubiquitous “banking model” (Freire, 1970) of learning present in so many learning environments. This was a person-to-person, as opposed to role-to-role form of learning and this was experienced at an emotional and personal level.
Connections and relationships with others precede, accompany, and follow peak learning experiences. The social network that develops creates a web of knowledge, skills, and capacities that goes beyond the sheer need to meet a challenge. Instead, relationships offer a depth dimension that serve as a structural element beneath the utility of surmounting any given project. The scenario that calls one to her learning edge initiates the relationships, however, the relationships are the residue that remains and contributes to the interconnected nature of the learner’s experience.

III. **Self affirming, validating; the learning was personal**

Peak learning can be a self-affirming experience. It can touch the deepest levels of thinking and feeling in ways that affirm what one feels and believes she knows. In using the new knowledge, learners gained the “reinforcement [they] needed regarding…interpretations.” Peak learning had value at a personal level and was not simply sanitized bits of knowledge, fact, or theory dissociated from the real, moist reality of life. The learning experience connected at an emotional level that was validating. In their connection to the personal learning there was also a sense that “most students like that kind of learning environment. I think the other emotion it appealed to was that of validation.” “The learning was about you” and was a meaningful experience that stayed with the learner and transcended simple acquisition of facts.

Learners moved beyond their own personal experience to feel into that of others. Their shared sense was that others also valued the personal nature of the experience which ties this theme to the previous theme on the relationality of peak learning. The relational component was a figural element that affirmed their experience. It also distinguished it from other more two-dimensional, and less self-relevant learning which is frequently characterized by the simple memorization of ideas, facts, and data.
IV. A transformative epiphany

Peak learning experiences change us. The emergence of new dimensions of self and self vis-à-vis world is common where learners confront the novelty of their learning. An a-ha’ sensation often accompanies the learning where learners have a deeply personal revelation. It is an experience that is different than the self affirming learning referred to above. In peak learning new meaning begins to be constructed in such a way that learners are opened to new vistas of themselves, how they have constructed their reality, or what they take to be true. It is a shift in their being, how they conceive of themselves or who they are in relationship. It alters how they think of the world/cosmos. “Culture shock,” “inspired,” “lost track of time,” “A realization of what the world is really all about,” “Had lots of confidence and was then surprised that I didn’t know that much after all,” and personal “development and evolution” are structural elements that are central to the experience of peak learning. How they know has much to do with who they are…their personal epistemology is bound up with their ontology.

A re-introduction to one’s self is part of the nature of peak learning and is what separates it from much of what currently passes for learning. Peak learning, while magnificent in the experience, reserves its special status precisely because it is uncommon. Were it to be one’s daily experience, likely it would devolve into just another day of learning, separated from other moments by nothing. While peak learning is not a common experience, given this interpretation perhaps it shouldn’t be. How frequent? In what preferred circumstances? With whom? While all good questions, they may serve to dilute the experience and remove the learner from its richness thereby reducing it to the level of other unremarkable learning experiences, and removing it from the category “peak.” If one is always having an experience it becomes mundane, possibly meaningless. Receiving roses every Tuesday at 4:00 PM loses its specialness and quickly
becomes just another scheduled event absent any apprehension, psychic tension, or personal surprise in the awe of human experience.

V. Yielding: doubt, faith, humility, and trust as inquiries into learning

Peak learning is characterized by the experience of yielding and “seek[ing] out advice from others.” Deferring to others requires that the learner doubt her knowledge and discover the courage to confront her limits in ways that create space for others/ideas. “The best way to overcome that is to listen to those who surround you. By doing so you create trust.” There is a certain irony that in order to gain knowledge and wisdom the first step is an admission of its absence. Yielding to the power of humility attracts contribution from outside one’s self. It is paradoxical in that one must have sufficient confidence to doubt one’s own knowledge in order to experience peak learning. How can one yield, doubt, remain uncertain, and publicly confront the limits to one’s knowledge without confidence? The cohabitation of these dynamics share the same psychic space in service to one’s learning. A sense of trust beyond what is known must be alive in the learner as she pursues knowledge that threatens to dismantle the very meaning structures she has erected. Faith in what is unseen accompanies the learner as she actively engages in expanding what might be discovered. Attraction, seduction, confidence, doubt, curiosity, and the courage and desire to expand consciousness transcend any comfort that may be gained from clinging to the known. Peak learning is characterized by “trust – you have to be able to let go and have faith” while yielding. In so doing the learner must “suspend judgment of what I did not understand” and engage in “empathy to know others’ experience.” The draw to some, as yet unidentified locale on the distant horizon must so capture the imagination of the learner that she is willing to let go of established and known structures of knowledge that, perhaps, have
outlived their usefulness. Transcendence of what “is” remains at the heart of peak learning and the only way to get there is to give up; to yield while embedded in faith and trust.

**VI. Real life/real world**

Peak learning experiences have a real life element to them. These are not simply experiences that live within the confines of a classroom or in theory but are experiences that have a “real world” connection. Something will be affected by the successful/unsuccesful negotiation of the learning experience. It has weight, impact, and results. While it connects at the intellectual level, the learning also has significant and tangible outcomes for the learner. “I could use what I learned” and “it wasn’t just principles in theory but in realistic application” - these realizations magnify the weight of the learning. Learners claimed to “understand the subject” in ways that made the learning meaningful in lived experience and took it beyond the limited role of knowledge for knowledge’s sake. For some, the experience aligned with the Jesuit tradition of learning that exalts knowledge in action. These learners experienced a visceral connection to the learning such that it had meaning and application in their daily lives. The learning came from the school of life and was not read to them from textbooks or spouted by professors. In this theme, learning lives at the gritty nexus of thought and action.

**VIa. High Stakes, risk**

A sub-theme of real life/real world is that the circumstances in which the learning occurred had high stakes. There was some risk in not succeeding or learning how to navigate the knotty issue that called them to a higher plane. The learner would either “succeed or fail” based on what they did and they would have only one attempt at getting it right. There was pressure to succeed and participants learned out of the “need to survive.” The imperative nature created certain pressure and tension that called them to higher levels of learning, attention, and
performance which created a “sense of ownership and ultimate responsibility for the project.” In these situations learners called on their deepest reserves of effort and worked with the awareness that there was no second chance. The pressure and tension demanded higher levels of learning where they mobilized their personal resources to achieve performance and success when the alternative was beyond imagination.

**VIb. Perseverance**

Another sub-theme of the real life/real world character of their experiences pertains to the need to persevere. “Guess, test, revise” was the mantra that enabled them to push on thus reflecting levels of self efficacy. They held onto simple faith that a “high determination to succeed” would enable them to find their way and discover the path to success even when “We made mistakes, learned from them, moved beyond them and gave it another try.” Perseverance “in the face of huge odds” and high stakes in a real world context stand as structural elements of the experience and set it apart from less meaningful learning experiences where there was some tendency to retire or discount the significance of the moment. Here the learners recognized the magnitude of what they were encountering in ways that separated it from others and called them to mobilize resources reserved for the most important projects in their lives.

**VIb1. Meaningful success, mastery**

On the heels of the perseverance sub theme a deeper layer of “meaningful success and mastery” surfaced as a structural element of peak learning. Learners said the experience was “fun” and that they “felt an accomplishment” that enabled them to “convey our new knowledge to others.” The knowledge went beyond personal meaning and use. They were able to “cope and develop strategies” that helped them achieve new levels of competence. It manifested in the learner in a way that helped them communicate it in a meaningful and valuable way to others. It
has been said that the best way to learn is to teach and this act cemented the learning in them. The outgrowth of this is a sense of “achievement [that] led to a sense of competency and power.”

This concludes the description, however, there are scientific issues that need to be addressed to establish the reliability and validity of the study. The following section on member checking aids in that task.

**MEMBER CHECKING**

Given the uncertainty of the qualitative paradigm, what is my confidence that the synthesis description reflects the essence of PL and the participants’ actual experience? Osborne (1990) identified four means by which the validity of a qualitative work may be assessed. First, the researcher may describe the data collection and analysis steps. Second, the researcher may work collaboratively with the participants to determine the goodness of fit of the interpretations and descriptions. Third, the researcher may validate interpretations by presenting “coherent and convincing arguments” (p. 88) while recognizing that there is no single ‘correct’ interpretation. Finally, the description’s validity can be measured by the extent to which it reflects the experiences of others who were not part of the study. Marshall (1985) suggested that standards of trustworthiness be applied to qualitative data, including 1) an explanation of the data collection process, 2) using data to support and explicate interpretations, and 3) data preservation such that it may be available for reanalysis. I have participated in Osborne’s first, second, and fourth criteria, and all of Marshall’s standards.

Since the horizons and textural elements of students’ peak learning experiences were collected over many semesters and across many courses it was not possible to conduct a member check of the final syntheses description with each of the cohorts. However, support for the validity of the results was achieved at the end of each facilitation of the AI exercise where I
reviewed the final list of structural themes after the debrief. This provided a pause such that any further themes discovered through the plenary were provided a moment to emerge and could be added to the rich list of experiences. This also provided an opportunity to correct any errors or misunderstandings. In addition, in the class session following the exercise we reviewed the structural descriptors of PL that we crafted during the AI exercise. This addressed Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) ‘credibility’ concern and was achieved by reviewing the research products with the participants. Students could reflect on what they had created after some time had elapsed which may yield subsequent experiences they have had and their ideas regarding what informed them. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) ‘dependability’ was addressed via the numerous separate iterations of the process with distinct classes of students. This accounts for the ever changing context of the research site that still has yielded similar and related results. ‘Transferability’ is another issue identified by Lincoln and Guba and refers to the generalizability of the results to other contexts. To some extent this was accomplished through the broad variety of stories and contexts where students experienced PL that yielded the shared structural descriptors they agreed upon in the small groups during the phenomenological interpretation of the AI results. This was further exhibited through the quasi-longitudinal quality of this research project which has collected results over numerous semesters with a rich variety of students. Finally, Lincoln and Guba discussed ‘confirmability.’ This is the extent to which results can be confirmed by others. This was achieved by submitting the thematic description to three classes of students who participated in the AI exercise, but whose Discoveries were not included in the pool of horizons that yielded the textural elements that informed the structural elements of the description. They concurred that it reflected their experience of peak learning. While this addressed Lincoln and Guba’s confirmability, it also reflected Osborne’s fourth criterion above. A full class session
was committed to listening and exploring their experiences in each class of students. This resulted in considerable discussion and concurrence with the description as written.

**DISCUSSION**

Regardless of the context, content, or location, peak learning is a personal experience that is growthful. There is no expectation nor is there any indication from the above research examples that peak learning must be pleasurable. It may be, however, this is not a necessary quality for it to be considered peak. Students often find the AI exercise stimulating, freeing, and a novel approach to opening a course. Many enjoyed the freedom created through this exercise for them to discover fuller self expression. The post-exercise, open-ended, anonymous questionnaire (Appendix C) produced a rich variety of reflections. Students claimed to be intrigued by the liberating approach compared to their more common experience where they felt compelled to comply with teacher directed mandates relative to class management. Below is a sample of anonymous responses represented in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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The exercise elevated our hopes and our experience of fostering peak learning and for some was a peak learning experience itself. The AI exercise helped us revisit our learning experiences and then make sense of them through a phenomenological lens. What may have been taken for granted in our learning histories was reconsidered through the phenomenological process which encouraged us to shed the typical and taken-for-granted perspective. Adopting the transcendental
attitude introduced us to an alternative form of reflection that stands apart from our everyday means of living, thinking, and doing.

The post-exercise comments suggest that students experienced some nonphysical risk, personal growth, change in self concept, and perhaps, self actualization. Their comments align with work by Ewert, (1989a, b), and Hattie, Marsh, Neill, and Richards (1997), who claimed these experiences as markers of peak learning. Their responses also relate to work by Boud, Cohen, & Walker (1993) and Joplin (1981) which showed that peak learning could occur in reflective activities, and in activities that included nonphysical involvement (Flor, 1991; Gilsdorf, 1995; Robinson, 1992). Peak learning pushes mental, emotional, and physical limits (Brown, 2008; Flood, Gardner, & Cooper, 2009; Leberman & Martin, 2002). The AI exercise created this condition, particularly the mental and emotional domains by introducing students to the phenomenological frame where students could re-interpret past learning moments (Mayer, 1999). By making the “unconscious process conscious” (Nadler, 1995, p. 53) we increased awareness which reflects LeVasseur’s (2003) mandate of suspending the natural attitude such that new vistas of familiar settings can be received. Conducting the exercise in small groups also supports Dickson, Chapman, and Murrell’s (2000) work who found peak learning in spiritual, psychological, and social experiences.

Given this summary I believe the four objectives were accomplished:

1. The AI data collection exercise and phenomenological analysis revealed the essences of PL;
2. Students learned how AI can facilitate reflections on learning that may reveal their peak nature and about phenomenology by engaging with the data that the AI process generated;
3. The synthesis description provides a thorough account of the PL experience; and,
4. The final objective, learning what might help to create peak learning experiences, will be addressed through literature yet to be reviewed.

In addition, the results of the AI conducted in each course were applied in the construction of the learning environment for the term. This addressed a major goal of education which is to help students learn to leverage new knowledge in solving new problems or to facilitate new learning and new material (Mayer & Whittrock, 1996).

The AI exercise levied some of Mezirow’s (1996, 2000) elements of transformative learning. These include a disorienting dilemma generated by the freedom created in the exercise, an assessment of assumptions of what it means to be a student, exploring new roles and actions as students, planning new courses of action, and integrating new perspectives into one’s life. However, the phenomenological interpretation of the data produced new ideas and themes that diverge from his work. Therein lies the power of the phenomenological gaze. Seeing what is old, again for the first time, is at the heart of phenomenology and resonates with the essence of the appreciative method.

The description of peak learning offers a nascent measure of what may be happening in our classrooms and helps us take stock of it. Given the themes, we can now ask questions that explore these issues. Possibilities include:

1. Are students experiencing these themes in my classes?
2. Do my classes contain themes of peak learning that can be added to the elements shared here?
3. If so, what was happening when a peak learning experience occurred?
4. Is it possible to recreate this in future classes?
5. What can I do to facilitate these experiences in my courses?; and,
6. How does the description stand against my individual taken-for-granted presuppositions of good learning?

There is a begging question here: what can we concretely do to increase the likelihood of peak learning taking place on our watch? Recent literature suggests various practices now being enacted by academics. For instance, experience based learning practices (Anderson, Boud, & Cohen, 2000), problem based learning (Carroll, 2005; Coombs & Elden, 2004), student centered learning environments (Biggs, 1990; Biggs, 1999; Estes, 2004; Shuell, 1986), courses designed on principles of andragogy (Knowles, 1980, 1984; Lindemann, 1926; Roglio & Light, 2009), internships (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007), online learning environments (Arbaugh, Desai, Rau, & Sridhar, 2010; Arbaugh, Godfrey, Johnson, Pollack, Niendorf, & Wresch, 2009), international experiences (Charlebois & Giberson, 2010), and autonomy supportive learning environments (Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999; Reeve & Jang, 2006) provide alternatives to the traditional “stand and deliver” classroom. These authors and others (Nadkarni, 2003; Romme, Georges, & Putzel, 2003) are pushing the boundaries of what is considered a learning environment. Many of these variations extend beyond the classroom in ways that stretch students’ capacity. They transpire in real life environments where there is something at stake for the student, the teacher, and quite possibly the site. These approaches diverge from the traditional model of learning according to lecture and lesson plan. Instead, these are available to the unexpected, the novel, that which does not conform to the agenda. It is the “becoming” not the “being” (Whitehead, 1929/1979) of the learner and learning that counts, not the pre-planned delivery and clearly anticipated unfolding of prefigured events according to logical presentation of content. While these approaches create higher levels of uncertainty, they better reflect the world students will inhabit upon graduation.
with its increased ambiguity and the demand that they still act. With a nod to Freud, perhaps they will discover a greater ability to tolerate ambiguity thereby holding their neuroses in check.

Finally, if we are to have any meaningful impact on students we must consider their experience. Classrooms are ripe environments for much beyond the simple transfer of ideas and theories into the heads of others. Classrooms have the potential to transform how learners understand and organize ideas against existing frames and how that sense making integrates with the learner’s ontology which seems intimately informed by her epistemology. “[C]concerns, values, and habits” (Doolittle, 1994, p. 223) occupy the psyches of students and shape their meaning making. Remaining available to these dimensions which lie beyond the conscious collective mind can serve more than just the sum of facts and ideas others carry with them; it can also contribute to the evolution of the hearts and minds of those learners.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Assessing ongoing classes of students according to the themes here could further develop these ideas and add refinements, additions, or deletions to the current catalog. In addition, it would be a worthy endeavor to study the idiosyncrasies of peak learning experiences at the individual level. Doing so might provide multiple descriptions upon which to reflect and from which to draw, thus strengthening the clarity of this experience and description. Any thematic consistencies or the emergence of new themes would add depth to a broadening field of descriptions. Parallel research focused on creation of these experiences also needs to be undertaken as a means of generating more of these experiences for learners and, arguably, educators. Cross validation of this work against more objective means through a mixed methods approach would add a level of rigor not available to research conducted through a single frame. Perhaps brief surveys of students at random moments in class through the use of experiential
sampling method (Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007) could bridge the retrospective approach contained in this work to more “in vivo” data. This would strengthen the confidence in the themes generated here.

While the phenomenological description serves as an approximate answer to the question of “what,” it is equally important to consider “how” we might move forward in implementation. Given the description, how shall educators behave? While there are many suggestions cited above, Senge’s (1990) ideas around the learning organization are also worth considering. In sum he discussed shared vision, personal mastery, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking as necessary concerns if organizations are to flourish. According to Senge: “While traditional organizations require management systems that control people's behavior, learning organizations invest in improving the quality of thinking, the capacity for reflection and team learning, and the ability to develop shared visions and shared understandings of complex issues” (p. 289). Considering peak learning through these frames might offer much to our knowledge of the “how.” And, what better place to apply our knowledge of learning organizations than to consider the very organizational form, the classroom, for which learning is the primary objective?
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Appendix A

☯ Appreciative Inquiry

- A collaborative human process for imagining, creating, and organizing

☯ Appreciative Inquiry

- No man or woman is exempt from taking up the challenge. Social scientist, intellectual, artist, leader, middleman of any breed, and the Common Man (and Woman) to whom, after all, this century belongs—each must ask himself, what is my vision of the future? And what am I doing about it?

  Polak – The image of the future

☯ Appreciative Inquiry

- Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. They are heliotropic. (self-fulfilling prophecy)

- The seeds of change are contained in the questions we ask.

- Organizations are not problems to be solved, but mysteries to be embraced. They need constant re-affirmation.

☯ A.I., Essential Conditions

- Get the whole system in the room.

- Focus on the life-giving past to envision and ignite possibilities of preferred futures.

- This is not problem solving. It is an exercise in anticipatory learning - the social construction of a preferred future.

☯ Appreciative Theory of Change

- What to grow

- New grammar of the true, good, better, possible

- “Problem focus” implies that there is an ideal. AI breaks open the box of what the ideal is first.
- Expands vision of preferred future. Creates new energy fast.
- Assumes organizations are sources of infinite capacity and imagination

☐ A.I. - 4 Key Questions

☐ High point, peak learning experience

☐ What was valued most in that experience?
  - about self
  - nature of work
  - others
  - the organization/school/classroom

☐ A.I. - 4 Key Questions

☐ What are the core factors that give life to that instance?
  - Images of future possibility: 3 wishes that would make learning always like this?

☐ A.I. Leverage Points

☐ Participatory process, vs. dictated from top management
  - Competitive advantage is people

☐ 4 Main Steps in Application

☐ Discovery - Best of what has been
  - Dream - Best that might be
  - Design - What it might truly look like
  - Destination - What will we commit to?

☐ The phenomenology of learning

☐ What are the essential elements that accompany peak learning experiences?
  - Thinking beyond your individual experiences, what are the elements of peak learning that are “always present” - the “invariant constituents” of peak learning?

☐ Discovery
Think of your most peak or significant learning experience…ever:

- What happened?
- What did you do to make that happen?
- What did others do to contribute to that great learning experience?
- How did that experience feel?
- How would you characterize/describe it?
- What are the unique characteristics of peak learning that are common to all of the experiences you discovered and discussed in your group?

Dream

- What would have to happen for this to be a peak learning experience?
- What would you hope to learn?
- Describe your experience if this were a great class.
- What was it about this class that made it peak?
- What was the one thing that you did that resulted in this peak learning experience?
- What 3 wishes do you have that would make learning always like this?

Design

- Is what we have clear to everyone?
- What needs to still be added?
- What needs clarification?

Destiny

- Who will do what by when to ensure that our experience in this class reflects the qualities of peak learning?
- How will we make these propositions come alive and be real?
## Appendix B

| 1. Stretch, novelty, discomfort, edge experiences | - It was baptism by fire - we were in crisis  
- Out of my element; had to deal with it  
- It was uncomfortable  
- New possibilities led to learning  
- I felt excitement and scared at the same time  
- Discovering positive qualities of self through adversity and opportunities  
- It was a completely new task for me, out of my realm of comfort  
- Out of my normal situation - Frustration leads to change and experience  
- Choosing the unknown challenge and task  
- Being out of my element and challenged  
- Being thrown into a project and having to figure it out  
- It was uncomfortable  
- You hated it  
- Learning from failure |
|---|---|
| 2. Relational nature of peak learning | - I got unexpected help from others  
- I felt the enthusiasm of others  
- Communication and relationships with others changed my life  
- We were supported but not told what to do  
- What really stimulated me in learning English were my peers for whom native language is not English  
- Talking to others regarding our experiences and how it connected to the material  
- A supportive environment led to feelings of accomplishment and confidence  
- Learned the importance of support system and teamwork  
- Informal conversation among others  
- Need to lean on others and motivate each other  
- Having a champion/mentor  
- Made a mutual satisfying relationships with a mentor  
- My mentor had passion for the topic and I caught it - it was contagious  
- Mentor saw something in me, some potential or spark  
- I was willing to seek out vice from others  
- Experienced surprising responses from others - unanticipated |
| 3. Self affirming, validating; the learning was personal | - Most students like that kind of learning environment. I think the other emotion it appealed to was that of validation  
- Applying it gave me the reinforcement I needed regarding my |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretations</th>
<th>4. A transformative epiphany</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The learning was about you</td>
<td>It was an epiphany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professor asked what I think</td>
<td>I felt a culture shock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A supportive environment led to feelings of accomplishment and confidence</td>
<td>I felt inspired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection after the event concretizes the learning</td>
<td>We felt enlightened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforced what I already knew - I saw consistency and patterns</td>
<td>We lost track of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The CEO had a breakthrough and discovered what others knew all along</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A realization of what the world is really all about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Had lots of confidence and was then surprised that I didn’t know that much after all - humbled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of enlightenment - best lesson learned after the fact, hindsight was very powerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There was a level of personal experience, development and evolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5. Yielding: doubt, faith, humility and trust as inquiries into learning</th>
<th>6. Real life/real world</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Found that sometimes you need to step up and lead, and others you need to let her lead</td>
<td>I understood the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We learned that empowering those who may be more experienced provides a greater level of understanding to all involved</td>
<td>I could use what I learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I approached the as experts, and asked what their suggestions were first</td>
<td>It wasn’t just principles in theory, but in realistic application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The best way to overcome that is to listen to those who surround you. By doing so you create trust</td>
<td>Uncomfortable at first but learned to adjust and see the positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust, you have to be able to let go and have faith</td>
<td>Suspended judgment of what I did not understand. Need empathy to know other’s experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had to trust in something and learn to trust</td>
<td>Intimidation forced me to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learned from brutal honesty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **6a High Stakes, risk** | • Real world experience  
• Learned from mistakes and real world experience, not text/professor  
• Used prior book knowledge for tangible application  
• Contributed to the tangible result. My work culminated in a finished whole  

| **6b. Perseverance** | • I had a lot at stake in this case...kind of a one shot deal to succeed or fail  
• I put myself out there  
• Had to let myself be open  
• Learned out of love and the need to survive  
• I was thrust into a learning situation where I had to assess/learn/seek advice  
• I had a sense of ownership and ultimate responsibility for the project  
• Lots of pressure with the knowledge of a distant safety net  
• Superiors allowed you to make mistakes but not the fatal mistake  

| **6b1. Meaningful success, mastery** | • I felt an accomplishment  
• We could convey our new knowledge to others  
• Achievement led to a sense of competency and power  
• A supportive environment led to feelings of accomplishment and confidence  
• Grades don’t count/matter  
• It was fun and meaningful  
• Emerged from the challenge feeling stronger - If I can make it through this.... |
Appendix C

Evaluation Questionnaire for “The Preferred Classroom” Exercise

1. What did you like about this exercise?

2. What happened that you found life giving, freeing?

3. What did you learn from this exercise?

4. How do you feel now about possibilities in other domains of your life after having engaged in this exercise?

5. Are there new possibilities for you to impact other domains of your life and thereby change your experience there?
Table 1

- I liked expressing in our own words and letting you [the teacher] know what we want to get out of this class.
- It’s the first time where a teacher has taken the time to see where and how the class, lessons, and discussions should go for the course.
- Classes can actually be practical to life and career.
- It made me think about what I want to get out of this class rather than having someone tell me what I should get out of it.
- Opened my mind to learning new and exciting things.
- I feel it is possible for other domains [of my life] to be impacted as long as I remain aware and willing to learn from experience.

Students’ representative responses to the open ended questionnaire in Appendix C