Opening the Door:
Service-Learning Teaching Assistants Explore the Unfamiliar and the Meaning Made from Their
Service-Learning Experience - An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Dedication

With the deepest respect, honor, and gratitude
to my parents, Carl and June Fritze. Your heavenly inspiration was felt at every step of this process.
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It certainly took—A Village!
Abstract

A door, a mirror, and a window are metaphors for how Service-Learning Teaching Assistants (S-LTA’s) made meaning from the unfamiliar in their service-learning (S-L) experience. Standing at the threshold of the door, the participants entered the experience and take you through their feelings as they encountered the unfamiliar. Once passed the door, the participants unfolded the unfamiliar through a mirrored, self-reflective space of engaged reality from their S-L life-worlds. Reflecting on self and with others in context, the participants then translated the unfamiliar to discover a window of opportunity into personal meaning and application. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) guided the participants’ and the researcher’s experiential journey for exploring meaning from the unfamiliar and for discovering how conscious educational growth can be sustained by introducing a more critical perspective. Through this qualitative methodology, the shared participants’ interpretative stories were brought to life. The rich contextual renderings remind all that learning was once unfamiliar and that meaning made it personal, conscious, and transformative.

Key words: service-learning, the unfamiliar, conscious educational growth, service-learning teaching assistants
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CHAPTER ONE: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As I walk across campus, I am struck as I observe the huddled masses of students sitting in front of their MacBook’s with multiple screens up, as short response bytes are sent with just a click. People feverishly tap out condensed versions of thought with their heads down. iPhone and Beat headphones have replaced eye contact and smiles, as interpersonal conversations are now audible to all. Technology and many forms of social media platforms now compete for attention, suggesting what we should buy and from whom, who we should vote for, and everyday personal reality is captured on Snapchat, Facebook, and Instagram.

Social media depletes one’s attention from existential moments of reality as students gauge the number of followers they have and the number of likes they get on a post, and Snapchat images disappear into the virtual black abyss. Where are we? Who are we? Will we ever know? Are the answers in the myriad of screens that consume our attention unabated to the extent that walking and driving while under the influence of social media may cause physical injury or even lives? Resigning our thought processes to quick Google searches, while incredibly efficient may dismiss the dialogic needed to complete our thought processes with just a tap.

As class begins, phones are needed to check in for attendance. Class engagement is initiated by downloading the PowerPoint lecture and furiously filling in the blanks. Media forms of information, entertainment, and social discourse freely flow with little time to reflect and debate on interpersonal, intrapersonal, cognitive, or affective levels. Today’s students are adept at texting while riding bicycles down main streets, under their desks, even when the devices are supposed to be stowed away during class.

Class is over, and students quickly pull out their virtual worlds to connect again to the world of small screens as the world before them unfolds its majesty. A majesty, fragile and
quickly lost as the digital distraction fragments our minds, hollows our relationships, and captures our souls. This study will explore those avenues of meaning that bring us back to the unique presence of our being and when shared in contextual life experiences have the potential to produce majestic transformational moments—we call life.

The above vignette begs the question: Is there time or even interest in critical engagement, inquiry, or synthesis of thought? Paulo Freire’s statement from over 30 years ago seems prescient and compels further heuristic inquiry. Freire (1982) stated, “If men [sic] are unable to critically perceive the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality; they are carried along in the wake of change” (p. 7). Freire’s insight is a stark reminder that underlying education’s basic premise for learning is a necessity to discover, question, and engage with reality.

Today’s societal demands and educational reforms for competing educational marketplaces and the increasing prevalence of screen-based learning strategies inherent in today’s technology-focused classrooms, require a radical rethink of those higher-order learning strategies that invoke inquiry, reflection, and engagement. These learning strategies encompass mindful, open approaches to learning that challenge students to move out of their comfort zones and the insularity of screen knowledge to become civically engaged in experiencing and questioning social inequality, both locally and globally. Civic engagement experiences may enable students to critically reflect, analyze, and reconsider their values, beliefs, and acquired knowledge, challenging their *a priori* assumptions (Jacoby, 2015). Examples of such civic engagement include serving in economically depressed areas of the world by building shelters and water sources, mentoring urban children in after-school activities, and providing advocacy for the homeless.
Service-learning (S-L), a form of experiential learning, may be one key strategy for delivering students from the passive acceptance of “screen knowledge” to the promise of engaged learning and meaningful educational growth. S-L is a pedagogical strategy that combines community engagement and academic applications to enhance students’ academic growth, community awareness, and social-action skill development (Moore & Sandholtz, 1999). The convergence of academic theory and the engaged reality of the community provides a learning platform where educational growth can be a transformational rather than transactional means to secure a grade. S-L, when critically framed, challenges students to reflect deeply on the meaning, relevance, and agency in the classroom-community experience (Cipolle, 2010; Mitchell, 2008; Rosenberger, 2000). There is minimal screen learning as the S-L becomes immersed in an interdependent learning relationship with their community partners and students.

S-L teaching assistants (S-LTAs) are undergraduate students who have had a S-L experience and have gone through extensive training to become teaching assistants for S-L classes at Sage University (a pseudonym used for the actual campus). S-LTAs, having experienced an S-L course, have committed to “acting as a liaison and resource for S-L (S-L) campus and community partners” (citation omitted to preserve confidentiality). S-LTAs are situated in a unique juxtaposition which allows them to insightfully share their lived experiences of the S-L process as and to sustain their S-L engagement as teaching assistants. By exploring the S-L experience from the teaching assistant perspective, S-LTAs accessed a rich, contextual understanding of the meaning making process, have considerable experience in the context, and provided a glimpse in to what an engaged university could be. Because of their participation in both student and teaching assistant roles, S-LTAs can provide the critical reflection necessary to
explore the meaning construed from their experience and their experiences of transformational change toward integrating S-L as an active academic plan in their lives.

The following section sets up the context of the S-L experience. First, the societal tensions currently facing higher education will be discussed. The intersection of these tensions creates an unsettling pattern for understanding what the role of higher education should be and how today’s students approach learning. Second, S-L is discussed as a remedy that creates opportunities for students to critically engage and explore learning experientially.

**S-L as Antidote**

S-L as a form of experiential student learning leads students to engage in community partnerships and opportunities where the reciprocal needs of the learner and community partner are in balance. Critical reflection, an integral piece of most S-L courses, challenges students to move beyond the experience into deeper learning outcomes, such as “applying theory to practice, understanding human differences and similarities, [and] exploring options for individual and collective social action with the community (Jacoby, 2015, p. 3). Whether a program, a pedagogy, or a practice, S-L seems to promote the necessary substrate for an impactful and active learning partnership where students can experience diversity and discover learning relevance through real world experiences (Jacoby, 2015; Kuh, 2008).

**The Tensions**

Beyond technological changes and the consumption of all things digital, current educational discourse reflects an unsettling shift in philosophy and purpose. The vector for this change seems to be a perceptible shift from a critical space for inquiry, reflection, and cognition to one conflated with authoritarian market imperatives necessary for a globalized knowledge economy. Many of these imperatives appear to reflect a political-economic agenda rooted in
neoliberalism. Neoliberalism in this context is defined as the exclusive use of market initiatives (e.g., free markets, competition, individual meritocracy, privatization) to solve all social and economic challenges. Historically, the ideological shift to neoliberalism was uncritically accepted as the only way out of economic stagnation during the 1970s and 1980s (Baltodano, 2012). Neoliberalism has since been normalized and accepted as a common-sense mode of governance permeating every social institution, including higher education (Giroux, 2004, 2009, 2014; Kellner, 2003; Saunders, 2010).

Foucault (1978, 1979) weighed in on neoliberalism as a mode of governance by deconstructing the political rationale of neoliberalism. As a form of governmentality, neoliberalism corrodes institutions, values, and processes of liberal democracies (Brown, 2006); it erodes skills for a vibrant democracy and implicates broader societal challenges (Apple, 2006, 2011; Baltodano, 2012; Freire, 1971, 1972, 1985; Giroux, 2004, 2014; Kellner, 2003); and it questions the notion of education as a common and public good (Luke, 2005). For example, this shift in attitude frames college students as consumers, bloats management in administration, fosters academic capitalism, yields research funded by big business, underfunds public colleges and universities, and promotes the exclusivity of private banking sponsoring student loans. These economic influences subvert higher education’s philosophical goal of education for the public good in favor of a corporatized academic enterprise (Apple, 2011; Aronowitz, 2000; Baltodano, 2012; Blackmore, 2000, 2009; Brown, 2006; Carr, 2010; Falk, 1999; Gildersleeve, Kuntz, Pasque, & Carducci, 2010; Giroux, 2003, 2009; Giroux & Giroux, 2006; Jones, 2007; Luke, 2005; Mackler, 2010; Saunders, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Washburn, 2005).

Globalization has expedited neoliberalism’s influence on higher educational reform to create *human capital* (Blackmore, 2000, 2009; Burbules & Torres, 2000; Falk, 1999). This
narrative has very little to do with human factors and educational philosophy and more to do with economic rationalism, which focuses more on instrumental learning driven by societal demands (Baltodano, 2012; Giroux, 2014). One may witness the loss of one of the nascent purposes of education: to develop students with the qualities of mind to be critically reflective, independent thinkers and socially engaged agents for change (Brown, 2006; Chomsky, 2011; Giroux, 1997, 2004, 2009, 2014; Giroux & Giroux, 2006; Grant, 2012; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2007; McLaren & Farahmandpour, 2002; Porfilio & Hickman, 2011; Saunders, 2010; Washburn, 2005). If current neoliberal educational reform continues unabated, chances are remote for future undergraduate students to explore their educational process in any dialectic, heuristic, or critical manner (Kellner, 2003). Instead, what may be observed is learning becoming increasingly transactional, critically empty of reflection and meaning, as students become knowledge consumers, driven by the necessity to secure lucrative careers (Giroux, 1999; Saunders, 2010).

As more universities embrace business models to survive, relentlessly competing for the best and brightest students, it becomes imperative to selectively position the university in the educational marketplace. Marketing, advertising, and branding to student consumers have brought this competition to a new level, as value is measured in anticipated wealth rather than developing a constructed sense of intellectual and moral purpose (Deresiewicz, 2014). The next section will discuss how S-L may mitigate the challenges facing higher education brought on by the neoliberal agenda.

**The Antidote**

S-L is one of many pedagogical strategies that challenge students into deeper, more engaged learning experiences. Some examples included: learning-living communities, study abroad, international dialogue, and independent study and research projects to name a few.
However, S-L is positioned to have immediate impact within a community engagement framework. With that said, S-L, a key learning experience, has the potential to immediately push back on countervailing trends that diminish liberal educational goals. In its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2007) specified 21st century learning outcomes associated with S-L, including (a) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, (b) intellectual and practical skills, (c) personal and social responsibility, and (d) integrative learning. This initiative would require a university-wide curriculum modeled after what Hodge, Baxter Magolda, and Haynes (2009) called an engaged learning university (p. 16). This approach is grounded in transformational learning (TL), a theoretical approach that establishes one’s internal authority or “self-authorship” (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994, 2009; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). As an engaged approach, this deepest level of learning challenges the student to shift from “uncritical acceptance of external authority to critical analysis of authority to establish one’s internal authority” (Hodge et al., 2009, p. 16). S-L challenges service-learners to explore and experience learning outside of the normal purview of a traditional classroom. S-LTAs, as former service-learners, originally entered unfamiliar contexts to engage in this learning process. S-L environments include settings such as homeless shelters, urban school environments, non-profit after-school programs, preschool support, and elderly housing.

Traditional S-L must use a critical approach to deepen the learning experience (Claus & Ogden, 1999; Teahouse & Jarrett, 2012). This bridging experience engages students in developing a critical consciousness for social change (Cipolle, 2004, 2006, 2010; Merriam & Bierema, 2014) and challenges students to ask larger questions about the relationship between communities...

Several constructs can foster critical reflection in S-L (Kiely, 2005). Contextual border-crossing and dissonance, according to Kiely (2005), are two of five learning processes in S-L that may stimulate critical reflection and meaning making. Contextual border-crossing consists of four contextual elements that may affect student’s TL: (a) personal, (b) structural, (c) historical, and (d) programmatic. These factors serve to “frame the unique nature and impact of the student’s’ service learning experience” (Kiely, 2005, p. 9). The personal aspects would involve the student’s personality traits, knowledge, skill, beliefs, and life experiences. These aspects become necessary to unpack as one becomes immersed in an unfamiliar or new setting for learning. The structural elements would also have to be considered as each student brings a unique set of power asymmetries (race, class, religion, gender, and/or nationality) to the learning context. The historical context of all the stakeholders would also be explored. This context involves antecedent notions relative to country or community power differences that are socioeconomic or political in nature. Lastly, the programmatic factors would include what the immersion in the community will be and the pedagogical purpose for the academic and community partnership. Contextual border-crossing challenges the service-learner to unpack previously held notions and beliefs by ushering them out of their comfort zones of the traditional or technology-based classrooms and into unfamiliar community learning settings. These community settings are often unfamiliar to the service-learner and expose students to people with experiences very different from their own. This unfamiliarity can promote critical reflection (Jones & Abes, 2004). These settings, combined with an analytical approach to S-L, provide opportunities for dissonance or contradiction to occur (Morton & Campbell, 2007). Dissonance,
in this study, is defined as “incongruence between participants’ prior frame of reference and aspects and the contextual factors that shape the S-L experience” (Kiely, 2005, p. 8). Doerr (2011) saw dissonance as “a transformative experience students involved in S-L gain through confronting the complexity of the issue at hand” (p. 71). It is in these pivotal moments that critical reflection is stimulated to make meaning and where transformative shifts in learning are likely to occur (Aronson, 1997; Doerr, 2011; Elliot & Devine, 1994).

S-L may have the potential to help maintain and/or restore many qualities associated with meeting full educational outcomes for an engaged learning university in the 21st century. Teaching assistant positions provide opportunities where students can experience S-L’s intersection with the classroom and their engagement with the community, may be a useful pedagogical tool to “transform lives, to touch the hearts as well as the minds” (Kretchmar, 2001, p. 9). As the nexus of theory and reality converge in S-L classrooms and communities, this study will explore S-L as a theater for developing one’s way of being in the world (i.e., ontology) by critically reflecting on one’s ways of knowing (i.e., epistemology). Additionally, S-L provides service-learners with dialogical engagement where opportunities exist not only for personal transformation, but also for an enhanced learning relationship with instructors, community partners, and as mentors for other service-learners (Kiely, 2005; Murray, 2015; Owen, 2011; Pribbenow, 2005).

Many characteristics of S-L support contexts to nurture engaged learning environments. For example, the unknown nature associated with S-L (e.g., contextual border-crossings, engagement with community partners, dissonance, collective tensions) may create the substrate for critical reflection, meaning making, TL within that experience, and implications for broader social inquiry (Jones & Abes, 2004; Kiely, 2005). Webster and Arend’s (2012) research utilized
a single case study of an international S-L experience. They demonstrated how narrative critical reflection led to the student’s transformation and critical engagement as a global citizen. TL is highlighted in Carrington and Selva’s (2010) study of S-L with pre-service teachers. A critical reflective log process was used illustrating how students critiqued their experience, read their world, and imagined their contributions as future teachers. Study conclusions showed a movement from “knowledge transmission to knowledge transformation” (Carrington & Selva, 2010, p. 49) as students critically engaged with their teaching roles and embraced their responsibility to create a better world.

The framing of S-L can determine learning outcomes. Levison (1990) cautioned that offering exposure to experiential educational experiences (e.g., S-L, study abroad, learning/living communities), rather than engagement, diminished the potential for critical reflection. Watts, Diemer, and Voight (2011) identified a lack of qualitative literature in discerning how young people make meaning and act on their critical reflections. S-L, when critically framed, positions both academic and community work with the potential to experience unfamiliar contexts, social relations, and the opportunity to explore dominant assumptions. Service-learners begin to question themselves, the context, and the broader political-economic system in an educational space designed for dissonance, debate, and discourse (Webster & Mertova, 2007). It is this very nature that gives this pedagogy the potential for its transformative nature (Clayton & Ash, 2004). Critical S-L pedagogy utilizes readings, discussion, and writing assignments that allow service-learners to reflect critically on their service in a broader social context (Mitchell, 2008). This learning platform challenges service-learners to become knowledgeable of the societal forces shaping not only their lives, but also the lives of others (Mitchell, 2005, 2007, 2008; Rhoads, 1997).
Critical S-L is a unique pedagogy characterized as being counter-normative (Clayton & Ash, 2004; Howard, 1998) and counter-hegemonic (Cipolle, 2010; Mitchell, 2008; Rosenberger, 2000). Clayton and Ash (2004) listed many existential qualities of S-L that make it counter-normative from traditional teaching. The list of conditions included “the real-world messiness and unpredictability, complexities of social change processes, personal and intellectual risks in reflection, and shared control and responsibility implicit in partnerships” (Clayton & Ash, 2004, p. 59). These qualities, according to Clayton and Ash (2004), often called for transformative shifts as students, instructors, and community members ride the “waves of incoming dissonance” (p. 60) toward greater self-awareness, meaning, and collaborative engagement. The norms of a traditional approach to S-L emphasize service without attention to more pervasive systemic inequality. As a counter-hegemonic approach, critical S-L would encourage leaning in to discomfort to confront social issues without apology. A critical interpretation of the S-L experience may include a transformative shift from existing beliefs and perspectives. A critical pedagogical approach to S-L would balance “student outcomes with an emphasis on social change” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 54).

notion of *conscientization* or critical consciousness becomes that layer of articulated meaning where social change is needed. Brookfield (2005) also weighed in noting, the many tools needed for adults to critically reflect to render an *ideological critique*. These changes necessitate students to reflect critically on the areas of asymmetric power, privilege, and implicit bias, and how these may translate into developing the agency for social change.

This section highlighted the contextual narratives surrounding higher education discourse on educational reforms and policies. This premeditated the need to examine learning approaches that facilitate critical inquiry, dissonance, reflection, dialogue, and agency. The S-L experience, being academically and contextually based, is a critical pedagogical approach for developing these skills for engaged educational growth. Baxter Magolda (2007) noted, “College is a prime context in which to introduce provocative experiences, portray accurately the complexity of adult life, and guide students through the developmental transformations that lead toward inner wisdom” (p. 73).

A discussion of Sage University’s contextual background will follow. How Sage University positions and implements S-L within its mission will be necessary for understanding how students approach the learning process. This section concludes with a background analysis of S-LTAs and will describe the rationale behind studying S-LTAs and the insight that will be gained from the re-telling of lived experiences.

**Background of Study Site: S-L**

Sage University is a large, private, urban research university in the Northeastern section of the United States. The university is categorized as a Research I institution by the Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education, offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees at its main campus and advanced degrees at two other external locations within the
United States (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 2015). At the time of this study, university enrollment was 13,510 undergraduate students (49% male, 51% female). The annual cost to go to Sage University was $58,490 for the 2014-2015 academic year.

One of the university’s hallmarks is that of experiential education, an approach to education that complements learning by blending the academic work of the classroom with application to real life experiences. The reflective and experiential traditions of Dewey (1916, 1933, 1938) and later experiential theoretical frameworks of Kolb (1984) provided the foundation for this approach. The five domains of experiential learning include: (a) co-operative education, (b) student research, (c) global experience, (d) study abroad, and (e) S-L. The S-L program, housed in the Center for Community Service, has been recognized as one of the best S-L programs for the past six years in a row by U.S. News and World Report. The S-L program at Sage University received the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification in 2015 and was a member of Campus Compact, a national coalition of colleges and universities with expressed commitment to the public purpose of higher education.

S-L supports Sage University's goal of civic and community engagement by integrating classroom and community goals through transformative service partnerships to inspire lifelong community involvement and strengthen our local and global communities. Each year, 1,100 students complete more than 41,000 hours of service within the program. Collaborating with 109 community partners, 40 faculty, and 59 S-LTAs, students can participate in 80 S-L courses from eight colleges and schools within the university and in three countries (United States, Spain, and Zambia) covering three continents (North America, Europe, and Africa).

The research, faculty engagement, student learning outcomes, community impact, and S-LTA learning outcomes make this program comprehensive and collaboratively focused. The S-L
Program collected data from a sample size of 631 service-learners. The results indicated that an average of 80% of service-learners experienced a strengthened connection between service and learning course objectives, their community service helped them to learn and retain course concepts, their experience made a unique contribution to their learning, and their course work strengthened their ability to engage with the community partner. Particularly, students revealed that skills gained from S-L were in areas of interpersonal communication, self-confidence, self-awareness, and leadership. Expected learning outcomes for students completing the S-L course experience included the following: “analyze social issues through the lens of the course’s discipline, synthesize course concepts and their service experience, demonstrate critical reflection of service, identify skills used in their community, and identify community needs” (citation omitted to preserve confidentiality).

This study’s participants will come from a pool of S-LTAs who have experienced an S-L course and have then committed to “acting as a liaison and resource for S-L campus and community partners” (citation omitted to preserve confidentiality). S-LTAs are expected to spend 7 to 14 hours per week in this role with responsibilities including training, office hours, tracking student progress, attending all class sessions, facilitating reflection components, and partnering in thought with faculty and community.

The rationale for studying S-LTAs is the belief that they can provide a rich resource for articulating and examining the unfamiliar contexts that may inherently provoke elements of dissonance, critical reflection, and discourse. S-LTAs have had an S-L experience and are positioned as upper-level students to both process and continue to re-examine meaning from their prior S-L experience. They can potentially deepen the articulation from this original experience in ways different from service-learners exposed to S-L for the first time. These
observations are supported by the S-LTAs’ blog posts to the university community as they recall and reflect on the meaning of their past S-L experience and how it positioned them to become S-LTAs.

Examples of S-L experiences might include a human services class working with preschools in low-income neighborhoods to increase literacy, social, and emotional skills to close achievement gaps or meeting weekly with local women to discuss cultural stereotypes and to empower them in the face of gender-based abuse and violence. The narratives generated from the S-LTAs’ own lived experience through critical reflection seem to produce truly compelling material for understanding transformational meaning and translation of that meaning for themselves individually, but also for the translation into the teaching assistant role.

The conceptual understanding of the study will be discussed in the next section. S-L presents a complexity of relationships, collaborations, and contexts and cannot be informed by a single theory. Thus, this study will integrate TL theory with relevant perspectives. In the following section, TL theory is explained, as it serves as the foundational theory for this study, as does Brookfield’s (1991, 2005, 2010) critical reflection cycle that includes four reflective lenses that prompt necessary questions for unpacking the S-L experience. Kiely’s (2005) TL model for S-L concludes the discussion on this study’s key underlying concepts. This theoretical model suggests how S-LTAs may have processed the unfamiliar to generate meaning from their S-L experience.

**Conceptual Framework**

Conceptual frames provide a theoretical understanding and attempt to explain cognition and behavior of the participants in a study based on prior research. Understanding the theoretical implications informs the research in many ways, albeit abstractly. However, conceptual frames
provide needed links to ground the researcher’s understanding and plans for the research. Mile and Huberman (1994) defined conceptual framework as “a visual or written product that explains the main things to be studied” (p. 18).

TL theory provides the conceptual framework for this study (Mezirow, 1978, 1991; Mezirow & associates, 2000). Mezirow (1978) introduced TL as he studied the experiences of women returning to higher education after a long absence in preparation for entering the job force. This significant life event with the unfamiliar caused the women to examine deeply what they believed about themselves and how societal expectations had shaped their identities. As the learning process unfolded, the women experienced conflicting suppositions that created an ontological awareness to critique existing assumptions and beliefs, which supported a transformative decision to embrace a new perspective and to translate it to broader social contexts (Mezirow, 1991). The process is essentially based on making meaning of one’s lived experience (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Mezirow (1978) began his 10-step process of TL with what he called a disorienting dilemma. This essentially begins with an experience, life event, or an accumulation of experiences that precipitates the need for critical reflection or examination of existing assumptions. These observations are communicated and shared with others, and new perspectives begin to form a plan of action to be integrated into one’s life. This process can be expanded to take into consideration the extra-rational (Dirkx, 2000; O’Sullivan, 2012) and social change notions of transformation (Brookfield, 1986, 1987, 1991, 1996, 2000, 2005, 2009, 2010; Freire, 1971; Taylor & Cranton, 2008). Given the unique relationships and social contexts of S-L, this may be true, so it is necessary to examine additional perspectives to bring a more integrated view of TL (Brookfield, 2000, 2005; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Taylor, Cranton, & Associates, 2012). In integrated conceptual approach theory, the
unfamiliar is seen as the standard theoretical thread, a beginning point for the critical reflective learning process in all theoretical understandings of TL perspectives (i.e., the extra-rational, the critical pragmatic, the epistemological development, and the social-emancipatory) explained in detail later in the section. This study will focus on Mezirow and associates (2000) TL theory, Kiely’s (2005) TL model for S-L, and Brookfield’s (2005) critical reflection process, with complementary perspectives from Kegan (2009), Baxter Magolda (2009b), Freire (1971, 1982, 1985). These perspectives will provide a foundation for the theoretical and operational flow of how S-LTAs may process the unfamiliar from their S-L experience.

Foundation of TL Theory

Mezirow’s extensive work (1978, 1981, 1985, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1998; Mezirow & associations, 2000) on TL draws from the contexts of “constructivism, critical theory, and deconstructivism in social theory” (p. xviii). According to Mezirow (1991), “meaning is an interpretation and to make meaning is to construe or interpret experience to give it coherence” (p. 4). This statement introduces the premise for TL. As one develops meaning perspectives, the necessity for reflecting on the assumptions from these perspectives is paramount, especially considering disorienting dilemmas (e.g., the unfamiliar) and dissonant or contradictory experiences or events. A disorienting dilemma is defined as “an activating event that typically exposes a discrepancy between what a person has always assumed to be true and what has just been experienced, heard, or read” (Cranton, 2002, p. 66).

TL is rooted in Habermas’s (1971, 1984) theory of communicative action. The salient condition from this theory according to Mezirow (1991) is “free, full participation in reflective discourse” (p. 7). As one begins to make meaning, the learning process unfolds as a way of interpreting, making explicit, validating, and acting upon our experiences and engagement with
the world. When critically examined, TL occurs by questioning presupposed assumptions and constructing new meaning. This type of learning is called *perspective transformation*.

Perspective transformation, according to Mezirow (1991) is a “process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world” (p. 167). The higher education learning process seems to become more personalized and relevant when informed by TL. Mezirow and associates (2000) offer some key ideas associated with TL as students transition from different learning contexts. These ideas include; a transition from school life to university life, being led into deeper understanding of issues that challenge existing assumptions, developing critical reflection skills on societal levels, and harnessing transformational tools to be change agents.

TL theory provides a theoretical approach to understanding educational experiences associated with transformative personal growth, an important insight for critical reflection, meaning, and engagement. The theory focuses on how one learns, negotiates, and acts for our purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than on those uncritically assimilated from others (Baxter Magolda, 2004b; Kegan, 2009; Mezirow, 1991). According to Mezirow and associates (2000), TL entails “a shift from uncritical acceptance of external authority to critical analysis of authority to establish one’s internal authority” (p. 8).

Figure 1 provides an operationalized version of TL as a process that begins with a disorienting dilemma and moves clockwise as one navigates the cognitive, affective, and conative or volitional elements of learning.

Recalling disorienting dilemmas or dissonance (e.g., contradictions, incongruent personal assumptions) that oppose one’s understanding of the world initiates the critical reflection process and the potential for transition or transformation of some type (Mezirow and associates, 2000).
This examination works through existing or distorted assumptions as one becomes engaged in rational discourse, analytic and reflective thought, and begins to discover and negotiate new meanings that inform future action. This model is also fluid and recognizes that a student could come into TL at various stages of their cognitive development. Mezirow and associates’ (2000) TL theory provides a comprehensive understanding of individual meaning through critical reflection and rational discourse. However, to promote engaged change agents, critically reflective pedagogical moments are needed from multiple bits of intelligence to stir critical consciousness from mere exposure to critical engagement for social change.
The next section reviews TL’s relationship in a social context by introducing alternative perspectives as metaphors of TL. This builds on the foundation of TL and the understanding needed for navigating the complexities of both academic and community dimensions of S-L.

**Transformation as ideological critique: A critical pragmatist approach.** Brookfield (2005) differed from Mezirow and associates (2000) by opening the discourse about the individual in a social context. Given that S-LTAs as former service-learners are challenged to explore differing social contexts and relationships within that context, an ideological tool box was needed to help S-LTAs question that reality. Brookfield (2005) offered critical theoretical help in this area by providing critical theoretical tools that “challenge dominant ideologies, contest hegemony, unmask power, overcome alienation, learn liberation, reclaim reason, and practice democracy” (p. 39). Also, these tools expanded the range of societal critical reflection in stark contrast to Brookfield’s (1987) previous proposals focusing primarily on individual critical reflection. However, Brookfield’s (1987) individually critically reflective proposals should not be underestimated, as they provided useful and constructive elements for constructing meaning, self-authorship, and for expanding the critical consciousness of learners. Taken together Brookfield (1987, 2005) built a framework for: analyzing assumptions, focusing on learners’ perceptions of their own experiences (e.g., contextual awareness), encouraging group analysis of relevant issues and suggesting imaginative speculation through presentation of alternative meaning perspectives, and emphasizing critical skepticism.

As former service-learners, S-LTAs in their roles as teaching assistants, continually revisit their own individual reflection techniques, help students develop reflection techniques, and have the experience to nurture inquiry into broader societal issues. To examine a broader societal perspective, the use of critical theory and reflection according to Brookfield (1991) is
foundational for one to ideologically critique the narratives that shape belief systems and assumptions. Brookfield (2005) defined ideological critique as “the process by which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices” (p. 293). Critical reflection requires, Brookfield (2000) argues, “one to examine power relationships and hegemonic assumptions” (p. 125).

One application for examining the constructs of power and hegemony is through pragmatic questioning. Figure 2 represents questions that may apply to Brookfield’s (2005) critical reflection process.

Moving from the top of the picture clockwise, the first block contains a question to deepen one’s contextual awareness and serves to clarify what to observe and consider. In other words, one’s exploration of what’s happening in the context of the experience, values, cultural issues, sociopolitical considerations, and environmental influences. The questions from the second block ask the student to explore how the experience happened and to imagine other ways of looking at the experience and how the experience affectively informs one’s meaning. The third block asks the student to wrestle cognitively with assumptions and to analyze what beliefs and values have shaped these assumptions. If these assumptions are incongruent with the reality of the experience, students can question what new interpretations can be rationally, critically, and pragmatically brought forward. Critical reflection is understood as an ideological critique initiated by the dissonant tension of becoming aware of the socially constructed nature of our beliefs, assumptions, and values. The final block asks students to reflect what are the actions taken considering new interpretations of the experience. The questions serve as a critical frame and a critical approach to initiate inquiry, reflection, and change within a social context. In other words, by launching an investigation on existing assumptions, students must broker dissonance
in ways that facilitate deeper existential meaning. The learning experience seems to become an avenue for transformative growth serving to inform future actions and engagement.

The following sections offer thoughts from constructivism and social-emancipatory perspectives to inform the study’s goal of understanding the transformative nature of meaning making through critical reflective experiences. While these perspectives are not at the forefront of this study, they remain essential to understanding the complexity and the transformative nature of the S-L process. The researcher will listen for these ideas as S-LTAs unfold their
experience with the unfamiliar during the critically reflective process of meaning making and the possibility of a transformative shift in understanding themselves in a social context with others.

**Transformation as development.** The constructive-developmental perspective explores how one understands their individual relationship to reality. This point of view, according to Kegan (2009), suggested that “a form of knowing always consists of the relationship between subject and the object of one’s knowing” (p. 45). Thus, transformation occurs when the “subject” of our knowing becomes an “object” of our knowing by reconstructing the frame of the mind, shifting from a socialized mind to self-authoring mind (Kegan, 2009). This thought process is one of several epistemological shifts students use in organizing meaning to reflect a more general, discriminant, reflective, and emotional ability to change. Kegan (2009) designated five forms of meaning making: (a) perceptive/impulsive, (b) concrete/opinionate, (c) socialized, (d) self-authoring, and (e) self-transforming. Kegan’s (2009) forms of meaning making recognize the various levels of epistemological maturity that may be relevant for understanding S-LTAs individual differences present in the study.

The S-L context facilitates learning when service-learners begin to examine the relationship between themselves and social contexts. This is accomplished by interfacing academic theory learned in the classroom with the S-L experience on the real world. Critical thinking, reflection, and inquiry is fostered and made explicit when the tension of what they value diverges from what they discover. Through contextual discourse, the experience challenges the students to triangulate personal meaning in parallel while engaging in real life contexts with others.

Essential for making meaning of a learning experience, one must understand their ways of knowing (epistemology) by examining this in the context of objective means of knowing; this
informs one’s sense of being (ontology). A more informed and agented approach to learning is invoked, as students begin to understand the importance of individual autonomy and collective agency, particularly as it relates to the interaction needed to solve and change discordant social issues that arise (Kegan, 2009). According to Kegan (2009), “we will better discern the nature of learners (i.e., needs for TL) by better understanding not only their contemporary epistemologies but the epistemological complexity of the present learning challenges they face in their lives” (p. 46).

Developmental cognitive theorist Baxter Magolda (1992, 2000, 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2009a, 2009b) built on Kegan’s (2009) constructivist-developmental theory and his call for a holistic theoretical perspective in the development of the whole student. Baxter Magolda’s (1992, 2001) 22-year longitudinal research study followed the developmental learning journeys of young adults from ages 18 to 40. This study provided rich, in-depth narratives that made explicit the moments of epistemological transformation, or in Baxter Magolda’s (2004b) words, “the questioning of existing assumptions and crafting new ones to see the world from more complex perspectives” (p. 31). This insight would lead to two critical conceptual models for meaning making and the coveted learning ideal of self-authorship. According to Baxter Magolda (2004b), the first model—the epistemological reflection model—is based on the assumptions that “personal epistemology is socially constructed and context bound” (p. 31) and reflects an understanding that “people actively create or make meaning of their experience based on interpretation, evaluation, and drawing conclusions about the meaning” (p. 31). The second model—the learning partnership model (LPM)—guides educational practices by linking learning and development toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004a). This model was critical for developing the framework for constructing transformative contexts that emphasized “the
social construction of knowledge, the participants’ role in it, and the mutual engagement with experts in knowledge construction” (Baxter Magolda, 2004b, p. 41). Both models served to enhance self-authorship as a necessary epistemological tool to resist Freire’s (1982) notion of “being carried along in the wake of change” (p. 7). Important to the understanding of meaning making, Baxter Magolda (2000) suggested that S-L provides the experiential connection with the unfamiliar in both contexts and with others that, in turn, may create dissonance. When this dissonance is critically reflected upon, a transformational opportunity may exist to deepen one’s sense of self, to develop self-authorship, and to question broader societal implications.

**Transformation as consciousness raising.** The social emancipatory approach builds on Habermas’s (1984) emancipatory learning and epistemological understanding (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Kegan, 1994). According to Freire and Faundez (1989) and McLean (2006), this approach challenges students to free new perspectives, then translate these transformative shifts into acting on broader social change. Research from Shugurensky (2002) using a Freirean (1971) perspective, argued that “transformative learning is transformative when critical reflection and social action are part of the same process” (p. 63). This combination of reflection and social action is what Freire (1971, 1982) would call *praxis*. Praxis is the basis for critical S-L, in that it demands a more critically reflective pedagogical approach. This approach may enhance the transformative potential of S-L, as praxis is both expected and nurtured (Cipolle, 2010; Clayton & Ash, 2004; Daigre, 2000; Howard, 1998; Rosenberger, 2000). When the learning context is framed in social justice, the social-emancipatory perspective may explain one of the potential transformative shifts by S-LTAs as they experience the unfamiliar (e.g., working with dramatically under-resourced marginalized populations).
This section focused on the conceptual development of TL theory applied to S-L theory and how S-LTAs may begin to process the unfamiliar in developing meaning from that experience. The next section will discuss Kiely’s (2005) TL model for S-L. This model helps to provide a constructive lens that operationalized how S-LTAs might process meaning from their S-L experience.

**TL Model of S-L**

Kiely’s (2005) TL model for S-L is one lens for how S-LTAs may process their S-L experience. Kiely’s model is theoretically based in Mezirow’s understanding of TL, but expands beyond Mezirow’s concern for rational processes of meaning making to include non-rational elements of feeling and sensing. Additionally, Kiely’s model seems to challenge service-learners into discourse, epistemological shifts, and praxis, all elements from previously mentioned by TL scholars. Kiely’s longitudinal case study research, the basis for his model, will be discussed in the next section.

Kiely’s (2005) longitudinal case study of undergraduate student’s S-L immersion in Nicaragua (1994-2005) provides an opportunity for the students to perform service work on health and social issues in resource-poor communities. This methodology generated significant insight on how students made meaning of this experience and the transformative nature of S-L. Several data gathering methods that included observation, document analysis, and interviews were used; then, the data were triangulated for emerging ideas and interpretations, analyzed through constant comparison, and coded for themes and conceptual relationships. Analysis from Kiely’s longitudinal case study of service immersion for undergraduate students placed in Nicaragua generated five process ideas: (a) contextual border crossing, (b) dissonance, (c) personalizing, (d) processing, and (e) connecting (see Figure 3). Figure 3 was adapted from
Kiely’s (2005) TL model for S-L. It represents five reflective processes (both experiential and cognitive) one may go through when immersed in a S-L context.

Kiely’s (2005) findings were significant in terms of the proposed research. Findings confirmed the notion that, for students situated in real-life experiences addressing social issues and problems, many constructs emerge. These situations are likely to include unfamiliar contexts, problematic tensions or dissonance, “disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow & associates, 2000), “forked-road dilemmas” (Dewey, 1933), “ideology critique” (Brookfield, 2000), and/or a “shock or psychological jolt” (Rockquemore & Harwell Schaffer, 2000). These emerging constructs served as a catalyst for critical reflection, meaning, and transformation. Additionally, Kiely’s study offered much-needed depth for explaining the unfamiliar via contextual border-crossings that revealed insights on the intensity, type, duration, and type of learning involved in dissonance.


All constructs serve as an overview of what is potentially needed to navigate the deep process of TL. Mezirow and associates’ (2000) constructs (noted in black) include disorienting dilemmas, an activating event that triggers dissonant tension, and existing assumptions and beliefs (frames of reference, meaning schemes, and perspectives). Frames of reference, according to Mezirow (1994), are “the structures of assumptions through which we understand experiences that shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings” (p. 5). Critical reflection focused on these frames of reference leads to an inquiry into new meaning and
Figure 4. Adapted schematic showing the integrated constructs and processes of TL theory.

knowledge and has the potential for the eventual adoption of new perspectives (i.e., perspective transformation). Brookfield’s (2005) four critical reflective lenses (noted in red) breaks down the analytic thought process into five important questions, including “what,” “why,” “what if,” “what is,” and “now what?” Kegan’s (2009) and Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2009b) construct of epistemological shifts (noted in green), Freire (1971, 1982, 1985) notion of praxis (noted in purple), and Kiely’s (2005) transformational S-L themes (noted in blue) provide the operationalized constructs of what may be happening as the S-LTAs move through disorienting, unfamiliar contexts through processing dissonant experiences and into critical transformative reflection and action.

Summary

The section began by introducing TL theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 1994; Mezirow & associates, 2000) as the foundational theory for conceptualizing this study. However, from the
literature reviewed, there appears to be a need for additional TL perspectives given the unique context of S-L (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Taylor et al., 2012). Therefore, an overview of salient TL perspectives from Brookfield’s (2005) critical pragmatist approach, Kegan’s (2009) and Baxter Magolda’s (1992, 2000, 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2009a, 2009b) constructive-developmental approach, and Freire (1971, 1982, 1985) social emancipatory approach have also been included. A blended transformational theoretical approach helps to inform the proposed research by providing clarity to map constructs and elaborate on the critical reflective process toward understanding the meaning that S-LTAs may attribute to their S-L experiences. A conceptual map was then presented that integrated the perspectives from the scholars to present a visual schematic of how the process may unfold.

S-L as a contextual, pedagogical, real-life conduit to TL invites individuals, educators, students, and community members to journey down a transformational path toward a more meaningful understanding of themselves, of others, and of their relationship to the world through expanded agency, awareness, and critical reflection (Brookfield, 2005; Jacoby, 2015; Kiely, 2005; Mitchell, 2008).

Problem Statement

There seems to be a growing trend indicating higher education’s embrace of a business model of organization (Saunders, 2010; Washburn, 2005). When education is treated as a transaction in the knowledge economy, the notion of education as a common and public good is subverted (Luke, 2005). More importantly, one of higher education's key purposes for education may be in jeopardy: developing the qualities of the mind that takes one into deep TL and engagement. Therefore, it is imperative to embrace pedagogical strategies that develop students with the qualities of mind to be critically reflective, independent thinkers and socially engaged.
agents for change (Brown, 2006; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2007; Malott, 2010; Saunders, 2010; Washburn, 2005). S-L is one of those strategies.

S-L combines an academic classroom experience and a community engagement component. As pedagogical strategy, it has the potential to restore meaningful educational outcomes, including calls for an engaged learning university for the 21st century (Hodge et al., 2009; AAC&U, 2007). The unique nature of S-L, according to Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999), provided a platform for “the accomplishment of tasks that meet genuine human needs in combination with conscious educational growth” (p. 6). In the typical S-L classroom reflective components to deepen thinking about the experiences of engagement in the community and to make connections between experiences and course content (Cress, Collier, Reitenauer, & Associates, 2005). Opportunities for critical reflection in an S-L class may include: blogs, class debriefing, journals, reflective papers, or portfolios. Critical reflection is needed to bridge academic theory in the classroom with real life experiences in the community. Also, as students engage the unfamiliar, through new community organizations and clients it begins to challenge their prior understandings and worldviews (Rockquemore & Harwell Schaffer, 2000). Examples of how students experience the unfamiliar may include serving in urban school settings as science tutors or in community health clinic where interpreters are needed or working in a shelter that serves the homeless and destitute. While much has been written on the assessment of S-L outcomes, reflective practices, and the potential transformational benefits, there is relatively little if any literature on how the unfamiliar catalyzes student’s meaning in the experience seems scant. Perhaps, it may simply be a battle of semantics where the unfamiliar can be subsumed under broader categories of dissonance. However, it will be intriguing and worthy to explore how S-LTAs experience the unfamiliar, process dissonant tension, and reflect on the meaning of
the S-L experience; educators and community partners are better prepared to design relevant pedagogical opportunities to promote deeper civic engagement, critical reflective inquiry, and TL.

Engaging with the unfamiliar is a necessary and important part of S-L. It places students in situations with people and community partners who may be very different from their more conventional life experiences (Jones & Abes, 2004). How they learn from experiencing the unfamiliar is the focus of this study as little is known about this phenomenon. It is important to understand how S-L, as a compelling heuristic tool, draws students out of their comfort zones to experience, explore, reflect, and engage with community partners and populations different from themselves.

S-LTAs are leaders in S-L: They initially engaged in S-L themselves and now help others to navigate and reflect upon experience when engaging in unfamiliar community settings. S-LTAs navigated entering and learning from the unfamiliar, and their work with current S-L students allows them opportunities to return to those early experiences and make further meaning of them. S-LTAs have been challenged to critically reflect on issues and problems that may be disorienting, ambiguous, ill-structured, or messy (Schon, 1983; Mezirow, 1991; Eyler, 2009). Experiencing the unfamiliar can create dissonance (Kiely, 2005) or a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991) when students are faced with problems, situations, and scenarios that challenge their understanding of the world as young adults with limited life experience. Critical reflection is one of the vital components needed to make sense of new experiences. When critical reflection is stimulated to make meaning of an experience, the potential for TL occurs (Aronson, 1997; Doerr, 2011; Elliot & Devine, 1994). Given that TL is a “learning process of making meaning of one’s experience” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 84), it is possible that the S-LTAs transformed
as they made meaning of the unfamiliar in their prior S-L experiences. S-L may create shifts in S-LTAs’ understandings of themselves and their community partners and may be deeply transformative. Therefore, this study’s intent is to give voice to the deeper collaborative exchanges of meaning making and explore the rich contextual insight of S-LTAs that has the power to reinforce pedagogical strategies to “transform lives, [and] to touch hearts as well as minds” (Kretchmar, 2001, p. 9).

Prior studies in S-L have utilized TL theory, including Kiely’s (2005) study from which a model was developed. However, scant attention has been given to how the meaning making process is initiated and sustained (Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, Ireland, Niehaus, & Skendall, 2012). Also, there is little research on exploring how S-LTAs experience the unfamiliar as it relates to the meaning making process. This study hopes to fill this gap by having S-LTAs tell their stories of experiencing the unfamiliar as the process of meaning making unfolded. By studying the process of meaning making as experienced by S-LTAs, an opportunity exists for educators, students, and community organizations to explore this avenue of learning for themselves as well as collaboratively with classmates and community partners alike. In *Pensees of Joubert*, French writer Joseph Joubert (1754-1824) wrote, “To teach is to learn twice” (as cited in Auster, 1983, p. 57). May we all continue to engage and learn from one another.

**Purpose Statement and Research Question**

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study is to explore how S-LTAs make meaning from experiencing the unfamiliar in their personal S-L experience at a private research university located in the Northeastern United States. One research question will guide this study: How do S-LTAs experience and process the unfamiliar to make meaning in their S-L experience?
Significance of the Study

Critical reflection on the S-L experience is often required in most S-L pedagogical approaches. Given the unknown or unfamiliar contexts, relations, events associated with most S-L (e.g., contextual border-crossings, engagement with community partners, dissonance, and the collective tensions), these experiences have the potential to create the substrate for critical reflection, meaning making, and TL within that experience and may have implications for deeper broader social inquiry (Jones & Abes, 2004; Kiely 2005).

This proposed study seeks to add to qualitative research discourse on TL and critical TL. By using an integrated TL lens to frame the proposed study, the hope is to make explicit the processing of both the unfamiliar and the meaning made individually and in a greater societal context through the S-L experience.

This study has the potential to add to the discourse and expand the understanding on how students, teachers, and community partners can develop deeper relational approaches for more meaningful learning experiences. S-L’s pedagogical strength lies in the argument for engaging in transformative approaches that challenge students to explore the unfamiliar, to process the dissonance through reflective discourse approaches begin to question existing assumptions, structural injustices, and to develop agency for social change. Also, teachers are challenged to become reflexive, to incorporate cognitive tools for discovery, and to facilitate questioning on structural, systemic societal issues in the classroom. Community partners, as co-creators of the learning experience, bring critical realism forward by providing the opportunity to test theory in real world settings. Administrators are challenged to expand learning experiences that may restore meaning to the human experience and serve broader societal good. Taken together, the experiential context of S-L infused with critical reflection (both rationally and extra-rationally)
creates a unique educational space where conscious educational growth can flourish individually, academically, experientially, and communally.

The results of this study have the potential to add to the literature on TL theory by moving it from theory to practice, from rhetoric to reality, from exposure to engagement, and from individual development into social engagement. The study may add to the current research on experiential learning by substantiating the transformative potential of S-L. By focusing on how S-LTAs experienced the unfamiliar, processed dissonance through critical reflection to create meaning, the potential for meaningful educational growth that may restore the qualities of mind (and heart) ideally sought in an engaged university.

Selecting an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach renders the researcher in parallel with the participant for understanding the meaning of learning experiences. As such, the research process unfolds this meaning with the participant not at the participant. The information from this study could be shared with Sage University—whose core tenets rely heavily on experiential education—to better improve programming, curriculum, pedagogy, and practice and to effect broader sociocultural change. By using an integrated TL lens to examine students’ reflective S-L experiences, the intended hope is to promote the potential for conscious educational growth with service-learners, to stimulate the critical scholarship needed to invoke change within partnering communities, and to sustain the notion of education for the public good.

The following section reviews the researcher’s intersection with both the context and participants for the study. This analysis allows for any biases to be explicated and bracketed ensuring the integrity of the research and for validating trustworthiness.
Positionality Statement

Positionality is one’s relationship to the context of the study and the participants. Every person comes into this world with the unique potential for being. Our experiences and our relationships contribute to our understanding of self over time. It becomes necessary to reflect historically on those individual experiences to determine what drives one to discover, question, and to challenge. Education, for me, always has been a location of refuge to explore the world (objectively), while at the same time allowing me to explore my place and purpose in the world (subjectively). The beauty of these reflexive moments demonstrates the need for deeply conscious introspection in a complex world. In these moments, we are neither subject nor object, but both. Resolved of this dualistic tension, we are then free to discover life. Education provides one of the many paths of discovery, and together with educators who give guidance, we are challenged to seek the truth that compels us to walk forward.

Seeking the truth, however, often implies critically questioning the world around us and developing an educational philosophy for doing so. Radical humanism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) best aligns with my walk toward that truth. This paradigm takes the subjectivist view and sees the social world from a “nominalist, anti-positivist, voluntarist, and idiographic view” with emphasis on “human consciousness and its release from domination by ideology” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 32). The current path of educational reform overvalues instrumental knowledge and economic rationalism. This path of knowledge acquisition minimizes critical inquiry as a means for seeking truth. Our commitment to education must involve an ethos of critically conscious engaged learning, thinking, and action. It must provide students with the tools and support necessary to embrace the unfamiliar, to challenge existing beliefs, and to transform the
world. However, this ideal must be bracketed by the student researcher allowing S-LTAs’
meaning making narratives to unfold without my own implicit bias on the study.

For this study, I am positioned outside of the S-L context, looking in. I have no affiliation
with the S-L program, other than meeting with the associate director for a consultation. The
rationale for choosing S-LTAs and the S-L context began with my personal reflection that higher
education becoming more of a transactional hire education. In other words, questioning the
notion of students as customers and heavily laden business approach to securing a credential as
an end rather than a means to an end.

S-L, as an engaged pedagogy with community partners, seemed to restore notions of
inquiry and reflection—critical imperatives that seemed necessary for understanding a complex
society. S-LTAs aligned within this context, potentially position themselves for experiencing the
unfamiliar, processing dissonant tension through reflection, and actively engaging in the
possibility for transformative change. S-LTAs will reflect on how that meaning was made as
their story unfolds. In doing so, they will be encouraged to examine reality objectively and to
determine the meaning of that reality as self-authors.

This study’s inception began with the observation of a dissonant tension prompted by
what appeared to be student distraction, lack of engagement, and questioning within educational
realms. By examining an unfamiliar context of S-L, the researcher realized the heuristic quality
of the construct and progressed through formulating the proposed study.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions are provided to ensure contextual understanding throughout the
study.
Agency is “a person’s ability to shape and his/her life by freeing the self from the oppression of power” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 42).

Conservative modernization is “a hegemonic bloc of social forces (neoliberalism, neoconservatism, authoritarian populist, religious fundamentalist, and professional managers) that collude to effect conservative changes in education” (Gildersleeve et al., 2010, p. 88).

Constructivism is “a collective of learning perspectives in which the common assumption is that “learning is the construction of meaning from experience” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 36).

Critical consciousness is “the process in which learners develop the ability to analyze, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural, and economic context that influence and shape their lives” (Dirkx, 1998, p. 3).

Critically conscious thinking is “an expanded notion of critical thinking that has the potential to transform effectively learning into critical engagement that improves the human condition” (Allan & Iverson, 2003, p. 51).

Critical reflection “involves the experience of questioning and then replacing or reframing an assumption unquestioningly accepted as representing dominant commonsense by a majority” (Brookfield, 2009, p. 298).

Critical service learning includes S-L experiences that challenge existing assumptions and beliefs and support the development of critical thinking and “questioning about predominant and hegemonic norms of which control defines, and limits access to knowledge and power” (Butin, 2010, p. 11). According to Pompa (2002), “becoming conscientious of and able to critique social systems, motivating participants to analyze what they experience, while inspiring them to take action and make change” (p. 75).
**Critical thinking** is “being able to identify and then challenge to change dominant ideologies hegemonically used to convince people this is the normal” (Brookfield, 2009, p. 298). In other words, critical reflection calls into question the power relationships that allow, or promote, one set of practices over others.

**Critical TL** is an integrated learning approach that challenges students to reflect critically on their learning experiences, to question existing social realities and to examine their existing assumptions beliefs and values that result in a transformative shift to new meaning perspectives and agency (Butin, 2010; Pompa, 2002).

**Disorienting dilemmas** are significant life events or an accumulation of experiences that triggers the process of self-reflection (Mezirow, 1978).

**Dissonance** “constitutes incongruence between participants’ prior frame of reference and aspects and the contextual factors that shape the S-L experience” (Kiely, 2005, p. 8). Also, Doerr (2011) defined dissonance as “a transformative experience students involved in S-L gain through confronting the complexity of the issue at hand” (p. 71).

**Distorted assumptions or premises** are thought patterns that lead the learner to view reality in a limiting way (Mezirow, 1991).

An **epistemological transformation** is “a shift to a more complex set of epistemological assumptions rather than the acquisition of particular learning strategies or skills” (Baxter Magolda, 2004b, p. 31)

**Experiential education** blends classroom theory with applied practice that “ignites students’ passion for learning, while opening up the endless possibilities around them” (Sage University vision statement, citation omitted to preserve confidentiality).
Habits of mind are “broad-based assumptions that act as a filter for our experiences, including moral consciousness, social norms, learning styles, philosophies, worldview” (Mezirow and associates, 2000, pp. 17-18).

Hegemony refers to the “combined use of force and consent to maintain an unequal system” (Malott, 2010, p. xviii). Brookfield (2009) defines hegemony as “a process whereby ideas, structures, and actions come to be normative, but when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo” (p. 301).

Ideology critique “describes the process by which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices” (Brookfield, 2009, p. 293).

Meaning structures (frames of reference) refer to “our structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions. Meaning structures have two dimensions: a habit of mind and resulting point of view” (Mezirow and associates, 2000, p. 17-18).

Meaning making is an approach to interpreting and understanding one’s experiences as a critical component of one’s learning (Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013).

Perspective transformation refers to how the meaning structures that adults have acquired over time become transformed (Mezirow, 1991).

Resulting point of view includes our points of view, attitudes, beliefs, and judgments (Mezirow & associates, 2000).

S-L combines service with community connections and academic applications, enhancing students’ academic growth and encouraging community awareness and social action skill development (Moore & Sandholtz, 1999).
S-LTAs are upperclassmen and are compensated to serve seven to 14 hours per week as a liaison between the S-L campus and community partners. They hold office hours, attend all assigned course sessions, introduce S-L to peers alongside a faculty member, cofacilitate reflection activities with a faculty member, and act as thought partners for faculty and community partners.

Self-authorship is the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, values, identity, and social relations (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009a; Kegan, 1994).

Social justice refers to the intentional steps that move society in the direction of equality, diversity, economic justice, participatory democracy, environmental harmony, and nonviolent conflict resolution (Lakey, Lakey, Napler, & Roibinson, 1995). Social justice is “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007, p. 1).

The unfamiliar refers to any context, situation, or event in the learning process that was unexpected, new, different, or surprised the learner and became a heuristic for further understanding.

TL is described as, “learning to negotiate and act on one’s purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). Additionally, Merriam and Bierema (2014) defined TL as “a learning process of making meaning of one’s experience” (p. 84).

Chapter Summary

This chapter concludes on two levels. The first, on a macro-level, the researcher began by laying out the argument on how education in the past 30 plus years became influenced by the political-economic vectors of neoliberalism. To discover how this agenda has played out in the
educational domain, it became compelling to explore how students make meaning within their educational contexts. Secondly, on a micro-level, by presenting an opening vignette on the observed distraction of technology it became clear that S-L as the chosen research setting, provided unique, unfamiliar challenges and learning relationships with community partners that intersected with theoretical concepts within academic classrooms. Discovering how S-LTAs negotiate the unfamiliar components of S-L and the meaning made through description, interpretation, and narration of that learning experience has the potential to provide S-L educators with essential information for guiding undergraduate students on their educational journeys in the traditional classroom and beyond.

The next chapter will discuss the review of the literature. The literature review will attempt to build on previous research to substantiate this study’s thesis by providing context and background on S-L and meaning making. The hope is that the literature review will provide the reader with enough understanding about the topic of study to establish a convincing case for why this study is necessary to answer the research question (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative IPA study was to explore how S-LTAs made meaning from experiencing the unfamiliar in their personal S-L experience at a private research university located in the northeast sector of the United States. One research question guided this study: How do S-LTAs experience and process the unfamiliar to make meaning in their S-L experience?

Introduction

The 1969 foundational definition mentioned in chapter one described S-L as “the accomplishment of tasks that meet genuine human needs in combination with conscious educational growth” (Stanton et al., 1999, p. 6, emphasis added). However, the overarching question becomes how one determines conscious educational growth. One avenue for answering this question may come from exploring S-Ls’ opportunities with the unfamiliar and through critical reflection how it may influence the meaning students’ make of their S-L experiences. The experiential nature of S-L seems to offer students the opportunity to explore the relationship between one’s personal epistemology and reality.

To delve further into the learning process of S-L, an understanding of the salient S-L research literature is needed. Notably, writing regarding how the unfamiliar may be a catalyst to dissonance and further critical reflection on the meaning of this experience and its potential to shift S-LTA s’ consciousness. Also, reviewing the literature informs the proposed study regarding the current thought about S-L, both as a pedagogical process and philosophy, as well as strengthening the advocacy argument for critically TL experiences in S-L.

Based on the primary research question, the following questions guided the review of relevant literature. They included the following:
What is the purpose and role of S-L in a contemporary higher education context?
What are the origins and current research on S-L?
How does the unfamiliar or the unknown settings in S-L invoke dissonance, critical reflection, meaning making, and foster potential TL that seems to inform students’ deeper epistemological relationships with S-L?

Collectively, these questions guided the literature search by defining the parameters for the student researcher.

**Organization and Scope of the Review**

The literature search provided a foundational understanding of what has been written theoretically and empirically about S-L, dissonance, critical reflection, and TL. This knowledge was essential to address the research question on how the notion of the unfamiliar, an inherent characteristic of S-L, serves to catalyze the process meaning making of that experience.

Northeastern University’s Scholar OneSearch, an integrated data search system, was used to locate and review the literature. These databases included PsychInfo, Sociological Collection, ERIC (EBSCOHost), Academic Search Premier, Premier Education Databases, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Education Research Complete, and JSTOR. A variety of filters, including the following, improved the search: full-text, peer-reviewed articles, dates after the year 2000, higher education, and college students.

Subject filters selected included several search queries. The keywords included critical consciousness, critical reflective learning, TL and higher education, S-L, meaning making in education, dissonance, research strategies in S-L, TL theory, academic epistemology, critical pedagogy, integrated learning theory, and developmental constructivism.
This study identified four streams from the review literature: contextualization, introspection, analysis, and introspection. *Contextualization* traced the historical tradition of S-L in higher education to its current interpretation in higher education contexts. *Introspection* discussed the role of reflection in S-L and couples it with meaning making for a deeper epistemic and critical notion of S-L. *Analysis* advocated for S-L as the conduit for meaning in TL and social change. This research stream addressed theoretical foundations and offered complementary and alternative perspectives for critical reflection and inquiry. The final stream, *application*, concluded with a discussion of critical consciousness, a salient ingredient for meaning and transformative change. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the potential pedagogical role that critical transformative S-L may play in contemporary higher education.

Within each stream of literature, four questions framed the inquiry. First, what was the historical evolution of the subject? Second, what were the terminology and theoretical foundations? Third, how has the issue been studied and who are the major scholars? Finally, how does this literature inform the study’s design?

A brief overview of S-L opens the next section. This summary followed by a discussion on the historical development of S-L, theoretical foundations, institutional interpretations, S-L challenges, and exemplars of S-L research. The section culminates with how this information provides a substantive background in the area of S-L. Contextualization will help the reader understand the historical evolution of S-L and will help the reader position the S-LTAs in this study.

**Contextualization: Experiential S-L**

S-L, as a form of experiential learning, is intended to bridge theory studied in academic classrooms with the application and practice of this theory in reciprocity with local community
organizations. This partnership between university and community, which may take a variety of forms, is uniquely designed to present the student with a context for applying classroom concepts while meeting a desired need for the community organization. The experiential partnership between classroom and community has historical positioning discussed in the next section.

**The Historical Foundation for Higher Education and S-L**

According to Jacoby (2015), S-L was grounded in American higher education’s long tradition of public purpose. This public purpose identified in the democratic mission of service and civic involvement was foundational in early colonial colleges, land grant institutions, and urban universities (Harkavy, 2004; Harkavy & Hartley, 2010).

**Early Beginnings.** Colonial colleges (1745-1775) were designed to provide elite males with education in the fields of law and religion. According to Pollack (1996), education in religion and law was essential for fulfilling their public service mission. During the next 100 years, higher education emerged in the mid to late 1800s, departing from the classical college model. This departure happened amid growing challenges of identity, purpose, direction, wars, financial exigencies, student “unruliness” and protests, denominational tension, and curriculum struggles. Land grant colleges and urban universities emerged along with a more progressive, utilitarian emphasis on education. Precursors of S-L as an emerging educational component began in earnest by the 19th and 20th centuries. Two movements that propelled the notion of service and learning were the Morrill Land Grant Movement which led to extension schools and the Settlement House Movement.

**Morrill Land Grant Movement (1862, 1890).** Government initiatives, namely the Morrill and Homestead Act, developed land grant colleges that focused on rural development and education. A direct outgrowth would be university extension schools which fused agricultural
science with the rural community. This focus became a perfect example of what university extension activists called an *applied science* definition of service.

**Settlement House Movement.** As part of the Progressive Era (1890-1920), the Settlement House Movement was the historical basis for recent university-community partnerships (Rabin, 2009). Typically, residents of the settlement house movement educated young men and women who wanted to develop a deeper understanding of poverty and the plight of the urban poor by living among them, getting to know them, and joining them in efforts to escape poverty (Bremner, 1988). Reformers such as Addams (the Hull House in Chicago) and Richman (the Educational Alliance in New York City) worked with urban immigrant populations newly settled in these cities. Rabin (2009) noted that the scholarship from the settlement house movement “emphasized engaging in the lived experience of the community” thus translated into having “a considerable influence on the way universities and other American institutions interact with the communities that surround them” (p. 49-51).

Dewey, as a young academician, was heavily influenced by the work of Addams and would later become a trustee of Hull House (Daynes & Longo, 2004). Addams and Dewey shared similar philosophical and educational traditions couched in experiential learning but translated them to different domains: Addams in service to the community and Dewey as a learning approach in academics. While S-L was not part of Dewey’s philosophy of education per se, Dewey’s educational philosophy (e.g., experience, inquiry and reflection) is undeniably foundational to a theory of knowing in S-L (Giles & Eyler, 1994b). Also, Dewey’s social-philosophic notions of community, citizenship, and democracy provided the theoretical substrate for an evolving framework for S-L. Dewey’s academic (e.g., educational and social) relevance to S-L will be discussed at length later in the study.
In summary, the historical research on the roots of S-L in both the extension programs of the land-grant institutions and the early settlement houses emphasized the relational importance between communities and academia. Also, these educational movements served to inspire educational theory (e.g., experiential learning, S-L, and TL) by situating learning in one’s lived experiences.

**The late 19th century and early 20th century.** The latter part of the 19th century reflected changing demographics in the United States. Growing populations in urban, rural, ethnic, indigenous, and marginal communities increased the need for understanding the lived experiences of these communities and necessitated the need for linking community service and learning. Sigmon (1999) outlined a variety of organizations from government, higher education, business, and religious groups that addressed this need. From higher education, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded on the principle of combining work, service, and learning in the communities. Appalachian folk schools evolved to become 2- and 4-year colleges with an emphasis on connecting work, service, and education. Religious organizations sent many missionaries abroad in service to others, while volunteer groups like the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) became prevalent, with service as their primary community focus. This time reflected the rise of prominent businesspeople (e.g. Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller) who created charitable foundations dedicated to advancing knowledge and human welfare through research on the root causes of need.

**Mid to late 20th century.** The next three decades brought an expansion of additional government initiatives, S-L fellowships, international experimental living, and youth service programs aimed at linking service and learning. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944
(the G.I. Bill) combined service and education by providing educational access to 1.1 million
government-issued personnel (G.I.s) who provided service to their country.

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s marked an escalation of S-L programs that called for
strengthening the link between service and learning. This link was necessitated by what was
characterized as “turbulent times in need of relevant humanism in education” (Stanton, 1987, p.
1). Several regional and governmental organizations, higher education initiatives, foundations,
and associations responded in a variety of ways to support S-L. Some of the more notable efforts
included government agencies like the Peace Corps, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA),
Urban Corps, and the White House Conference on Youth. Experiential learning with practice
settings introduced in the community and private colleges. The Ford Foundation provided
financial support to S-L initiatives through its many foundations and an increased visibility of S-
L conferences (e.g., Atlanta S-L Conferences, 1968, 1969). These programs reflected the call by
social activists and educators for relevance and social justice, founded on the premise “to join
communities and structure learning to provide leadership in communities and deeper relevance
for students” (Stanton, 1987, p. 1). The S-L philosophy projected the need for a socially relevant
presence on college campuses and for deeper engagement by students in the educational process.

S-L literature and practices (the 1980s and 1990s) became formalized through many
avenues, including legislation, journal articles on best practices and principles (e.g., Wingspread
Principles of Good Practice), international S-L, new directions in experiential learning, youth
opportunities in S-L, and Conrad and Hedin’s (1981) research touting the value of S-L.
Principles of good practice for combining service and learning such as the Wingspread principles
outlined what an efficient and sustained program would encompass. Porter-Honnet and Poulsen
(1989) articulated the following nine principles for best practices in S-L:
(a) engaging people in responsible actions for the public good; (b) providing structured opportunities for critical reflection on the service experience; (c) articulating clear service and learning goals for all involved; (d) matching service providers and service needs that recognizes change; (e) allowing for those in need to define those needs; (f) clarifying the responsibilities for each person and the organization involved; (g) expecting genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment; (h) including training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals; (i) ensuring the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate and in the best interest of all involved; and (j) committing to program participation by and with diverse populations. (p. 40)

Conrad and Hedin’s (1981) influential research review presented a rich history of experiential learning. This historical synopsis included Kirkpatrick’s (1918) project method, a process-oriented teaching method in which students developed independence, “responsibility, and practiced social and democratic modes of behavior.” Other programs mentioned Sigmon’s anthology include: the Citizen’s Education Project (1950) and more active, engaged educational programs in the 1970’s that include the emergence of urban semester programs and private colleges creating S-L programs. Additionally, a series of influential reports written on educational improvement from Boyer (1997) and Harrington (1987) (as cited in Schumer, 2005). While this research, according to Schumer (2005) noted, “only provisional support from quantitative, quasi-experimental and personal reports,” qualitative studies pointed out that S-L “had a wide range of plausible outcomes” (Schumer, 2005, p. 48). Eyler and Giles’s (1999) Comparing Models study, inspired by Conrad and Hedin’s (1981) research, focused on the value of S-L in higher education. This study gathered data from over 1500 students at 20 colleges and
universities and revealed much about student learning. The researchers’ major focus was concerned with the possible changes in critical thinking and problem solving; however, their findings revealed learning began with personal connection, and when combining service and academic study, learning was useful, developmental, and transforming.

There was also a broadening of opportunities for S-L (e.g., alternative spring break), and recognition by the Carnegie Foundation Unit on Service (1987). By the mid-1990s, there were designated S-L conferences in state regional, and national levels.

Most scholars, according to Jacoby (2015), marked modern S-L with the work of the National Society of Experiential Education (NSEE) in 1982. Other organizations followed this work, such as International Partnership for S-L, National Youth Leadership Council, Campus Outreach Opportunity League, and, most notably, the Campus Compact in 1985 (Sigmon, 1999). The Campus Compact formed by the presidents of three higher education institutions—Brown University, Georgetown University and Stanford University—and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) was organized to challenge higher education “to make civic and community engagement a priority” (Campus Compact, 1985, p. 2). This concern prompted a response to a media generated perception in the mid-1980s that most students pursuing higher education had become self-absorbed and obsessed with making money rather than becoming socially conscious and responsible citizens. College presidents, however, felt this perception was false and created the Campus Compact to set up and support opportunities for students to engaged with the community and renew the public purpose for higher education (Gearan, 2005). The Campus Compact grew from three institutions in 1985 to over 1100 in 2009 achieving institutional support and widespread success in community engagement efforts.
**Late 20th century to early 21st century.** The end of the 1990s and early 2000s emphasized the work of establishing campus S-L centers, as well as the push for integrating S-L into the curriculum, interdisciplinary studies, leadership programs, alternative spring breaks, and multicultural education (Jacoby, 2015). Colleges and universities hoped to broaden their scope to include social issues, local challenges, and more campus engagement. The emphasis on an engaged campus required colleges and universities to rethink both their public purpose and civic responsibilities. There was also a call for faculty research to include “scholarship of engagement” with the purview of the tripartite: research, teaching, and service (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2007; Boyer, 1997; Campus Compact, 2013). S-L centers in higher education became the conduit for engaging students, faculty, and communities in the symbiotic approach to learning from real world experiences.

Table 1 is a modified version of Sigmon’s (1999) S-L timeline from the 19th century to the 1990s. The purpose of this chart highlights five critical areas—government, higher and secondary education, business and philanthropy, education associations and religious groups, and intellectual markers—with S-L’s historical positioning. Putting the information in a matrix format provides the reader with a more concise rendering of time periods and intervening influences about how S-L evolved.

Early leaders in the field heavily influenced S-L’s emergence. Stanton et al.’s (1999) treatise of 34 pioneers in S-L emphasized the challenges these men and women had in bringing S-L to the attention of both government and educational administrators. Their efforts yielded the necessary funding and support to sustained S-L programs as well as bringing relevance, experience, and pragmatism to higher education.
# Table 1

The Evolution of S-L

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<td>Morrill Land Grant and Homestead Initiatives</td>
<td>HBCUs and universities established based on combining work, service, and learning</td>
<td>Wealthy families create foundations funding for many service and learning projects</td>
<td>Missionary work abroad</td>
<td>Intellectual foundations of service-based learning. (Dewey, James)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Education Movement – University of Cincinnati (1903)</td>
<td>Appalachian Folk Schools become 2- and 4-year colleges</td>
<td>Settlement Houses for the purpose of understanding the lived experiences of special populations</td>
<td>Voluntary associations with service focus (e.g., YWCA, YMCA)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Civilian Conservation Corps</td>
<td></td>
<td>Experiment in International Living (1932)</td>
<td>Lisle Fellowships (early 1930s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Work Projects Administration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>National Youth Administration</td>
<td>American Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (GI Bill)</td>
<td>Religious Denominations in youth service programs</td>
<td>Dewey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)</td>
<td>January terms with experiments linking learning and service</td>
<td></td>
<td>Atlanta S-L Conferences (1968,1969)</td>
<td>Civil rights movement strong; Vietnam War and protests</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>College work study (1965)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>White House fellowships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban Corps</td>
<td>Community colleges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

“S-L” phrase used to describe
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Area Health Education Centers (1972)</td>
<td>National Student Volunteer Program (later called National Center for S-L) (1979)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kettering Foundation Service for Development study (Pine, YEAR)</td>
<td>NCSL phased out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban semester programs emerge</td>
<td>National Center for Public Internships (1971)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private colleges create S-L programs</td>
<td>Society for Field Experience Education (1971)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conrad and Hedin (1981) research on value added to learning when service involved</td>
<td>Kolb work on experiential learning and theory evolving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conrad and Hedin (1981) research on value added to learning when service involved</td>
<td>Synergist: journal for service and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Above merge as National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE) (1978)</td>
<td>AEE PUBLISHES Experiential Education Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Association for Experiential Education (AEE) (1972)</td>
<td>CAEL becomes Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL) (1974)</td>
<td>NSIEE newsletter grows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NSIEE, AEE, CAEL and COOP ED conferences</td>
<td>Secondary school service and learning programs gain in numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Youth Service America (1986)</td>
<td>McNight works on dangers in service work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donald Schon on reflective practitioners: how professional are trained and then work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Note:** Adapted from Sigmon (1999) S-L timeline as cited in Stanton et al. (1999), pp. 250-257.

These biographical narratives revealed a rich tapestry of challenges, successes, and much debate regarding the ideological and pedagogical approaches to S-L. Challenges continue to exist to this day as debate continues among S-L professionals regarding definition, purpose, and goals, theoretical frameworks, and the positioning of S-L within colleges and universities.

Finally, understanding the position of S-L within an institution is contingent on the university's mission. Pollack (1996) demonstrated this by connecting types of educational institutions with their primary educational mission and how S-L is positioned within a variety of institutional levels and mandates (see Table 2).
Table 2

**Typology of Institutional Responses to Service**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Primary Educational Mission</th>
<th>Definition of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal arts college</td>
<td>Citizenship training for democracy; Character formation</td>
<td>Engaging with ideas; Training cities for types of public life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research university</td>
<td>Expanding the knowledge base</td>
<td>Applying knowledge to solve social problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional schools</td>
<td>Teaching applied concrete skills</td>
<td>Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community colleges</td>
<td>Providing access to nontraditional populations</td>
<td>Access to educational opportunities and employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Adapted from Pollack (1996).*

The research university sector is the proposed study’s area of focus. Typically, the research university educational mission is concerned with expanding the knowledge base; S-L in such institutions is a pedagogical process for applying theoretical knowledge to deconstruct and solve today’s societal challenges. This objective will be important for understanding the direction for S-L and the expected learning outcomes for service-learners in this study. The following section discusses the historical evolution of S-L’s terminology and associated competing theoretical traditions.

**Discussion of Terminology and Theoretical Traditions**

Early attempts to contextualize S-L was accomplished by coupling learning with community service work projects (e.g., Morrill Land Grant and Homestead Initiatives, Work Projects Administration, Settlement Houses). In 1966, Sigmon and Ramsey coined the term S-L from their work at the Southern Regional Education Board (cited in Stanton et al., 1999). This work was a tributary development project in Oak Ridge, Tennessee (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010; Sigmon, 1999; Stanton et al., 1999). In 1969, a foundational definition described S-L as “the
accomplishment of tasks that meet genuine human needs in combination with conscious educational growth” (Stanton et al., 1999, p. 6, emphasis added).

Multiple definitions and interpretations exist for S-L. Kendall’s (1990) review of the S-L literature revealed 147 different terms and definitions related to S-L, resulting in their conclusion that S-L is an educational practice and a philosophy. Also, Kendall (1990) noted the many descriptions of S-L which included civic awareness, collaborative learning, community-based education, cooperative education, internships, and school-based youth involvement. Stanton (1987) saw S-L as a teaching practice that they considered “an approach to experiential learning” as well as a philosophy (p. 4). Stanton (1987) considered S-L as an “expression of values (i.e., service, community development and empowerment, and reciprocal learning) determining purpose, nature and the process of social and educational exchange” (p. 4).

The theoretical foundation for S-L is housed in experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory (ELT) was developed by Kolb (1984) to integrate the scholarship of prominent 20th-century scholars who believed that experience was central to human learning and development. Learning within this paradigm became student-centered. Many experiential learning researchers influenced Kolb, including James (radical empiricism), Dewey (experiential education), Lewin (action research), Piaget (constructivism), Rogers (self-actualization through the process of experiencing), Vygotsky (proximal zone of development), Jung (development from specialization to integration), and Freire (naming experience in dialogue) (Kolb & Kolb, 2012). The educational theories of individual scholars are beyond the purview of this study, but what can be synthesized, according to Kolb (1984), are six propositions commonly shared by the theorists above: learning is a process; all learning is re-learning; learning requires resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world (reflection/action,
feeling/thinking, experience/abstraction); learning is a holistic process of adaptation; learning results from synergistic transactions between the person and the environment; and learning is a process of creating knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2012, p. 1216). What these propositions seem to indicate is that learning takes time, learning is a dynamic process, divergence needs resolution, learning requires a wide perspective, learning is a relationship between the self and context, and finally the opportunities for knowledge creation exist in the learning process. What has transpired from these constructs is that ELT defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41).

Cress et al. (2005) explored the variety of experiential learning applications. S-L, as one form of experiential learning, seems to share commonalities with other experiential learning applications (e.g., student engagement, community service activities, and, in some cases, classroom integration). The subtle distinctions between the applications include the extent of the emphasis on service and learning, who benefits from this experience, the inclusion of reflection, and most importantly, opportunities for reflection. Experiential learning applications from Cress et al. (2005) included the following:

- **Volunteerism**: Students engage in activities where the emphasis is on service for the sake of the beneficiary or recipient.
- **Internship**: Students engage in activities to enhance their own vocational or career development.
- **Practicum**: Students work in a disciplined-based venue in place of an in-class course experience.
- **Community service**: Students engage in activities to meet actual community needs as an integrated aspect of the curriculum.
• Community-based learning: Students engage in actively addressing mutually defined community needs (i.e., a collaboration between community partners, faculty, and students) as a vehicle for achieving academic goals and course objectives.

• S-L: Students engaged in community service activities with intentional academic and learning goals and opportunities for reflection that connects to their academic disciplines.

(p. 7)

Figure 5 illustrates Furco’s (1996) distinctive service programs of along an experiential learning continuum as “determined by its primary intended beneficiary and its overall balance between service and learning” (p. 3). Practicum was added to field education to reflect the current lexicon used in experiential learning programs.

Recipient ←---------------------------Beneficiary-------------------------------→Provider

Service ←---------------------------Focus-------------------------------→ Learning

Figure 5. Distinction among service programs. Adapted from “Service Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education” by A. Furco in Expanding boundaries: Service and learning (J. Raybuck, Ed.), 1996 (p. 3).

As a more intentional academic focus emerged, understanding the nexus of student-community engagement with rigorous academic experience reshaped the definition of S-L. The Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform (1993) noted, “By placing curricular concepts in the context of real-life situations, it empowers students to analyze, evaluate, and
synthesize the concepts through practical problem-solving, often in service to the community” (p. 3). The learning experience thus became more symbiotic, reciprocal, and relevant for all stakeholders.

Developing definitions of S-L reflected an accommodation of current educational needs. Jacoby (2015) shifted her own definition of S-L from addressing opportunities to prepare civically active citizens in the late 1990s to a more engaged activity approach to address human and community needs in the early decades of the 21st century. In 1996, Jacoby tied S-L theory to practice by positioning classroom and community together in one context, connecting students with real life experiences, and offering students opportunities to prepare and become civically active citizens (Jacoby, 1996; Stanton et al., 1999). Jacoby (2015) defined S-L as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes” (p. 2). Understanding how these definitions emerged prompted further inquiry into the theoretical origins of experiential learning, and, more specifically, S-L. The next section provides an overview of experiential learning as the theoretical foundation for S-L.

**Seminal experiential learning theorists.** The reflective and experiential traditions of Dewey (1916, 1933, 1938) and later experiential theoretical frameworks of Kolb (1984) provided essential philosophical constructs for developing experiential learning theory and for the subsequent pedagogical development of S-L (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Dewey was a pragmatic educational philosopher, whose influence spanned for more than a century. He suggested experience is essential to bridge between theory and practice and, thus, meets the needs of the individual learner and for society (Giles & Eyler, 1994b). Dewey’s (1916) notion of education “meeting the needs of the individual learner and society” suggested that education needed to
become progressive, critically reflective, and experiential if learning was to engage the populace in a democracy civically (p. 217). To move the education from passive acceptance of knowledge to active inquiry based on experience, Dewey’s (1938) theoretical insight suggested that learning should be interactive and constructive between the learner and their environment. This notion dismantled the dualisms of knowledge/action and individual/society by reconciling the learning relationship through Dewey’s (1916, 1933) experiential theory and principles of civic participation in a democracy. Thus, Dewey’s (1916, 1933, 1938) ELT provided the necessary pragmatism in that it not only included a vision that education can change society but also provided the pedagogical foundation for developing S-L practices required for that change. Finally, Dewey’s (1933) concern for the quality of the experience identified by four essential conditions for maximizing the educative potential of an experience. These four basic requirements include (a) generating interest in the learner, (b) being intrinsically worthwhile to the student, (c) presenting problems that awaken new curiosity and create a demand for information, and (d) covering a considerable time span to foster development over time (Dewey, 1933, p. 217). As Dewey laid the foundational constructs for experiential learning, Kolb delved deeply into the reflective components of the learning experience.

Kolb’s theory of experiential learning (1984) utilized a constructivist approach to S-L. The core idea employed in a constructivist approach in that learners actively construct their understandings. Kolb’s theory facilitates this understanding by framing constructs of service learning into reflective questions of what, so what, and now what. Kolb (1984) considered learning a process in which knowledge was created through the transformation of experience. This insight led to the development of Kolb’s (1984) model that consisted of four elements: a concrete experience, observation and reflection on that experience, formation and synthesis of
abstract concepts based on reflection, and active experimentation that tests the concepts in new situations. This model is cyclical, rather than linear, as an individual may enter at any point. However, with S-L, the concrete experience predominantly initiates the learning. The educational process continues as one critically reflects on this experience and begins to apply and test their understanding of the academic content. The reflective questions when asked, epistemologically challenges the learner to explore with deeper interpretation, reflection, and meaning. As a student-centered model, Kolb’s learning cycle accounts for a variety of individual learning styles by which students develop and integrate their skills.

Both Dewey and Kolb’s theories of learning remain foundational for experiential learning and the application of S-L, particularly, on how reflection may be used in S-L contexts. However, as S-L matured, innovative approaches to S-L emerged as well. Learning theorists began to understand S-L’s potential for engaging in more expansive learning paradigms and contexts. Pedagogical approaches from the post-structural, critically-pragmatic, and integrated holistic perspectives soon followed. Moore’s (1990) post-structural approach is one example that would call for “critical pedagogy to investigate social institutions, power relations, and value commitments” (p. 281). Moore (1990) argued that meaning is not fixed and suggests experiential approaches that offer ways for students to “examine…histories, power arrangements, and values underlying work (learning contexts) where shifting systems of meaning are present” (p. 280). The following section discusses research from S-L settings.

**S-L in review.** The following research reflects varied contexts, research traditions, learning pedagogies, and dialogue regarding how S-L is utilized to bring undergraduate students into a deeper epistemic and engaged approach to learning. Also, this section reviews the contemporary institutional challenges when positioning S-L in academia.
Intolubbe-Chmil, Swap, and Spreen (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of United States higher education consortium partners and South African institutions that utilized study abroad learning experiences (a form of experiential learning) to create TL. They found when students’ frames of reference shifted through critical reflection; both habits of mind and points of view (perspective transformation), emerged as essential components of TL. Undergraduate participants articulated dissonance in their thinking, expressed the value of learning outside the classroom, and began to formulate meaning. Similarly, Webster and Arends (2012) utilized a single case study in an international S-L context to demonstrate how critical reflection led to student transformation and decisive action. The research suggested that by challenging existing frames of reference through critical reflection enabled students to reach higher epistemological development, personally, socially, and contextually.

A more self-reflexive approach taken by Carrington and Selva’s (2010) study looked at pre-service teachers engaged in S-L as a pedagogical process. Informed by critical social theory (CST) and Butin’s (2005) four conceptual lenses (technical, cultural, political, and postmodern/poststructuralist), the study analyzed the students’ reflection logs. The findings included evidence of TL, on how students critiqued issues, and how to engage in their teaching roles to create a better world. This research informed this proposed study by expanding the notion of critical reflection to include integrated elements of emotion, identity, and power.

The social justice implications of S-L were brought out in a more contextual and nuanced way in Wang and Rodgers’ (2006) empirical research which utilized the measure of epistemology reflection (MER) instrument. A sample of 72 students from six S-L courses (three social-justice orientations and three non-social-justice orientations) was used to explore the impact of S-L and social justice educations on cognitive development. The results indicated that
S-L courses had a positive impact, and specifically, S-L courses with a social justice emphasis had more of an impact on the cognitive development than those without the social justice focus.

Similar research from Jones et al. (2012) used a multi-case study approach to investigate student experiences in an immersion program. Interviews and observations of thirty-seven students were used to discover how the context stimulated both the students’ learning and their ability to make meaning in transformational ways (new understanding of social issues of privilege, stereotypes, and reframing experiences). The findings supported the significance of context in contributing to initiating learning and meaning for engaged students.

Grant’s (2012) research argued for deeper S-L outcomes. Believing that education should cultivate flourishing lives and involve “a robust social justice vision that includes self-assessment, critical questioning, practicing democracy, social action, and criteria for adjudication” (p. 910). The social justice vision and contextual considerations from this research informed this study by indicating how S-L can be framed to challenge or at the very least, serve to initiate a need for students to utilize a critically conscious approach for examining their learning within social contexts. When this type of application occurs, both an opportunity and a platform exists for meaning to be extracted through a critical TL lens within S-L settings.

Collectively, the research suggested that S-L brought both a pedagogical fluidity and relevance to the learning community. Also, the S-L experience seemed to provide students with cognitive tools for inquiry and encouraged students to challenge themselves and others to higher epistemological dimensions.

The next section explores the discourse surrounding S-L’s identity as well questioning where the academic “home” should be for S-L.

A community engagement approach initially prompted by Rhoads (1997) and later by Butin (2010) redefined S-L. Butin (2010) defined S-L as “an active pedagogy with community engagement component set within loosely interrelated practices and theories linking classrooms with communities and theory with practice to improve academic achievement, enhance cultural competence, and foster a more inclusive and just world” (p. xiv). However, as the complexity of the world intensifies and economic demands on higher education increase, experiential learning of all kinds have come under intense scrutiny. Barber (2012) outlined six conditions—neoliberalism and privatization, new digital technology, multiculturalism, political polarization, widening inequality, and global interdependence—suggesting civic learning continues to fight for legitimacy in an increasingly corporatized atmosphere of higher education.

Challenges for the future. Philosophical tension exists within S-L according to some educational theorists (Butin, 2010; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). S-L is at a methodological crossroads, prompting calls for more rigorous approaches to investigate the topic (Ziegert & McGoldrick, 2004). Amid the plurality of definitions and roles, critiques of S-L emerged (Jacoby, 1996; Kendall, 1990; Wade, 1997). Rhoads (1997) called for critical consciousness in community S-L that embraced engaged learning for both teachers and students, thus opening the door for considering additional critical S-L approaches that included those from a Freirean perspective (Rosenberger, 2000; Schon, 1995). This perspective served to broaden S-L’s
approach as characterized by “a more radical engagement beyond standard outreach models and served to stimulate scholarship that appreciated the ‘community’ as a source of knowledge production” (Rhoads, 1997, p. 125). Engagement with the community thus promoted more efficient social intervention for urban development, emphasized a more equitable partnering with universities, and allowed the organization to rediscover civic and social responsibilities associated with progressive traditions.

Ideological tensions exist in the literature regarding what S-L can and should be in the context of higher education (Butin 2010; Kezar and Rhoads, 2001). Some would call for a more critical approach for S-L that presents a framework for unpacking power, knowledge, identity, and for imparting meaning (Braa & Callero, 2006; Breunig, 2005; Kapitulik, Kelly, & Clawson, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Rosenberger, 2000).

**Critical S-L.** Mitchell (2008) reviewed the S-L literature to distinguish critical S-L pedagogy from traditional S-L approaches. According to Mitchell (2008), the most referenced elements of critical S-L included a social change orientation, work to redistribute power, and the development of authentic relationships. Unlike traditional S-L approaches, critical approaches strive to understand the nature of contexts where asymmetries in authority exist. Rosenberger (2000) and Rhoads (1997) suggested that critical S-L serves emancipatory interests as students begin to question different notions of power, investigate assumptions and values, and reflect on their agency for change. This shifts the conversation of oppression from individual accountability to systemic societal and institutional structures simply by carving out the critical educational space needed to question dominant narratives in social discourse (Ratkovic, Tilley, & Teeuwsen, 2010).
The next section discusses the many roles that S-L occupies in contemporary educational settings.

**Metaphors of S-L**

The rapid and pervasive growth of S-L inherently led to varied interpretations of what constitutes S-L. Butin (2010) characterized the S-L movement as an amalgam of experiential education, action research, critical theory, progressive education, adult education, social justice education, constructivism, community-based research, multi-cultural education, and undergraduate research… and as a form of community service, a pedagogical methodology, a strategy for cultural competence and awareness, as a social justice orientation, and as a philosophical worldview. (p. 41)

On the surface, Butin’s (2010) description of S-L would appear as an array of fragmented theoretical foundations, pedagogical methods (both academic and community) and interpretative goals and purposes. However, upon closer examination, S-L's apparent fluidity presents a flexible learning opportunity and context for students to develop authentic, complex epistemologies.

Given the varied influences on S-L development, both external (e.g., government, educational associations, foundations) and internal (e.g., theoretical underpinnings, historical positioning, philosophical orientation), metaphorical interpretations abound for what S-L should be. The following includes some of the most frequent S-L outcomes discussed among S-L educators.

**Civic engagement.** S-L’s preeminent role three decades ago was “to reassert the public mission of higher education” through educating the next generation of active citizens (Butin,
Sustained in part by the Campus Compact, a national coalition of college presidents, S-L grew to over 1100 institutions (Campus Compact, 2013).

**Social agency.** Methodologically, some ideal goals ascribed to S-L are community collaboration, reflective learning, active (experiential) learning, a sense of caring (empathy), civic responsibility, and social change (O’Grady, 2000). To accomplish these ideal goals of S-L, enhanced skills of contextual critical reflection and collaboration are necessary to produce theoretical results of increased motivations for engaged learning, civic consciousness, and greater social agency. However, research supporting how well S-L meets these goals remains scarce. In fact, if critical theorists are correct, civic and critical consciousness may become non-existent, as current neoliberal discourse dominates educational policy. Seemingly, a system embedding individual rights in the context of competition by adapting market solutions to any social challenges that may befall our society.

**TL.** Because many S-L practices require intentional critical reflection, they elicit a struggle in feelings, beliefs, and worldviews. Because of this, they expand moral tensions (Scott, 2012). S-L settings facilitating deep, embedded, and integrative learning can be transformational in collaborative learning communities (Mahoney & Schamber, 2011).

For TL to occur, a hermeneutic shift, turn, or dissonance occurs about one’s relationship with knowledge, context, and reality. Much of Mezirow and associates’ (2000) seminal research on TL relied heavily on critical reflection for personal transformation. Others would argue that relying exclusively on a critical-reflective lens and negating context does not capture the holistic nature of transformative S-L (Brookfield, 2005; Fenwick, 2003; O’Sullivan, 1999; Taylor & Cranston, 2008). These authors suggested that by simply focusing on personal transformation
without a contextual reference may negate the critical, holistic, and ontological nature of TL processes that include: social, emotional, contextual, ideological, identity, or power perspectives.

**Summary**

The research from this section suggested that S-L can be interpreted and implemented in a variety of ways in educational institutions. As S-L matured, theorists with emerging theoretical and pedagogical frameworks debated the very definition, purpose, and efficacy of S-L. By reviewing S-L’s theoretical foundations, this study created a deeper understanding of how S-L evolved, what it is, and what it can be.

The following section discusses the literature on reflection. It begins with thoughts on the purpose and theoretical understandings of reflection in S-L. This is followed by a discussion on how reflection and meaning making may converge in S-L to influence one’s personal epistemology. The section concludes with how critical reflection informed this study.

**Introspection: Theory to Practice: Reflection’s Role in S-L**

*One can do service, one can learn, but reflection is the process through which service and learning can become transformative.*

(Jacoby, 2015, p. 50)

Reflection is the very bridge that connects what is learned in the classroom (theory) to the reality of everyday lived experiences (reality). There are many modes of reflection (e.g., writing, group discussion, journaling, narratives) and the quality of reflection depends on the framing of reflection within the learning experience. Personal reflection remains an essential, yet complex process in the S-L environment.

Moon (2004) suggested that Perry’s (1970) work considering “each student’s epistemological position provides a frame of reference for the manner in which the student interprets (and reflects on) meaning” (p. 34, emphasis added). The following section discusses
the terminology and theoretical understanding of reflection in learning in general, and then moves into the role that reflection plays in S-L. The section concludes with a discussion on how critical reflection informed this study.

Discussion of Terminology and Theoretical Understanding

The terms reflection and reflective learning are used interchangeably in much of the literature. In addition, various disciplines use the term reflection in a variety of ways. There seems to be a strong developmental link between stages of knowing (epistemological development) and reflective capacity in an individual’s learning process. This may influence how a student would reflect on and filter meaning through a contextual learning experience as well as the emergence of one’s voice to articulate that meaning. How reflection is defined is an important indicator of how one may utilize reflection in learning. Some of the more notable definitions include Dewey (1916), Schon (1983), Rogers (2001), and Boud, Keough, and Walker (1985).

Dewey (1916) described reflective thought as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6). From a more pragmatic perspective of a practitioner, Schon (1983) saw reflection as a “continual interweaving of thinking and doing” (p. 281) and a reflective practitioner as one who “reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in [one’s] action, which [one] surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action” (p. 50). The nexus of understanding and experience is primary to reflection (Rogers, 2001). Rogers noted reflection allows the learner to “integrate the understanding gained into one’s experience to enable better choices or actions in the future as well as to enhance one’s
overall effectiveness” (p. 41). Boud et al. (1985) saw reflective activity in more pragmatic terms, where individuals engage in experiences that lead to new understandings.

Reflection is not a simple request that a teacher can make of students. Understanding that student reflection needs to be structured and supported, Ash and Clayton (2004) contended that students “need help with connecting their experiences to course material, with challenging their beliefs and assumptions and with deepening their learning” (p. 138).

Many theoretical approaches were used to encourage reflection and influence how one approaches, understands, and utilizes knowledge. Dewey (1938), Kolb (1984), and Eyler and Giles (1999) utilized a rationalist approach to reflection. Ash and Clayton (2004) embraced a more integrated reflection model that combined articulated learning guidelines (based on Bloom’s taxonomy) and critical thinking standards (Paul, 1993). The use of these models, according to Ash and Clayton (2004), “seems to push students beyond superficial interpretation and facilitates academic mastery, personal growth, civic engagement, critical thinking, and a meaningful demonstration of learning” (p. 139).

Moon (2004) built on the reflection literature with four studies from Perry (1970), Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), King and Kitchener (1994), and the collective work of Baxter Magolda, (1992, 1999). Perry’s (1970) work from 1960s and 1970s focused on how students view knowledge in three developmental stages: basic dualism, position of multiplicity, and relativism. Each stage builds on the understanding of how students perceive knowledge. It starts with the passive acceptance stage of polarities in basic dualism, moves through the recognition of multiple perspectives and a sense of having one’s own opinion, and concludes with the realization that knowledge is relative to context and is constructed with the understanding that opinion must be validated with evidentiary facts.
Five epistemological perspectives emerged from Belenky et al.’s (1986) work. Working exclusively with women, this study revealed the following stages: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. Silence was indicative of the notion of having no voice, that authority dictated one’s perceptive reality. The perspective of received knowledge indicated a competency of receiving ideas but not a capability of creating their own ideas, similar to passive acceptance of knowledge. Subjective knowledge was revealed as understanding that truth is both personal and private and intuitively known. This seems to be a more implicit understanding of knowledge that is held “close to the cuff.” Procedural knowledge indicated that the participants understood that by using objective procedures to obtain knowledge, they would be able to communicate that knowledge. In essence, the participants found their external voice from this perspective. Finally, the process culminated in the point of view of constructed knowledge. Participants realized the relationship of knowledge to its content, understood themselves as creators of knowledge, and recognized the value of both subjective and objective ontologies.

The work of King and Kitchener (1994) lends insight into what is known about reflective judgment particularly in ethical issues. These issues, characterized as “ill-structured problems,” are indicative of not having right or wrong answers, analyses, evaluation, or argument (p. 38). The seven stages of reflective judgment are aggregated into three phases: pre-reflective thinking (stages 1, 2, 3), quasi-reflective thinking (4, 5), and reflective judgment (6, 7). The pre-reflective thinking phase is observed in young children’s understanding that authority carries the truth and that it must be learned. The quasi-reflective thinking phase reveals that people understand problems to be ill-structured. Although they remain uncertain with some knowledge is uncertain, they will assert their right to opinion. In addition, when utilizing different frames of reference,
one would adjust supportive evidence accordingly. The final phase of *reflective judgment*, they understand that knowledge is constructed and related to context. Intelligence is nuanced revealing a skilled and sensitive ability to work with complexity, to utilize imagination proportionately, the understanding that people learn from experience, and the way reason influences our decisions and responses to the situation. This final phase makes a compelling case for reflection in S-L, as students are confronted with a variety of frames of reference, learn from experience, and become more self-reflexive and nuanced in their reasoning processes.

One hundred college students were studied over a 5-year period in Baxter Magolda’s (1992-1996) work. The nature of this longitudinal study provided confirmation for four domains of knowledge conception. These stages include absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing, and contextual knowing. According to Baxter Magolda, *absolute knowing* is when one simply absorbs the knowledge by experts, like the banking notion of Freire (1973). In *transitional knowing*, the second domain, they begin to question the certainty (integrity or rigor) of knowledge. The domain may also manifest in what is described as *partial certainty*, *partial uncertainty*, as congruence is beginning to be questioned by learners. The third domain, *independent knowing*, is when uncertainty is fully recognized and the understanding that each person has her or his beliefs, opinions, assumptions, and values. *Contextual knowing*, like Perry’s (1970) relativism and King and Kitchener’s (1994) *reflective judgment*, advances the understanding that knowledge is constructed and deployed based on the contextual fit of the evidence. The literature reveals that as learners become progressively metacognitive with their understanding of knowledge construction, reflection becomes more of an internal experience that will consciously or unconsciously manifest contextually through an individual’s voice. The
beauty of this is the ability to be fluid about learning contingent on how the knowledge is perceived.

Finally, Saljo’s (1979) work confirmed that subjects do indeed display different conceptions about and approaches to learning (i.e., an individual’s relationship to knowledge) contingent on one’s knowledge perspective. In other words, if knowledge is considered to be absolute, then a student may employ memorization to reproduce the knowledge; however, if knowledge deemed contextually constructed, more sophisticated learning processes (e.g., assimilation, accommodation) are utilized to approach the learning and construe knowledge.

Beyond the learning approach, the question remains how students translate knowledge drawn from the unfamiliar into meaning to produce transformative shifts in understanding. Additional factors must also be considered to move learning to a more engaged state (Moon, 2004). Such factors include: emotional insight (Entwistle & Entwistle, 1997; Felton, Gilchrist, & Darby, 2006), the learning environment, and the depth of reflective learning. In addition, how a student chooses to reflect and engage the learning process may be a matter of intent (Rogers, 2001). Intent in this context is defined relative to the depth in which a student consciously decides to engage and invest in the learning context. The deeper the intent, may suggest that the learning experience holds meaning for that individual.

Exploring how undergraduate students manifest meaning in S-L seems to indicate that service-learners must consider a variety of conditions. These conditions would consider understanding one’s learning approach, epistemological readiness, the authenticity of intent, mindfulness of the community’s needs, and an awareness of mutual respect and reciprocity with the process. These conditions underlie the nature of one’s epistemological reflective process and consequently may determine one’s epistemological relationship with learning. This
understanding aligns with Freire’s (1973) notion of an epistemological relationship with reality as one intentionally frames their relationship and approach to learning and reality. S-L provides that unique opportunity to move beyond what is comfortable passive reception of knowledge into the direct experience of reflecting on one’s relationship with learning and with reality.

The following section explores, in deeper detail, the experience of the unfamiliar, the role of dissonance, and the reflection on meaning in S-L contexts. A discussion of the interdependence of the unfamiliar, dissonance, and reflection and the implication for meaning making. The discussion continues with the suggestion that critical reflection is a decidedly more nuanced approach that challenges existing beliefs, values, and assumptions. The section concludes by reviewing how experiences with unfamiliar may prompt dissonance and reflection to further inform the proposed research study.

**The Role of Unfamiliar Contexts, Dissonance, and Reflection in S-L**

S-L experiences present a unique learning environment for service-learners to explore complexities intersecting both academic theory and real-lived experiences. As these complexities are explored, the service-learner is placed able to reconsider previously held notions within oneself and the context of the community served. Service-learners are challenged to explore learning outside of the traditional classrooms, with new environments, and engage in interactions with new people. These contexts may evoke some uncertainty, uncomfortableness, and even fear as they begin to move outside of their comfort zones. These uncertain tensions are what some would call, disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991) dissonance (Kiely, 2005), or shock (Rockquemore & Harwell Schaffer, 2000). These tensions seem to promote critical reflection on the meaning of the experience.
The Unfamiliar (Uncertainty, Ambiguity, Unknown)

Empirical research on the unfamiliar or uncertainty in the S-L process and the notion of dissonance has revealed interesting findings. Naude (2015), with five cohorts of postgraduate psychology students (n = 72) from 2006-2010, sought to “describe the meaning students attributed to transformative experiences during their S-L course” (p. 89). Information from individual reflection reports, field observations, and focus groups corroborated the findings. Informed by Kiely’s (2005) transformative model for S-L, it became apparent to Naude that change occurred in iterative cycles, metaphorically described as a “spiral staircase” (Tatum et al., 2003, p. 91). The service-learners from this study experienced dissonance from the unfamiliar that included contextual boundary crossings (e.g., new community culture, new roles, and responsibilities). Balancing these tensions was achieved through two processes, assimilation, and accommodation (Naude, 2015). Assimilation, according to Naude (2015), was characterized as a “deeper or fuller understanding of pre-existing knowledge and realities,” whereas accommodation included “a more active phase of searching for new and more encompassing schemas and answers” (p. 93). The study revealed that dissonance facilitated iterative, TL cycles that led to “more complex cognitive processes, more sophisticated perspectives of self and society, deepened emotional realizations, and a recommitment to act as and be socially responsible citizens” (Naude 2015, p. 84). Rockquemore and Harwell Schaffer’s (2000) study analyzed the reflective journals of 120 undergraduate students enrolled in S-L courses. They also administered a pre- and post-service questionnaire to gauge student attitudes at two points in time. Concerned with the question “how do students learn while they are engaged in S-L?” Rockquemore and Harwell Schaffer (2000) concluded that students experienced three phases of development: shock, normalization, and engagement (p. 16). The shock stage was entered
because of the cognitive dissonance experienced as students “interacted with people and situations very different from their own” (p. 20). Normalization moved the reflection from description to a deeper understanding of their community experience and the connection to the class content. This experience challenged the students to reflect on the deeper social issues of the community and personalized and humanized their interactions with the community. The engagement stage brought the learning experience into the full, cognitive circle. This stage according to Rockquemore and Harwell Schaffer (2000), which includes the reflection from the course content and community experience, “challenges students to questions their assumptions, reframe their perspectives, and determine their behavior for the future” (p. 21). The role of dissonance in this study provided a jolt to initiate a journey toward “cognitive openness” (p. 17). The final research study reviewed was from Giles (2014). This study spoke to the alienating influence of dissonance in learning. Specifically calling into question, under what conditions do experiences of dissonance facilitate or interfere with learning and why some disorienting dilemmas trigger transformation and other do not (Giles, 2014).

**Dissonance.** The literature reflects the use of dissonance and cognitive dissonance interchangeably as well as many varied perspectives on its definition (Aronson, 1997; Elliot & Devine, 1994; Festinger, 1957; Morton & Campbell; 2007). The foundation of cognitive dissonance can be traced to the work of Festinger (1957). Festinger’s (1957) stated, “An individual strives toward consistency within oneself where his or her beliefs are consistent with his or her actions” (p. 2). Festinger (1957) would replace the words consistency with *consonance* and inconsistency with *dissonance* (p. 2). His theory is driven by two hypotheses that explain a person’s motivation to reduce dissonance. According to Elliot and Devine (1994), cognitive dissonance is “an arousal of one’s beliefs that lead to motivation for an attitude change process”
Aronson (1997) saw cognitive dissonance as “sense-making of beliefs, environments, and behavior to lead lives that are reasonable, sensible, and meaningful” (p.129). Morton and Campbell (2007) saw cognitive dissonance as “the temporary gap that exists between what we already know and a contradictory experience or piece of evidence” (p. 12). It is this critical moment that drives the service-learner to question previously held beliefs and views of the world. It is this integral moment of engaging dissonance through the critical reflection in S-L that ushers in personal and social transformation (Doerr, 2011).

**Reflection.** Westheimer and Kahne (1994) noted that “almost all discussions of S-L practices emphasized the importance of reflection” (p. 24). Reflection is an implicit component in S-L described as “the essential link between the community experience and academic learning” and is semantically emphasized by the hyphenated structure of the word S-L (Eyler, 2001, p. 35).

Many researchers have contributed to our understanding of the role reflection plays in S-L (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Felton et al., 2006). Eyler and Giles (1999) offered five principles of reflection: connection, continuity, context, challenge, and coaching. Bringle and Hatcher (1999) explained that effective reflection activities exhibit the following conditions. They link experience to learning objectives, they are guided, occur regularly, allow for feedback and assessment, and they include clarification of values. Felton et al. (2006) redefined reflection in S-L “as a process involving the interplay of emotion and cognition in which people (students, teachers and community partners) intentionally connect service experiences with academic learning objectives” (p. 42).

As research continues to expand on in S-L, a discussion on the ways in which the unfamiliar catalyzes reflection on students’ meaning making will follow.
The symbiotic relationship of the unfamiliar, dissonance, reflection, and meaning. S-L experiences present unfamiliar experiences that inherently challenge students to reflect and discern meaning. Service-learners’ abilities to cognitively balance their existing epistemological relationships with learning realities leave many existential questions about the notions of reflection and meaning: Can one have reflection without meaning? Can one have meaning without reflection? Is there a distinction between making sense and making meaning? Many philosophical and psychological traditions attempt to explain how reflection and meaning contribute to one’s personal and social growth in learning. One avenue of research salient to this study is student development, specifically focusing on epistemological reflection.

From epistemology. S-L provides opportunities for students coming into the learning context with differing personal epistemologies. They can explore their epistemological orientation from three interrelated dimensions (personal, academic, and community). Student development literature suggests that students bring personal ways of knowing to learning contexts (Daloz 1986; Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 2000; Belenky & Stanton, 2000). When students engage with unfamiliar contextual challenges in S-L, disorientation (dissonance) occurs, requiring reflection. This reflection often induces necessary steps to make meaning of this experience.

Baxter Magolda (2004b) launched a 16-year longitudinal study that used a unique approach to develop an epistemological reflection model based on a constructivist’s theory of personal epistemology. The research yielded some significant findings regarding reflection and meaning. First, by developing an epistemological reflection model, it helped in understanding that personal epistemology is socially constructed and context bound. Baxter Magolda (2004b) concluded that “people actively construct or make meaning of their experience” (p. 31).
Secondly, Baxter Magolda’s (2004b) research clarified terminology surrounding the distinct nuances of epistemological reflection, assumptions, and transformation. In Baxter Magolda’s (2004b) work, epistemological reflection refers to assumptions about the nature, limits, and certainty of knowledge, and how those epistemological assumptions evolve during young adulthood. Epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge concern certainty, complexity, and source as the core of personal epistemology. Epistemological transformation is a shift to a more complex set of epistemological assumptions rather than the acquisition of particular learning strategies and skills (p. 31).

As it relates to reflection and meaning, Baxter Magolda (2004b) posited:

People actively construct or make meaning of their experience as they interpret what happens to them, evaluate it using current perspective, and draw conclusions about what experiences mean to them. The meaning they construct depends on their current assumptions about themselves and the world, conflicting assumptions they encounter, and the context in which the experience occurs. (p. 31)

S-L presents a transformative and interactive opportunity to examine internal (e.g., assumptions) and external (e.g., experiences) factors, while reflecting on personal epistemology as developed through the dimensions of identity and relationships. If the collaboration between teacher, other students, and community partners develops, meaning making is likely to ensue to form an explicit and articulated learning elicited by an intentioned awareness of the academic, the personal, and the community.

A common goal for students of many colleges and universities is to instill students with higher epistemological (meaning making) strategies. However, most students graduate from college without developing meaning making strategies that reflect an understanding that
knowledge is socially constructed (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Belenky et al., 1986; Perry, 1970). If students are not challenged to solve problems independently, meaning making strategies, and autonomy become lost (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

In an exploratory study on personal epistemologies, Pizzolato (2006) asked if epistemological skills transfer to other contexts. Using a grounded theory approach, Pizzolato (2006) analyzed data from interviews and a questionnaire of 90 students from two large public universities. Her research findings suggested that personal epistemologies were not used consistency across contexts, but rather students felt compelled to use them based on perceptions of what different contexts were valued and the examination of the goals in each context (Pizzalato, 2006). Students seemed to have a “range of epistemological orientations” they could choose to use in meaning making (Pizzalato, 2006, p. 276). This finding would seem to suggest that students align their strategies for meaning making based on what the course requirements incentivize. This insight seems to point to more of a transactional analysis in the learning process rather than a deeper transformative shift. For this transformative shift to occur, conditions for reflection and meaning will be discussed in the next section.

From TL. Research from Jones at al. (2012) reviewed the significance of contextual influences (e.g., getting out of the bubble, boundary crossing, and personalizing) for prompting meaning making among the participants by using Kiely’s (2005) TL model. Keily’s (2005) model contained five learning processes (contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalizing, processing, and connecting). The findings suggested that students achieved learning primarily in the areas of new understanding of themselves, complex social issues, and other cultures.

From S-L. Boyle-Baise’s (2000) interpretive case study of 24 pre-service teachers in a multicultural education course confirmed Scheckley and Keeton’s (1997) notion that individuals
construct meaning through the confirmation (comfortable learning preference) or disconfirmation (an unsettling event; dissonance) of context from prior understandings. Boyle-Baise (2000) concluded that construction of meaning in education was a complex, varied, and somewhat idiosyncratic process.

The psychology of meaning seems to be a highly subjective construct originating from various reflective dimensions (e.g., introspection, retrospection). Also, there are many phenomenological aspects of meaning (e.g., existential, humanistic). The complex nature of meaning creates a heuristic inquiry generating the following questions: When and how does reflection become meaningful (i.e., to whom, for whom, and by whom)? When does learning take the critical and transformative turn? Critical reflection discussed in the following section may hold the answers to the above questions.

**Critical Reflection**

There are several definitions of critical reflection in S-L literature. Dewey (1933) defined critical reflection as “the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). Bringle and Hatcher (1999) explained, “Experience becomes educative when critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and the ability to take informed actions” (p. 180). Jacoby (2015) defined critical reflection, “as the process of analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning one’s experience within the broad context of issues and content knowledge” (p. 26). Blount (2006) considered critical reflection as a “crucial leadership skill and an immersed art form of an experience that shoulders attentiveness to both the intensity and complexity of an approach, grounded in the here and now, while cognizant of the larger social implications” (p. 272).
Critical reflection is also widely discussed in TL literature. Mezirow and associates (2000) argued that experience must be paired with critical reflection for TL to occur, suggesting that critical reflection enables students to become aware of their frames of reference (meaning perspectives). Belenky and Stanton (2000) expanded on the idea of critical reflection in TL, claiming that critical reflection must happen in discourse with others. This insight assumes that people consciously assessed their assumptions and premises and can articulate this learning through reflective discourse. The antecedents for meaning making were discussed as part of an introspective and theoretical journey into the process that S-LTAs may encounter as they enter unfamiliar experiential contexts of S-L community partnerships. The technology based classrooms and distractive elements of social media may begin to lose its compelling pull for our attention as service-learners interface with reality and people.

**Summary**

Many constructs serve as antecedents to reflection that challenge students to seek understanding and meaning through the metaphors of a mirror and a window. It is a reflective mirror for students to examine their assumptions and worldviews in society. It is also a conscious choice to look through the window with a cognitive openness to the reality of the human experience. The intersection of the S-L experience and the existential tension from the unfamiliar create a uniquely educative moment for students to self-examine in context with others. The reflection garnered in these synergistic moments, compel one to reflect on meaning that may result in TL, a heuristic for conscious educational growth. When the patina of critical reflection is added, the agency for socially conscious change is greatly enhanced.

The next section reviews TL theory, followed by a review and discussion of alternative perspectives that seem necessary for a holistic and integrated understanding of what happens as
one embraces dissonance and begins to reflect critically, question, and interpret meaning from S-L experience.

**Analysis: S-L as Critical TL**

"Knowledge without transformation is not wisdom."
(Coelho, 2002, *The Alchemist*)

“That one might have had the experience but missed the meaning.”
(Eliot, 1969, p. 24)

Critical TL seeks to disrupt existing thought models uncritically assumed into one’s social reality and worldview. One way to frame this is by identifying keywords with the research question that metaphorically serve as “hangers in a theoretical closet” (Maxwell, 2005). For understanding how the unfamiliar catalyzes an existential tension to explore meaning in S-L contexts, keywords are necessary to filter meaning. These keywords include *epistemological relationship* (how students question, interpret, and give meaning), *S-L contexts* (as the medium for transformative experiences), and *critical consciousness* (how transformative experiential knowledge interfaces with one’s existential reality). Experiential learning provides the substrate for understanding the relationship between what is learned, how this learning interfaces with beliefs and assumptions on a micro level (individual) and macro level (societal), and if this translates into transformative change. As students continue to explore their relationship with reality, particularly in S-L contexts, the notion of praxis becomes engaged. Praxis, as an informed theory of reflection and action, engages one with unfamiliar and alternative contexts to problematize and question existing assumptions, beliefs, and values (Arnett, 2001).

TL theory and its relationship to meaning making begin the review in the next section. A discussion of alternative perspectives on TL calling for holistic and integrated approaches to learning experiences concludes the discussion.
Theoretical Foundations, Alternative Perspectives, and Pedagogical Considerations

When students are challenged by real-life scenarios to question, interpret, and make meaning of their existing assumptions, beliefs, and values, one of the many ways to frame this is experience is TL theory. This section begins with a review of foundational transformative theorists and concludes with a discussion of a multi-theoretical approach to TL theory.

The rational approach. Mezirow, a seminal adult learning theorist and renowned author of adult TL theory blended constructivism, critical theory, and deconstructivism in social theory. TL used initially by Mezirow (1978) in a qualitative case study of 83 U.S. women in 12 re-entry college programs who experienced extended lapses of time away from these contexts (Kitchenham, 2008). Mezirow concluded that those participants had undergone personal transformative moments, and identified ten phases of that transformation. Mezirow’s goal was to understand how people “interpret and explain what happens to them that determines their actions, their hopes, their contentment and emotional well-being, and their performance” (Mezirow, 1991, p. xiii).

Simply put, TL suggests a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. However, this description occludes the multi-faceted nature of this type of learning. Transformative dimensions of this theory include meaning perspectives, intentional learning, making meaning through reflection, distorted assumptions, and perspective transformations. The evaluation of transformative experiences cannot reduce the preordained learning outcomes, (e.g., observable behavioral changes, competencies) but instead becomes identified through reflective changes and shifts in the meaning schemes from disorienting dilemmas and consequent actions (Mezirow, 1991). Autonomous thinking supported by TL in which people understand the sense
of an experience as essential to the human condition and the primary goal of adult education (Mezirow, 1996).

**Early development.** Mezirow’s TL theory influenced by Kuhn’s (1962) paradigm, Freire’s (1971) conscientization, and Habermas’s (1971, 1984) domains of learning. Together, these theorists helped to inform Mezirow’s key concepts (e.g., disorienting dilemma, meaning schemes, perspective transformation, frames of reference, habits of mind, and critical reflection). According to Kitchenham (2008), Mezirow effectively translated Kuhn’s (1962) conception of paradigms into the frames of reference (i.e., habits of mind or meaning perspectives), the pursuit of own interests (i.e., meaning schemes), and coming into a new worldview (i.e., perspective transformation). By answering theoretical questions about learning and by developing practitioners that adhered to the theory, TL theory eventually became a paradigm itself.

Freire’s (1971) notion of conscientization (interpreted as critical consciousness) provided Mezirow with the necessary construct to embed critical reflection and practice. This insight relates to the discussion of education’s purpose for enabling students to become more autonomous learners by critically reflecting on social, political, and economic contradictions and existing preconceived assumptions. This notion seems to empower agency in a learning relationship to effect social change by developing praxis, which connects critical reflection and action.

Finally, Habermas (1971) three knowledge domains (technical, practical, and emancipatory) helped Mezirow, understand how critical theory informed adult learning and contributed to formulating Mezirow’s notion of perspective transformation. Of these three domains, the emancipatory domain intrigued Mezirow (1981) the most. This domain was useful
in developing a description of perspective transformation and ten phases of adult learning.

Mezirow wrote:

The emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings (Mezirow, 1981, p. 6).

Mezirow (1985) revised the domains of learning to instrumental, dialogic, and self-reflective, with central aspects of these domains being the meaning perspective (frame of reference with two dimensions: a habit of mind and point of view and the meaning schemes. Kitchenham (2008) summarized these ideas: “Learners ask how to learn the information (instrumental), when and where this learning could take place (dialogic) and why they are learning the information (self-reflective)” (p. 109). Meaning perspectives, according to Mezirow (1985) refers “to the structure of cultural and psychological assumptions within which our experience assimilates and transforms new experience” (p. 21). Meaning schemes, on the other hand, are “the constellation of concept, belief, judgment, and feeling which shapes a particular interpretation” (Mezirow 1994, p. 109). Thus, a meaning perspective is a general frame of reference comprising a series of meaning schemes (Kitchenham, 2008).

Mezirow (1998) continued to revise TL theory with a taxonomy of critical reflection involving subjective (narrative, systemic, therapeutic, and epistemic), and objective reframing (either a narrative critical reflection of assumptions communicated or a self-critical reflection on assumptions for a task-oriented problem of defining the problem itself). Mezirow (1998) posited
that “learning to think for oneself, involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings” (p. 118).

Mezirow and associates (2000) revised TL theory by arguing that a meaning perspective is a frame of reference and comprises habits of mind and points of view. He expanded “habits of mind” to include six dimensions (socio-linguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic, philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic) and added a fourth domain of learning (transforming points of view).

Although Mezirow and associates’ theory (2000) is widely accepted as the foundational theoretical thought regarding TL, its evolution was not without considerable criticism or modification, prompting alternative perspectives to emerge (Brookfield, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2004; Taylor et al., 2012). For example, Collard and Law (1989) asserted that TL was not a comprehensive theory of social change because it failed to address questions of “context, ideology, and the radical (critical).” Mezirow (1990) countered this insisting that social action was only one goal of education.

**Critiques of Mezirow.** Brookfield (1991) believed that Mezirow’s TL theory was too narrowly conceptualized, ignored issues of power, and lacked the questioning of hegemonic assumptions. Mezirow and associates (2000) rebutted this indicating that TL involved critical reflection of assumptions and did not lead one to think primarily politically. Merriam (2004) said that TL assumes a certain level of emotional intelligence, maturity, and cognitive ability. Guba and Lincoln (2005) argued that TL theory needed to be more expansive and mindful of viewpoints outside its western European lens. Taylor et al. (2012) called for a more unified and integrative view of TL where many perspectives could coexist.
**The critical pragmatic approach.** As TL theory continued to evolve, it challenged others to stretch the theory and develop alternative perspectives based on their respective ideologies. Critical theory views society “where people see their individual well-being as integrally bound with that of the collective…where generosity and compassion rule our actions while being alert to injustice, inequity, and oppression” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 39). Anecdotally, S-L, when framed in social justice or change perspective, provides a venue for self-discovery (identity), a space to generate thought (knowledge), and an opportunity to question injustice in society (asymmetric power). As people critically identify, challenge, and work to change their assimilated assumptions and beliefs systems, they must examine dominant narratives and ideologies that are inherently manipulative, unjust, or oppressive. Learning to question an ideology (i.e., ideological critique) is one of four strands of criticality (ideological critique, psychoanalytic-psychotherapeutic, analytic philosophy, and logic, and pragmatist constructivism) according to Brookfield (2005) that remain central to critical theory, critical pedagogy, and TL. Drawing from all four traditions, Brookfield (2005) approached TL by blending “ideological critique” and “pragmatic constructivism” into an approach described as “critical pragmatism.” Critical pragmatism emphasized critical theory’s relevance while embracing a theoretical critical self-perspective.

Brookfield (2000) posited that a critical theory of adult learning must focus on skills that teach adults how to “challenge ideology, contest hegemony, unmask power, overcome alienation, learn liberation, reclaim reason, and practice democracy” (p. xii). Although Mezirow and associates (2000) equated “ideological critique” to “systemic critical reflection that focuses on probing sociocultural distortions,” Brookfield (2005) felt the need to expand on Mezirow’s
TL theory indicating that it did not go far enough into the contextual nature of systemic structural inequality (p. 12).

Educators must challenge students to critically reflect on personal as well as broader social, political, and economic issues. This reflection nurtures the need to construct meaning that may translate into TL. Educators who nurture critical thought and inquiry in students initiate reflexive in themselves as well. The S-L partnership between teachers, students, and community members becomes collaborative, and dialogic, not measured by testing metrics, but through enhanced individual and collective meaning. The literature suggested that experiential learning (e.g., S-L) supported opportunities to experience existential tension that initiated further inquiry into one’s ontological and epistemological patterns of knowing on an individual level and a collective level when experienced in social contexts (Mezirow and associates, 2000; Brookfield, 2005; Baxter Magolda, 2004b; Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984).

Alternative perspectives. Taylor et al. (2012) called for a more unified theory of TL. The pair, concerned with theoretical fragmentation, sought to update TL theory by offering an integrative, holistic theoretical alternative that extends the rhetorical question of where TL is going in the future: the what if. Taylor et al. (2012) agreed that the coexistence of varying perspectives (constructivist, humanist, critical social theory) are viable paradigms for understanding TL, rather than Mezirow’s dichotomous nature of the “individual versus social” polarities.

Additionally, Merriam (2001) questioned whether students had the cognitive maturity and readiness necessary for critical reflection and discourse in TL. She suggested three additional alternative perspectives for TL (psychoanalytic, psycho-developmental, and social emancipatory). The psychoanalytic perspective utilizes an individual’s lifelong transformation of
and reflections on an individual’s identity (i.e., both rationally and extra-rationally) as the unit of analysis. Noted proponents of this perspective included Boyd and Meyers (1988), Cranton (2000), and Dirkx (2000). Psychodevelopmental perspectives (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Daloz, 1986; Kegan, 1994) reflected on an individual’s lifelong progressive growth, relationships, and epistemological change. Social emancipatory approaches take the unit of analysis to include social structures vetted for transformation through critical reflection, cognitive/dialogic problematization, and teacher-student equanimity (Freire, 1972, 1984).

Table 3 depicts five perspective lenses for TL. The matrix illustrates the foundational perspective of Mezirow and associates (2000) and four alternatives lenses (Merriam, 2001). Also, the unit of analysis, core concepts, and notable theorists are listed to provide a comparative overview of the perspectives.

Taylor and Cranston (2008) provided four more emerging perspectives on TL based on the work of contemporary theorists that addressed the complexity of the 21st century. The first viewpoint, the neurobiological approach, documented change in the brain structure during the learning process (Janik, 2005). Second, the cultural-spiritual perspective focused on how knowledge narratives are constructed by learners during TL experiences (Brooks, 2000; Tisdell, 2003). Third, race-centric perspectives used race as the unit of analysis and explored how inclusion, empowerment, and cross-cultural negotiation were key concepts for fostering TL (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). Finally, the planetary view calls for the systemic reorganization of political, social, and educational systems to replace the “dysfunctional, technocratic, and Western Eurocentric” ideology that “shows little regard for an integral worldview” (O’Sullivan, 1999, p. 9).
Table 3

**Perspective Lenses of TL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective/Lenses</th>
<th>Unit of Analysis</th>
<th>Core Concepts</th>
<th>Theorists</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Learning to negotiate and act on one's beliefs, values, and meanings, rather than uncritical acceptance of others belief systems; perspective transformation</td>
<td>Mezirow and associates (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Pragmatic</td>
<td>Individual in Context</td>
<td>Social transformation by critically reflecting on reality; critical reflection; ideological critique</td>
<td>Brookfield (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-Emancipatory</td>
<td>Social structures vetted through individual critical reflection</td>
<td>Social transformation by critically reflecting on reality; develop critical consciousness and praxis for learners to rediscover agency, problem-posing and dialogic methodology</td>
<td>Freire (1971, 1972, 1982, 1985)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taylor et al. (2012) contended, “The ways of gaining clarity in TL can differ, depending on the person or people and the context or situation” (p. 3). However, despite the diverse
perspectives of TL theory, the key seems to be cultivating a process of critical reflection. Cranton (2002) described this as how one works through beliefs, assumptions, assessing their validity considering new experiences or knowledge. As a commonly agreed upon learning outcome, critical reflection might lead to a shift in meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1978).

A blended perspective. S-L has a unique potential for transformational meaning and learning that blends these alternative perspectives so that the individual is in context with society. By introducing a holistic, critically transformative approach to S-L, an enhanced ability for students to make meaning by engaging deepening and broadening the reflective analysis of their learning experiences. By blending three alternative perspectives—critical pragmatism (Brookfield, 2000, 2005), psychodevelopmental (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Daloz, 1986; Kegan, 1994) and social emancipatory/transformative (Freire 1985; Freire & Faundez, 1989; McLean, 2006)—meaning making approaches that are critically conscious approach the goal of conscious educational growth. While acknowledging the theoretical foundation of Mezirow (1978, 1991) and Mezirow and associates (2000), the societal and global complexity of the 21st century must include the following additional perspectives. Critical pragmatism (Brookfield, 2005) informs an individual’s critical consciousness by providing learning skills necessary for reflecting on an ideological critique and pragmatic approach for critical praxis (individual and social dimensions). Psychodevelopmental approaches (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Daloz, 1986; Kegan, 1994) explore how people begin to develop their epistemological relationship to reality. This perspective reflects that individuals derive meaning theoretically; the students start to question their assumptions and initiate what Baxter Magolda (2000) would call self-authorship. Social emancipatory/transformative approaches (Freire, 1985; McLean, 2006) build on an individual’s
epistemological understanding and free new perspectives that translate to an ontological shift with TL for broader social change (Friere, 1985; Freire & Faundez, 1989).

Education as a means for social change seems to be an *a priori* assumption for some, an important calling for others, and overlooked by many. Anecdotally, these varied responses seem counterintuitive to the socio-moral purpose and reasoning for most college and university mission statements. Discerning the best learning context for developing a more socially just and equitable world is at the heart of democracy and a moral imperative for education (Kincheloe, 2005). However, the convergence of experiential education (i.e., S-L) and critical pedagogical approaches may be limited by implementation issues (Breunig, 2005). Also, Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) observed the consequences of the current cultural climate of extreme individualism. They suggested, “Americans are not responsible or accountable to each other; a decline in civility, mutual respect, and tolerance; and the preeminence of self-interest and individual preference over concern for the common good” (p. 7). As S-L moves beyond being a pedagogical context to being a critical literacy or competency, it then becomes essential to understand praxis, identity, and community (Fritz & Roberts, 2006). When S-L moves beyond pedagogical outcomes to examine the convergence of praxis, identity, and community, a more critically transformative approach develops. As the literature reveals, TL theory brings a diversity of perspectives from a variety of theorists to explain the process of meaning making. S-L with its diverse contexts and complex relationships seemingly cannot be understood nor limited by a single theory. The call for an integrated TL theory best explains the meaning making process for experiential learning approaches.
Summary

TL is as much about social change as individual transformation. Idealistically, a holistic learning premise may include an unfamiliar stimulus to create dissonant tension that urges critical reflection on old assumptions, which cause a shift in a new perspective (individual transformation). When dissonance persists in a social context, critical reflection may continue as an ideological critique that has the potential to activate agency for social change (critical praxis) to include a comprehensive global awareness (planetary consciousness).

The pedagogical application of critical TL is explored in the following section. Pedagogy informs the learner by theoretically framing the context. Without such framing, S-L would simply be service. When S-L pedagogy challenges students to infuse their learning experiences critically with intent, reflection, and consciousness, a shift happens: It is transformational. The concluding stream of literature discusses the notion of critical consciousness and its importance for creating meaningful learning. When S-L moves toward a critically transformative pedagogy, meaningful educational growth becomes apparent.

Application: Towards a Critically Transformative Pedagogy in S-L

“There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that is linked to efforts to transform structures”
(hooks, 1996, killing Rage:End Racism)

What is needed to make the paradigm shift toward critically reflective learning that supports meaning and transformation? This section discusses critical consciousness as a reflective mindset for approaching the challenges of today’s S-L contexts. Much has been written on the nature of critical consciousness. Various definitions, contexts, and conceptual frameworks exist (Allan & Iverson, 2003; Freire, 1973; Halx, 2010; Kincheloe & Steinburg, 1993; Landreman, Rasmuseen, King, & Jiang, 2007; Watts et al., 2011; Zamudio, Bridgeman, Russell,
& Rios, 2009). The following section provides a brief overview of critical consciousness as an essential learning approach for meaning making, questioning dominant narratives, developing an individual’s learning approach for translating theory into practice, and understanding epistemological reality with an individual’s learning context.

**Critical Consciousness Mindset**

Thornton (2005) traced critical consciousness, democratic freedom, and liberal education from ancient Greek history. This historic analysis emphasized the importance of liberal education, centering the discussion on critical consciousness and the preservation of democratic ideals. Doughty (2006) positioned critical consciousness (along with Socratic dialogues, hermeneutics, and critical analysis) as one of four examples necessary for critical thinking.

The collective insights of conscientization (Freire, 1982), the model for desocialization (Shor, 1992), and critical consciousness (Thornton, 2005) have been pivotal for illustrating the role that critical consciousness plays in education for and in a democracy. These combined thoughts on critical consciousness are both useful and operative for this study.

Freire’s (1973) definition of critical consciousness included a state of awareness activated through dialogue that engages an analysis of context and power. Shor (1992) brought critical consciousness into a personal referent “as a way we see ourselves in relation to knowledge and power in society, the way we use and study language, the way we act in school and daily life to reproduce or to transform our conditions” (p. 129). Finally, Thornton (2005) defined critical consciousness as “the impulse and willingness to stand back from humanity and nature, to make formalized expressions (i.e., philosophy, rhetoric, analysis, democracy) objects of thought and criticism, and to search for their meaning and significance” (p. 4). Together these form the collective notion that a person possessing critical consciousness (a) can articulate and formalize
explicit expressions about context and power (knowledge), (b) exhibits the ability to be self-reflexive in forming their identity relative to that knowledge, and (c) understands and possesses both power and agency to make transformative changes within themselves and society at large. Given that critical consciousness plays a significant role for understanding the constructs knowledge, identity, agency, and power, research findings from Cipolle’s (2006) dissertation suggested that S-L as an application of critical pedagogy and within the purview of social justice seemed to facilitate critical consciousness in students.

The current study sought to understand how service-learners experience the unfamiliar to critically reflect on meaning in their S-L experiences and to underscore the need for developing critical consciousness. Through critical self-reflection, an essential component for questioning one’s beliefs, assumptions, and values, and in discourse with academic and community partners, a broader challenge emerges. It is a challenge that seeks to question and to make explicit the social and structural inequalities and then effectively translate what students have learned both in theory and practice into transformative action for social change.

**Positioning Meaning and Critical Consciousness in Education**

Freire advocated for Brazilian democracy through an education for critical consciousness. This construct can serve to free students to question educational learning experiences from a narrowed isomorphic educational vision emphasizing instrumental and economic rationality, to one where students develop a critical consciousness to construe and construct meaning from a variety of ways of knowing. If education becomes a place for expanding qualities of the mind (e.g., critical reflection, inquiry, debate) into meaning making strategies for pursuing knowledge, conscious educational growth will manifest in a democracy. However, as Freire (1982) noted, “democracy is subverted by making it, irrational, hateful,
fearful, an instrument of the powerful, or by alienating a nation in the name of democracy; one defends democracy by leading a state which is nourished by a critical spirit” (p. 58). The same can be said when educational reforms create competition, when defunding and de-professionalization create a hierarchy among knowledge domains that moves students away from critical self-reflection and meaning making. The Freirean courage to utilize and nurture conscientization (critical consciousness) through critical pedagogical means is needed now more than ever to resurrect “the critical spirit in academia,” to sustain a vibrant, engaging democracy, and to return the human back to human capital. In other words, the utility of people for economic rationalization may increase productivity for material goods, but the deeper question begs for restoration of the democratic soul of the people.

While some post-modernists would disagree with the invocation of Freirean pedagogy as being anachronistic for American colleges and universities, the constructs of conscientization and problem posing remain relevant, useful heuristic tools for critical reflection and inquiry and for confronting complex issues today. Keller and Osgood (2010) used a Freirean model for S-L and concluded that challenges and obstacles exist when implementing a critical approach. Despite those challenges, the key to a Freirean approach is praxis, which includes “dialogue and engagement with the individuals involved” (Keller & Osgood, 2010 p. 79). Simply put, this means educators must challenge students to become more critically reflexive in own learning, their learning with others, and in the world, to then transform it and themselves (Freire, 1982). Rosenberger (2000) suggested using a Freirean lens for theoretical clarity in mitigating tensions arising from contemporary educational contexts and reforms where critically conscious approach would be warranted.
As educators’ challenge students to experience the unfamiliar, to embrace dissonance through critical reflection, to examine dominant discourses, to provide opportunities to explore meaning and social change, a self-narrated approach to learning and knowing begins to emerge. This emerging insight clearly imparts more than just a passive acceptance of knowledge and by necessity invokes what seems to be a more critically conscious and meaningful approach to learning.

The Challenge to Stimulate Meaningful Learning Contexts

According to Baxter Magolda (2009b), the key for exploring meaning making in individuals must be situated in the context of social location. Individual meaning is also influenced by culture, power, and oppression. For developing minds to examine these influences requires critical pedagogical practices necessary to help them create critical dispositions to question structural inequality and normative assumptions about learning and knowledge.

Abundant research surrounds the theoretical feasibility of critical pedagogical practices. Action-based research studies include the work of Laman, Jewett, Jennings, and Souto-Manning (2012) who examined the use of critical dialogue to engage learners. Ainsa’s (2011) qualitative action research study of 17 early childhood educators sought to understand the variables necessary to engage in a democratic classroom and their willingness to engage in critical pedagogy. Kincheloe and Steinberg (2006) pointed to critical literacy to unpack power differentials describing “a literacy of the world that enables us to explore the relation between power and knowledge and to expose the imprint of power on the rhetoric that bombards us each day” (p. 48). Students need to locate themselves within critical context to explore their own epistemologies and biases. This can help them determine meaning in their own learning.
approaches and develop personal philosophies to assume roles as agents of social change (Breunig, 2005).

Enhanced engagement. For critical engagement to occur, students must link real-world experiences to considerations of agency learned from classroom experiences. This process is essential for sustaining both critical consciousness and praxis. Many universities have addressed the need for critically conscious learning and educational growth by fostering learning communities, community S-L centers, and social justice organizations. Nikolakaki (2011) submitted critical pedagogical applications ensures that education remains an active agent, challenging dominant (e.g., neoliberal) discourses and providing students and teachers with the necessary tools for critical thinking, inquiry, discourse, and agency. Critical and civic-minded educators believe it is imperative to facilitate student learning opportunities that nourish the qualities of the mind and stimulate engaged participation, essential for social change and for sustaining democracy’s ideals.

Enhanced ontology. It is important to implement critical pedagogical tools that encourage ontology of critical consciousness. This can be accomplished by challenging students, to question existing power, knowledge, and identity issues associated with hegemonic educational reforms, initiatives and practices. Students begin to expand their notions of knowing as they become more ethically engaged to examine dominant discourses, have opportunities to enact social change, and examine their own beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world.

Enhanced epistemology. Experiences, when framed as self-reflexive, socially responsible, and exercised in a critical vein, enhance the likelihood for developing critically conscious ways of thinking. This frames the students understanding in the context of the learning
experience and the broader realm of society. This meaningful relationship is what Freire and Faundez (1989) referred to as an epistemological relationship to reality.

Understanding the ways in which service-learners critically reflect on the meaning of their S-L experience may invoke those with critically conscious dispositions to question their beliefs, assumptions, and values relative to their identity. As service-learners are challenged to move out of screen-based learning to engage the unfamiliar, they may question dominant social issues and social discourse to seek and translate learning not only for individual transformation but for deeper social change.

**Framing Learning for Social Change**

Engagement in diverse socially interactive contexts often challenges an individual’s existing held beliefs and assumptions. When educators expand learning opportunities that support critical reflection and engagement, students may invoke a critically conscious lens for improving the human condition. Rivera and Dann (2011) echoed this, stating, “The overarching opportunities to deepen undergraduate critical reflection are immense and largely unexplored, yet the need for reflexivity increases as our social issues become more complex.” (p. 89).

**Summary**

The current study filled a gap in research, challenging students to critically examine their assumptions, values, and beliefs in the context of S-L. The S-L process begins with reflection on the unfamiliar as an existential tension that seems to challenge existing assumptions, values, and beliefs. To process the tension, critical reflection is needed to make sense of the experience. As the process continues one goes deeper into the inquiry and begins to develop an approach that nurtures a critically conscious mindset for transformative growth and learning. By grounding S-L
experiences with the real world, collaboration with community partners and other service-learner begins both the discourse and agency to effect social change.

Table 4 presents the S-L context as foundational for an emerging critical TL paradigm. S-L experiences with the unfamiliar begin the process of critical reflection and critical self-reflection. By providing service-learners with a context that challenges implicit assumptions, values, and beliefs, a dialogic develops to critically analyze to make them explicit. It will be important for S-LTAs to let their narrative unfold so that all stakeholders may begin to understand that engaged and meaningful learning at its best becomes an inter-relationship with self, context, issues, and the learning community.

**Future Implications**

An understanding of TL, integrated with a critical consciousness approach, contributes to understanding how knowledge and power intersect to create ideologies. Left unexamined, these ideological influences become normalized and significantly alter an individual’s epistemological relationship with reality and constrain and individual’s agency for social change. By explicitly introducing critical thought into TL and S-L pedagogies, educators can challenge and provide opportunities for undergraduate students to embrace new and unfamiliar experiences, to process dissonance, and to question existing beliefs, values, and assumptions. This critical overlay may encourage service-learners to create meaning making strategies and author personal academic identities and philosophies and for problematizing socio-political constructs in society.

**Chapter Summary**

S-L infused with critical reflection, serves as a learning platform to construct meaning, challenge existing epistemologies, and transform and create new ontological identities. S-L’s
Table 4

*An Emerging S-L Pedagogy for Critical TL*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical TL Outcomes</th>
<th>S-L Context</th>
<th>Critical/Transformative Theory Constructs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological inquiry</td>
<td><strong>WHAT?</strong></td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical reflection, reflexivity, and meaning making</td>
<td><strong>SO, WHAT?</strong></td>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td><strong>NOW WHAT?</strong></td>
<td>Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translate</td>
<td><strong>WHAT IF?</strong></td>
<td>Praxis</td>
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</table>

contextual focus for this proposed study may provide opportunities for S-Ls to explore the meaning from the S-L experience (a way of feeling); to discover if that knowledge informs their thinking to question existing epistemic assumptions (a way of knowing); and to observe, if any, paradigm shifts that translate ontologically into critical engagement (a way of being and acting) in a broader context of application. Critical consciousness may present the mindset for developing a personal philosophy and a practice for learning and life. Blending salient constructs of critical theory, critical pedagogy, experiential theory, S-L pedagogy, and TL theory in S-L context is one way to develop a critically conscious ethos in students, leading to deeper meaning, reflection, and engagement. The benefit from this intended knowledge of self when interfacing with society and the world at large cannot be overstated.
The complexity of globalization and its impact on all societies require scholars to ask the bigger questions about humanity and one’s place in the world, to develop societal symbiosis, and social critique. To accomplish this, the university must provide learning opportunities to experience the unfamiliar that produces existential tension, critically reflection, and inquiry needed to discern meaning, and to effect social change. Experiential learning, as achieved through S-L programs seems to present a context for developing a critically conscious mindset, one that allows for reflection and for challenging of existing held beliefs, values, and assumptions, both on an individual and societal level. S-L’s potential transformative value as a contextual tool for developing greater social and critical agency and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2007).

The review of literature positioned S-L as a potential context for developing a critically conscious approach to meaning making and learning. The S-L literature suggested that alternative learning contexts are needed to inspire critical reflection and inquiry. When higher education provides students with intellectual tools, contexts, and curiosity to question existing realities, shifts in academic identities occur.

TL integrated with a critical pedagogical approach, was the final stream reviewed. It is the necessary theoretical lens through which students’ skills of critical inquiry, imagination, and reflection may be observed. Knowing how students critically reflect on meaning making in their S-L experiences may provide future educators new pedagogical strategies for engagement. It may help service-learners move toward an epistemic understanding of how power, knowledge, and identity interplay with education and help to discover one’s agency. With this knowledge, service-learners may affect socially just change and mitigate “the crisis of meaning” left by a narrowed marketed vision of higher education (O’Sullivan, 2012, p. 9).
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative, IPA study was to explore how S-LTAs made meaning from experiencing the unfamiliar in their personal S-L experience at a private research university located in the northeast sector of the United States. One research question guided this study: How do S-LTAs experience and process the unfamiliar to make meaning in their S-L experience?

Introduction

The following two quotes provided a canvas of thought into the research methodology for this study. The first quote from Frankl (1984) stated:

For the meaning of life differs from [human to human] from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment. (p. 130)

Frankl’s observation’s highlights personal nature of meaning in an individual’s life and its relativity to time. The second quote from cited in Krauss (2005) paraphrased Lofland and Lofland’s (1996) notion of about the privilege of “participating in the mind of another, allows us a glimpse into the how and why, the meaning behind an individual’s behavior in social settings” (p. 764).

Krauss (2005) explained that to understand one’s behavior, we must understand the mind. Time, behavior, and the mind interface in the social learning moment to craft individual meaning. Research methodology allows participation in the mind of another, to engage in the questioning of relationships and context and to find meaning. IPA as the selected research design, helped to situate, gather, and analyze the needed data to explore the role of how the unfamiliar played in the meaning S-LTAs made of their S-L experience. The structure of this
chapter consists of philosophical perspectives of the research design from the researcher’s standpoint and the methodological approach, the qualitative research tradition and the rationale for its use, the research approach, and the research design.

**Research Paradigm**

Guba and Lincoln (1994) defined a paradigm as “the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of methods but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (p. 105). An individual’s epistemological and ontological beliefs begin with one’s understanding of reality. That is, the nature of reality (i.e., the subject experiences of the participants) and how reality becomes known (i.e., multiple realities), respectively. Additionally, methodological premises include a research process that is emerging, inductive, and shaped by the researcher’s competence in data collection and analysis in a naturalistic setting. Creswell (2013) included a fourth assumption, that of axiological: the role of values in the researcher’s interpretation and the participant’s interpretations.

The researcher’s philosophical assumptions must be brought forward in full transparency for the collaborative integrity of the research. Given that S-L required a critical reflective interpretation of contexts, personal epistemology, and social change, the interpretive frameworks of *social constructivism, transformative, and critical theory* seem to be most salient for this study. Creswell (2013) identified the philosophical assumptions associated with these interpretive frameworks as separate, but given the unique contextual nature and collaborative relationships in S-L, a more as blended understanding of all three frameworks was necessary. The study aligned these three paradigms based on the premise that the researcher cogenerated the narrative with the S-LTAs. In other words, an understanding of S-LTAs’ lived experiences and meaning making (social constructivism) was stimulated through experiencing and processing the
the unfamiliar. The unfamiliar, context, event, or relationship invoked an existential tension that triggered critical reflection, an essential heuristic, that initiated the questioning of one’s existing assumptions, beliefs, and values.

The theoretical orientation of IPA is grounded in two principles—phenomenology and hermeneutics—and influenced is by idiography. Phenomenology is a vivid eidetic experience developed by Husserl (1970) where individuals consciously perceive and talk about a lived experience. Hermeneutics, a theory of interpretation, was originally invoked to understand biblical texts and later expanded to other literary works (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The hermeneutic circle and the double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2003) offer great insight into the cyclical and iterative process of interpreting data in an IPA approach. The hermeneutic circle asks that the researcher move between understanding a given part (e.g., a word, an extract, an interview) in relationship to the whole (e.g., a sentence, complete text, an entire research project) and to reverse the process, completing the circle. The double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2003) also identifies the researcher’s engagement of making sense of the participants trying to make sense of an experience in a cogenerative attempt at understanding a given phenomenon. The final influence, idiography, can be explained by an emphasis on “a particular phenomenon as understood by particular people in a particular context” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29).

**Research Tradition**

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) located qualitative research in the eighth historical moment since its inception beginning in the 1900s. As the field of qualitative research continues to transform itself, there is current tension from three fronts. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described these fronts as the political right, the epistemological right, and the ethical right. The political right (neoconservatives) insist that evidence-based, experimental methodologies are the only
valid methods and marginalize qualitative inquiry. The epistemological right (neotraditionalist) believe that the past can explain the present. Finally, the ethical right (traditional social scientists) eschewed any researchers engaged in collaborative, critical, or empowering research inquiries. Given that the investigator’s educational philosophy does not align with the values of the right, the qualitative tradition became an easy personal decision regarding the research approach to be utilized for this study. These tensions, according to Mackler (2010), may be mitigated if higher education would take a more hermeneutic approach to higher learning. What better way to do this than through a qualitative approach of meaning making.

A qualitative approach, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), is one that “seeks answers to questions on how social experience is created and gives meaning” (p. 8). Given the nature of the research question, a qualitative approach together with its interpretive processes would best aligned with this study. The qualitative approach sought understanding and meaning of human behavior, not an empirical set of generalizations or causative explanations. It provided rich descriptive accounts of a specific phenomenon driven by the research question. As an iterative process, it sought clarity from a collaborative dialectic that attended to radical listening (Tobin, 2011). As a cogenerative dialogue (Tobin, 2011), the study’s intent was to describe, interpret, and synthesize information through the researcher’s theoretical lens of choice by not reducing meaning, but by enhancing meaning holistically in a naturalistic setting. Understanding that qualitative research is an interactive process, shaped by complex interpretive activities, made it difficult to narrowly define distinct paradigms, methods, or practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Following that premise allowed for a rich panoply of approaches that emphasized processes and meanings not quantified in any measurable way. Believing that reality is socially
constructed, this qualitative researcher delved into the research topic asking how the experience is created and given meaning.

**Methodological Approach**

IPA methodology best explicated S-LTAs meaning made from the unfamiliar in their S-L experience. As the source of generated truth, Elliott (2005) coined the phrase “a narrative approach of the first order,” in which the participants share their academic lived experiences and stories with the researcher through interviews, observations, and collecting reflective data (p. 12). However, there is a fundamental difference that IPA brought to the research collaboration: the idiographic nature of interpretation in a context explores the participant’s personal account of a central phenomenon, and the double hermeneutic interpretation of the phenomenon includes both participant and researcher cogenerating the accounts. There were several key theories and theoretical constructs reviewed in the literature that helped inform the methodological process. They included: S-L theory, CST, critical pedagogy, critical S-L, experiential learning, TL, critical reflection, dissonance, and community engagement in S-L.

An IPA research approach was essential to this proposed study for a variety of reasons. First, the student researcher could frame and see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning in a dialogical understanding of individual and social change (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008). While ideological divisions exist in what constitutes contemporary interpretive phenomenology, the humanist poststructural traditions tends to view research (e.g., social justice) as a mode of resistance to structures of power subsequently stimulating inquiry and discourse. This insight allows for both theoretically (i.e., CST and TL theory) and philosophical assumptions ensconced paradigmatically in social constructivism, TL, and CST to
become aligned. This alignment served to both inform and position the student researcher for this proposed research study.

Secondly, the participant’s experiential accounts provided, highlighted the significance of personal narratives stories in formulating both identity and agency (Bruner, 1990).

Thirdly, IPA pragmatically seemed to be the best fit for this research. The inherent, personal nature of one’s words was essential for the described lived experience, interpreted meaning, and the stimulated essentials for critical reflection. IPA created a unique relationship between participant and inquirer, one that was defined by mutual respect for each other’s narrative journeys. The academic lived experiences shared by the participants, existentially engaged the researcher as the research process unfolded. IPA created a vital, critical reflective space for the participants to describe, critically reflect, assess, and make sense of the unfamiliar in their S-L contexts intended on exploring generated meaning. This approach is deeply reflexive, authentic in nature and the insights shared transcended the classroom.

Finally, IPA provided the necessary space for an experiential-relational-reflective process (Mitton-Kukner, Nelson, & Desrochers, 2010). The process intentionally moved the participants to think about the cognitive, affective, and conative relationships with the learning process. This reflexivity positioned S-LTAs to critically explore theory and experience, the nexus of S-L.

The IPA method was the most authentic and efficacious process that allowed the researcher both access and adaptability for interpreting the meta-analysis of meaning of the participants to capture and reveal the cognitive realm of learning fully aware there is no single truth (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Henry, 2011); to make the learning personal and reflective through critical narrative reflection and interpretation; to understand the transformative
potential one’s learning is unique and individual; and to substantiate the beneficence of a critical TL approach in education by listening to those in S-L experiences through a critical-ideological lens.

**Characteristics of the IPA Process**

Smith (2011) outlined several characteristics unique to the IPA process. The following components were observed in this study and informed the researcher’s inductive approach: (a) individual experiences of meaning assumed agency; (b) small, purposeful samples; (c) collection of individual stories in particular context; (d) descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual pattern coding and analysis for patterns (Chenail, 2009); (e) in-depth analysis created a thick description of interpreted lived experiences; and (f) collaboration with participants to makes sense academic lived stories as framed in social reality as researcher pulls the data interpretively through critical social lenses.

IPA allowed the participants to reveal their critical moments through telling their stories and experiences from the first person perspective. The research done was done in a safe, collaborative space with the investigator that unfolded the unfamiliar. The process allowed the S-LTAs to process meaning created from their respective educational contexts and the possible translation to broader systems of knowing. IPA made the case that understanding the is foundational for understanding the general (Smith et al., 2009).

**History of IPA**

IPA is a relatively new methodology for education and social sciences. Historically, positioned in psychology and health sciences, IPA use has expanded to several other disciplines including human and social sciences (Smith, 2011). The first IPA paper was a position piece in by Smith (1996) published in the United Kingdom (UK). The first IPA paper published outside
of the UK was as recently as 2002 with IPA activity increasing notably in 2008. A majority of IPA research comes from predominantly English-as-a-first-language countries as reported by Smith (2011). However, as more researchers become familiar with IPA, more resources are developed, and more collaboration ensues with other disciplines, IPA will take its place with other qualitative, experiential research methods.

**Key Philosophical Theorists and Scholars**

Chenail (2009), Smith et al. (2009), and Shinebourne (2011) provided a comprehensive historical foundation and highlighted the seminal theorists that have influenced the genesis of IPA. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Ricoeur, and Gadamer provided the theoretical base for IPA, firmly positioning it as a form of *phenomenological inquiry* (as cited in Chenail, 2009 p. 157). Husserl et al. helped our understanding of how people comprehend lived experiences by adopting a phenomenological attitude that entails reflective consciousness (as cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). Heidegger, Merlou-Ponty, and Sartre’s perspectives substantiated the phenomenological importance of Husserl et al. and included existential considerations that consider “the person as embodied and embedded in the world, in a particular historical, social, and cultural context” (as cited in Shinebourne, 2011, p. 3). Smith et al. (2009) drew on Ricouer’s distinction between hermeneutic engagement of meaning recollection and suspicion arguing that both be essential for IPA.

Smith et al. (2009) are scholars most notable in developing IPA methodology and have co-authored a rich methodological text, entitled, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Theory: Method and Research*, used by many interested in IPA. Smith’s (1996) research in psychology called for an approach that “captured the experiential and qualitative” (p. 4). As such, the primary goal of IPA researchers explores how individuals make sense of their
experiences under the assumption that they actively interpret events, objects, people in their lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The following theorists helped to align IPA’s interpretative yet narrative base with CST and TL theory. Landridge’s (2008) critical narrative analysis was emblematic of both phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches (Shinebourne, 2011). Czarniawska (2004) brought the notion of deconstruction, helped in rendering a critical, holistic stance. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) advocated for a social justice perspective and the turning points or critical moments of the participants were salient for exploring critically conscious insights. Mumby’s (1993) edited works provided examples from a critical perspective that served as essential narrative exemplars. Webster and Mertova’s (2007) research was used to expand the present researcher’s understanding of interpretive inquiry by exploring critical event analysis in education. The following section discusses how the participants were solicited for the study.

**Participants and Sampling**

The participants were drawn from an undergraduate/graduate S-LTA population that consisted of traditional-age students (18 to 25 years of age) who participated in S-L contexts at a private research university in the Northeast sector of the United States. The potential participants were purposefully sampled for whom the research question was both salient and meaningful. The homogeneity of the group depended on two factors: interpretive concerns and pragmatic concerns (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The interpretive criterion for this process included S-LTA’s with a minimum of sophomore status, required critically reflective written assignments on the S-L experience, self-examination after reflection, new meaning and/or a cause perceptible shift in that meaning, and deeper engagement with S-L or reflected a deeper epistemological understanding of S-L.
The pragmatic concerns for contacting the S-LTAs as well as feasibility for studying the phenomenon of the unfamiliar were discussed with the assistant director for S-L at Sage University’s Center for Community Service. The assistant director assured high probability for experiencing the unfamiliar well as the inherent reflective component required by many S-L course experiences. as was inherent to S-L. The literature search revealed sparse research devoted to the topic of the unfamiliar and meaning making by S-LTAs.

A sample size of six participants was solicited for this study. The sample size was purposefully small as the study’s focus was on the quality of deep contextual stories that both described and elicited meaning from the respective participant S-L experiences. The investigator recruited students who were accessible and willing to share information about the meaning generated from their S-L experience and selected those that meet the above criteria. The criteria from Table 5 was used for selecting prospective participants for the study. The participants were undergraduate S-LTAs and one sixth year student who were willing to share how the unfamiliar informed their construction of meaning from their S-L experience. Every effort was made to get a representative mix of males and females; however, many more females participate in the S-LTA program than males.

**Researcher Participation**

Co-creating a lived experience through the participant’s eyes was one of the most humbling and privileged experience a student researcher can have. It is a process that involved garnering trust, sharing emotions, listening unconditionally, and creating a safe, nurturing space to let the story unfold. As the student researcher entered the mind of the participant, it was important for the researcher to be cognizant of positionality concerns to reduce bias. While it was impossible to remove all bias in co-creating, it was contingent upon the researcher to be aware of
the immense responsibility to always keep it checked. Committed to the integrity of the research process, the researcher disavowed any philosophical assumptions that biased the study. In doing so, the researcher remained open to all aspects concerning how the participants explored the unfamiliar to make meaning in each participant’s S-L experience.

**Recruitment and Access**

Permission and guidance were needed from the director of the S-L Center and assistant director of the S-L Center on how to solicit prospective S-LTAs from the participant pool. The researcher met with the director and assistant director of S-L Center and determined the least unobtrusive, yet efficacious way to recruit potential participants. A letter was sent to the director of the S-L Center and explained the purpose of the study (see Appendix A). Once permission was granted, a poster (see Appendix J) was displayed as a call for participants for this study and the appropriate contact information was given. The director and assistant director were not
involved in any direct way with the participants other than allowing the recruiting poster for interested participants to be displayed.

All interested participants were sent a letter (see Appendix B). A follow-up e-mail sent within one week from the distribution of the letter. From the pool of solicited students who responded to the letter, individuals were emailed the copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix C). The participants provided the researcher with three dates and times to meet and discuss questions regarding the study, their involvement, and expectations. The participants were asked not to discuss the proposed study with the S-L Center staff until the study had been completed.

The researcher met with potential participants who chose to move forward with the study. At this meeting, the student researcher answered any questions regarding the study and provided two signed informed consent forms, one for the researcher and one for the participant, and the researcher closed the meeting with a request for each potential participant to suggest available dates and times for individual interviews. After all individual interviews with potential participants were done; criterion sampling was used to determine a coherent and collaborative fit for the study. These students were then contacted as eligible participants.

**Ethical Considerations and Practices for Human Subjects Research**

Ethical issues in any qualitative research can emanate at any stage of the research as well as after its conclusion (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This valuable insight must permeate one’s entire study from the research problem, purpose, questions, data collection, data analysis, writing, and disseminating the research. However, qualitative research and most research, in general, are never formulated in a vacuum and require the mutual collaboration of others to
pursue truth. This section speaks to the care, respect, and integrity warranted for the participants instrumental to this study.

History poignantly reminds us all the many cases of research malfeasance. The abhorrent maladies from the Tuskegee Study (1932-1972), Nazi Medical War Crimes (1939-1945), Cold War Human Radiation Experiments (1944-1945), Nuremberg Doctor’s Trials (1946), Jewish Hospital Study (1963), and Willow Brook Study (1963-1966) should never be repeated (Pressel, 2003). Entering the realm of research was a privilege, and it became incumbent for those all associated with research to never forget and to never repeat those historical tragedies. The U.S. National Commission’s Belmont Report (1979), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (1979), The Office of Human Research Protection (2000), and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) ensures heightened consciousness. Strict adherence to guidelines outlined in all ethical considerations and concerns will be transparent, shared, and addressed in a manner that respects the integrity of all involved in the research endeavor.

**Ethical Research Relationships and Collaboration**

The collaborative relationship between participants and researcher is the focus of this section. Negotiating ethical relationships with advisors, the IRB Committee, and S-L Center staff involved with access to the research site and participants in the study determined whether this research study moved forward.

Access and permission to the research site and potential participants was done through an informational letter (see Appendix A) was sent to the director and assistant director of the S-L Center. The letter explained the researcher’s background, the purpose of the research, research questions, methodology, participant profiles, and time expectations that were salient for this
study and for soliciting willing participants for the study. Under the advice from the Director of S-L Center, the most efficacious way to recruit participants was to give those interested copies of the call for participants letter (see Appendix B). This letter explained the researcher’s background, research purpose, participant expectations, and asked for convenient dates and times for an informational meeting and as well as contact information.

A conversational, informational meeting was arranged to meet with interested participants. The meeting outlined the research study, purpose, protocols, expectations, and timeline for the study. Any questions were entertained at this session, and interested students were informed about the details and expectations of the study. Students interested were given an informed consent form (see Appendix C) to review. Six S-LTAs participants were finalized for this IPA inquiry, solicited primarily with access help from S-L Center staff at a private research university.

**Ethical Implications for Research Design**

This design sought to discover how S-LTAs experienced and processed the unfamiliar and constructed meaning from those S-L experiences. The expectation was for participants to describe and reflect on the experience through conversational in-depth interviews.

According to Creswell (2013), the following list represents the care that one must take in reviewing ethical concerns for personal narrative research, but these concerns would also be salient for other qualitative methods utilizing data collection that involve participants retelling lived experiences. These ethical concerns include: gauging the authenticity of stories, relying heavily on self-reporting, obtaining permission to report stories, preserving the participant's voice, maintaining the integrity of quotes and language, accurate detailing of time/space events, and respecting decisions by participants to discontinue involvement at any time.
Smith et al. (2009) suggested evaluating any harm that may be elicited when talking about sensitive issues (e.g., guilt, privilege, anger). Informed consent for both participation and outcome of data analysis (e.g., the use of verbatim texts) was given. Participants were given and informed to the right to withdraw at any time for up to one month after the interview and opportunities to review the transcript for any comments that may be sensitive in a public domain.

These issues were discussed and understood with all stakeholders before the start of the study, and the informed consent form was available at the interview with specific oral consent regarding unanticipated sensitive issues.

**IRB Process**

The comprehensive, multi-layered approach for IRB approval and protecting human research participation was imperative for the integrity of this study. Honoring the core principles of ethical research (beneficence, autonomy, and justice) was the primary driver that guided the decision making for every facet of this study. Ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, autonomy, ethical data collection/storage, diversity in recruitment, cessation of participation, and full disclosure of research agenda was provided in writing through the informed consent forms (see Appendix C) with copies given to the participants. The participants were asked to sign informed consent forms upon review, and the forms were maintained for three years following completion of study as per IRB guidelines.

Before submission to the IRB approval process, the interview questions were pilot tested and the research protocol was scrutinized by the student researcher and advisor ensured that the research is in strict compliance with IRB. All policies and procedures for Human Research Protections were conducted in accordance with federal regulation and university guidelines. The layered process for IRB approval included the following:
• A completed application for Approval for the use of Human Participants in Research and a signed Assurance of Principal Investigator;

• An initial review and assigned protocol for the type of review status (exempt, expedited or full review);

• The status pending review determined the further action necessary to complete IRB review process;

• All data collection will commence pending approval from IRB.

The next section outlines the data collection methods as well as the provisions used for storing and managing the data collection.

**Data Collection**

The qualitative research method involved collecting data on the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). The student researcher sought to illuminate how the experiences of the unfamiliar initiated meaning making processes for S-LTAs during their S-L experience. The researcher hoped that this narrative would be delivered in a “thickly contextualized manner to reveal the historical, procession, and interactional features of the experience” (Denzin, 1989, p. 26). The collection of data was in three interview sessions: one of 45 minutes, one of 90 minutes, and one of 30 minutes. Interview content was specific, in-depth, semi-structured, and conversational to reconstruct participants’ experiences (Schuman, 1982). The phenomenological interviews employed Smith’s (1996) IPA method of reflection for S-LTAs to tell their story. Written reflections from the participants were solicited. Two participants shared their written reflections that complimented their interview answers. The rationale for both interview and written accounts was to maximize the depth of description of the phenomenon of the unfamiliar in the process of meaning making (King & Horrocks, 2010).
The interview provided not only a description of S-L experiences, but revealed the participants interpreting the actual lived experience during the interview. This study elicited rich data from the interviews characterized by S-LTAs freely telling their stories to reflect the depth and scope of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

**In-Depth Phenomenological Interviews**

The primary source of data collection was the conversational, responsive interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; van Manem, 1990) at a convenient, neutral site or through conversations by phone and skype. The format was a modification of Seidman’s (2006) three interview series and focused on three specialized contexts of understanding: life history, details of the unfamiliar experience, and reflection on the meaning. The first interview included an introduction to the study and focused on participants’ life experiences with S-L (see Appendix D). The second interview asked the participant to recreate and critically reflect on the details of the unfamiliar from their S-L experiences. Interview protocol and questions framed the interview but did not drive the dialogue as the interview process sought depth on the phenomenon of the unfamiliar as it related to the meaning generated from participants’ S-L experiences (see Appendix E). The final and third interview asked participants to review the interview transcripts to ensure they reflected statements and thoughts. At this time, the researcher asked for additional input from the participant (see Appendix F).

The timeline for the interview protocol unfolded as follows. The first 45-minute interview was audio-recorded and focused on demographics and contextual understanding. One week later, the second interview took place. The second, 60- to 90-minute interview was audio-recorded and focused on the details of S-L experiences reflecting on meaning. Upon completion of the second interview, the transcriptions were e-mailed to participants to review for accuracy.
Once the transcription was member checked and confirmed, the researcher began the narrative analysis per IPA. One week later, participants were provided written narratives to review before the final interview. The final, 30-minute interview was audio-recorded and was reserved for member-checking the narrative analysis and to co-generate the narrative analysis, if needed, to ensure and reflect the authenticity of the participant’s voice, statements and thoughts. The researcher then moved to the next participant and repeated the interview protocol and written analysis until all six participants were done.

In-depth interviews in IPA can be qualified “as a conversation with a purpose” as the interview schedule suggested content and order of the interview questions that facilitated S-LTAs and the researcher to enter the S-LTAs world to reveal and reflect on S-L experiences (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57).

Reflection Papers or Blogs

A request was made to examine final reflection papers or blogs written that documented timely reflections on S-L experiences. The reflection papers or blogs were coded thematically through content analysis and used primarily to substantiate and enrich what the participants disclosed through the interview process. This request could mitigate concerns of validity through triangulating more than one set of data (Creswell, 2013). Two participants provided written material and was used to supplement interview data.

Data Storage and Management

Recorded interviews were identified by pseudonyms only and were recorded via the researcher's iPhone, the primary device and a secondary audio-recording device as a backup. The recordings were submitted to an online transcription program. The iPhone was password protected, and the secondary recording device was stored in a locked box. Data storage and
management for the interview files, transcripts, and written documentation were on computer files that were password protected on the researcher’s personal computer at the researcher’s private residence. All participant files used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of those involved in this study. A master file was generated to account for participants/pseudonyms. The paper generated was stored in a locked box at the researcher’s residence. Backup files were also securely stored on a Dropbox account with password access only to the principal investigator and student researcher. Identified transcripts were secured and indefinitely kept after the completion of the study should further analysis be needed for the study.

**Data Analysis**

The data collection process generated 2 hours and 45 minutes of audio-taped data per participant, which was transcribed, member checked, and readied for analysis. The transcripts were professionally transcribed by Rev Corporation, requiring a verbatim account of the questions and answers. Reflection papers, likewise, underwent the same rigor to ensure confidentiality and underwent semantic content analysis. IPA required the researcher to focus analytically on a six-step process that was iterative and inductive for data analysis. These steps included reading, re-reading, initial noting, and developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009).

The next section outlined Pietkiewicz and Smith’s (2014) three major steps (multiple readings and notes; notes to emergent themes; and relationships and clustering themes) of IPA data analysis. Each of these measures must be clearly delineated and organized in separate files under the participant’s pseudonym, so that an independent auditor could easily monitor the sequencing of the analysis and ensure the validity of the analysis (Yin, 1989).
**Multiple Readings and Explanatory Notes**

The procedure commenced with several readings and re-readings of the transcribed interviews notes that allowed immersion in the data and a visualized holistic picture from observations and reflections. Exploratory comments were generated from three levels of coding: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. The descriptive level looked at content that structured the participant’s experience. The linguistic level referred to the attention that was given to semantics and metaphorical use of words that conveyed meaningful ideas. The last level, the conceptual level, moved back to the transcripts and formed the conceptual notations from the interrogation and then from interpretation. This interpretative and iterative process, called for an analysis from a variety of sources that addressed content, the language used, context, interpretive, emotional responses and the personal reflexivity of the researcher. Relevant notes were copiously taken and ensured the researcher maintained an open mind in deep engagement with the participant’s words as they described their lived experience.

**From Notes to Emergent Themes**

Once detailed and annotated notes have reached a comprehensive phase, the next step moved into a concise rendering of emergent themes. The process begins the deeper conceptual work more with the notes than the transcripts as the student researcher aimed to transform notes into emergent themes. The goal was to reach an identifying phrase that captured the interpretive process of the hermeneutic circle (i.e., the part is a relation to the whole, the whole is a relation to the part) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

**Relationships and Clustering Themes**

How things fit together was the next stage for analysis. This process involved organizing, grouping, and conceptual mapping for connections from the emergent themes and then providing
a descriptive label for these relationships for the entire interview transcript. Smith et al. (2009) suggested a variety of ways this can be done. The following list suggests ways the researcher can prepare the relationship across the themes: (a) abstraction (e.g., super-ordinate themes); (b) subsumption (i.e., an emergent theme as superordinate brings together a series of related themes); (c) polarization (e.g., oppositional relationships); (d) contextualization (i.e., key critical events from the narrative); (e) numeration (frequency of themes); and (f) function (e.g., positive or negative interpretations).

Once the themes were teased out, a matrix for themes was made to show the analytic process of thought through. An individual case study was written for the first participant; it was member checked for accuracy, and enhanced with additional insights from both the participant and the researcher. The interview protocol then commenced for the second participant using the same process until all participant interviews and narrative were completed, allowing then for observing comparative patterns across the sample. Table 6 represents the six-step analysis in IPA. This matrix depicts how the researcher approached and ordered the data for analysis.

**Data Analysis Process**

Smith (2007) described IPA data analysis as an iterative and inductive cycle utilizing a variety of strategies that allowed the researcher to focus intently on the participants meaning making. However, as a novice researcher, having a set of guidelines to master the analysis process was invaluable.

Data analysis involved several steps in a comprehensive cycle for an IPA study (see Figure 6). The first step involved numerous immersions into the interview transcript itself. The initial immersion involved listening to the transcripts and become actively focused on hearing the participant’s words. The researcher jotted down compelling observations in the research
Table 6

Matrix of the Data Analysis Process in an IPA

**Step 1: Reading and re-reading**
- Researcher immerses themselves in transcribed data.
- The participant is the focus of analysis.

**Step 2: Initial Noting (Exploratory level)**
- Researcher examines semantic content, context, and initial interpretative comments.
- Researcher considers personal reflexivity.
- Researcher highlights distinctive phrases: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual.
- Researcher uses reflexive engagement by using the participant’s words to substantiate interpretation.

**Step 3: Developing emergent themes**
- Researcher manages the volume and complexity of data by mapping the interrelationships, connections, and patterns between the exploratory notes.
- The original whole of interview becomes a set of parts in the analysis to become and new whole in the write-up.
- Researcher produces concise statements of importance from comments in transcript.
- Phrases speak to the psychological essence while balancing the particular with enough abstraction to be conceptual.

**Step 4: Searching for connection across emergent themes**
- Chart how themes fit together: abstraction (super-ordinate themes), subsumption (emergent theme acquires super-ordinate status), polarization (oppositional relationships), contextualization (identify contextual or narrative elements), numeration (the frequency with which the emergent themes appear), or function (examine emergent themes for their specific function within the transcript).
- Language is deeply intertwined with the meaning and thoughts of the participant.
- Researcher notes how the stage was analyzed and conducted by using a research diary to record descriptions of the analysis process and analytic commentary along the way.
- Researcher make a graphic representation of the structure of the emergent themes and annotates each theme with the line on which it is located with a few key words from the participant to remind you of the source of the theme.
- Researcher constructs files of transcript extracts: for each emergent theme, the researcher opens a new word file, names it with the theme title, and pastes all relevant transcript extracts in the file and identify with transcript line.

**Step 5: Moving to the next case**
- Researcher brackets the ideas that emerge from the first maintains the idiographic integrity.
- Researcher allows themes to emerge with each case.

**Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases**
- Researcher looks for patterns in graphic representations.
- Researcher creates a table to demonstrate nested themes for individual participants.
- The group table shows the most important messages from each participant and to order analysis.
- Researcher will move from descriptive to interpretive analysis.
- Researcher will use Mohanty’s (1975) layers of reflection: pre-reflective reflexivity, reflective glancing at pre-reflective experience, and attentive reflection on pre-reflective, and deliberately controlled reflection.
- The researcher facilitates self-conscious phenomenological reflection with the participant.

*Note. Adapted from Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis Theory: Method and Research by J. Smith, P. Flowers, & M. Larkin, 2009, pp. 82-106.*
and highlighting the deeper sections to explore. The next immersion step of the analysis openly explored and noted the language and content that seemed interesting. These initial notes were more descriptive relationships, places, values, events (the what) that clearly triggered meaning to the participant. A natural development emerged from the initial notes to more interpretative noting that explored understanding of the how and why the participants were concerned with these issues. The researcher engaged the transcripts through initial noting to develop explanatory notes that would highlight the meanings that arose from the participant’s experience. At this point, without losing meaning, it was necessary to collapse the data from large chunks (the whole) into subthemes of organized, concerted reflection and interpretation. The third step, developing emergent themes, included taking the subthemes and organizing them into a concise statement or series of words that reflected the participant’s meaning and conceptual interpretative analysis of the unfamiliar. A matrix was devised that showed the development of verbatim text, subthemes, and emergent themes for the first case as well as an explanation of each emergent
theme. An interpretative narrative was co-created by the participant and researcher to tell the lived story of how this participant created meaning from the unfamiliar in the S-L experience. Once a detailed examination of the first case reached closure, the first case was bracketed before moving to the next case. This process allowed the next participant’s story to unfold without bias maintaining the idiographic feature of an IPA research study. This process continued through all six until all cases were completed. Once all cases were completed, a cross-case analysis was initiated where everyone’s table of themes were scrutinized for convergence and divergence (Smith, 2004). From the table of themes, the researcher surveyed the themes for patterns that would rise to the superordinate status. The super-ordinate status reflected the patterns that were shared by at least three of the participants.

**Trustworthiness: Assessing Credibility, Quality, and Validity**

Creswell (2013) reviewed many validation perspectives relative to qualitative research (Angen, 2000; Eisner, 1991; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). In doing so, Creswell (2013) exposed the tension that the very word *validation* presented to qualitative research. The authors listed posited alternative terms that align with the core tenets of qualitative research rather than default to the traditional quantitative language for discussing validation. The ideas developed by these authors provided the framework for developing strategies that address concerns of credibility, reliability, and quality. Each data source involved had its unique challenges to credibility, reliability, and quality. What is imperative to understand in qualitative research is the researcher’s cognizance of potential threats to credibility, quality, and validity and what strategies will be useful to minimize these threats.
Credibility

The salient strategies for credibility, quality, and evaluation in this IPA study involved a sustained involvement, member checking, thick description, triangulation, clarifying bias, and sustaining a negotiated and highly collaborative relationship with the participant. Member checking involved asking participants to examine rough drafts and provide comments and critical observations. Thick descriptions provided in-depth details of the story to transform the readers into the academic lived experience of the participants. Triangulation of data sources when possible, enhanced and substantively affirmed the interpretive findings. Credibility functions through the transparency of researcher’s bias and reactivity from the onset of the study (Maxwell, 2005).

The researcher’s individual bias was mitigated by an IPA approach because of its inherent understanding that one cannot completely reduce bias in qualitative research. In selecting this methodology, the prime research interest was the explored role that the unfamiliar had on the meaning S-LTAs made during their S-L experience. The primary research intent was to explore the unfamiliar as a catalyst for meaning making in S-L contexts. The researcher’s role was to bring the S-LTA’s stories forward and to be a conduit for interpreted meaning for how the unfamiliar was presented as a catalyst for deeper reflection and engagement.

Quality

Evaluating the interpretive quality of an IPA research study drew upon the work of Yardley (2000). Yardley presented four principles inherent of quality IPA research: (1) sensitivity to context, (2) commitment to rigor, (3) the collective - transparency, coherence, and impact, and (4) importance. Sensitivity to context encompassed several examples that the researcher attended to with the same emphasis, including theoretical, relevant literature,
empirical data, sociocultural setting participant’s perspectives, and ethical issues. Commitment to rigor comprised what the researcher expected regarding thoroughness in data collection and analysis as well as reporting of the research. Commitment entailed the prolong engagement with not only the topic but competence and immersion in methods and relevant data. The completeness of both data collection and analysis was a characteristic of rigor. Transparency and coherence came in at the presentational level of the study. The following questions were answered to ensure both transparency and coherence: Was there clarity and rhetorical power of the description and arguments of discovery? Was coherence presented and aligned with all the research components (questions, paradigm, method, and analysis)? Transparency was detailed every aspect of data collection as well as other relevant aspects that might influence the research process (e.g., researcher’s assumptions or motivations). Finally, the impact and importance principle revealed quality provided it revealed interest or usefulness to the reader. However, upon further research, Smith (2011) revealed additional notions to consider in an IPA analysis. Smith (2011) claimed Yardley “is not specific enough” and offered the following criteria: clarity, subscription to theoretical principles; transparency; coherent, plausible, and interesting analysis; sufficient sampling from data to show the density of evidence for each theme; well-focused, offering an in-depth analysis of the specific topic; strong data and interpretation; and engaging and enlightening work (p. 14). Smith’s (2011) additional criteria suggested a deepened rigor as well as a compelling interest for the reader to digest an IPA analysis. This study attempted to address Smith’s (2011) concerns.

Quality, according to Creswell (2013), must include the researchers, participants, and readers. This collaborative relationship between the researcher and participants with sensitivity for one’s audience was imperative throughout the study. The quality of an IPA study is judged
by how well the researcher actively listened and provided the participants with an environment of trust, transparency, and comfort to enable the meaning of their experiences to be revealed and shared (Riessman, 1993). Through deep reflection and active listening, the chronology of events, experiences, and reflective meanings unfolded collaboratively for both participants and researcher. It was incumbent for the researcher to ensure integrity through mutual respect and ownership for the participants’ narration of meaning by dispelling any gaps through constant collaborative checking and developing a negotiated working relationship at every phase of the study. Collaboration with the participants at every phase of the research validated the accuracy of their lived service experiences. Also, the process reflected a process of making sense. The narrative accounts were written in a clear, coherent manner. This approach allowed the writer to connect with the reader by invoking “the liminal qualities of transcendence, transgression, evocation, complexity, creativity, and engagement” (Sikes & Gale, 2006, p. 24). The narrative accounts were evaluated for their “substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity and participatory ethics, impact, and authenticity” (Sikes & Gale, 2006, p. 25).

Validity

A complete way to ensure validity in IPA research is with an independent audit of the paper trail. This included all research notes, proposal, audiotapes, annotated transcripts, draft reports amassed and securely filed to ensure transparency. This level of transparency ensured that anyone could make sense and follow the entire process (Smith et al., 2009). If an independent researcher conducted an audit of this study, all files would clearly guide the researcher through the same process and analysis. If needed, this study provided additional smaller audits of the investigator’s work (e.g., first interview transcripts and initial notes) are available for a review of best practices and for ascertaining the skills of the researcher.
While validity is imperative for high-quality IPA, Smith et al. (2009) noted that IPA as a creative process, validity requirements needed to be flexibly applied and balanced amongst the growing corpus of IPA research. The balance between high quality and acceptable IPA research is something a novice researcher and supervisor should always be cognizant of (Smith et al., 2009). Member checking ensured authentic meaning was not lost in the analysis and used the participant’s words to substantiate the thematic thought process of the research narrative. Prior permission to use the participant's words in the study were acknowledged per informed consent form (see Appendix C), and anonymity was assured by ascribing a pseudonym to all data sources at every phase of data collection and analyses.

Limitations

Smith et al. (2009) suggested that researchers frame IPA research regarding theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalizability. This study is particular to the experiences of these students at this particular university. The small sample size may be considered a limitation, but Smith et al. (2009) argued that a smaller sample size allows for a deeper analysis. However, it should be noted that the small sample size does not represent all students and this university does not represent all institutions of higher education. A three-interview series offered a unique glance not the totality of the participants’ experience. Also, the participants were asked to recall their S-L and relied on their memories to get at the essence of their experience along with considering the comfort level in sharing personal stories. While the findings are not statistically generalizable, that should not preclude the valuable reflective discourse that emerges from an IPA study. Braun and Clark (2006) posited that IPA is limited also by its theoretical roots; however, Pringle et al. (2011) countered, noting IPA’s theoretical roots add to the depth and purpose of the study.
Summary

Qualitative research that engages the lived stories of others must consider Mumbry’s (1993) postmodern perspective. This perspective considered the lived stories “as consisting of petit recits” (“little narratives”) that continually challenged the stability of received knowledge” (p. 3). In other words, participant and researcher pieced together the narratives with constant reflexivity that invoked a pattern of looking between and behind the words that produced stability and meaning. This study used interpretive narratives to explore the unfamiliar through critical reflection as it contributed to the meaning S-LTAs manifested in S-L and “how [interpretive] narratives function to construct the social reality that constitutes the lived world of social actors” (Mumbry, 1993, p. 5). This study provided a meta-cognitive (both product and process) application of this notion by soliciting little narratives to explore the phenomenological essence of the unfamiliar on the meaning S-LTAs attributed to their S-L experience.

Methodologically, IPA essentially operated on two levels: as a communicative phenomenon and as a representation of an orientation toward the study of social phenomena. IPA methodology provided the critical collaboration between participants and researcher to extract the necessary interpretive meaning from the unfamiliar by placing subjectivity, agency, and voice at the forefront of this research study.

The thorough analysis of the data collected provided a rich narrative to tell participants’ lived experiences in S-L as they critically reflected on the meaning/translation derived from their S-L experiences. The analysis of the researcher making sense of the participants’ making sense of their learning experience is critical to the hermeneutic dialogue (Smith et al., 2009). The next section will provide narrative accounts of the participants’ S-L experiences that will enrich understanding of the meaning drawn from those experiences.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore how S-LTAs experienced and processed the unfamiliar to make meaning from their S-L experience. The data collected and subsequent analytic strategies utilized in this study helped to construct the following sections for this chapter. The sections included (a) phase I, the participants’ stories with themes and subthemes weaved into the narrative, a table for each participant’s themes and subthemes and a summative revelation by each participant, and (b) phase II, a cross-case analysis for all six participants that includes a table of superordinate themes and sub-themes, an explanation for superordinate and subthemes and conclusions drawn for each superordinate theme, and a summation of the chapter.

Primary data for this study was collected via 18 interviews broken down into three interviews for each participant. 16 interviews were face to face and two interviews were held via Skype. The repeated engagement provided both the participants and researcher a chance to really delve into certain topics and allowed for follow-up if needed. More importantly, a trusting relationship could develop over time and continues beyond the research study. It was both a privilege and honor to have shared in the lived S-L experiences and to be able to cogenerate their stories with them.

**Phase I: The Case Stories**

The case stories in phase I provide the participant narratives with specific thematic findings for each participant. For each participant, the themes and subthemes will be presented and discussed. The themes are presented first, followed by the subthemes. A summary table for each participant will be displayed at the end of each narrative followed by a summative revelation for each participant that seemed to encapsulate a meaningful insight.
Anniello’s Story

Anniello is one of six S-LTAs taking part in this study. She is in her third year at Sage University studying biology. Her involvement with S-L began in her first year at Sage University. It began with two S-L experiences that ran concurrently in Anniello’s freshmen year. The first was Jumpstart, a community outreach program, where students would be partnered with a community organization. This experience utilized her work-study opportunity in direct service with the community partner. The second experience involved her academic class in biology. In this class, students who came into the class with advanced placement credit could select certain courses. Anniello selected the one that she was most interested in and one that had an S-L component to it. This was her first academic experience with S-L. However, the collective nature of Anniello’s S-L experiences was intertwined throughout Anniello’s story. Anniello’s coupling of JumpStart and S-L provided a deeper rationale for her involvement in S-L. Anniello entered these S-L experiences with relative unfamiliarity but that did not deter her from being open to new learning experiences. Her willingness to jump into the unknown was reflected in the following statements. She shared, “My first experience with S-L … nobody really knew what it was.” Anniello stated, “I was pretty interested to be in a new city and kind of throw myself out there.”

There were three themes and subsequent subthemes. The themes surfaced from my conversation with Anniello and further analysis with the transcripts. The themes were: solving contradictions (subthemes: experiencing the disconnect, putting the pieces together), reflection reveals (subthemes: popping the privilege bubble, uncomfortable acknowledgement, accountability, and social awareness), and transcending existing beliefs (subthemes: transitions and continued growth). Each theme will be followed by a discussion of its respective subthemes. Following the narrative, Anniello’s core revelations are discussed.
**Solving contradictions.** The theme, solving contradictions, was a strategy chosen by Anniello to ameliorate the unfamiliar challenges she faced in her S-L experience. As Anniello’s academic S-L experience unfolded, she was presented with challenges that required resolution. Anniello’s group was tasked with making the lesson plans for after-school science projects. These projects were used to promote interest in STEM education to underrepresented groups of children. These mini lesson plans and projects were implemented by the organization later. The contradictions felt through the various challenges of simply making the plans rather than implementing the plans led to the sub theme, *disconnections*. One way Anniello began to solve the contradictions permeated by disconnection exposed the second sub-theme, *putting the pieces together*. This process began Anniello’s initial phase for experiencing and processing the unfamiliar.

**Disconnection.** The subtheme, disconnection, was the first challenge Anniello faced with her academic S-L experience. Anniello described this sentiment in several contexts. First, she described the initial feeling, “At the beginning, you may feel disconnected or you’re like, this is just something I must do for class, time commitment… You get caught up in it being another thing to do.” Secondly, her group would feel disconnected from the actual project. According to Anniello:

> It was kind of difficult to be [connected]… We were basically making science after-school programs related to STEM… to get underrepresented groups and children interested in STEM… So, important and so cool, but we were just making the plans… They would be implemented later.
Resolving the disconnection was a critical turning point for Anniello and her group. It was a pull between two paths: the struggle of “just another time commitment” or the path toward a deeper understanding of an unfamiliar context.

**Putting the pieces together.** The second subtheme, putting the pieces together, was a strategy for making sense of both contradiction and disconnection felt by not being directly engaged with the community partners. Fortunately, Anniello’s S-L instructor “challenged [them] to see the bigger picture of everything.” In response to this challenge, Anniello decided to put the pieces together, not only with her personal approach to S-L, but collaboratively with her team to make the experience both fun and informative. Anniello’s decision to process the challenge into a deeper learning opportunity opened many doors to personal reflection and societal inquiry.

**Reflection reveals.** The second theme, reflection reveals, was also a gate-way to process contradiction and to garner deeper meaning. This process challenged Anniello to a deeper form of personal reflection with her S-L experience. Anniello reflected on many things, both personal and more systemic societal implications. In working with urban communities in Boston, the first important reflection was acknowledging the privilege she had growing up. Anniello would characterize the notion of privilege in subthemes, *popping the bubble of privilege* and *it’s uncomfortable*. This second reflection is explaining how Anniello chose to mitigate privilege through reflection on the sub-theme, *accountability*, and then to translate this into action in the subtheme, *social awareness*.

**Popping the bubble of privilege.** In this subtheme, Anniello explored her own privilege both at home and at college. She explained, “I never thought about my privilege. You don’t really think about it until you get to college, I guess, because you’re in a bubble… Then you’re like, pop it.” As Anniello moved beyond the comfort of her bubble engaging with community
leaders from unfamiliar contexts, Anniello was ready to the bubble of privilege. When she did she became open and engaged with the S-L experience rather than simply being exposed to the experience. Anniello explored feelings, her intersectionality, and the deeper social constructs associated with working with untapped educational potential of urban youth. The following subthemes revealed Anniello’s reflective processing of the unfamiliar from her initial feelings of being uncomfortable to becoming more socially aware.

**It’s uncomfortable.** This subtheme reflected the angst Anniello felt as she reflected on her own privilege. She shared, “I think I felt uncomfortable at first. You’re uncomfortable because you’re like, you don’t want to acknowledge that this is so important because of institutional things.” Anniello in the previous quote alluded to ‘institutional things’, the researcher was remiss in not asking for further clarity and perhaps was a missed opportunity. However, in naming her privilege, she has acknowledged its existence. This was necessary for Anniello to continue the reflective process and move toward resolving the conflict she felt regarding her privilege. Anniello, after processing the initial feelings of privilege, experienced the cognitive maturity gained from the unfamiliar in the subthemes, accountability and social awareness.

**Accountability.** The subtheme, accountability, was how Anniello chose to resolve the contradiction that privilege presented. By taking ownership and acknowledging her privilege, she became deeply engaged in her learning S-L experience. Anniello explained, “I think just acknowledging it [privilege], gives your service meaning… It makes you more passionate about what you are actually doing.” By becoming more accountable, Anniello understood her existential role in the S-L relationship. She went on to explain, “You want to think, this is just for fun. This is just to get kids interested, and whatever, but it’s not just that… This is happening and
I can make a difference.” These words from Anniello begin to express a shift from being uncomfortable to more meaningful levels that required a deeper commitment to processing the unfamiliar.

**Social awareness.** This subtheme reflected an insight gleaned from Anniello’s deeper engagement. This level of engagement opened Anniello up to a level of social awareness that she never had the opportunity to think about. Anniello reflected on the needs of communities near the university, the underrepresentation in STEM, under-resourced communities, and how intersectionality advantages those with privilege. Anniello articulated this insight from the following excerpts: “I don’t really think you see how privileged you are when you’re at a university, especially like this one, when literally there are communities like 5 minutes away from where these programs are so important;” “I never thought about that and how minorities are underrepresented;” “I learned that it’s not just coincidence that minorities aren’t so represented in technological fields;” “He [the community organizer] was so thankful because he didn’t have all the resources to have professional do this;” and “My understanding of intersectionality is kind of the way different, not just institutions, but identities in your life intersect to advantage you, disadvantage you or whatever.” These insights gave Anniello the contextual understanding needed to discern on how her privilege could be applied as a force for good in service to others. Anniello embraced this understanding through the next theme, transcending existing beliefs.

**Transcending existing beliefs.** The theme, transcending existing beliefs, served to culminate Anniello’s deeper personal meaning on how S-L had profoundly affected how she continues to move through the world and her relationship to those that inhabit this world. Anniello’s deeper personal meaning concluded with reflection and insight on the personal growth that emerged from experiencing the unfamiliar in her S-L experience. What became clear
from her story were the transitional phases that occurred. As she made meaning of the learning experience, four transitional subthemes emerged. They include: *privilege to inspiration; uncomfortableness to passion; questioning contradictions to accountability; and the transcendent phase of continued growth*. Anniello’s own words revealed the thought process for each transition and the learning shift acquired from experiencing the unfamiliar. It should be noted that these transitional phases have become translational ways of being for Anniello.

**Privilege to inspiration.** This subtheme revealed Anniello’s transition first by acknowledging her own privilege. She decided to use her privilege for a higher calling. The marriage of science and service if platform. She explained, “Having that [understanding of privilege] transcend into inspiration and things that you can teach other people that was a really exciting and new idea that service and science could transcend into an educational thing.”

**Uncomfortableness to passion.** This subtheme was Anniello’s transition from the initial angst of being uncomfortable with things (e.g., her privilege, being in a bubble, not being directly engaged with community) that were unfamiliar. She processed this tension by reflecting on her initial feeling of being uncomfortable. In doing so, she realized the passion of mutual reciprocation from being involved with the community. She explained:

I think they [the community] just gives back knowledge [to you]. It just makes you think and makes you realize different people, different settings, [it begs the question] why are things making you uncomfortable? It brought to me a lot of questions and so much happiness. I always want service to be part of my life.

Anniello’s desire to integrate service in her life, ushered in an approach to process the source of her uncomfortableness. She demonstrated in the following subthemes, *questioning contradictions to accountability and transcendent phase of continued growth*, a higher
epistemological awareness that involved questioning, accountability, and a deeper awareness as she now moves through the world.

*Questioning contradictions to accountability.* This subtheme expressed the transitional understanding, stimulated and nurtured through her S-L experience. She explained,

My S-L experiences questioned and contradicted a lot of things that I had grown up believing, and they pushed me to be uncomfortable and demand more of myself. I held myself accountable for these past beliefs while not judging myself for them. I realized my place in the world and how I move through it more easily or more difficult than others, and now I understand how I can be aware of these interactions and influence them using my privilege.

This passage revealed Anniello’s growth as an individual and as socially responsible person in society.

*Transcendent phase of continued growth.* The final subtheme, transcendent phase of continued growth, is illustrated in Anniello’s final words. Her passion for continued personal growth reminded her of the value of stretching to embrace the unfamiliar and the lessons those experiences taught her. Anniello’s own words appropriately close the chapter of her story.

Anniello shared:

These experiences have profoundly impacted the way that I walk through the world as a more open and compassionate person. These experiences have influenced who I am as a person and have given me an awareness that I am endlessly thankful for and will continue to grow from.

The following table (See Table 7) depicts Anniello’s themes and subthemes as analyzed from her transcripts.
Table 7

Anniello’s Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Key Words and Phrases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solving contradictions</td>
<td>Experiencing disconnect</td>
<td>“At the beginning, you may feel disconnected.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Putting the pieces together</td>
<td>“It [the S-L experience] challenged all of us to see the bigger picture of everything.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflection reveals</td>
<td>Popping the privilege bubble</td>
<td>“I never thought about my privilege… I guess because you are in a bubble… then you’re, like, pop it.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncomfortable / Acknowledgement</td>
<td></td>
<td>“You’re uncomfortable… You don’t want to acknowledge that this is so important.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td></td>
<td>“This is happening. I can make a difference.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social awareness: The need is near</td>
<td></td>
<td>“There are communities, like, 5 minutes away.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Underrepresentation in STEM</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I never thought about how minorities are underrepresented.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Under resourced communities</td>
<td></td>
<td>“He didn’t have all the resources to have professionals do this.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding intersectionality</td>
<td></td>
<td>“…identities in your life intersect to advantage or disadvantage you.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transcending existing beliefs</td>
<td>Transitions: From privilege to acknowledgement</td>
<td>“Having [privilege] transcend into inspiration and things you can teach other people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From uncomfortableness to passion</td>
<td>“Why are things making you uncomfortable? It brought me a lot of questions and so much happiness.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>From questioning contractions to accountability</td>
<td>“I understand how I can be aware of interactions and influence them using my privilege.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continued growth</td>
<td>“S-L experiences have influence who I am… I will continue to grow from them.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anniello’s personal understanding of her truth and meaning from the unfamiliar was succinctly expressed in a core revelation unique to her and her learning experience.

**Core revelation: Understanding intersectionality.** Anniello’s experience in processing the unfamiliar led to a higher understanding of herself in context with the world. She would carry
this understanding and deepened sensitivity to those who enter her lifeworld. She explained this in interview three as a written response to a question posed to her that stated, how did exploring the unfamiliar inform your meaning of S-L? She wrote:

These experiences have profoundly impacted the way that I walk through the world as a more open and compassionate person. These experiences have influenced who I am as a person and have given me an awareness that I am endlessly thankful for and will continue to grow from.

**Ken’s Story**

Ken is a fourth year, economics major at Sage University. Ken’s first introduction to S-L was in his sophomore year in a minor requirement class, called Strategic Philanthropy and Non-Profit Management. This was a two-semester course where the students learn about the nonprofit sector and its relevance to society. The course utilized an S-L component by having the students research various non-profit organizations who have submitted applications for a $10,000 grant. The first semester entailed crafting the grant proposal, requesting the proposal, and outlining what the funding priority would be. In the second semester, applicants were reviewed, site visits were conducted, and the final selection of the non-profit that best meet the needs of the community occurred. The following story unfolded with Ken sharing his experience in the course from beginning to end. Ken was initiated to the process of the unfamiliar with the theme of, not knowing, what to expect from the professor and not knowing what S-L really entailed.

There were three themes and subsequent subthemes. The themes surfaced from my conversation with Ken and further analysis with the transcripts. The themes were: *Not Knowing* (subthemes: *Kumu: An unfamiliar challenge, it’s complicated, insights shared, and levers of change*), *Reflecting from multiple perspectives* (subthemes: *systemic think-meaning, teach to*
question, bring it to the table, seeing past the personal), and Step Back: the view is holistic (subthemes: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, an amalgamation of worth, lessons learned and what truly matters). A table of themes will follow along with Ken’s core revelations.

**Not knowing.** The theme, *not knowing*, is a descriptive phrase that captured Ken’s initial feeling as he entered an unfamiliar context. The intentional, unfamiliar structure of the class as Ken explained, “Was a bit terrifying at first, not knowing what you are doing or what the professor really wants.” This tension was exacerbated with an introduction to an unfamiliar technology. This technology was essential to learn and for completing the class challenge. That challenge would be to advocate for their non-profit organization vying for the $10,000 grant. There are four subthemes (*KUMU: An unfamiliar challenge, it’s complicated, insights shared, and the levers of change*) that supported the theme, not knowing. They are discussed in the next section and provide the context Ken faced as he entered his S-L experience.

**Kumu: An unfamiliar challenge.** The subtheme, KUMU: An unfamiliar challenge, introduces the reader to Ken’s initial challenge in his S-L course. One the challenges that had the most impact on Ken was learning an entirely unfamiliar software program that would be essential to successfully complete the course. Kumu (means “source of wisdom in Hawaiian) was an assistance visualization and mapping program that collapsed the data from non-profit organizations to assess the efficacy levers needed for systemic change. This program, Ken both learned as a student and then as an S-LTA taught it to his students. Ken explained, “The main challenge as a student was to learn Kumu, as an S-LTA, the main challenge was communicating the knowledge about this very unfamiliar technology to students.” Also, Ken explained in addition to unfamiliar software that needed to be learned, all the non-profit organizations were unfamiliar to the Ken’s S-L class as well. As the class began to explore the non-profits,
collaboration between the group members was needed. This collaboration was also a challenge as Ken explained, “It was a challenge to distance ourselves from our own perspectives and think about it in terms of the group.” At the very onset, the foundation of the course was set in the unfamiliar and that was by design. Ken explained the instructor intentionally made instructions for the course ambiguous to nurture individual and group interpretations.

**It’s complicated.** The subtheme, it’s complicated, is a descriptive term that best described the Ken’s initial feeling to the course expectations. Ken explained:

It’s a bit terrifying at first, not knowing what you’re doing or what the professor really wants. Instructions are intentionally vague. They want students to develop their conception of what a system is. The click moment was during when we all presented the maps to each other and looked at how we each brought our own perspectives to this concept of systems thinking. It came together to show it’s a complex issue with many sides.

Despite not having a clear sense of the course, Ken found solace knowing that the means justified the end. He related this notion saying, “You don’t really know what the class is about. You’re thrown a bunch of information in the first weeks. It only comes together in the last few weeks. It always comes together.” It came together for Ken as he made meaning of this experience. Ken’s introspection on this issue is referenced by an observation he shared about the process:

I think as humans we generally tend to think linearly about certain problems. We like to take abstract notions and break them down into things we understand. When you try to do that and you look at real world examples of complex problems, it’s always vastly more intricate and complex that you can ever hope for.
The challenge to articulate your thoughts in class and support your arguments for a non-profit is discussed in the next section.

**Insights shared.** The subtheme, insights shared, marked the pedagogical strategy used through class discussions where students had the opportunity to express what they were discovering, exploring the software, and clarifying the missions for each of the non-profit organizations. Ken explained, “A lot of class time was spent in class discussions. Any sort of insight a student had as was shared with the class, it would be a back and forth in the creative process.” The ability to advocate for your non-profit was an important key in decision-making process that determined what organization received the grant.

**The levers of change.** The subtheme, the levers of change, brought a holistic understanding to Ken’s insight on the unfamiliar. With all the components being identified in the process, Ken explained it was time to explore the dynamics of the process. Ken shared his thoughts:

> You take a problem and you think of everything that could possibly be a part of it and then you sort of weigh which ones have the most influence and how pressing one of these levers affects the rest. We had to assess the levers to be pulled in order to actually realize systemic change.

However, identifying all components to the process would be just the beginning to a myriad of intentional and unintentional learning that followed.

**Reflection on Multiple Perspectives.** The second theme, reflection on multiple perspectives, marked where Ken began to process all the information necessary for making the unfamiliar familiar. This process occurred within himself and in collaboration with others that included a variety of insights and learning styles for putting the pieces together. The following
subthemes (*systemic thinking-meaning, teach to question, bring it to the table, seeing past the personal, and fusion: the blend of experiential with technology*) are indicative of multiple reflective levels used to make meaning of a complex process with many moving parts.

**Systemic thinking meaning.** The subtheme, systemic thinking-meaning, best described the process Ken found necessary to collapse the plethora of information into Kumu, while not losing sight of the totality of the project or the people involved. Ken shared his understanding of the process in the following passage:

> It’s the [class] process of looking at a system and how different programs and different majors connect you to different people or different aspects. As you are learning the software you critically thinking about something you don’t know all these other details that are sort of bolstering you. You tend to think more about what you’re putting in and what’s actually at play.

As Ken became engaged with the software program and class process, he was known to the class as the “Kumu Guru.” Ken assumed this responsibility without reservation placing himself at the very core of the project. Ken explained his initial thoughts saying, “The deeper part is I’m thinking of where to put the data or how things fit together in these complex systems. We use the word ‘systemic change’ and how non-profits affect communities.”

**Teach to question.** The subtheme, teach to question, captured the notion that with all things unfamiliar, questions were mounted to clarify purpose and meaning. Questions were also essential to approach the depths of thinking necessary for the course. Ken explained at the very core of the course was solving problems. Particularly, discerning the most efficacious non-profit worthy of a ten thousand dollar grant as well as advocating for the non-profit that your group has selected. Ken explained the process:
Each group is assigned to map out these different non-profits with the goal of eventually picking one non-profit to sponsor and give $10,000 grant to, and so a lot of people, me included, absolutely pick favorites. And you read about one non-profit who maybe had an issue that’s personal to you and that’s the one you think you should fund or even just analyze and you think it’s the best and I think in a lot of these contexts other people will point out things that you didn’t realize.

Ken resorted to critical thinking as the starting point for advocating for his groups non-profit. Ken explained, “The challenge of critical thinking about if you’re going to look at a problem and how to solve it.” This approach for Ken’s group ushered in a stream of questioning that illuminated a path toward greater understanding and impassioned advocacy.

**Bring it to the table.** With all the groups deeply enmeshed in collecting all relevant information pertaining to their non-profit, it was imperative for each group to articulate the merits for their non-profit. Bring it to the table is a subtheme that described how important it was critically analyze the findings for the group and can provide evidence for advocacy. This was especially true dealing with complex systems and levers of change. Ken explained:

100% collaboration was essential… because when you are looking at the complex systems the more perspectives, the better… Everyone brings something relatively unique to the table and even if it might seem silly or stupid question that other perspective has value in it and when you’re trying to encompass the breadth of complexity the more perspectives you have the better.

Even as collaboration became an essential dynamic, it was difficult to accept other’s perspectives especially if they reflected negatively or challenged your advocacy for your non-profit. However,
Ken learned that many perspectives provided greater depth and breadth when dealing with unfamiliar complex systems.

*Seeing past the personal.* The subtheme, seeing past the personal, reflected Ken’s understanding about balancing personal passion with pragmatic perspective. Ken found that the more familiar he became with his groups non-profit, the more aligned and passionate he became. However, when it came time to release the group’s findings to the class, Ken shared the thought process behind this insight:

So maybe you really liked this non-profit and someone pointed out that, ‘Oh, well, the financial side is a little questionable’ and because you have such a personal connection to the non-profit you sort of put all these visors on it, it’s hard to see past that, so that outside perspective really helps.

While it was difficult to hear negative feedback, Ken could listen with an open mind and relinquish personal ties that may have occluded the group’s decision to fund the most deserving non-profit organization.

*Fusion: The blend of experiential with technology.* The subtheme, fusion: the blend of experiential with technology, among all the levels of interactive learning that Ken experienced, culminated with a reflective passage that detailed the value the course. From its many unfamiliar components, Ken explained:

I think I learned the most of many of my classes taking this course. I really enjoyed the professor’s teaching style and her engagement with the students and I thought the lessons taken from the course were valuable beyond the classroom setting. Which I think a lot of courses you take, you learn the information, then a few years later, you don’t know any of it, and I think the way this course is structured, both the experiential learning with the
learning system technology is all these various aspects you wouldn’t otherwise get in a normal really contribute to this environment where you can learn.

With the assistance of technology, Ken made something unfamiliar, very familiar and made the complex, more manageable. In the next theme, Ken discussed a meaningful learning approach he adopted by simply taking a step back from the complexity of the situation.

**Step back: The view is holistic.** The theme, *step back: the view is holistic*, detailed Ken’s strategy for making meaning. His unique perspective, as both a service-learner and an S-LTA, provided both continuity and a longitudinal approach to learning and teaching. Ken shared his insights as he reflected on processing the unfamiliar from his S-L experience through the following subthemes: *the whole is greater than the sum of its parts*, *an amalgamation of worth*, and *lessons learned*.

**The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.** Through this subtheme, Ken shared the insights gained from his experience. Ken explained:

As a Kumu guru, I learned how to code and take charge of what our map would look like…in doing so I developed a deeper understanding of the process as a whole. Kumu gives you this holistic view, this big picture of how change happens within a community and which levers are pulled by which actions (example: how lobbying affects a law), a law can in turn effect other non-profits- it has a reverberating effect. I think unless you take a step back and try to visualize this big picture, it’s easy to get lost.

Also, Ken explained what affect Kumu had on his understanding for solving complex problems as well as how he approached the problems. What was interesting was how Ken integrated Kumu components to his general understanding of the course. Ken stated:
There are two parts to Kumu: One, the data. Two, thinking about where the data goes. I think both have positive effects when it comes to learning and even the data input serves to reinforce the lessons your learning. It’s never simple, it’s never linear, and you have to think about in terms of all the parts at stake.

Ken expanded on the explicit meaning that experiential learning had beyond the classroom.

**An amalgamation of worth.** Through this subtheme, Ken elaborated on the value that experiential learning had afforded him. Ken noted, “[The critical thinking process is] this distant and holistic view which you don’t often get in the classroom and you’re not often asked about.”

Ken articulated the importance of relevance on his learning process in the following passage:

I mean especially in this age where college tuition is becoming more and more expensive, you want your lessons to be relevant to your life, it feels like what you are doing is worth it, it’s justified and all the time you put into the course and all the work you put in and all the amalgamation of your effort is not wasted. You can see the impact that your hard work has. I think that’s a valuable thing to have in any course.

Ken also reiterated how S-L served to substantiate its value on his education.

**Lessons learned.** This subtheme reflected Ken’s transition for understanding the value of embracing the unfamiliar in one’s S-L experience. He shared:

A lot of people myself included didn’t realize it’s an S-L course. I really didn’t know what S-L was, after taking it and having taught it, I think a lot of students will sort of complain about class and say, ‘Oh, when am I ever going to use this? And when you take one of these S-L courses, that question is immediately answered for you and there’s already this tangible counterpart to what you are learning in the classroom.
For Ken, having a tangible counterpart was a compelling existential tool for him as well as for his students. He shared this notion in the following excerpt:

Just being able to have lessons that students can just get into and fully engage with and actually be passionate about is really important and to have lessons that are demonstrably relevant, that you can actually take the students and show them what they’re learning. Just because for me, that course, I don’t think you could not be engaged with it. You had to be present; I think that’s really powerful.

Being fully engaged and present was imperative for learning something so unfamiliar. According to Ken, the unfamiliarity had a peculiar way of reinforcing the value of the lessons learned. Ken stated, “The main value is that in learning something you’ve never seen before, that I’ve never seen before and that a lot of students don’t really have any comparable experience to compare it, I think that sort of in some way reinforces the lessons that you are learning.”

Ken initial encounters with the unfamiliar is his own S-L course served to not only provide an authentic context for his S-L teaching, but propelled him to a more engaged presence with the students he taught.

The following table (See Table 8) depicts the themes and subthemes from Ken’s transcripts.

Ken concluded by recalling the essence of his learning in two statements: what truly mattered to him and the notion of trust.

**Core revelation: What truly matters.** Ken differentiated between the notions of fixing a problem superficially with the deep matter of systemic change. Ken stated:

What matters to me, it’s the whole lesson that taught in social entrepreneurship and non-profit courses, where a lot of times it’s not to say that it is not important to give food to
<table>
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<th>Themes</th>
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<th>Key Words and Phrases</th>
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<td><strong>Reflecting from multiple perspectives</strong></td>
<td>Systemic thinking-meaning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teach to question</td>
<td>“The challenge of critical thinking about a problem and how to solve it; Other people will point out things you didn’t realize.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bring it to the table</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Seeing past the personal</td>
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<td><strong>Step back: The view is holistic</strong></td>
<td>The whole is greater than the sum of its parts</td>
<td>“I developed a deeper understanding of the process as a whole; KUMU gives you this holistic picture… I think unless you take a step back and try to visualize this big picture, it’s easy to get lost.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>An amalgamation of worth</td>
<td>“You want your lessons to be relevant to your life. What you are doing is worth it… All the amalgamation of your effort is not waste.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lessons learned</td>
<td>“The main value is that in learning something you have never seen before… in some way reinforces the lessons that you are learning.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What truly matters</td>
<td>“What truly matters… that systemic change is actually targeting the roots of the issue… that is going to have lasting change; You realize that everything you have been learning is all over the place is actually connected and relevant to what we are doing outside of class.”</td>
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people that are hungry or to give clothing to people that are homeless. That’s an important thing, but systemic change is actually targeting the roots of the issue, and obviously I think a lot of people want to make the world a better place in a way that is going to have a lasting effect.

Also, Ken collapsed all the moving and unfamiliar parts into one word, trust. When you trust the process and those entrusted with the process something beautiful is borne out. Ken explained:

The lessons all your professors are teaching sort of all come together, it like in terms of teaching style of the course because we ask the students to trust us in the beginning of the course because we draw on so much information and there’s so many different angles in these complex systems. As the semester progresses it comes together in this beautiful way and as you start to understand the technology you start to understand how non-profits interact with the community. It sort of like this ‘aha’ moment where you realize that everything you’ve been learning that just seems all over the place is actually connected and relevant to what we’re doing outside of the class. And that was like the most powerful part of the class.

Ken was both the first and last of the data collection process as the interviews unfolded. The synchronicity of the opening vignette of this study on the distraction of technology and the conclusion from the last interview is a lesson on trust. Ken trusted the process and in turn the unfamiliar gave back to the process unlimited insight into cognition with a purpose. That purpose may have been different for each participant but the unfamiliar unfolded for each of them, exactly as it was intended.
Nathan’s Story

Nathan identified as a 23-year-old Asian-American male. Nathan grew up in Silicon Valley and came to Boston to study international business in the Chinese language track. Nathan quickly realized the international business course load precluded him from doing other things and switched to his current major of finance and information systems. While Nathan did not fully embrace the finance side of this dual major, he embraced the information systems side as a more tenable avenue given his core values. There were three themes and subsequent subthemes. The themes surfaced from my conversation with Nathan and further analysis with the transcripts. The themes were: into the abyss (subthemes: being unprepared, powerless and beyond, teaching is hard, and cultural play, conflict default), reflection evolves (subthemes: in the beginning, transactional reflection, and learning from others), and getting it: thinking outside of yourself (subthemes: transitional understanding, empathy, deeper engagement, and looking back). A table of themes will follow the narration and Nathan’s core revelations will be discussed.

Into the abyss. The theme, into the abyss, described and encapsulated the spectrum of challenges Nathan encountered from this new learning experience. Nathan expressed trepidation as he entered the classroom to help Asian students with their homework. S-L can be daunting for some even under the most familiar conditions. The following subthemes: being unprepared, language barriers, cultural play and conflict, powerless and beyond, and teaching is hard served as markers for Nathan’s initial understanding of his S-L experience. From these subthemes, it was clear that Nathan’s journey illuminated both academic and personal challenges.

Being unprepared. The subtheme, being unprepared, characterized Nathan’s initial exposure to S-L. Prior to switching his major, Nathan took a class unaware that it carried an S-L component. Nathan chose the path of least resistance relative to the time commitment by tutoring
Asian students ages 7-11 at the YMCA on Saturday mornings. Nathan explained, “There was no in-class preparing. To be honest, I think the Chinese level I had to do that [S-L] was not appropriate … and I definitely was unprepared to deal with a bunch of kids from Asia,” this referring to his first S-L experience at the YMCA.

**Language barriers.** This subtheme, language barriers, was an unfamiliar trigger that would prompt the need to assess meaning and direction for the role he was required to play. The students that Nathan tutored fluctuated between speaking Mandarin and Cantonese knowing that Nathan could only speak Mandarin. Nathan felt powerless at that time, but was determined to work through this situation despite the unfamiliarity with Cantonese language. Nathan shared, “…the kids would talk to each other in Cantonese, but I’m only learning Mandarin…I have no idea what they are talking about.” However, rather than sink in despair, Nathan continued the need to process this experience.

**Powerlessness and beyond.** The subtheme, powerlessness and beyond, described how Nathan felt during his S-L experience. He continued the conversation by personally reflecting about challenges and insight gleaned from the S-L experience. Nathan expressed,

> As an 18, 19-year-old working with a group of kids, you can still kind of feel powerless in a way… It feels like you hit a wall… I don’t feel like I’m making a significant impact… It doesn’t feel rewarding… I feel like under a certain threshold if you can’t make a significant impact it’s kind of distressing.

**Teaching is hard.** This subtheme reflected a deeper angst Nathan experienced while he was tutoring his students as the YMCA. It was here that Nathan began to question and was compelled into deeper introspection and rationale of purpose. Nathan observed the varied levels of commitment that students had for S-L and sought appropriate strategies to fully engage his S-
L students. It would be here that Nathan understood that, teaching is hard. This experience informed Nathan’s approach to being an S-LTA. Nathan stated, “I feel like it is hard because sometimes you’re working with three or four kids and they all want different things out of coming to the Y.” Also, Nathan realized, “Everyone learns in a different way… what is suitable for them... and my being limited in speaking, understanding, and writing in Mandarin makes it hard to do that.” Nathan explained the challenging roles he encountered as a tutor. He shared, “In a way, you have a duty of being a tutor and helping them out, but your roles aren’t defined to a point where you feel justified with saying you need to stop talking with your friend and do your work.” Nathan observed the varied levels of commitment that students had for S-L and sought appropriate strategies to fully engage his S-L students. He used reflection as a means for understanding and for developing more efficacious strategies for his students.

**Cultural play conflict and default.** Despite Nathan’s S-L experience being less than he had hoped for, it was not without value, as it moved Nathan to a more empathic understanding of others and a more personal processing for meaning. The subtheme, cultural play and default, made Nathan reflect on his own cultural upbringing. Nathan realized that he also used two cultural understandings to move between his Asian and American upbringing. Nathan shared, “I think it’s always difficult because there are aspects of the Asian and American cultures that conflict. The way I deal with those two conflicting things is there are some situations where you default to Asian values, there are some situations where you default to American values.” The fluidity with which Nathan moved between two life-worlds helped him to be more open and understanding to the challenge that his students were experiencing.

**Reflection evolves.** The theme, reflection evolves, emerged for Nathan as an organic process for deriving meaning from within and from the help of others. It would be here, amidst
the reflective space of other S-LTA’s, that Nathan understood the varying levels of student commitment for S-L but also, the appropriate strategies to be taken to fully engage S-L students. It would be here that Nathan understood that the importance of reflection and that “S-L is more complicated” than simple reciprocity. The subthemes: in the beginning, transactional reflection, and learning from others, marked the evolving nature of Nathan’s reflective process.

In the beginning. The subtheme, in the beginning, highlighted Nathan’s initial understanding of the reflection process. It was important to understand Nathan’s initial understanding of S-L as a student fulfilling a course requirement evolved into “something much more.” Nathan reflected that, “[In my S-L class], reflection was, like, not a big component of it for me at the time. I was just writing whatever was on the top of my head.” This subtheme was the baseline for how Nathan approached reflection. As Nathan’s story continued, it became apparent that he experienced a shift in understanding about the value of reflection on many levels, personally and academically.

Transactional reflection. The subtheme, transactional reflection, described a type of reflective behavior both Nathan’s students and Nathan himself used in academic and social encounters. Interestingly, Nathan’s experience with his students triggered a reflective insight on his own Asian upbringing. Nathan explained that he fluctuated between using American and Asian values contingent on the situation he was in; just as his students fluctuated between using both Mandarin and Cantonese languages in his classroom. Nathan could relate to his student’s need “to be inside their own Asian community”.

Nathan also related how reflection was driven by the teaching assistant prompts with the on-line discussions. Nathan felt this reflective exercise was motivated by fulfilling a grade requirement rather than something he enjoyed doing. Nathan explained:
I think the idea of being able to reflect is good, but it felt more like something that we didn’t do because we really wanted to, or we enjoyed reflecting. It was more like, this is also a component of your service-learning thing that you need to do in order to get your grade.

*Learning from others.* It would be this subtheme, learning from others, where Nathan understood the value of reflection. By moving through an unfamiliar experience as an S-L and then with other S-LTA’s, Nathan began to shift his thoughts on reflection. He shared:

> We had weekly meetings with other S-LTAs and honestly SLTA meetings were one of the best experiences I had at [Sage University] … Everyone’s listening, time devoted to listening to other people, reflecting on their experiences and it feels like a good environment to reflect on yours.

*Getting it: Thinking outside of yourself.* The final theme, *getting it: thinking outside of yourself*, is where Nathan gave a rich chronicle of the how S-L had changed him. This sentiment is reflected in the following passage:

> At first, I feel like I saw it [S-L] as a mandatory portion of course learning, and now, I feel like it is something more complicated than that. I didn’t understand how much students could benefit from doing S-L… Not every student benefits in the same way. Not every student is willing to reflect on it as much, but I felt like it was a really good way to kind of think outside yourself.

There were four subthemes that expressed Nathan’s process for making meaning from the unfamiliar. It begins with the subtheme, *transitional understanding*, where Nathan assessed his current challenges, beliefs, and understandings and reconstruct new constructs that brought
deeper meaning to his experience. This will be followed by a discussion of the new personal insights shared through the subthemes, *empathy*, *deeper engagement*, and *looking back*.

**Transitional understanding.** The subtheme, transitional understanding, described how Nathan’s current understandings were derived from deconstructing and reconstructing meaning from the unfamiliar challenges he faced during his S-L experience. The following subthemes represented three behavioral shifts from exploring the unfamiliar.

**Empathy.** The subtheme, empathy, described how Nathan moves through the world now with a deeper appreciation for S-L, an empathic sense for others, a richer sense of himself, and with the tools necessary to teach others. Nathan explained:

> As a student, it’s easy to see all these requirements from now until when school is done that I need to do, the classes, the, co-ops and it’s just like me, me, me, then you go do service learning for two to three hours per week and it’s not me, me, me, there are other people and they have stuff going on.

**Deeper engagement.** The subtheme, deeper engagement, is how Nathan approached helping others in learning contexts. Nathan stated, ‘as a student it’s so easy to be [consumed with knowing] these are all the requirements for graduation.” However, through deeper engagement, Nathan embraced S-L as more than a requirement and translated this through the following excerpt: “I think doing S-L has made me develop a greater appreciation for taking time out to try and help the community around you.”

**Looking back.** The subtheme, looking back, explained the reflective insight gained from his S-L experience and the effect it had on his learning and his approach to future challenges. Nathan’s opportunity to explore the unfamiliar through the S-L context, helped him become more familiar with his understanding of himself in context with others. S-L’s experiential nature
and inherent contextual unfamiliarity became Nathan’s existential teacher, urging him toward greater self-awareness, understanding of others, and for facing the challenges of cultural fluidity. Nathan reflected:

I think if I could go back as myself now, back to the YMCA, I think I’d have more tools; not just lingual, but I’m more confident about trying to deal with people… [And through] seeing students come from Asia and having English as their second language, [understanding that] it must be so hard to make the transition between being here and there, it made me think about growing up Asian-American, you’re like exposed to two different sets of values, and there’s an appropriate way to act in every situation depending on the group of people you’re with.”

The following table (see Table 9) depicts the themes and subthemes for Nathan, the third participant in this study. Three themes (into the abyss, reflection evolves, and getting it) are followed by the subthemes and the key words that align with the subthemes.

**Core revelation: The joy of service.** Nathan made a fundamental ontological shift in understanding of what S-L truly is. He moved from utter resistance imploring God “in not wanting to do this” to understanding the joy behind moving beyond oneself. Nathan’s engaged S-L experience to experience and find meaning from the unfamiliar, continued to inform him as he translated this experience as he became an S-LTA. Nathan closed our collaborative rendering of his story by sharing, “I learned the joy of service as I became more aware of the issues in the community and developed a greater sense of duty for solving them.”

**Gem’s Story**

Gem is a fourth-year student in behavioral neuroscience with a minor in computer science at Sage University. Growing up in an affluent neighborhood with good schools and
Table 9

Nathans’s Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Key Words and Phrases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Into the abyss</strong></td>
<td>Being unprepared</td>
<td>“I was definitely unprepared; The kids would talk to each other in Cantonese. I only know Mandarin. I have no idea what they are talking about.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Powerless and beyond</td>
<td>“Working with a group of kids you can feel powerless… It doesn’t feel rewarding.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Teaching is hard.</td>
<td>“Everyone learns in a different way… Being limited in speaking Mandarin made it hard to do that.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cultural play, conflict default</td>
<td>“I think it’s always difficult because there are aspects of the Asian and American cultures that conflict… Some situations you default to Asian values… Some situations you default to American values.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection evolves</strong></td>
<td>In the beginning</td>
<td>“Reflection was not a big component for me at the time.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transactional reflection</td>
<td>“It was more like a component of your service-learning thing that you need to do in order to get a grade.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Learning from others</td>
<td>“S-LTA meeting time [was] devoted to listening to each other… Reflecting on their experiences and it felt like a good environment on yours.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Getting it:</strong></td>
<td>Transitional understanding</td>
<td>“I saw [S-L] as mandatory portion of a course learning and now I feel it is something more complicated than that; I felt like it was a really good way to think outside yourself.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Thinking outside of yourself</strong></td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>“Go do service-learning for 2-3 hours per week and it’s not me, me, me. There are other people and they have stuff going on.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Deeper engagement</td>
<td>“I think doing service-learning has made me develop a greater appreciation for taking time to try and help the community around you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Looking back</td>
<td>“I’m more confident about trying to deal with people… Seeing students come from Asia having English as their second language… It must be hard to make the transition.”</td>
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supportive parents prepared Gem for the college track. Community service was a part of her high school experience, so the natural lead into community-academic service at Sage University was an attractive feature to explore. She did two years of Jumpstart, one year as an S-LTA, and one year as an S-L street team member at Sage University.

This story begins with Gem becoming involved with Jumpstart even before arriving on campus. After hearing about Jumpstart at orientation, Gem contacted the site director: “I want to apply for this. Please let me know how I can proceed with this program.” However, as familiar Gem was to community service, S-L in an urban center disrupted her existing notions and presented existential tensions with the unfamiliar.

There were three themes and subsequent subthemes. The themes surfaced from my conversation with Gem and further analysis with the transcripts. The themes were: *I had no idea* (subthemes: *expect the unexpected* and *learning opportunity/teaching moment*), *reality check* (subthemes: *seeing is believing*, *making it real*, and *the whys of difference*), and *be the change* (subthemes: *make an impact*, *S-L: an indelible bond*, *changing thoughts*, and *social responsibility*).

**I had no idea.** The theme, I had no idea, were Gem’s own words that expressed her initial thoughts as she entered her S-L experience. While Gem’s desire to help, inner-city youth was strong, she would be the first to admit, “I was just kind of clueless and just kind of learned as I went.” She soon realized, “This is a lot more than I signed up for.” Gem reflected, “Going into a service-learning setting is typically something you may not be familiar with.” Nonetheless she persisted, recalling how she felt walking into the Jumpstart classroom. She explained her feeling the very first day: “The minute you get into the classroom you’re like, I have no idea what I’m doing and there are screaming kids running around and I just can’t.” However, despite
the chaos and the unfamiliarity with this environment, she went back, day after day, for two years to serve the pre-K children in Boston.

*Expect the unexpected.* The subtheme, expect the unexpected, was one of Gem’s first revelation from her S-L experience. As she entered the environment of the community partner she was serving, she experienced two poignant contextual moments. Chaos ensued from each of these situations, but from chaos came a reflective insight that would serve Gem in her professional and personal pursuits.

Gem recalled two incidents that occurred in the classroom from which she could draw meaning from chaos. The first incident involved a three-year old boy. She explained:

This little boy, age three, came in half-way through the program. He came in the first day and had to get his diaper changed. He escaped from the teacher, running around in his diaper, pants thrown everywhere. He was just running around and yelling all over the classroom.

The second event occurred as the children were about to enter nap time. Gem recalled what happened that day:

There was this one time when one of the students really didn’t want to take a nap and she felt angry, so what happened is that she started yelling at the teachers in a five-year old type of way, but the next thing I knew this little girl picked up a chair and she threw it across the classroom.

The energy of thirty young children ages three, four, and five would be a challenge for most people. However, the teachers and the support staff in service to the community were committed to the development of the young children in their charge. From chaos, came the necessary questions and challenges that Gem would need to process.
Learning opportunity/teaching moment. The subtheme, learning opportunity/teaching moment, was how Gem chose to remediate chaos from the unfamiliar and begin meaning making. Gem’s commitment far outweighed her fear and she was quick to admit, “This was my first day, so I was nervous, excited, confused, and just trying to be aware of my surroundings.” Gem translated this awareness “to learn as much as possible about my environment and the culture of the classroom itself, just follow my team leader she said to herself. I’m going to follow your lead.” Gem continued to adapt to her learning environment and adopt a learning approach revealed in the following passage, “You just have to go into the situation, no expectations, know that you are as prepared as you can be, and learn from the first day and adapt to what you find in your environment.” Gem continued to learn from her experience realizing that she was also an integral part of the learning environment. She reflected on, “I think this was just a really good learning opportunity [referring to the chair throwing incident] for me to realize the impression I could have on these kids in terms of learning to appropriately deal with their emotions.”

Reality check. The theme, reality check, was Gem’s realization on the existential value of her S-L experience. Gem was inspired by the progress she observed in the classroom. The fact of being in the classroom to experience the wins, the chaos, and the progress the children made had a way of opening her eyes to greater understanding regarding ethnic differences, educational disparities, and societal challenges that her students faced.

Gem’s commitment to the second year with the same group of children deepened her reflection. She explained, “This [situation of the student throwing the chair] helped me realize that unexpected things are going to happen and you can’t control everything in your environment.” This insight served Gem as she approached other community settings that were unfamiliar with a sense of calm, respect, and with no preconceived expectations. She explained,
“I took a moment to really reflect the professionalism with which they [the classroom teachers] handled the situation. Gem reflected on seeing the little boy who refused to get his diaper changed in the second year of her service. She explained,

It was so powerful to see this child who wouldn’t keep his clothes on to this child who was respectful, excited, dedicated, involved and had shown progress. The progress we saw in just two years of coming twice a week was astounding. It was the most memorable thing for me and the first thing I go to when I talk about [S-L], when people are like, does this actually have an impact? And I’m like, absolutely, it has an impact.

Seeing in believing. The subtheme, seeing is believing, reaffirmed Gem’s value for S-L. Gem explained, “I keep repeating the same things, but until you’re in the that environment you don’t [realize], like sure, it sounds great or whatever, but to see it in person is just like, wow, I actually helped to create this progress.” Gem expanded her support and enthusiasm for experiencing the real world through the following statement:

It was really eye-opening in terms of the fact… You can hear about the environmental crisis or the homeless crisis or the education gap, but it’s different when you can find something you’re passionate about and you can apply yourself to it.”

Gem moved deeper into the reflection on the unfamiliar with the following assessment:

You’re going into this setting, which is typically something you may not be familiar with…It’s like a reality check going into a situation like that, and it brings home the fact that there is an education crisis. This is a real thing and maybe you’ve heard about it, but seeing a purpose that an organization is dedicating to in person is different than just reading about.
**Making it real.** The subtheme, making it real, reinforced Gem’s epistemological connection made by embracing learning authenticity through participation in real life experiences. She confirmed this in the following observation:

> Seeing it in person brings it home and makes it real. It helps me get more passionate about it, I was like, wow. This is a real thing, you should do more than throw money at an organization. They need more than that.”

Gem would do more and it would be action with an impact that drove her to deeper involvement with S-L. However, there was still some contextual learning that had to happen for Gem.

**The whys of difference.** The whys of difference is a subtheme that catapulted Gem into deeper questioning of the unfamiliar. Being in an urban classroom challenged Gem in many ways. An interesting observation was felt by Gem as soon as she entered the classroom of her community partner. She noted,

> Going into the classroom of student they all had dark skin, some skin as black as night. Children notice differences, and they are like why is your hair that color? Why is your skin so light? I was like, I was in the minority in this classroom. This is different… I was, if you look around this room one of these things is not like the other and that’s me. It was a different feeling.

This observation was an important understanding for Gem personally and later as she became an S-LTA. The experience of being in the minority was valuable for preparing other students for going into the community. She explained:

> For some S-L students I knew they definitely might be uncomfortable going out into some of these areas that have a bad reputation. It’s different, you might end up being the minority and that might be something you’re not used to, and it puts you in the spotlight.
Gem understood that difference and unfamiliarity are powerful tools for learning and for developing personal meaning.

**Be the change.** The theme, be the change, motivated Gem as she became more familiar with her various roles in both Jumpstart and as an S-LTA. She became more comfortable with each new experience, drawing from her previous understanding and insight from the community interactions. Gem understood that to make change one needed to take an active part. She explained, “You’re one person, who’s one out of six billion or something but you have to take action for something to change.” The following subthemes (make an impact, S-L: an indelible bond, changing thoughts, and social responsibility) supported Gem’s desire to do something to help others.

**Make an impact.** The subtheme, make an impact, reflected an important application of Gem’s energy that became part of her world view. Gem understood that her role was becoming more expansive as she identified challenges and contributions she brought to the classroom. She explained in three passages what this meant to her. She said, “To me it [learning experience] meant that my presence in the classroom that I had more opportunities than I realized.” Gem elaborated:

I do have the opportunity to make an impact. I had a lot more to offer than just literacy, how to help students grow and handle their emotions and their feelings and that would help set the groundwork for the rest of their maturing personalities.

She also said, “You’re one person, who’s one out six billion or something but you have to take action for something to change.” S-L became a platform for change to occur. Gem readily embraced this opportunity to make a difference.
**S-L: An indelible bond.** The subtheme, S-L: an indelible bond, revealed Gem’s understanding that the S-L platform, as unfamiliar as it was, provided greater clarity and coherence for self-understanding and understanding others. She explained, “What it has done for me, and I think the hyphen [in S-L] the biggest thing is learning is not separate from service.” This understanding was translated into the broader purview of social contexts and as Gem approached larger life applications. However, before applying the notion of S-L into broader contexts, Gem acknowledged how her thought process had changed in the following subtheme, changing thoughts.

**Changing thoughts.** This subtheme, changing thoughts, reflected the change Gem underwent in her thought process from interacting with new and relatively unfamiliar situations. She explained:

> What I learned in the classroom and doing things within the larger community changed my thought process about how I handle new situations and meeting new people…especially [with people] from diverse backgrounds different from me and diverse communities that I had no experience with. I just changed my perspective of approaching these new situations. It just let me be more open-minded and calm and respectful to anything I came across, which was very important.

As Gem helped to lay the learning groundwork for her pre-k students, her experience with her students helped Gem lay the groundwork for her professional approach to her future clients.

**Social responsibility.** As Gem began to expand her thought process into other applications, she was reminded what her S-L had taught her. The social responsibility subtheme was the platform Gem used to translate deep personal meaning into action. She noted, “When you are learning a new job whether it’s education or anytime you are learning anything at all you
can apply it to the world at large.” She continued the support for this understanding and application in the following passages:

There is always something that you can do for other people, for animals, for the environment… for anything that might need assistance, and everything does… you can apply it given the skill that you have.

I think every person should have some type of requirement or encouragement to do some form of community service… you are always going to learn something new and it’s always going to help shape you as a member of society.

The following table (see Table 10) presents three themes (I had no idea, reality check, be the change,) and subthemes with keywords from Gem’s transcript to provide support for the themes.

**Core revelation:** Gem’s core revelation was revealed by balancing the passion as Gem interfaced with her deep commitment to service and her professional career. Community service would always be an integral piece of Gem’s future. She explained:

Just finding an organization that I can get involved with as a volunteer on the weekends or week nights after my job, so I have a balance of having a career that I’m passionate about and at the same time having a role in the community that I’m also extremely passionate about. That helps to [make] my experiences well-rounded… making sure I’m also impacting the community at large.

As Gem’s future unfolds, it will be filled with new or unfamiliar events. Gem now approaches these events by viewing them as a wealth of opportunity. Gem explained:

Try something new because I think that long term involvement in a mission or service organization is really important… You can actually get in-depth involvement,
### Table 10

*Gem’s Themes and Subthemes*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Key Words and Phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>I had no idea.</em></td>
<td>Expect the unexpected</td>
<td>“I had this idea I wanted to be involved in the community… because that I was just clueless… This is a lot more than I signed up for.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning opportunity/teaching moment</td>
<td>“I learned that you have to go into a situation, no expectations… and learn from the first day and adapt to what you find in your environment.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Reality check</em></td>
<td>Seeing is believing</td>
<td>“Until you’re in that environment you don’t realize… but to see it [students’ progress] in person just like, wow, I actually helped to create this progress.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Making it real</td>
<td>“You’re going into this setting, which is typically something you may not be familiar with. It’s like a reality check; Seeing it [an organization’s purpose] in person brings it home and makes it real.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The whys of difference</td>
<td>“Children notice differences… Why is your hair that color? Why is your skin so light? I’m the minority in the classroom. This is a different feeling.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Be the change</em></td>
<td>Make an impact</td>
<td>“You have to take action for something to change; To me, it [the learning experience] meant that my presence in the classroom that I had more opportunities than I realized; I do have an opportunity to make an impact.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S-L: An indelible bond</td>
<td>“What it has done for me… is learning is not separate from service.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social responsibility</td>
<td>“Anytime you are learning anything at all you can apply it to the world at large. There is always something you can do for people, for animals, for the environment.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Changed thoughts</td>
<td>“What I learned in the classroom, larger community changed my thought process about how to handle new situations and meeting new people… It changed my perspective of approaching these new situations. It just let me be more open minded, calm and respectful to anything I came across; I think every person should have or be encouraged to do some form of community service… It’s always going to help shape you as a member of society.”</td>
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knowledge, and have an impact on the community… Try something new so that you can get a new perspective and look at a new situation that needs more help.

As Gem continued her work encouraging students at Sage University to get involved with S-L, one is reminded that learning outside of our comfort zones can challenge you in ways that last a lifetime. Gem’s shared her final thought from her lived experience in S-L, “There is always something you can do for other people, animals, the environment, for anything that might need assistance, and everything does.” Gem’s words indicate how the unfamiliar from her S-L experienced reinforced her understanding of what it means to human on this earth. The essence of helping others is what Gem brings with her as she moves through life.

Ren’s Story

Ren is a female graduate student in at Sage University. She graduated in May with her doctorate in physical therapy. The myriad of S-L experiences over the course of her academic career were intriguing. Intriguing from the standpoint, that one could literally see the evolution of S-L at Sage University through Ren’s timeline. The word intriguing can also be used to describe Ren’s initial curiosity about S-L. She recalled, “I just remember being intrigued by school and learning more about integrating into the community from the university perspective.” Ren’s eight-year path through S-L took a little different direction than most. Ren was a facilitator and S-LTA for two classes in undergraduate school. In graduate school, she was both a service-learner as well as an S-LTA. Ren would later recall “…that she drew upon her S-LTA experience for the S-L and then drew upon her S-L for being an S-LTA. This integration of S-L roles uniquely positioned Ren to reflect deeply about each experience.
There were three themes and subsequent subthemes. The themes surfaced from my conversation with Ren and further analysis with the transcripts. The themes were: **challenging contexts** (subthemes: unique experiences, unique challenges, unfamiliar communities, connect and relate), **entering the learning portal** (subthemes: an unpretentious approach, supersize your experience, learn from your mistakes), **reflect with an open mind** (subthemes: difference as teacher, and the nexus of people and place), and **seeing with new eyes** (subthemes: growing from experience, looking in …to be better out, a changed me, what do you need?). A table of themes will follow the narrative, along with a discussion of Ren’s core revelations.

**Entering the learning portal.** The theme, *entering the learning portal*, described Ren’s understanding for need to form close bonds with her community members and the need to deepen relationships to become an effective professional. Ren incorporated this understanding through her interactions with the clients and community partners. Ren’s understanding of the unfamiliar came through as an individual trying to understand her space and position in relation to others in both an unfamiliar context and circumstances. Two subthemes emerged from this theme include: *an unpretentious approach* and *super-size your experience*.

**An unpretentious approach.** The subtheme, an unpretentious approach, spoke to Ren’s humility and respect in learning from others. This approach was expressed in numerous passages throughout the conversation. In Ren’s own words she explained, “There’s a lot we can learn from community members…we’re not these know-it-all students who need to impress our knowledge upon people, that’s not what it is all about.” A poignant example of Ren’s interaction with a community member is illustrated in the following excerpt:

I tried to gain as much from the experience as possible… One of our community members had gout. I talked with her to figure out what her perception of her disease was
and what her experience was and what she felt and just really try to see a different perspective.

**Super-size your experience.** The subtheme, super-size your experience, captured Ren’s need to learn as much as she could from each S-L experience. Ren’s fervent curiosity was the motivation to create a learning palette that made every moment for Ren, an experiential brush stroke to her personal canvas of meaning. Ren explained, “I always tried to gain as much from the experience as possible” and “really use it as an opportunity to see a different perspective and get information from a different point of view.” Ren began to experientially paint with contrast and depth, but as with any new experience, there would be a learning curve.

**Challenging contexts.** The second theme, challenging contexts, described the varied S-L contexts and roles that Ren encountered in her eight-year academic career. These experiences set the stage for Ren’s processing of the unfamiliar through her recollection and reflection. These contexts challenged Ren to reach for the goals that each S-L experience proffered.

**Unique experiences, unique challenges.** The subtheme, unique experiences, unique challenges, perfectly characterized Ren’s many and varied S-L experiences. Ren’s first experience in 2009 was as a facilitator (as it was called back then) for 80 students working with three community partners. The class was a health science class called Food Behavior and Eating Disorders. Ren recalled the experience as “okay” and “challenging” but felt “the faculty didn’t really integrate the S-L” as it was all for extra-credit. In 2011, Ren’s second S-L experience was a class in Inequality and Race. The class rotated faculty and topics and she recalled the class as “being very positive, with small ten-person elective with four really amazing faculty”. As the S-L program grew, Ren’s biggest S-L challenge came as an S-LTA for 110 students and fourteen community partners. Ren’s job was, “to talk with the students and place them in an S-L site,
participant in class discussions, and assist with class materials.” Ren tried to impress on her students to embrace the experience in several ways. However, many times Ren was met with some resistance as she explained:

I really wanted students to open their minds to other people and ways of thinking, and I really tried to maintain an open mind and just learn from other people’s experiences and just tried to open the students up to a different perspective, and a lot of students were like: ‘Ugh, I have to do one more thing on top of school work.’

Ren reflected on her own varied S-L experiences. She recalled, “I made a lot of mistakes as I interacted with people from a lot of different backgrounds.” This would be a recurring theme as the Ren moved deeper in to recalling specific service experiences which she questioned both her language and behavior in unfamiliar setting and with new people she interacted with.

**Unfamiliar communities: So, close, yet so far.** The subtheme, *unfamiliar communities: So, close, yet so far,* captured Ren’s observation of being positioned between the Sage campus and urban communities. She explained that she traversed the area repeatedly without ever having interacted with the community residents. When asked if she could recall a time when she faced an unfamiliar environment or situation within the community, Ren responded:

Its most of the time. I lived close to Jefferson Hill near Sage University for a long time. I’ve used their fields but never really met or talked to any community members at Jefferson Hill nor had I explored the community, so my orientation day was new and unfamiliar to me. I learned by watching how he [the facilitator] interacted with the community members, how they responded to the way he reacted…seeing how he played off people was very helpful.
Ren observed others to try and understand how to approach and adapt to an unfamiliar environment and the people that she would eventually interact with.

**To connect and relate.** The subtheme, *to connect and relate*, was paramount for Ren’s understanding. Forming relationships was the key to connect to both people and contexts that were unfamiliar. Ren explained, “the service itself was always challenging: trying to find ways to connect with the community members, they were older with really different backgrounds than I.” One of the ways Ren, as a service learner, formed bonds with her community members would be to “ask about the community we were serving in and to learn about some of the history.” Having a shared learning experience with the community members, Ren connected to the community on a personal level.

**Learn from your mistakes.** The subtheme, *learn from your mistakes*, served to capture Ren’s attitude to learn as much as she could about the experience despite having some miss-steps. This in turn, led to a deeper introspection of her behavior during the S-L interactions. S-L provided the format for Ren to question language, decisions, and exchanges with community partners; where learning, not judgement, was reciprocal for both parties. Ren explained:

If I hadn’t had S-L, I might not have noted a lot of the faux pas and mistakes I was making in my interactions with community members. It’s always an on-going process to interact most effectively with people. I made a lot of mistakes in my younger career as I went along through the S-L program, but I would reflect on them and say OK I should have said this differently, it was unfair of me to make that assumption, so it really challenged my assumptions about school and people.
Ren utilized reflection as a major tool to deepen understanding of herself as she interacted with people. This became an important teaching platform in forming her professional identity as well.

**Reflect with an open mind.** The third theme, *reflect with an open mind*, served to capture Ren’s approach to S-L as an opportunity to learn as much as she could from others and from different contexts. Each experience was an opportunity for opening Ren’s mind to a laboratory of learning with people and herself. Each laboratory experience was theater to greater growth for her academic and professional identity and her growth as a person. The following subthemes: *difference as teacher* and *the nexus of people and place*, are discussed next to support the theme, reflect with an open mind.

**Difference as teacher.** This subtheme, difference as teacher, was a tool that Ren used to embrace greater understanding and as an opportunity to learn from others. Ren explained, “I felt like a lot of my exposure to open-mindedness from my S-L experiences and some of the ways we learned to form positive relationships, suspend judgment, ways to connect by having people teach me about their cultures.” This type of reciprocal learning played out in several scenarios. One example Ren shared was at a site where 50% patients were refugees who didn’t speak English, but Arabic. She explained, “A lot of my patients were Arabic speaking, so I had them teach me Arabic.” A simple solution to forming relationships as well as empowering those community partners where the difference in language may have been insurmountable.

**The nexus of people and place.** The subtheme, the nexus of people and place, reinforced Ren’s realization that people from diverse backgrounds had much to offer. Also, it was the key that enabled Ren to reflect deeply and precluded her from making premature assumptions or
superficial judgements about people who were different from her. Ren shared an experience that captured this insight:

My most recent experience I had was one of my patients who couldn’t read or write in their own language. I remember being confused by that and then started asking myself questions and I was initially judgmental of that…What do you mean you can’t read or write in your own language? How am I supposed to communicate? But then I found out that a lot of these patients can’t read or write in their own language because the schools in their region were bombed when they were babies. Through S-L …instead of making judgments, try to understand and meet people where they are at and learn instead of impressing your knowledge upon other people, really learn from each experience and each person, each community. It’s really informed my thinking in a lot of ways on a basic level.

The insight of “meeting people where they are at” was alluded to in several other experiences. An open understanding of people and place served to connect Ren with those who were different from her. Ren completed her approach to learning from new situations with reflection.

**Seeing with new eyes.** The fourth theme, *seeing with new eyes*, enhanced Ren’s reflection on her S-L. She began to view her S-L and para-professional endeavors with the notion that experience is a great teacher. As Ren looked back, she discerned a noticeable and profoundly important insight from the span of her S-L experiences. The subthemes, *growing from experience, looking in…to be a better out*, and *a changed me*, supported Ren’s personal, experiential growth.
Growing from experience. The subtheme, growing from experience, explained Ren’s reflective thoughts over the span of her S-L. She explained the framing of her experience as follows:

In the beginning, I definitely thought, oh this is great I’m going to volunteer. I was in that helping mindset, this is going to be a great thing that I get to do for someone else….it makes me feel good when I’m involved. So initially I looked at it from that perspective but then I started to understand the framing and reshaped it more as like, I have so much to learn.

Ren’s words “I have so much to learn” rang clear from someone who now understood that life presents a pallet of opportunity to grow from.

Looking in…to be better out. The subtheme, looking in… to be better out, was essential to Ren’s process for adapting, applying, and translating what she learned from new situations. Ren understood it was necessary to look deeply how she presented herself to others and to new situations. She explained, “Reflecting on what you said, how you are saying it, where you are coming from and striving to always make those interactions better.” Each time Ren’s invoked reflective insight, it provided her with the necessary sensitivity and compassion to form helping relationships. As a physical therapist, Ren would draw from her past experiences in S-L to navigate unfamiliar situations, people, and context as that she would later encounter in her professional career.

A changed me. The subtheme, a changed me, explained how Ren changed personally from her experience with the unfamiliar in S-L. This behavioral change was essential for Ren personal development and professional demeanor. This enlightened, personal approach served to
inform her initial interactions with people or clients she would meet for the first time. Ren now embraced unfamiliar challenges with a new sense of self and purpose. Ren shared the following:

I definitely changed my language and my approach to different situations. I try to really reflect and make sure I am coming at things to really see different perspectives. There’s lots of times there are perspectives that I don’t see, but if I remain open-minded enough, eventually I come around. I have found when you’re helping someone or serving them in a medical setting, sometimes it can be really beneficial to the relationship if they are able to teach you, if you are able to learn from them too.

Ren reached a self-less point in service to others. Would this perspective have been attainable had it not been for Ren’s evolution through unfamiliar in the S-L experience? It can be surmised that her S-L experience served to stretch her personally, academically and to deepen meaningful interactions with her clients.

The following table (see Table 11) provides the themes and subthemes with key words to support the interpretation of Ren’s experience.

**Core revelation: What do you need?** Ren concluded her story by reflecting the totality of her experience. Ren shared the insight gained by being open and reflective with the learning exchange. She explained:

My roommate worked for a charter school a couple of years ago, and wanted people come in for a career day. Physical therapy is a career that is heavily white female. I was excited to go talk to these students and I brought some props with me and at the end I said I have all these props. Can I leave them with you for your gym stuff? Then I left and was reflecting after I got home. And I thought that wasn’t appropriate. Me just if what I had to give them was what they needed… I really should have framed it as, hey, I have
### Table 11

**Ren's Themes and Subthemes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Key Words and Phrases</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenging contexts</strong></td>
<td>Unique experiences, unique challenges</td>
<td>“I made a lot of mistakes as I interacted with people from a lot of different backgrounds.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unfamiliar communities:</td>
<td>Interviewer: “Tell me about a time when you faced an unfamiliar environment or situation?”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>So close and yet so far…</td>
<td>Ren: “It’s really most of the time… I live pretty close to Jefferson Hill (pseudonym) near Sage University, but I never really met or talked to any community member at Jefferson Hill.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To connect and relate</td>
<td>“The service itself was challenging… trying to find ways to connect with community members. They were older with different backgrounds than me. We would ask about the community we were serving in and learn about some of the history as a way of forming relationships.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Entering the learning portal</strong></td>
<td>An unpretentious approach</td>
<td>“There’s a lot we can learn from the community members… We do not need to impress our knowledge upon people; That’s not what it is all about.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Super-size your experience</td>
<td>“I’ve always tried to gain as much from the experience as possible… and really use it as an opportunity to see a different perspective.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Learn from your mistakes</td>
<td>“If I hadn’t had service-learning, I might not have noted a lot of the faux pas and mistakes I was making in my interactions with community members… but I would reflect on them and say, okay, I should have said this differently. It was unfair of me to make that assumption… so it really made me challenge my assumptions about school and people.”</td>
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<td><strong>Reflect with an open mind</strong></td>
<td>Difference as teacher</td>
<td>“My exposure to open-mindedness from service-learning and the ways we learned to form positive relationships, suspend judgment, and connect by having people teach me about their cultures.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The nexus of people and place</td>
<td>“Through service-learning… instead of making judgments, try to meet people where they are at.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seeing with new eyes</strong></td>
<td>Growing from experience</td>
<td>“In the beginning, I thought… this is going to be a great thing that I get to do for someone else… but then I started to understand the framing and reshaped it more, as I have so much to learn.”</td>
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Looking in… to be better out  “…reflecting on what you said and how you said it, where you are coming from and striving to always make those interactions better.”

A changed me  “I definitely changed my language and my approach to different situations. I really try to reflect and make sure I am coming at things to really see different perspectives.”

What do you need?  “I brought some [physical therapy] props to a charter school for career day. I ask, can I leave them with you for your gym stuff? I left and I was reflecting back after I got home. I thought that it wasn’t really appropriate assuming that what I had was what they needed.”

these things that I use. Are they something that you could use? It is a very minor small example, but prior to my S-L, I would have walked home like “I did a good thing “having S-L, I could reflect and thing, “Gee, that wasn’t quite the way I should have done that.” That’s my example of how S-L has changed my actions and perception.

Ren opened the doors necessary to deconstruct, construct, and reconstruct the personal knowledge and experience. This was essential to her becoming a consummate life-long learner and professional. The unfamiliar from her S-L experience became a platform for her to engage her new understanding of the world and herself. Ren’s final comment reflected profound understanding she processed from her experience with the unfamiliar. Ren understood the essence of learning and meaning in the following passage:

Through S-L instead of making judgments, try to understand and meet people where they are at and learn instead of impressing your “knowledge” upon other people, really learn from each experience, each person, and each community.

Anna’s Story

Anna is an English major in her final year of study at Sage University. Her intent is to teach English literature at the high school level. Anna was introduced to S-L through a
required course called Education in the Community. The focus of this course was to discover what it means to be an educator in your community. This entailed being aware of the socio-economic and ethnic context, being engaged beyond the walls of Sage University, and understanding how that affects what it means to be an educator. Anna’s initial tutoring role at the 826 organization became a catalyst for future involvement with S-L domestically, abroad, as an S-LTA, and S-L team manager for every semester of her academic career except for one. Anna’s story begins as she ends her academic career, looking back on her academic stay with all the S-L experiences on the way. Four themes surfaced from my conversation with Anna and further analysis with the transcripts. The themes were: willingness to be disturbed (subthemes: embracing the uncomfortable, my own implicit biases, the danger of the single story), reflection on the past (subthemes: reflexive curiosity, Kayla: my portal to understanding myself, the power of my own reflection), and being present (subthemes: My toolbox, a reflective presence) and mutual beneficence (subthemes: service-learning experiences, service-learning relationships, collective learning, an evolutionary process). A table of themes and a discussion of Anna’s core revelation will follow.

Willingness to be disturbed. The first theme, willingness to be disturbed, explained Anna’s approach to her S-L context. Anna shared Wheatley’s (2002) notion of willing to be disturbed as a pre-emptive understanding to prepare her for the unfamiliar. She explained that this concept is a theoretical notion often discussed in S-L as an essential foundational attitude that serves to open one’s mind to the plethora of experiences that may be forthcoming in diverse or from unknown settings. The subthemes: embracing uncomfortable, my own implicit bias, and the danger of the single story, provided the supportive evidence for this theme.
Embracing uncomfortable. The subtheme, embracing uncomfortable, was Anna’s initial experience with a student named Kayla. Throughout Anna’s story, Kayla, was a source of inquiry, challenge, and created a need for deeper understanding. However, this was a mutual relationship where Kayla challenged Anna and Anna challenged Kayla in ways not limited to acknowledging diverse cultural norms, but also, communicatively. Anna explained that Kayla used Spanish selectively as technique “to veil her language and keep what she wanted to say private or think she was keeping what she wanted to say private from me.” However, to Kayla’s surprise, Anna could speak some conversational Spanish. Anna and Kayla’s initial exchanges reflected a mutual willingness to be disturbed, a prelude that continued to deepen their relationship. Anna explained in the following passage:

What do you mean she’s cooking dinner? Why is her family like that? It raised a lot of questions for me. It’s acknowledging the reality of different cultural norms, the reality of assumptions that I made, also sort of projecting what I believe is right onto someone else without knowing their context. I was thinking it was wrong to go home by herself, wrong for her to go home and make dinner, whereas, that might be the way that things worked for her and maybe things that she enjoyed. So, yea, I was really feeling uncomfortable. I definitely was uncomfortable… Our whole class was structured around acknowledging different cultural norms, and the reality of racism. Kayla needed to leave school to make dinner for her family. I had asked Anna why she needed to leave and if she had finished her homework. There were moments in the conversation where Kayla would speak Spanish. However, she didn’t realize that I understood Spanish. She [Kayla] had this moment of surprise where it’s like, “What are you talking about? This white girl is speaking Spanish to me.” My moment of surprise came from the assumption I made
about Kayla parental upbringing. I had that moment of surprise where I’m saying, these are not my norms from my family that I grew up in. I would never be allowed to make dinner for someone. Eight-year-old me was eight year old me and I realized I was bring these judgments alongside these discomforts.

The discomfort Anna felt prompted the process of inquiry. She began to question what she had been taught growing up. The door of reflection had been thrown opened for Anna as she tried to resolve discomfort from an unfamiliar experience with Kayla.

**My own implicit bias.** The subtheme, my own implicit bias, expressed Anna’s acknowledgment and internal questioning of an unfamiliar experience. Anna explained her thought process through a series of questions and subjective judgments. Anna shared the following excerpt:

As Anna reflected on this, she began to process and reveal a higher level of understanding. Anna shared the following passage:

I learned that even as I try to work through my own understanding of young people and their backgrounds, I still carry some implicit biases. I think about the moments where I waffled on language and struggled how to correctly phrase what I was talking about here. Anna’s reflection stimulated convergence with the theoretical constructs (e.g., willing to be disturbed, examining implicit bias) from the classroom and real-world experience shared with Kayla.

**The danger of the single story.** The subtheme, the danger of the single story, was a revelation Anna came to from processing the unfamiliar. It is every educator’s hope that students translate and apply knowledge that deepens personal meaning and serves to broaden one’s perspective. Anna had the classroom learning in her head, but through the experience with
Kayla, learning became personal, on an emotional level. In doing so, the experience with Kayla provided a deeper epistemological filter to inform her future S-L experiences. Anna explained these insights in the following passages:

Reflecting on my parenting growing up. They [my parents] wouldn’t let me walk home by myself, let alone cook dinner. I think realizing the reality to be eight or nine years old and to have these intense responsibilities was something I never faced…that is the reality for many students.

The next passage showed how Anna linked her classroom learning to the reality of Kayla’s situation from her S-L experience. This reflection provoked an enlightened insight into the realities of childhood. Anna shared:

In our class, we talked about ‘the danger of the single story’. It’s the idea that you can build these single stories around people, cultures, and neighborhoods. You think you have a single perspective of what something should be. I kind of realized in that moment, that I have a single story of what childhood should be… Just acknowledging there are many ways to be a child.

Another example of implicit bias was played out again regarding Anna’s understanding of what real S-L was. Anna explained:

I’m thinking particularly about one of the other TA’s doing an attack visualization class. They only do a total of four hours of direct service. In that time, they’re collecting data and interviewing people working there. All the data collected, all the personal anecdotal information, plus all the numbers becomes this beautiful visual project that maps this experience and then becomes a product the community partners can us.

Anna explained her thought process:
When I first heard four hours I was like that’s nothing. You’re not doing anything. I had a negative perspective. Stepping back I’m like, that’s such an incredible thing to take that time, be so present during that time, gain so much information during that time and turn it into something that both helps the students learn and provide the service to community partners.

Anna’s understanding of what S-L was and what S-L could be now emerged from a wider perspective and one emanating from a greater appreciation of the work of what other service-learners were doing. However, another important insight was gleaned from this new understanding and it came from the words “to be so present.” Anna discovered the key for how she approached being in the experience. She explained, “There are many things that can be service. I know that the S-L process isn’t necessarily about a long-term commitment. It’s more about the presence and the time you invest being there thinking about your time there.”

Anna understood the notion of the danger of the single story because she experienced it first-hand with her own learning and from that understanding she was could make a perceptible shift in thought and behavior to become more existentially present in the experience.

**Reflection on the past.** The theme, reflection on the past, became the entry point for unfolding, creating, and understanding Anna’s story. Three insightful events framed Anna’s story. It began with her own reflexive curiosity about how she understood the meaning of her S-L experiences at the time of those experiences but from the outside looking in. Anna shared her reflective posts that she had written three years ago. These posts were about Kayla, the student with whom Anna encountered in her S-L experience. This relationship became the second insightful event, as Anna and Kayla experienced the nexus of the unfamiliar as divergent cultures became the departure point for deeper understanding. The final segment concluded with Anna
moving into a deeper reflective mode that became a powerful testimony for S-L’s appeal for introspection.

**Reflexive curiosity.** The subtheme, reflexive curiosity, was a learning tool Anna resorted to in recalling her S-L experience. It was important for Anna to go back and re-read her online posts that she had written during her S-L experience. This was a compelling approach, in that, she was using a written document that required her to make meaning at that space and time and she was making meaning of that document for this story in the present time. Anna explained, “Huh, I’m curious to see… What did I say this time? What was I reflecting on? ...Wow that was really an interesting and challenging moment.” The online post that she shared became the deep dive into the unfamiliar and the spring board for additional conversational items to weave Anna’s story.

**Kayla: My portal to understanding myself.** The subtheme Kayla: my portal to understanding myself introduced Kayla, a student that Anna met during her S-L experience. Anna tutored children K-12 with their homework and writing skills during her first S-L experience. This is where Anna met Kayla, who was about 9 years of age at the time. One day Kayla needed to leave the classroom to go home before finishing her homework. Anna explained, “This little girl is telling me (she’s only nine years old) that she has to go make dinner for her family.” This was a moment of surprise for Anna that lead to deeper reflection on cultural diversity and disparate opportunities that support lower-income communities. Anna reflected:

I was thinking about the fact that this student [Kayla] didn’t have the chance to stay and complete her homework because she had more adult responsibilities she had to complete at home. That is the reality for a lot of young people living in low-income communities and households. They may not necessarily have all the support mechanisms that would
help them grow as students, help them do their best at school, be it lack support from the
community, be it responsibilities at home.

This incident caused Anna to question what she called the “opportunity gap” in education. As
Anna reflected on this, she recalled societal implications as well as a personal story that she lived
through in her high school career, this event ultimately determined her educational aspirations.
Anna explained:

The opportunity gap plays out in many ways, but the reality is children can work it out,
but children who are living in low income communities and households are more likely to
start ignoring school just from the lack of opportunities… In some ways, it is
heartbreaking. It is why I want to be a teacher.

Anna’s S-L experience with Kayla was a converging point for personal reflection and for
translating classroom learning to the real world. Anna reflected this insight in the following
passage:

I think really understanding the opportunity gaps as a phenomenon is like a daunting
experience. It’s something I’ve been pretty ware of growing up in a working middleclass
town where most people who live there are mostly Latino. In school, we did ok, but
lacked in opportunities, old books, not a lot of AP or Honors classes. That space existed
surrounded by some of the wealthiest communities in the country. The town right next to
ours seceded from my town in the late 60’s and early 70’s because of an influx of
immigrants. There was a big demographic shift…people were worried about that. Now
the school district in that town is like number nine or ten in the country, their students
ultimately going to Ivy League universities. It made me so angry because I was like that’s
not fair, I’ve been working my butt off and these kids are getting opportunities left and right.

Anna’s experience both growing up and with her S-L encounter with Kayla served as a reminder of the work that still needed to be done. It was evident from the conversation that Anna was very clear when asked what if there were no opportunity gaps and what would that education look like for Kayla. Anna also broadened her understanding of cultural norms that felt different. She explained her initial surprise that Kayla’s supervisors allowed her to walk home by herself. Anna voiced her concern as her supervisors explained, “its ok for her to go herself.” Anna indicated, “That was a really shocking and surprising moment for me, because I always feel like we really have to have all this supervision on kids, but her family clearly trusts her.” Anna acknowledged, “It’s a responsibility and it’s also acknowledging very different cultural norms.”

**Being present.** The third theme, being present, was an existential learning strategy Anna used that had indeterminate value for her. As she continued to grow in this understanding, everything deepened relative to her personal beliefs and professional learning experiences. The following subthemes, My Toolbox and Reflective Presence, emerged as Anna gained greater understanding of herself, her S-L experiences, as a way of being in both contexts.

**My toolbox.** The subtheme, *my toolbox*, described the myriad of teaching tools Anna gathered as she became more present in the S-L experience. The first strategy tool was an approach to the role she played in the classroom. Anna’s approached was explained as “high expectations/high support.” She explained rationale for this tool in the following passage:

> With the knowledge of the opportunity gap, I want to be able in whatever role I play to do my best to push students to pursue opportunities to give them as much access as I can… Again with that level of high support, the expectancy is to meet the goals, not
cutting them slack. Of course there’s always extreme situations as with Kayla, but not letting them skate by. They’ll learn to actually work hard and achieve anything they can achieve.

One application of this approach was used by Anna with her own S-L classroom students. Anna moved into the discussions with her service learners in a way that reflected high expectations/high support. She explained:

On the pull/push of discussions… Now I really think, I’m more willing to value that you should pull or learn to push things across discussions…to really reread as much as I can and kind of dig deep as I can with what I ‘ve got. Seeing the same material for a second term, you think it would be redundant, but it doesn’t become redundant. It makes you think of different things that you didn’t see the first time.

*Reflective presence.* The subtheme, *reflective presence,* described Anna’s ontological notion for *how to be* in the classroom or S-L experience. Anna explained:

I think because I’m feeling more will to be present now, I’m kind of gaining a lot more for myself, not only for my students. I do think my varied experience in S-L, the more I’ve grown in my understanding of what it is and how to be more present.

Anna’s growth emerged from reflecting on the myriad of S-L experiences that she was involved in. This reflection led to deeper insight on the importance of S-L in her academic and personal life.

*Mutual Beneficence.* The final theme, mutual beneficence, explained how Anna’s valued her relationships, experiences, and processes throughout her story. Anna understood how important these constructs were to her understanding of herself, her understanding of others, the learning derived from S-L, and to crafting a teaching philosophy. The subthemes: S-L
relationships, S-L experiences, and evolutionary process served to support Anna’s insight on mutual beneficence.

**S-L relationships.** The subtheme *S-L relationships* described the importance Anna placed in learning with and from others. Anna explained that her relationship with Kayla was special. It was special because both Kayla and Anna shared an unfamiliar exchange that elicited an interpersonal insight for each. An insight that Anna shared in the following passage:

> Going back to the first situation with Kayla... I was very much of the belief that I would end up working with Kayla all the time. Me and Kayla, she’s my student. I’ve seen her every week. That did not happen. I would have a different group of students every week. Even though I didn’t see Kayla again or work with Kayla again, I did have that tool belt of reflection, that ability to move back and apply the learning from Kayla to educational experiences with other students.

Anna realized from this relationship that letting go and learning from this experience was a gift from Kayla. In return, Kayla had the gift of Anna truly being present for her in way exercised special concern that clarified a shared understanding that learning is a relationship when teaching.

**S-L experience.** The subtheme *S-L experience* placed the described the contextual platform for learning. The S-L experience was the conduit for learning that deepened Anna’s reflection and Anna and Kayla’s relationship. When object (e.g., cultural differences, opportunity gaps) became subject in the real world, a powerful portal for learning was shared by both Anna and Kayla. Anna shared this in the following sentiment:

> I think looking back; it’s kind of cool but really thoughtful and thought-provoking experience with S-L. Especially in direct S-L with kids. You may have that one moment
that seems really pivotal and never be able to return to that of service again and that’s where the reflective learning component comes in. Even though Anna would not see Kayla again, she left an indelible imprint on Anna’s psyche.

**An evolutionary process.** The collective learning from Anna’s S-L experiences can best be described in the subtheme *an evolutionary process.* Anna explained, “First year I definitely thought [S-L] it was like the concrete moments that were S-L. This big crazy thing happens. I think that’s not necessarily what S-L is. I think it’s sort of an evolutionary process.” As an evolutionary process, S-L experiences and relationships needed to form in heuristic way that unfolded over time. Time was not the calibration for the process, but a reflective presence of being was essential to the process. Having that insight on presence, S-L became a powerful experiential tool for understanding others.

This final concluding sentiment fully encapsulates Anna’s understanding of this learning experience called S-L. Anna writes,

From my first day of S-L, I was told to approach my work with a “willingness to be disturbed.” This concept comes from a reading from the first day of my first ever S-L class, which was also my first-ever college class. It has stuck with me ever since. I always approach my roles with S-L, be they volunteer, S-LTA or S-L team manager, with this willingness. This willingness acknowledges that a part of S-L is a reality that things will be unfamiliar, perhaps even surprising, shocking, or upsetting. The goal of S-L, for me, is to “disturb” my preconceived notions about people, places, ideas, etc. and really build new understandings through my experience. Exploring the unfamiliar is the foundation of my relationship to [with] S-L.
Anna exhibited those rare intrinsic qualities found in many educators. The insights that Anna shared from recalling her S-L experiences resonated deeply with her both personally and professionally. One can be fully reassured that the metacognitive levels that Anna reached will serve her as she continues her life journey. Anna’s tool belt is brimming with knowledge that will continue to serve her well long after she graduates. Also, the wisdom ‘of being present’ will continue to provide the relational context needed for deep engagement when serving others and for her teaching.

The follow table (see Table 12) provides the themes and subthemes as well as keywords for Anna’s analysis.

**Core revelation: Compassion and patience with oneself.** The final element of growth Anna shared with me was a strategy of self-care. This strategy was essential for Anna to learn because the nature of teaching and service is hard work-emotionally, mentally, and physically. Especially, this work is hard if you overlay the directive of being present in your approach to teaching and learning. Anna shared an example of learning situation with an S-L student where she wasn’t as present and the struggle she had with processing that. She explained:

> When I think about actual situations, there was kind of a hard situation earlier in this semester that I didn’t think I handled the best at the moment.” [Reflecting on the issue of fear from a Muslim American student who was entering S-L and the prospect of about the way students would respond to her]… In the moment I kind of said, thank you for sharing, it’s a valid fear, we’ll talk about it later and just kind of moved on… I immediately e-mailed my professor… I was like I don’t feel good about this are you comfortable with me reaching via email? I invited her to my office hours so she could
Table 12

Anna’s Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Key Words and Phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to be disturbed</td>
<td>Embracing the uncomfortable</td>
<td>“I was definitely uncomfortable… Our whole class was structured around acknowledging different cultural norms and the reality of racism. I realized I was bringing these judgments [about Kayla’s cultural norms] alongside the discomforts.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My own implicit biases</td>
<td>“[My experience with Kayla] raised a lot of questions for me… It’s definitely acknowledging the reality of different cultural norms and the reality of the assumptions I made… projecting what I believe is right onto someone else without knowing their context.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The danger of the single story</td>
<td>“[Kayla’s responsibilities as an 8 year old] was something I never faced… That is a reality for many students. In class… we talked about the idea that you can build these single stories around people, cultures and neighborhoods… You think you have a single perspective of what someone should be… I realized in that moment that I have a single story of what I thought childhood should be.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection on the past</td>
<td>Reflexive curiosity</td>
<td>[Looking back on her previous S-L posts] “I’m curious to see… What did I say this time? What was I reflecting on?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kayla: My portal to understanding myself</td>
<td>“This little girl is telling me she’s only 9 years old and she has to go make dinner for her family… That was a moment of surprise for me; I was thinking this student didn’t have a chance to stay and complete her homework because she had adult responsibilities at home… that this is a reality for a lot of young people living in low-income households… they may not have all the support mechanisms to help them grow as students… that the opportunity gap plays out in many ways… but children who are living in low-income communities and households are more likely to start ignoring school just from the lack of opportunities… It’s why I want to be a teacher.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The power of my reflection</td>
<td>“I think really understanding the opportunity gaps as a phenomenon is a daunting experience. It’s something I’ve been aware of growing up.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being present</td>
<td>My toolbox</td>
<td>“There are many things that can be service… It’s more about the presence and the time you invest being there and thinking about your time there.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A reflective presence “I’ve grown in my understanding of what it is and how to be more present.”

Mutual beneficence

S-L experiences “You may have that one moment that seems pivotal and never be able to return to that service again and that’s where the reflective learning component comes in.”

S-L relationships “Even though I didn’t see or work with Kayla again I did have that tool belt of reflection, that ability to move back and apply the learning from Kayla to apply the learning from Kayla to educational experiences with other students.”

Collective learning: An evolutionary process “First year, I definitely thought service-learning was like concrete moments… that this big, crazy thing happens… I think that’s no necessarily what service-learning is… It’s sort of an evolutionary process.”

come and talk, just taking some time to clarify. I don’t want to minimize it all. I just worry about how to get there, how to figure it out.

Anna came to understand how she saw herself through the transcripts and her recollection of the meaning interpreted from her S-L experiences. From this perspective, of looking back and looking in she gained a greater understanding of how to navigate the unfamiliar in a way with less criticism and more compassionate. Anna shared this notion in the following passage after reading her transcripts:

I feel that I am always quite self-critical, and I hear that in these transcripts. I think re-reading them was a reminder of a lesson I learned through my S-L experience, which is to care for oneself and be okay with making mistakes. I want to continue to grow in this balance of holding myself to high standards and also forgiving myself and being kind to myself when things aren’t perfect or I fall behind.

Wrapping Anna’s story with the cognitive insights gained from S-L and her exploration into the unfamiliar implied looking at what truly mattered to Anna. She explained:
I think because I’m feeling more willing to be present now, I’m kind of gaining a lot more for myself, not only for my students, but I hope that I can use that material that I gain to help them for their thinking… In conclusion, I do think my varied experience in S-L, the more I’ve grown in my understanding of what it is and how to best serve has made me more present.

**Section Summary**

This section revealed the personal narratives for each of the participants as they experienced and processed the unfamiliar in their service-learning contexts. The chapter was designed to be shared with the reader and allowed the nuanced themes to emerge that explained how the participants entered their service-learning contexts and what they experienced. Immersion into the shared lived stories provided both the participant and researcher, a deeper platform to explore meaning from the unfamiliar. The nature for searching for patterns across all the cases begins the next section. It will be here where the unfamiliar was brought to full relief and supported by contextually rich analysis and interpretation.

**Phase II: Cross-Case Analysis**

The following analysis discusses the patterns or connections for experiencing and processing the unfamiliar across all six cases in the study. The first phase of this chapter took a close look at the individual case for each participant. The cross-case analysis now takes a broader perspective as the researcher looks for patterns or connections by examining all the cases together. The pernicious thread that held the narratives together can be articulated as: *embracing the unfamiliar: An evolving process for becoming and learning*.

When the participants of this study encountered an unfamiliar episode, person, context, or learning construct, something personal happened within them. Some participants met the
experience with varying degrees of trepidation and others saw it as an opportunity. As the stories unfolded, the participants through recall and reflection revealed their deepest intimations with their S-L experience. The unfamiliar aspects and components of experiential learning can best be described as instances, behaviors, contexts, or situations that challenge one’s current level of understanding to such a degree as to invoke reflection and a compelling need for further understanding. If fully embraced experientially as a learning component, it may change or even disrupt currently held beliefs about oneself and society at large. What is clear, is that something personal happened within the participants that compelled them into a reflective process to discern meaning. The following analysis brought to fruition, three superordinate and six subordinate themes of understanding as six S-L teaching assistants told the lived stories from their S-L experience with the unfamiliar. The researcher used direct quotes and short vignettes to provide supporting evidence for the thematic findings and preliminary conclusions to maintain both transparency and validity. Table 13 depicts superordinate, subordinate, and the case narrative themes for each participant rendered from the cross-case analysis of the six participants in this study. This will be followed with a definition and explanation of each superordinate and subordinate theme and present evidence from each participant to support each theme.

Findings

It was important to show how the themes were inductively analyzed to produce both the superordinate and subordinated themes for the cross-case analysis (see Table 14, 15, and 16). This table represents how the researcher manage the themes by providing verbatim extracts and written notes to reveal the interpretative analysis for each superordinate theme and subordinate theme.
The descriptive thematic words helped the researcher to inductively analyze and determine the categories for explaining the phenomenon of the unfamiliar. Three main themes were identified to capture how S-LTAs experienced and processed the unfamiliar to make meaning in their service-learning experiences: (a) encountering the unfamiliar, (b) unfolding the unfamiliar, and (c) translating the unfamiliar. Two subthemes were identified that represented the participants' approach as they entered the learning domain to encounter the unfamiliar: initial trepidation and an opportunity. The following thematic sections describe the initial articulated feelings as the participants began to engage in their respective learning contexts outside of their traditional classroom settings.

Table 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate/Subordinate themes</th>
<th>Anniello</th>
<th>Ken</th>
<th>Nathan</th>
<th>Gem</th>
<th>Ren</th>
<th>Anna</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Encountering the unfamiliar</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Initial trepidation</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Not knowing…Ken</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Into the abyss, Nathan</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.2 An Opportunity</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Into the unknown, Anniello</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I had no idea …Gem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entering the learning portal, Ren</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be willing to be disturbed, Anna</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Unfolding the unfamiliar</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Grappling with tension</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solving contradictions, Anniello</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The unknown is complicated, Ken</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language barriers, Nathan</td>
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<tr>
<td>The unexpected, Gem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenging contexts, Ren</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>There is no single story, Anna</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Emerging ruminations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection reveals, Anniello</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflection on multiple perspectives, Ken</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflection evolves, Nathan</td>
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<tr>
<td>A reality check, Gem</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflect with an open mind, Ren</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflection on the past, Anna</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Translating the unfamiliar</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 An evolved understanding and application</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13

Superordinate/Subordinate/ Case Narrative Themes
This study defined the unfamiliar as a context, situation, or event in the learning process that was unexpected, new, different, or surprised the learner. These events would become a heuristic tool

### Table 14

**Superordinate Themes at the Cross-Case Analysis Level: Encountering the Unfamiliar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Participants contributing to this sub-theme</th>
<th>Indicative quotes</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Initial trepidation  | Ken, Nathan                                 | “You don’t really know what the class is about-It’s a bit terrifying at first not knowing” (Ken)  
“I was definitely unprepared, the kids would talk in Cantonese. I only know Mandarin. I have no idea what they are talking about” (Nathan).”                                                                                                                                                                                                 | The participants expressed a range of readiness through their words based on the familiarity working with people and from previous academic experiences.                                                                                           |
| An opportunity       | Anniello, Gem, Ren, Anna                    | “I was pretty interested to be in a new city and throw myself out there.” (Anniello). “I had this idea I wanted to be involved in the community…beyond that I was just clueless…this is a lot more than I signed up for.” (Gem) “I’ve always tried to gain as much from the experience as possible…and really use it as an opportunity to see a different perspective.” (Ren) “I was definitely uncomfortable… Our whole class was structured around acknowledging different cultural norms and the reality of racism.” (Anna) | One could explore the mindset of participants as they approach learning and events that may be unfamiliar and seek strategies that provide a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. Also, it appears that learning from people and relationships may be an affinity for some people |
for further understanding. Selected excerpts from the interview transcripts will be included to give voice to the findings and bring the idiographic nature of an IPA study to the foreground.

**Encountering the Unfamiliar**

The superordinate theme, encountering the unfamiliar, described how the participants assessed their feelings as they approached the context and the unfamiliar. Some participants entered S-L with more trepidation than others, while some seemed to embrace the opportunity to engage in S-L. After the initial exposure the context of S-L, all participants reached a level

Table 15

**Superordinate Themes at the Cross-Case Analysis Level: Unfolding the Unfamiliar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Participants contributing to this sub-theme</th>
<th>Indicative quotes</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Grappling with tension** | All Participants (Anniello, Ken, Nathan, Gem, Ren, Anna) | “At the beginning you may feel disconnected.” (Anniello)  
“The main challenge was to learn KUMU…this very unfamiliar technology.” (Ken)  
“Everyone learns in a different way… Being limited in speaking Cantonese made it hard to do that.” (Nathan)  
“I learned that you have to go into a situation, no expectations… and learn from the first day and adapt to what you find in the environment.” (Gem)  
“I made a lot of mistakes as I interacted with people from a lot of different backgrounds.” (Ren)  
“In class we talked about the idea that you can build these single stories around people, cultures and neighborhoods… You think you have a single perspective of what someone should be.” (Anna) | All participants felt some existential tension relative to their S-L experience. It came in many forms (contradictions, intentional ambiguity, language, diverse cultural norms, varying contexts, and their own implicit biases) and levels of intensity for each participant. It was important for all to share the angst of the moment to help de-brief and put into a perspective that could elicit a way forward. |
| **Emerging ruminations**   | All Participants (Anniello, Ken, Nathan, Gem, Ren, Anna) | “I never thought about my privilege…I never thought about how minorities are underrepresented (in STEM)... how identities in your life intersect to advantage you or disadvantage you.” (Anniello)  
“The challenge of critical thinking about a problem and how to solve it; other people will point out things you didn’t realize.” (Ken)  
“Reflection was not a big component for me” (Anniello) | When the participants could identify and talk through the tension from the unfamiliar with others and themselves, an observed ontological shift is evident. We see a more expanded |
at the time… It was more like a component you need in order to get a grade… At S-LTA meetings, time was devoted to listening to each other…it felt like a good environment to reflect on yours.” (Nathan)

“Until you are in that environment you don’t realize it but to see a student’s progress in person is like wow, I actually help to create this progress.” (Gem)

“Through service-learning…instead of making judgments, try to meet people where they are at.” (Ren).

“I’m curious to see…what did I say this time? What was I reflecting on?” (Anna)

epistemological inquiry and reflection. We observe more self–reflection from one’s identity in context with others. We see a deeper engagement with learning where each participant can observe the transformative behavior evolving. What is clear is that reflecting with oneself and others is essential for a holistic understanding of the experience.

---

Table 16

Superordinate Themes at the Cross-Case Analysis Level: Translating the Unfamiliar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Participants contributing to this sub-theme</th>
<th>Indicative quotes</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An evolved understanding and application</td>
<td>All participants (Anniello, Ken, Nathan, Gem, Ren, Anna)</td>
<td>“Having [privilege] transcend into inspiration and things you can teach other people.” (Anniello)</td>
<td>We see an evolved understanding grow from the initial base line experience understood to one that can relate to life in general. The participants are able to articulate the value gleaned from the unfamiliar and realizing this they have adopted a more open approach to a variety of experiences they encounter. We also see empathy, compassion, accountability, and a deeper existential presence emerged. There emerges a more open approach to learning that is mutually beneficial for all.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Essence of personal meaning             | All participants                            | “I understand how I can be aware of interactions and influence them using my privilege.” (Anniello) | The core revelations revealed here are the culmination of the hard
understanding that an opportunity for engagement existed for encountering something different and removed from the classroom. As the participants encountered their S-L context it was clear that two patterns of preparedness emerged on the readiness spectrum for new experiences. Some participants had some community service experience in high school, while others were surprised by the S-L component in their academic class. The subthemes initial trepidation and an opportunity represented an interpreted assessment of the participants feelings. These feelings seemed to project what may be described as an apprehension for some and a pronounced openness for others as they approached a new learning context.

**Initial trepidation.** The first subtheme for encountering the unfamiliar can be described as, initial trepidation. Initial trepidation was revealed by two of the participants as they realized their academic class carried a service-learning component. Not being familiar with service-learning from the onset left both participants feeling a little lost. Trepidation is described as an anxiety or fear as someone approaches the unknown or in this case the unfamiliar. Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Anniello, Ken, Nathan, Gem, Ren, Anna)</th>
<th>emotional, social, and psychological work that each of the participants personalized into their own personal repertoire and psyche. The insights gleaned from their experience with the unfamiliar stretched them beyond their initial understandings of themselves and others. The participants now appreciate that learning can come from a variety of settings and interactive reflection with others. The lessons here can be interpreted as both transformative and translational.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“What truly matters...that systemic change is actually targeting the root of the issue... That is going to have lasting change... You realize that everything you have been learning is all over the place is actually connected and relevant to what we are doing outside of class.” (Ken)</td>
<td>“Through service-learning... Instead of making judgments, try to meet people where they are at.” (Ren)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think doing service-learning has made me develop a greater appreciation for taking time to try and help the community around you.” (Nathan).</td>
<td>“I think re-reading my transcripts was a reminder of a lesson I learned through my service-learning experience which is to care for oneself and its okay to make mistakes.” (Anna)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Anytime you are learning anything at all you can apply it to the world at large...there is always something you can do for people, animals, the environment.” (Gem)</td>
<td>“Anytime you are learning anything at all you can apply it to the world at large...there is always something you can do for people, animals, the environment.” (Gem)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
participants both described initial anxiety and fear as they encountered the notion that their academic class carried a S-L component. Both participants have never taken a service-learning class and had no idea what to expect. So, from the onset, S-L was unfamiliar for these two participants and when combined with additional yet somewhat ambiguous expectations for the class, it was easy to understand their heightened anxiety.

As the discussions with the two participants continued, the anxiety did not abate nor did it avert either one from continuing with their class. This resilience was key for the participants to push through the experience and become engaged with the learning that was about to take place. Ken’s initial approach was one of fear, coming from not knowing what the instructor expected combined with the challenge of having learned an innovative technology, called Kumu. He explained his thought process as he faced two unfamiliar scenarios, knowing that he would have work through both to complete the class:

It’s a bit terrifying at first not knowing what you’re doing or what the professor really wants. Instructions were intentionally vague as they want students to develop their conception of what a system is.

However, as the process continued Ken’s fear turned to something quite different. Ken’s implicit courage evolved to where he would trust the process as it unfolded. In doing so, Ken would find the opportunity to collaborate with others was not only necessary, but essential to dealing with complex issues of social significance.

Fear was also expressed in words that described Nathan’s going ‘Into the Abyss.’ This fearful resistance to his learning context began when he learned that there was a service-learning component to the class. Nathan shared his anxiety learning when he learned about the S-L component, “To be honest, when I first heard that I needed to do S-L for the class, I was like, oh
my God; I don’t want to do this.” To make going into the abyss even deeper, Nathan found himself tutoring students who intentionally used a different language when they communicated with each other. Communication with the students became difficult as Nathan was familiar with Mandarin and not with Cantonese. He would find himself outside the communication patterns necessary to both teach and support his students. This became increasingly frustrating for him and it would take reflecting with others to bring him to a point to continue. Nathan continued and fortunately he found his way from the unfamiliar to the light of understanding himself in context with others. The second subtheme discussed how the four-remaining participant entered the service-learning context. The subtheme, an opportunity, expressed a slightly different, more open, approach to the S-L context. These participants saw S-L as way of engaging with others from diverse cultural backgrounds and as an opportunity to help others. There was some anxiety expressed as not knowing, but it seemed that the drive to help and learn from others superseded that uncertainty.

**An opportunity.** The second subtheme for encountering the unfamiliar was, an opportunity. An opportunity is defined as an understanding that all contexts and people present a forum for learning, despite being unfamiliar. Four participants elicited this open approach to the initial S-L experience. Anniello, Gem, Ren, and Anna seemed genuinely interested helping people. They all had some community service experience either in high school or as a parallel experience with S-L. However, despite having some community engagement, their college S-L experience presented unfamiliar events or situations that were both new or different for each one. Unlike the first two participants, these participants displayed an observed energy to take the risk to explore something different and stretch themselves to learn from others.
Each participant shared their initial feelings and as they did it was important to document these feelings as a baseline to the process that was to unfold. Anniello shared, “My first experience with S-L … nobody really knew what it was.” Also, Anniello stated, “I was pretty interested to be in a new city and kind of throw myself out there. Anniello’s stark openness to jump into the unknown reflected a willingness to approach learning with a presence of being open to the situation and to a certain extent taking a risk. Gem’s approach to S-L was based on an understanding that she wanted to be involved in the community. However, her initial understanding expressed, “I have no idea what I am doing.” This was reinforced as Gem shared two chaotic experiences that were unfamiliar to her. These events forced Gem into a reflective inquiry that led to a new behavioral understanding as she interacted with her community partners. Gem noted, “This [situation of the student throwing the chair] helped me realize that unexpected things are going to happen and you can’t control everything in your environment.” Ren explored the understanding that if she enters the learning portal by forming close bonds with her community partners, she better understands her space and position to others in unfamiliar contexts. Ren’s unpretentious approach, her desire to maximize her learning experience however unfamiliar it may be, and to learn from her mistakes served to enhance both her personal and professional knowledge base. Ren explained: “I always tried to gain as much from the experience as possible” and “really use it as an opportunity to see a unique perspective and get information from a different point of view.” Finally, Anna’s initial approach and self-understanding was most intriguing to this researcher. Wheatley’s (2002) notion, willing to be disturbed, was introduced in Anna’s academic class experience. The willingness to be disturbed was evident in Anna’s S-L experience with Kayla. Kayla was one of the students she tutored in
English. Anna shared that Kayla had to leave the class before it was finished and go home to make the family dinner. Anna explained:

I was uncomfortable…our whole class was structured around acknowledging diverse cultural norms, and the reality of racism. She (Kayla) had this moment of surprise where it’s like, ‘what are you talking about… this white girl (Anna) is speaking Spanish to me and me (Anna) had that moment of surprise where I’m saying, these are not my norms from my family that I grew up in…I would never be allowed to make dinner for someone…eight-year-old me was eight-year-old me and I realized I was bring these judgments alongside these discomforts.

The willingness to be disturbed served as an opening portal to many diverse experiences that challenged Anna into deeper reflection to examine her current way of being and possible implicit biases that she has carried with her.

**Section Summary**

This section described the first theme, encountering the unfamiliar, is this study’s effort to explore the participants meaning making from the unfamiliar. It was here the participants explained how they felt as they approached their service-learning contexts. Varying levels of readiness as well initial levels of fear were present. Fortunately for all, the intensity from the dissonance did not thwart the participants need for further understanding.

The findings indicated that assessing oneself in an unfamiliar context or event is an important realization for the meaning making process to continue and for meaning to unfold. The participants acknowledged their fear, reservation, and emotional misgivings, but with this acknowledgement came personal fortitude and resilience to continue into the learning environment. These findings aligned with the theoretical constructs of Mezirow (1978, 1994);
Mezirow and associates (2000) *disorienting dilemmas* and Kiely’s (2005) notion of *contextual border crossing* and *dissonance*. Disorienting dilemmas are described as significant life events or an accumulation of events that trigger self-reflection (Mezirow 1978, 1994, Mezirow and associates, 2000). Contextual border crossing and dissonance is described by Kiely (2005) as the initial themes for the transformational learning process in service-learning. The contextual border crossing components are what an individual brings to the experience, how the experience is set up, what are the objectives for learning, and what previous experiences outline the learning this can determine both the nature and impact of the experience (Kiely, 2005). These initial considerations can serve to enhance or preclude one from moving forward with the learning. One might also conclude could determine one approach or intensity to become engaged with the service-learning context. Dissonance, according to Kiely (2005), begins the psychological immersion into the unfamiliar or the disparate elements that the participants find in the context that does not align with their previous held notions. Examples from this study would include: disconnection from planning lessons to implementing lessons, intentional ambiguity with class expectations, language challenges, unexpected events that occurred within urban pre-school settings, challenging contexts, encounters with culturally diverse people, and cultural differences in parenting. It was very fortunate for this study that the participants had the intellectual curiosity and personal fortitude to push pass any hesitations they may have had and pursue the learning wherever it took them. Fortunately for all, the intensity from the unfamiliar and dissonant experiences, did not circumvent the participants need for further understanding. The second theme, unfolding the unfamiliar, begins the next phase as the participants begin to navigate their existential tension through introspection.
Unfolding the Unfamiliar

Describing how the participants felt as they encountered the unfamiliar was the first step to personally acknowledging the connection to the S-L experience. The second superordinate theme for making meaning was, unfolding the unfamiliar. This phase can be described in two steps: grappling with tension and emerging ruminations. Grappling with tension was identified as the affective tension generated from an unfamiliar event or situation that was new or different where the participant needed to make sense of. Emerging ruminations was the reflective process that participants used to unfold the tension and make meaning of what was happening around them and within them. These subthemes are discussed in the next section.

Grappling with tension. The first subtheme for unfolding the unfamiliar was grappling with tension. This subtheme was characterized as the participants wrestling with individual experiential tensions and varying degrees of existential angst from their initial encounters. The findings show that each participant came to their S-L contexts with varying levels of emotional insight, knowledge, and personal experience for processing the unfamiliar. Existential tension from the unfamiliar was necessary for initiating each participant’s challenge for learning. It can be described as a delicate dance between being over/underwhelmed in the process and framed how each participant navigated the process. The following participants explained how they began their process to unfold the unfamiliar. Each participant began first by grappling with tension from the unfamiliar in different ways. These analyses will be shared separate to maintain the idiographic nature as we bring the phenomenon of unfolding the unfamiliar foreword. The final part of this section will bring the cases together to reveal the patterns for understanding.

All participants felt some existential tension relative to their S-L experience. This tension manifested from the unfamiliar in many ways but did not rise to the levels of intensity that would
deter the participants from continuing in the learning process. However, was also evident from the participants was the need to resolve the tension to move forward. This resolution came from a variety of strategies used to debrief, acknowledge, share, and reflect on not only with oneself but in the company of other classmates, faculty, and community organizers.

The tension that Anniello’s wrestled with was to solve a contradiction. The contradiction stemmed from two moments where Anna felt disconnected. Anna explained that her initial tension stemmed from the following feeling, “At the beginning, you may feel disconnected or you’re like, this is just something I have to do for class, time commitment… You get caught up in it being another thing to do.” The second type of disconnect came from Anna’s efforts at designing science lesson plans for her community group but not actually implementing them. Resolving the disconnections was essential for Anniello to discover future learning. She resorted to utilizing all the resources available to try and solve disconnection by putting the pieces together. Anniello knew she had to put the pieces together for both clarity and relevance. With the help of her instructor and her group, she could change her initial thought pattern to one that challenged her to see the bigger picture. Expanding this understanding was a process that helped her resolve the disconnect, challenged her current perspective, and initiated a drive to higher epistemological levels of reflection and meaning. She soon discovered the deeper she became involved in her S-L experience, more aware and sensitive she became as challenges surfaced.

The angst was palpable as Ken’s processed the unfamiliar noting, it’s complicated. He faced the daunting task of learning a new software data analytic called, KUMU coupled with intentionally ambiguous class directives. It was clear that Ken’s take on his S-L experience with the unfamiliar appeared to be messy and somewhat confusing as he began. However, this was
not a deterrent to Ken’s approach to learning. Ken’s thought process was revealed as he tried to resolve the complexity from the unfamiliar. Ken noted:

I think as humans we generally have a tendency to think linearly about certain problems. We like to take abstract notions and break them down into things we understand. When you actually try to do that and you actually look at real world examples of complex problems, it’s always vastly more intricate and complex that you can ever hope for.

Constant angst characterized Nathan’s S-L experience as a tutor at the YMCA. He recalled the language barriers and feeling that he was not making an impact. This left Nathan feeling dejected and distressed. Nathan realized that teaching was complicated and when you don’t have the skills to address different learning styles it made it more difficult. Nathan expressed this notion as feeling powerless, hitting a wall, not rewarding, and not making a significant impact.

A much deeper angst was revealed by Nathan as compared to the other participants. He saw many parallels between himself and with his students. However, a significant difference was that Nathan grew up Asian-American and with that came the tension of trying to live between two cultures. Nathan explained his feelings in the following passage:

I think it’s always difficult because there are aspects of the Asian and American cultures that conflict. The way I deal with those two conflicting things is there are some situations where you default to Asian values; there are some situations where you default to American values.

Once, he identified that challenge, he could move forward into deeper reflection that evolved into more empathy and appreciation for teaching and for S-L.

The tension from the unfamiliar played for Gem out in the theme, the unexpected. Gem explained her surprise and resultant angst on two occasions. Both situations occurred in her S-L
class with preschoolers where in one instant a preschooler ran around the classroom in his diaper and another preschooler threw a chair. In observing these situations, Gem would take the lead from the professional she worked with to expand her understanding to expect the unexpected. Gem explained:

I learned that you might have to go into a situation, no expectations …and learn from the first day and adapt to what you find in the environment.

This resolution prepared Gem to commit to further reflection that informed her approach to the future S-L experiences.

A myriad of challenging contexts challenged Ren as she began to grapple with tension within the scope of her S-L experiences. When asked about a time when she faced an unfamiliar environment or situation, Ren replied, “It’s really most of the time.” The unique experiences and contexts that Ren encountered, would bring to her to the realization that she made a lot of mistakes interacting with people from a lot of diverse backgrounds. However, Ren was determined to reflect on and learn from these mistakes. These contexts provided the opportunity for Ren to develop relationships for connecting people and contexts. Ren explained, “The service itself was always challenging, trying to find ways to connect with the community members, they were older with really diverse backgrounds than I.” Resolving the tension by learning from her mistakes from challenging contexts set Ren up for the reflection needed to continue the learning process.

Implicit bias was the center point for Anna’s tension. Understanding her experience with Kayla and the prejudgment that occurred during that time stirred up inquiry into the reality of differing cultural norms. Anna explained that she was projecting what she believed to be right onto someone else without knowing their cultural context leaving her “feeling really uncomfortable.”
As Anna processed these feelings, she was reminded from her academic work the notion of the danger of the single story. This notion illustrates how we craft an understanding of the way things should conform for everyone. This narrowed way of thinking closes off our ability to see different perspectives and cultural diversity.

In looking at the various manifestations of tension that each participant went through is illustrative of how the unfamiliar nudges us into self-examination of assumptions, beliefs, and on a grander scale our world-view. The next section explains the participants’ reflective process as they navigate through their tension from the unfamiliar to greater understanding of self in context and in relationship with others.

**Emerging ruminations.** As the participants became able to identify and talk through the tension they experienced from the unfamiliar they initiated a reflective strategy that to deepen their understanding about the unfamiliar. The second subtheme, emerging ruminations, described the reflective process that the study’s participants used to ameliorate tension, to ask salient questions, reflect on their answers, and to awaken an expanded understanding. The concrete experiences (e.g., student outbursts, unfamiliar technology, differing cultural norms, language challenges, different populations) served to coalesce an introspective, reflective pattern was essential to each participant’s self-discovery process and how they positioned themselves in their respective contexts. Once embedded in the unfamiliar, each participant pulled what they knew to the learning context. It was here that each participant began question asking why am I feeling this way? what is going on in the context? what is behind this behavior? As more questions developed each participant moved into a deeper engagement for understanding that opened them up to for discover new knowledge and new perspectives. The discovery phase is a process, whereby the participants moved though the contours and nuances of their S-L contexts
in very personal ways. It must be noted that while there was deep reflection from the participants, it is never done in a vacuum. Collaborating with group members, faculty mentoring, presenting information, and being with your community partners all served in ways to nurture each participant’s path to discovering meaning.

As Anniello processed the contradictions through deeper reflection and critical inquiry as she explored the feelings that arose. Through those feelings, she questioned her own privilege, her intersectionality in society, and deeper social constructs that seemed to favor some over others. This critical inquiry revealed many things to Anniello. Anniello confronted the notion of privilege and by acknowledging it gave way to her reinterpreting it into a platform for helping others. Ken’s path of reflection took multiple perspectives into account. It began by processing all the necessary information to make the unfamiliar, familiar. Also, Ken’s reflective, holistic insight that a complex process has many moving parts. He embraced the technology that allowed him to command a systemic understanding, where he relentlessly questioned all things that pertained to the course project, and then became an articulate advocate for his community organization by defending them in class discussions. This pushed Ken into higher cognitive levels that opened new understanding on the totality of the S-L experience. Nathan’s reflective journey was described as, reflection evolves. It appeared in along a spectrum with a beginning, a middle, and an end phase. The first phase was reflected in the beginning and moves through learning from others to finally getting it. Reflection evolves seemed to be a natural process for Nathan. One that unfolded to reveal the deeper levels of insight and engagement to him. Once Nathan acknowledged his feelings and gave voice to his experience, his reflection evolved with others to provide him with a gateway to discover the reflective experiences as being positive and the notion that S-L is a way to think outside of yourself. Gem gained clarity from her experience
with her insight called reality check. She observed the progress in her classroom; with her own
eyes, in real world settings, through direct experiences with others and this substantiated in
greater depth what she may have suspected the reality to be. The experience of the unfamiliar
authenticated the educational challenges that she had read about. It personalized the challenges
that provided clarity to Gem’s epistemological well. Ren understood that it was necessary to
learn all that she could from her S-L experiences, particularly those that were the most diverse or
unfamiliar. For that to occur, Ren needed to reflect with an open mind. What would follow was
Ren’s deeper insight into embracing difference as teacher and the nexus of people and place. The
importance Ren attached to how she presented herself to community members was evident. It
also became a reflective learning platform for establishing her professional identity as a Physical
Therapist. As Ren looked in… she manifested the insight for translating her behavior to better
for the next interaction. The more unfamiliar the experiences, the deeper she had to reflect on her
reaction and what she wanted to communicate. Anna needed to draw deep from reflection on the
past. What Anna gleaned by recalling her S-L experience and how she processed the unfamiliar
began with her own reflexive curiosity regarding her past on-line posts. She went back and re-
read what she had written and the meaning discerned from that time and place. It would be here
that Anna recalled an experience with Kayla, as an important portal to understanding herself.
Anna continued to question educational challenges that children faced with a lack of resources.
This in turn, shaped Anna’s professional identity as well as an enhanced understanding of
cultural diversity.

Section Summary

The section, unfolding the unfamiliar, introduced the subthemes, grappling with tension
and emerging ruminations. These themes described the process the participants took to make
meaning from the unfamiliar the findings from grappling with tension explained the existential angst that each participant experienced from the unknown. The tension created the need to be named to begin the process for searching deeper within themselves to understand the relational dynamics within themselves and the situation. Grappling with tension was experienced differently, contingent on time and place for all the participants and was manifested in both expected and unexpected ways. The theoretical constructs from Mezirow and associates (2000) would indicate that in this phase participants began examining their own existing values and beliefs as they experienced unfamiliar situations or events. These findings also aligned with what Kiely (2005) considered the beginning of the personalization stage for transformative learning.

The second subtheme, emerging ruminations, was the hard, meaningful work that everyone experienced in their own individual ways. Reflection was manifested in many ways, but uniquely efficacious for everyone. These findings are situated in Mezirow and associates (2000) notion of acquiring new knowledge that occurred from the reflective processes. Kiely (2005) would situate this phase as the processing phase of the transformative learning model. The work of Kegan (2009) and Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009b) would also have to be considered as the participants began to use critical thinking and reflection tools that challenge the participants to think on various levels as they experience new understanding. The third superordinate theme, translating the unfamiliar will be discussed in the following section. It is here that the participants turn rhetoric into reality as they embraced the new knowledge found and began to explore the world in innovative ways.

**Translating from the Unfamiliar**

As the process for experiencing and creating meaning from the unfamiliar continued to unfold, each of the participants created a personal trajectory for translating what they had
learned. This trajectory led each of the participants into broader behavioral and professional implications. This denoted as a pronounced shift from their initial S-L encounter to what the participants learned that became part of both their personal/professional identities. This shift in understanding, also set up each participant to discover their own truth from their S-L experience. This personalized truth became each participants’ poignant learning revelation that simply could not have occurred where it not for experiencing the unfamiliar. The collective understanding expressed by each participant incorporated many philosophical, ontological, epistemological, and existential insights. These insights were then applied as they move forward in their personal and pre-professional lives. It was here where transformative learning lived and was expressed. Two primary themes were identified in the process of translating the unfamiliar: (a) an evolved understanding and application, and (b) essence of personal meaning. are discussed in the next section.

**An evolved understanding and application.** The first translatable finding discerned was an evolved understanding and application. This notion expressed what the participants learned and translated from their S-L experience. It was a type of deep learning garnered from an experience that had a profound effect that created lasting change on each of the participant’s choices for how he or she will move through the world. Across all participants an apparent shift occurred from encountering and unfolding the unfamiliar. These shifts are described in the participants collective stories in the following section.

An ontological shift from disconnection to transcendence occurred within Anniello. Four transitional phases occurred within the course of her recollection to move her well beyond a superficial understanding of self to one of deep personal revelation and responsibility. The four
phases include: privilege to inspiration; uncomfortableness to passion; questioning contradictions to accountability; and concluding with a transcendent phase of continued growth.

Ken translated the unfamiliar that fused knowledge, technology, and community organizations that coalesced into a coherent, systemic understanding of how systemic change works. Initially, Ken was perplexed at the discordant pieces chaotically thrown in an intentional manner at the students. The method for this madness was the substrate for learning the essential complexity of systems thinking. The key takeaway for Ken was to take a step back from the chaotic nature of the classroom project. In doing so, Ken could get a holistic perspective of the project and begin to shift to behaviors that provided the depth of understanding necessary to secure the knowledge, the collaborative effort, and present advocacy for their community organization. Supporting Ken’s newly acquired behavioral insight were key understandings that included the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, an amalgamation of worth, lessons learned, what truly matters.

Nathan understood that it was essential for him to deconstruct existing notions previously held to reconstruct new meaning. In doing so, Nathan perceptively engaged in transitional understanding that served to deepen Nathan’s understanding about S-L. The paradigm shifts included: empathy, deeper engagement, and looking back. Nathan’s understanding of himself and others became clearer, as empathy became part of his behavioral approach to others. The shift from self-interest to understanding others was key for empathic behavior. Deeper engagement was the second shift in which Nathan realized was imperative to greater attunement to others. Simply, moving through the requirements of graduation, while easy, never produced learning that had lasting value. Finally, Nathan had the opportunity to look back, in doing so; Nathan constructed meaning from an experience that was initially unfamiliar and distressing. Nathan concluded that these shifts continued to have meaning for him and his learning approach. Nathan shared, “I
learned the joy of service as I became more aware of the issues in the community and developed a greater sense of duty for solving them.” Gem’s be the change subtheme, reflected an active path of self-awareness from embracing the unfamiliar. The clarity of her role, her interactions with unfamiliar episodes from previous community engagements, and her ability to translate her S-L experience into definitive personal and professional behavior opened Gem to opportunities for greater levels of cognitive understanding. Gem changed her thought and behavior as she approached new situations. This expanded view of learning allowed Gem to center her being as unexpected situations or events unfolded. Gem understood that her experience with the unfamiliar infused within her a confidence that informed her personally and professionally. Gem also embraced the notion of encouraging others to explore S-L as a portal for garnering new perspectives. Moving outside of one’s comfort zone compels one to explore the unfamiliar and in doing so, provided opportunities for self-reflection and for discovering new knowledge. Ren developed the shift in her behavioral repertoire in the theme, seeing with new eyes. This was supported by subthemes; growing from experience, a changed me, and what do you need. As Ren reflected over the span of her S-L experiences, the unfamiliar was the learning platform served as a catalyst to deconstruct existing notions and reconstruct new perspectives from the experience. Ren’s initial view of S-L was translated to a deeper understanding that we must meet people where they are at. Anna’s evolved understanding from processing the unfamiliar can best be viewed collectively as being more present. Anna realized that she needed to be intentional present in S-L relationships and the S-L experience. The existential notion of being present is what is important to her and continued to serve Anna through the rest of her academic career at Sage University.
The final subtheme, essence of personal meaning, is discussed in the next section. The core revelations revealed here were the culmination of hard, emotional, social, and psychological work the participants went through to discover the newly formed insights for being. These insights were personal gifts to themselves to be shared with others.

**Essence of personal meaning.** This subtheme culminated in the participants’ personal understanding as the researcher took a holistic view of each participant’s story. This revelation was teased out collectively by the participant and the researcher. Each revelation was unique to each participant. It was the collective learning about oneself in context with others that came only from experiencing, reflecting, processing, unique and unfamiliar events that unfolded from the participants’ S-L experience. It was not acquired by books or technology alone, but through experiencing that which challenged them to question, collaborate with others, and nurtured a deeper contextual and relational understanding with service-learning.

The cross-analysis from this subtheme revealed core revelations from each participant. These revelations initiated by the unfamiliar, culminated into a deeper understanding and insights into themselves. By having greater clarity, each participant now walks through the world with a greater understanding and appreciation for learning experientially with others. These learning relationships and contexts experienced outside the norms of a traditional classroom have proven to the participants that learning can come from a variety of settings, from a variety of challenges, if one has the willingness to be open to them. Anniello through her experience with Kayla now understands how intersectionality can advantage or disadvantage one in societal and cultural arenas. More importantly, her experience and how she embraced reflective learning from her S-L has shaped how Anniello comports herself as she continues to walk through the world and interacts with others. Ken garnered an understanding about his S-L through engaging with an
unfamiliar technology software program. The Kumu software program with its steep learning curve was an essential component for understanding systemic change in complex systems. No longer overwhelmed by the many moving pieces, constituencies, and ambiguous directives, Ken’s understood what truly matters in systemic change. Nathan immersed in an S-L experience that initially overwhelmed him because everything was unfamiliar. However, through the challenging work of reflection and collaboration with others, he overcame this angst and reached deep toward an empathic understanding of those students that he worked with. Getting it characterizes the realization that when he placed himself in the shoes of others, he opened himself to learning about others. Gem developed a personal and impactful approach to learning characterized by an infectious energy to be the change. Gem understood how one person can make an impact. This was her mantra for embracing all things unfamiliar and for encouraging others to do the same.

Gem encouraged others to explore S-L as a portal for garnering new perspectives. Moving outside of one’s comfort zone was inherent to embracing the unfamiliar and in doing so, compelled self-reflection. Gem believed that long term involvement in a mission or service organization is important. Ren’s personal revelation came to her through the unfamiliar encounters with clients in her S-L experience. After every challenge that was presented, deep reflection and debriefing ensued to make her next encounter even more beneficial. Physical therapy academic preparation saturated Ren with much knowledge with the intent of helping others with this knowledge. However, what Ren discovered was that equally important to the knowledge was an understanding of what you (the patients) need. Anna’s pathway to understanding her truth was through a deep existential way of understanding of compassion and patience with herself. Anna through reading her transcripts was reminded that she was always
self-critical and that the salient S-L lesson was to care for herself and be okay with making mistakes. Anna understood the challenges presented by the unfamiliar in her S-L experience commanded a balanced, compassionate approach.

**Section Summary**

Translating the unfamiliar was the culminating phase in the process for meaning making. It happened when an unfamiliar, concrete experience is taken through the process of learning to personal meaning and further translation of that learning. The participants findings revealed in two themes: (a) an evolved understanding and application and (b) essence of personal meaning. An evolved understanding and application indicated that academic/personal growth transcended collective class outcomes. These revelations served to inform the participants well beyond college and into their professional realms. These findings are the transformational shifts the participants experienced as they apply what they have learned about themselves and about themselves in context with others. Mezirow and associates (2000) figured prominently as it revealed the participants new understanding about the value of learning from others. Kiely’s (2005) notion of connecting aligned with the participants ability to translate and apply new understanding from an empathic standpoint as they relate with their community partners now and in future interactions.

The participants dove deeper into the personal meaning from the unfamiliar that gave way to individual core revelations from the theme, the essence of personal meaning. The interpretation of meaning, by the participants, reached a pinnacle relative to their individual learning experience in both clarity and introspective thought. Each account personally resonated within each participant and was easily articulated to researcher. This phase of meaning making was a glimpse into the transformative moments for each participant. The depth of these
revelations can only be experienced through the interactive subjectivity of individuals within
contexts that challenged the participants to be more than just students, but as change agents
committed to social responsibility.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study explored how S-LTAs made meaning from experiencing the
unfamiliar in their personal S-L experience at a private research university located in the
Northeastern United States. Through an IPA, the constitutive question for this study was: How
do S-LTAs experience and process the unfamiliar to make meaning in their S-L experience? The
first phase of the chapter provided the narratives for the six participants in the study. The second
phase, provided a cross-case analysis over all six cases. By exploring the narrative stories from
each of the participants and then inductively analyzing across the case studies of the participants
three finding were revealed. The three cross-case analysis findings included: (a) encountering the
unfamiliar, (b) unfolding the unfamiliar, and (c) translating the unfamiliar. Encountering the
unfamiliar led to existential tension and contextual challenges focused on what the participants
were feeling respective to the unfamiliar. Unfolding the unfamiliar highlighted the stimulus
necessary to move into resolution of the tension through reflective measures. Grappling with
tension and emerging ruminations were key for the participant’s deep introspective work on
meaning. Here the participants had to examine existing notions and beliefs that surfaced as they
experienced and began the processing the unfamiliar. Some participants examined personal
beliefs, while others chose strategies that were efficacious for discovering meaning. Whether the
unfamiliar was an event, person, or context, it was clear that the process the participants adopted
for understanding the unfamiliar provided an opportunity to learn something new about
themselves and others. This new knowledge had such a profound impact as to make an
observable shift in personal epistemology as well as for the implications for the participants' professional identity.

The following chapter presents the conclusions drawn based on the findings and the theoretical constructs that served to inform the study. Also, the chapter will explore implications for future practice and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore how S-LTAs made meaning from experiencing the unfamiliar in their personal S-L experience at a private research university located in the northeast sector of the United States. One research question guided this study: How do S-LTAs experience and process the unfamiliar to make meaning in their S-L experience? The theoretical framework used was based in Mezirow and associates’ (2000) TL theory with complimentary theoretical constructs from Brookfield (2005), Kiely (2005), Kegan (2009), Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009b) and Freire (1971, 1982, 1985). One research question guided and informed this study: How do S-LTAs experience and process the unfamiliar to make meaning in their S-L experience?

The cross-data analysis from the interview transcripts generated three superordinate themes and six subordinate themes. The superordinate and corresponding subordinate themes were: (a) encountering the unfamiliar (initial trepidation, opportunity); (b) unfolding the unfamiliar (grappling with tension, emerging ruminations); (c) translating the unfamiliar (an evolved understanding and application, essence of personal meaning).

This chapter will answer the questions “So what?” and the affirmation “You can too!” The findings discussed in chapter four provided the necessary data to address these concerns. Now that the study has been concluded, what conclusions may be drawn? What is the relationship between the conclusions, existing research, and the theoretical/conceptual frame work that guided this study? How are the conclusions salient to educational practice? What future research is recommended that will expand and translate these findings? This chapter was organized into three sections to answer these questions: (a) conclusions and discussion, (b) implications for practice, and (c) recommendations for future research.
Conclusions and Discussion

The sections offer conclusions and discussion for this qualitative study that used an IPA methodology. Three salient conclusions were metaphorically (a door, a mirror, and a window) drawn from the analysis of the data: (a) encountering the unfamiliar—the threshold for opening the door to the meaning-making process; (b) unfolding the unfamiliar—was the mirror that provided the reflective synergy necessary to heuristically frame and engage the participants in their contextual experience? and (c) translating the unfamiliar—became the personalized application that opened the window for the participants into the transformative learning opportunities—where their perspectives became enlightened through personal and professional revelations. The following three sections elaborate on these conclusions and discuss how they relate to existing literature and the integrated theoretical framework that guided this study.

Conclusion One: Encountering the Unfamiliar - The Threshold for Opening the Door to the Meaning Making Process

The first conclusion of this study is that of encountering the unfamiliar—the threshold for opening the door to the meaning making process. Each S-L context presented several unique learning experiences for the participants of this study. Each participant in the study came to the S-L experience with varying degrees of exposure to S-L. Some participants came with little or no understanding of what to expect in environments outside of the classroom. The range of unfamiliar experiences included: a pre-school classroom, an after-school lesson planning, leaning a data analysis technology, weekend tutoring, culturally diverse senior centers, community support groups and tutoring students in English. These learning environments provided a consider the lives of people that many of the participants had never encountered. For some participants, it was frightening and for others, a welcomed opportunity to learn more. However,
the initial shock of the event for all participants elicited a spectrum ranging from discomfort to a willingness to be disturbed. Also, the event provided a compelling need to understand many things. Primarily, this study focused on how the participants themselves processed the unfamiliar in these very new contexts. Some participants met this challenge through peeking through the door and some relishing in the opportunity to fling the door wide open.

The findings connected to this theme suggested that the participants needed to understand feelings when presented with the ‘unfamiliar.’ There were two subthemes: initial trepidation and an opportunity. It was important to assess how the participants felt as they approached their S-L contexts. A type of existential tension was present as the participants began to explore the unfamiliar in S-L contexts. Participants explored their feelings and the contextual challenges from this experience through personal reflection and collaborative de-briefing with others. This tension described by the participants words and collapsed into subthemes that included a range of emotions and insights. Questions also began to surface as the participants engaged with their learning contexts. Questions that included: What makes students behave in a disruptive manner? How do I mitigate temper tantrums? How do I forge relationships with people from differing cultural backgrounds? How do I make an impact when I am just planning lessons? How do I understand what I am supposed to do for this class with little direction? Why are children asked as an eight-year old to miss school to prepare a family meal? By asking these questions, indicated that there was a tension within each participant that need to be resolved and understood. This finding indicated that contextualization in S-L presented opportunities to explore the unfamiliar (events, contexts, and relationships) outside the norms and security of the traditional classroom. In doing so, the potential for questioning one’s beliefs and values system when addressing unfamiliar situations and contexts greatly increased. Research demonstrates
how initial unfamiliar events can serve as a catalyst to transformational learning (Mezirow and associates, 2000; Brookfield, 2005; Kiely, 2005).

Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory confirmed the finding from this study suggesting that the reflective question of what is the attempt to understand self in context with others. This is where the unfamiliar is the heuristic that drives the need for further discovery and understanding. The contextualization of self in the experience was also necessary to personally embrace the unfamiliar and make the object the subject of reflection. Research from Jones et al. (2012) emphasized context as a contributor to the initial learning and subsequent derivatives of meaning. Grant’s (2012) research argued for deeper S-L outcomes. Self-assessment was included as one component needed for challenging students into deeper realms of understanding within learning contexts. Also, this finding is situated in the following research literature: Jones et al.’s (2012) research that stressed the significance of contextual influences (e.g., getting out of the bubble, boundary crossing, and personalizing); two of Kiely’s (2005) five learning processes (contextual border crossing and dissonance) for TL; and Scheckley and Keeton’s (1997) notion that individuals construct meaning through confirmation (a comfortable learning preference) or disconfirmation: and Rockquemore and Harwell Schaffer’s (2000) notion of shock supported Finding 1a (below). The participants interacted with their environment, albeit unfamiliar in all cases, it was necessary to self-assess how to be, how to then approach, and adapt to the unfamiliar challenges the contexts posed.

According to participants, how and what they were initially feeling as the experienced the unfamiliar created the need for understanding and discovering the basis for their feelings before they could progress through the experience. Moon (2004), drawing from Perry’s (1970) work,
suggested, “Each student’s epistemological position provides a frame of reference for the manner in which the student interprets meaning.” (p. 34).

The participants described the contextual challenges ranging from language barriers, the danger in assuming a single story, and the unfamiliarity of urban communities. Understanding self in unfamiliar contexts would support the literature from Taylor et al. (2012) that suggested “the ways of gaining clarity in TL can differ, depending on the person or people and the context or situation.” (p. 3).

Findings from the current study indicate that contextualization and assessing oneself in an unfamiliar context or event were important heuristic tools for the learning process to continue and for personal meaning to unfold. The participants acknowledged their fear, reservation, and emotional misgivings, and an opening reception, and with this self-acknowledgement came personal fortitude to continue into the learning. Knowing how the participants positioned themselves contextually, revealed the participants’ embeddedness or presence within that unfamiliar experience. How the participants were feeling as they experienced the unfamiliar was important for understanding how and when meaning was developed.

Presented with an unknown experience, the participants needed to utilize known resources and learning strategies to frame their reflective energy for what they experienced. The next section discusses what they drew upon to understand the unfamiliar in their S-L context.

**Conclusion Two: Unfolding the Unfamiliar--Was the Mirror That Provided Reflective Synergy Necessary to Heuristically Frame and Engage the Participants in Their Contextual Experience?**

The second conclusion of this study describes the phase for understanding meaning from the unfamiliar. As discussed from the previous section, the participant’s exposure to an
unfamiliar event, person, or context initiated the exploratory questioning about what they were feeling. The previous section, through collaboration of others (classmates, teachers, and community members) on framing the experience got them past the threshold of the door. Once passed the door and the initial exposure to the unfamiliar contexts, the participants began their personal journeys for understanding what they were feeling about the events that presented to them in their service-learning contexts. This would also test and challenge them in ways that necessitated not only naming the tensions that arose from these specific encounters, but, also investing in their reflective strategies that would resolve these tensions and for understanding and interpreting meaning from these unfamiliar tensions.

The data revealed two subordinate themes: grappling with tension and emerging ruminations. These were distinct processes but not mutually exclusive. One process was to name the tension initiated by the unfamiliar and secondly, to describe and enact the reflective strategy needed to resolve and to understand the unfamiliar experience. The range of tension from the unfamiliar included; solving disconcerting contradictions of not being able to implement the lessons they were making, intentional ambiguity of the class directives, divergent languages spoken in his tutoring class that led to him to question the efficacy of his efforts; expecting the unexpected, was a constant consideration given her pre-school class of children from a variety of households and child-rearing practices; experiencing contexts with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds would challenge her notions of learning from other people and how to forged relationships for greater understanding; the self-realization from her encounter with a young student, ignited the notion, of the danger of the single story and the implicit bias associated with that.
According to participants, reflection on parameters of time (past, present, and future) aided their understanding of the unfamiliar. Each participant utilized past knowledge, current understanding, and future strategies to help make sense of their S-L experience. This activity is supported in student development literature that suggests that students bring personal ways of knowing to learning contexts (Baxter Magolda, 2002, 2009b; Kegan, 2009). As the participants engaged with the unfamiliar and the challenges inherent in S-L contexts, disorienting tensions occurred required reflection.

Emerging ruminations was the second subordinate theme for unfolding the ‘unfamiliar.’ According to the participants, reflective strategies were avenues into a deeper, personal understanding of the unfamiliar, as well as a contextual necessity. This finding aligned with the theoretical frame that called for introspection and critical reflection. The work of Mezirow and associates, (2000) - examination and assessment of assumptions; Brookfield, (2005) - asking the questions why? And what if? For Kiely (2005), personalizing deepened the engagement for each participant by each person examine both their feelings and any implicit bias that may obfuscate potential TL and the relational moments with those in their respective contexts. The participants in the present study understood that S-L and the inherent unfamiliarity, required a nuanced approach with a sensitivity to complexity, a utility for imagination, the ability to learn from experience, and reasoning in decision-making.

As the participants processed and critically reflected on the unfamiliar, each participant discovered or came across something that contributed deeply to their current knowledge base or they critically examined conflicted assumptions. The participants revealed a variety of reflective modes as they encountered the unfamiliar. The work of King and Kitchener (1994) on reflective judgment, which entailed an understanding that knowledge is constructed and related to context.
They included: For Anniello reflection became a way to reveal underrepresentation of minorities in STEM field’s reflection revealed, “I never thought about how minorities are underrepresented …I learned that it’s not just coincidence that minorities aren’t represented in technological fields.”. For Ken, reflection on multiple perspectives (“the challenge of critical thinking about how you’re going to look at a problem and how to solve it”) was how he implemented a variety of ways to tackle the complexity of systemic change. For Nathan, reflection evolved (“I saw it [S-L] as a mandatory portion of the course learning and now, I feel like it is something more complicated than that”) described the process needed to garner a new appreciation for S-L. For Gem, a reality check (“It’s like a reality check seeing it in person brings it home and makes it real.”) provided a tangible authentic learning approach that served to reinforce that her work had an impact. For Ren, reflect with an open the mind (“Through S-L…instead of making judgments, try to understand and meet people where they are at and learn instead of impressing your knowledge upon other people really learn from each experience and each person, and each community”) was Ren’s approach to bonding and creating relationship from mutual respect. For Anna, reflection on the past, created a foundation from which she learned from reflecting on her own school experience growing up and intersecting it with Kayla’s (her student) experience growing up. Anna could relate to the disparities they both experienced. This reflection would solidify her goal of becoming a teacher.

The literature presented compelling evidence that reflection was crucial to unfolding the unfamiliar and process of meaning making. The participants needed to reach deep into their personal epistemologies and search for the notion of what I know and how do I access existing knowledge that would help me to understand the unfamiliar. The strategies employed by each participant described the intensity and methods for deeper reflection of the unfamiliar. These
themes indicated patterns for understanding that were introspective, reflective, and critically
drawn from each participant’s knowledge and experience base.

The second superordinate theme, unfolding the unfamiliar, in located in the research of
Kegan (2009) and suggested that “a form of knowing always consists of the relationship between
subject and the object of one’s knowing” (p. 45). This theme also aligned with Baxter Magolda’s
(2004b) epistemological reflection model. According to Baxter Magolda (2004b), this model is
based on the assumptions that “personal epistemology is socially constructed and context bound”
and reflects an understanding that “people actively create or make meaning of their experience
based on interpretation, evaluation, and drawing conclusions about the meaning” (p. 31). Also,
additional research would include Bringle and Hatcher (1999), research that explained,
“Experience becomes educative when critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads
to growth and the ability to take informed actions” (p. 180); Jacoby’s (2015) research that
defined critical reflection, “as the process of analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning one’s
experience within the broad context of issues and content knowledge” (p. 26); Blount’s (2006)
research considered critical reflection as a “crucial leadership skill and an immersed art form of
an experience that shoulders attentiveness to both the intensity and complexity of an approach,
grounded in the here and now, while cognizant of the larger social implications” (p. 272); and
finally, Baxter Magolda’s (2004b) research that supported this finding with the notion that
people will actively construct meaning as they reflectively interpret, evaluate, and draw
conclusions about experiential meaning.

The current study’s findings grappling with tension and emerging ruminations show how
the participants unfolded both the tension from the unfamiliar and the necessary reflective space
to continue their journey. This was the hard, meaningful work that everyone experienced in their
own individual ways. Reflection was manifested in many ways, but uniquely efficacious for everyone. Conclusions drawn from this finding revealed that learners had to draw deep from existing knowledge resources as they began to reflect on the unfamiliar. As the participants delved into the relevance of that knowledge they began to critically reflect on the efficacy of these reflective processes. Critical reflection was defined here as a critique of our current assumptions.

**Conclusion Three: Translating the Unfamiliar--Became the Personalized Application for the Participants to Open the Window of TL Opportunities--Where Their Perspectives Became Enlightened Through Personal and Professional Revelations**

The third conclusion of this study through translating the unfamiliar was a personalized application for the participants to open the window of TL opportunities—where their perspectives became enlightened through personal and professional revelations.

The finding from the data, translating the unfamiliar and the subordinate themes (an evolved understanding and application; the essence of personal meaning) emerged to reflect each participant’s understanding of what they were becoming. This theme revealed deep, cognitive and behavioral shifts had occurred compared to what they entered the S-L experience with. The themes for an evolved understanding and application were apparent in the following observations. The participants described their evolved insights: as transcending existing beliefs (Anniello described ;“Having that [understanding of privilege] transcend into inspiration and things you can teach other people”) revealed an acknowledgment of her own privilege and how she intended to use that privilege; Step back, the view is holistic (Ken’s insight stated, “I think unless you take a step back and try to visualize this big picture, it’s easy to get lost.”) was what he needed to do in order not to be consumed with the very complex nature and rendering of his
S-L challenge: getting it: thinking outside yourself (Nathan realized, “I think doing S-L has made me develop a greater appreciation for taking time out to try and help the community around you.”) revealed a personal understanding that was insular to one of embracing others in world; Be the change and balancing passion (Gem’s understood that now, “I have a balance of having a career that I’m really passionate about and at the same time having a role in the community that I’m also extremely passionate about.”) emerged as strategy for future endeavors upon graduation as she entered her professional field; Seeing with new eyes (Lauren realized, “There’s lots of times there are perspectives that I don’t see, but if I remain open-minded enough, I eventually come around”) informed how she would approach new and unfamiliar seeing in her future professional encounters; and being present, (Anna stated, “I’ve grown in my understanding of what it is and how to be more present”) served to engage her in all learning endeavors by investing both time and herself to those served. Indicative from these themes, a new-found consciousness was revealed as they processed meaning from the unfamiliar. The participants became more critically reflexive in their learning personally, with others, and in the world.

This finding is situated in the research literature of Kolb (1984) and Kolb and Kolb (2012) and begs the question for how students translate knowledge into meaning that produce transformative shifts in understanding. Additional factors must also be considered to move learning to a more engaged state (Moon, 2004). Such factors include emotional insight (Entwistle & Entwistle, 1997; Felton et al., 2006), the learning environment, and the depth of reflective learning. In addition, how a student chooses to reflect and engage the learning process may be a matter of intent (Rogers, 2001). Intent in this context is defined relative to the depth in which a student consciously decides to engage and invest learning approach. The deeper the intent, may suggest that the learning experience holds meaning for that individual. Also,
translating the unfamiliar is situated in the literature review from the work of Kiely’s (2005) notion of connecting (p. 8) and Baxter Magolda’s (2004b) notion of epistemological transformation (p. 31). Kiely’s (2005) notion of connecting is described as affective learning and understanding in relationship with others. It is learning through an intuitive mode such as sensing, sharing, feeling caring empathizing, and doing. This finding culminated from the stories the participants told and how they interpreted the learning drawn from their experience. Baxter Magolda’s (2004b) work on epistemological reflection situates this finding as a construct of an evolving personal epistemology indicative of a shift to more complex epistemological levels. According to study participants, transcending existing beliefs was a learning outcome demonstrated from reflection. It was an ontological shift that led to a new understanding that the participants integrated into the academic and personal life-worlds. This finding would align with Ash and Clayton’s (2004) work that posited the reflective activity can push students beyond superficial interpretations to more complex understanding, critical thinking, and meaningful learning. Also, Rockquemore, Harwell, and Schaffer’s (2000) conclusions align with this finding, in that, when students question their assumptions this begins the process of reframing perspectives and ultimately determining future behavior.

The final subordinate theme, the essence of personal meaning (core revelations), reflected a cumulative pattern of understanding through a unique personal learning component that each participant discovered and learned through experience and reflection. Here the transformational moments (Mezirow and associates, 2000; Kiely, 2005) occurred after the challenging work of collaboration and reflection. These unique learnings were carried forth these insights and shared with others as they taught in their S-L classes. Participants describe these core revelations as: Anniello ‘s understanding intersectionality (“I realize my place in the world and how I move
through it more easily or more difficult than others.”) was placed in a real life situation to be played and understood contextually; Ken’s insight on What truly matters (“What matters to me is systemic change, actually targeting the roots of the issue and obviously I think a lot of people want to make the world a better place in a way that is going to have a lasting effect.”) revealed his understanding for the deeper causation of societal challenges, specifically, poverty and the homelessness; Nathan discovered, The joy of service, (“I learned the joy of service as I become more aware of community issues and the duty to solve them”) was an ontological shift from fear to engaged appreciation for S-L; Gem realized the importance of, The personal impact of one, (“Try something new because I think that long term involvement in a mission or service organization is really important so you can actually get in-depth involvement, knowledge and Have an impact on the community.”) was the existential mantra for how she now approaches the world of service to others; Ren’s question, What do you need (“at the end of the [presentation] I said I have all these props can I leave them with your gym stuff? Then I left and was reflecting … and I thought that wasn’t appropriate… if what I to give them was what they needed”) garnered the realization that one cannot assume what others need; and Anna’s need to exercise, compassion and patience with oneself, (“I think re-reading [the transcripts] was reminder …to care for oneself and be okay with making mistakes”) was the necessary self-permission to maintain high standards without being self-critical with her efforts.

The participants revealed the essence of meaning through deep personal revelations that impacted them in ways that only that as individuals could experience. Developmentally, the growth was apparent from their initial exposure to the unfamiliar to their final processing of meaning from the unfamiliar. This transitional process a part of transformative development is said to be at the core of TL. All participants engage in all least two types of reflection (content
and process) that Mezirow’s (1991) work purported. Varying degrees of a critical self-reflective process indicated that premise reflection was beginning to take place by the participants. There were flashes of critical reflection on cultural systems but did not rise to level of power analysis of hegemony that Brookfield (2000) espoused.

From the findings and the related literature, translating to an evolved self, it can be concluded that each participant experienced some degree of transformation when engaged with the unfamiliar. Transformation happened when an unfamiliar, concrete experience is taken through the cyclical process of learning to personal meaning and further translation of that learning experience (Kiely, 2005). This process is one of the hallmarks of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). The findings the participants revealed indicated an academic/personal growth that transcended collective class outcomes. These revelations served to inform the participants well beyond college and into their professional realms.

As the participants dove deeper into the personal meaning from the unfamiliar that gave way to individual core revelations from the theme, the personal essence of meaning. The interpretation of meaning, by the participants, reached a pinnacle relative to their individual learning experience in both clarity and introspective thought. The second conclusion reached is that each account personally resonated within each participant and was easily articulated to researcher.

**Section Summary**

Three principle conclusions were drawn from an analysis of data. First, encountering the unfamiliar, the threshold for opening the door to the meaning-making process. Second, unfolding the unfamiliar, was the reflective synergy necessary to heuristically frame and engage the participants in their contextual experience. Third, translating the unfamiliar, became the
personalized application for the participants to open the window of transformative learning opportunities, where their perspectives became enlightened through personal and professional revelations. These conclusions demonstrate the process of contextualization, introspection, analysis, and application needed to tease the individual meaning for each of the participants. Utilizing the unfamiliar as the heuristic tool to start this process that unfolded in transformative insights to each of the participants in this study. This chapter concludes with two sections: implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings in this study are relevant to several areas of higher education where experiential education play a prominent role in the mission of the university. These areas include: pedagogical initiatives, faculty integration with service-learning, community engagement, and learning strategies for conscious educational growth. Implications for practice are discussed in terms of a holistic approach that encompasses all stakeholders in academic service-learning classes but potentially may have implications for all disciplines and research intensives (capstone research, independent studies, study abroad, or international dialogue studies). We are only limited by our imaginations; however, it is essential to have the academic will to put these ideas into action.

The first implication is that it was necessary to encounter unfamiliar events, situations, and contexts in real time to engage the learning potential for all involved.

The first recommendation of this study is the need for pedagogical strategies that develop deeper relational approaches unfamiliar contexts for more meaningful learning experiences. In other words, provide students with experiential academic experiences that disrupt to take them through essential patterns for self-understanding in juxtaposition with community, society, and
the world. This study demonstrated for this sample that S-L has the pedagogical strength to nurture engaged transformational approaches that challenge students to explore the unfamiliar, question existing beliefs and assumptions, and develop agency for change.

The second implication is that the unfamiliar was a necessary heuristic tool to broaden the lived experiences of students through community engagement opportunities. This experience allowed the participants of the study to move beyond themselves and to experience the real-world challenges that others may face. Once these experiences were revealed, the experiences promulgated further questioning and critical inquiry by the participants.

The second recommendation would be to provide students with the critical tools to evaluate, assess, and question systemic inequality in under resourced contexts and with underrepresented persons. This could be accomplished with an understanding of the purpose for S-L be interfaced with a social justice emphasis that supports a critical service-learning philosophy. A critical service-learning pedagogy will help students develop a critical consciousness where students combine both reflection and action in the class and community to examine the systemic social problems of our times and move to ameliorate these conditions as change agents.

The implication from this study emphasizes that not all students will be as engaged as the participants in the study, but the opportunity exists to show the powerful transformative shifts that may occur. It can begin with an assessment with five simple suggestions that students can ask of themselves as they approach a learning context: (a) begin to question your intent and approach to learning, (b) begin to take inventory of your personal beliefs values, goals, and assumptions, (c) begin to question why to move into a deeper personal and higher epistemological understanding of meaning, (d) begin to embrace the agency of change in
yourself and how that can be translated to others (yes, I can), and (e) learn to know your own truth and be able to articulate that truth from all learning.

The third recommendation for this is study is for practitioners and students to provide and take the reflective time to delve deep into the questions of why. This study underscores the need for practitioners to provide students with reflective space and time to debrief and help them develop patterns of understanding through a critical reflective process.

Implications for Future Research

Conscious educational growth is an ideal that higher education institutions should strive for (Stanton et al., 1999, p. 6). This study’s premise was based upon the need to seek learning environments that engaged learners in transformative ways. The findings substantiate and extend transformational research literature with qualitative data that brings theoretical transferability and discourse to the discussion. This study explores the unfamiliar as a heuristic tool for student engagement in experiential learning contexts by doing so provided a glimpse into the process that students use to make meaning. The following recommendations for future research could further extend the dialogue of meaning making as well as to promote experiential learning strategies that have the potential for transformative learning, bringing agency to the participants, and to begin grappling with the existential angsts of our times.

1. Identify opportunities for longitudinal research and participant action research where community needs are translated into systemic change. This type of research approach would engage students over longer periods of time with the community partners. This would the stakeholders to fully assess the community needs and move to provide actionable, sustainable change.
2. Identify through research opportunities, other heuristic tools that challenge students to explore and navigate ambiguity while providing the necessary support mechanisms to lead students to deeper forms of reflection and higher epistemological shifts in understanding.

3. More research studies are needed to chronicle the significance and meaning of S-L intervention. Particularly in the areas of faculty buy-in and efficacy for communities and community members.

4. S-L pedagogical approaches are both varied and fluid…as such, by identifying philosophical assumptions and student needs, these approaches and strategies could be translated to interdisciplinary areas for collaboration, independent studies, and social responsibility research initiatives.

The results from this study imply the need for embracing learning contexts that challenge the deepest notions of who we are and nudge one into a critically reflective practice of who we are in relation to others in unfamiliar educational and social arenas of learning. The unfamiliar was the impetus that began the reflective process, as it seemed to call into question existing beliefs and values held by the participants. The reflective process while introspective, is never fully rendered in a vacuum. The participants in this study were heavily engaged with their community partners, community leaders, course instructors, S-LTAs, and other classmates that formed a symbiotic web of interrelationships.

Summary

When this study was conceived, there was little research related to S-L teaching assistants experience with the unfamiliar. Given their unique place as having been both a service-learner and teaching assistant, it was safe to assume that the participants could provide a rich and
detailed recollection of experiencing the unfamiliar and the meaning formed from the S-L experience. The complexity of S-L required a theoretical framework that integrated several theoretical paradigms. Through this blended approach, the researcher theoretically situated and framed the process as it developed in each of the participants’ stories. Entering the mind of another was facilitated by means of an IPA. An IPA methodology was essential for understanding how the participants made meaning from the unfamiliar.

Each participant told a story as they processed the unfamiliar and began the reflective activity to make meaning. As the stories were told, the narrative revealed keywords and dialogue the participant shared with the researcher. Keywords and dialogue, then were inductively analyzed into themes and sub themes for each participant. A cross-case analysis was done across all the participants to reveal three super-ordinate themes and six subthemes. It was clear that the process for meaning making followed very similar paths from the review of literature. There was a concrete experience that disrupted the participants’ state of mind. This experience induced personal and collective reflection from an introspective domain. This state then cascaded into question and critical inquiry, which resulted in a behavioral or cognitive shift into changed state of being which was transformative for all the participants. From the process, each participant identified a germane truth specific to their learning experience and processing of the unfamiliar.

This study illuminated a deep contextualized meaning for each participant in ways that cannot be measured in academic metrics. What can be observed with each participant was a personal journey into a reflexive state of meaning. This was initiated by an unfamiliar event or situation that created enough tension that moved them into engaged understanding of themselves and their position to others in the context. This understanding was strong enough to influence both cognitive and behavioral patterns for each participant. The unfamiliar challenged each
participant to seek their personal truth gleaned from the S-L experience. This personal truth would be carried with them to each learning scenario and shared with those with whom they taught as teaching assistants.

In conclusion, it is the researcher’s hope all students can experience the transformational nature of S-L. It is the type of learning that engaged participants will carry for a lifetime, it is a type of learning where experience becomes the teacher, and one begins to author one’s place together with the lives of others to change the world and to share each participant’s unique gift to the world. What can be gleaned from this process is a profound respect and honor it was to share in the academic lives of the participants from this study. Anniello, Ken, Nathan, Gem, Ren, and Anna, what you revealed through this journey (understanding intersectionality, trust the process, it’s not about me, be the change, what do YOU need, and be present) made this researcher, a better researcher.
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Appendix A

Letter to Access Research Site

Opening the Door:
S-L Teaching Assistants Explore the “Unfamiliar” and the Meaning Made from Their S-L Experience - An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Dear Colleague:

My name is Colleen Fritze, and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. I am conducting research to explore the “unfamiliar” and the meaning S-L teaching assistants (S-LTAs) make from their service learning experience, under the direction of my Dissertation Chair, Elisabeth E. Bennett, Ph.D.

I am reaching out to you for assistance and permission to access and recruit six to eight participants from your student populations who may be interested in telling their academic lived stories and experiences through an interview and any reflective documentation relative to their experience.

I welcome any and all concerns, considerations, and input that you may have relative to this study. If you wish to discuss this study in a more in-depth manner, I can be reached by email at fritze.c@husky.neu.edu or by phone at (978) 376-1014. I am also available for discussion at your convenience at the Northeastern University campus.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and support in this research endeavor. This is truly a collaborative effort and I respect your expertise in this matter.

Sincerely,

Colleen J. Fritze, Ed.D. Candidate
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston, MA
Appendix B

Letter for Recruitment/Solicitation for Participants

Dear Participant:

Would you like share your experience with Service Learning? My name is Colleen Fritze, and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. I am conducting research to explore the “unfamiliar” and the meaning S-L teaching assistants (S-LTAs) make from their service learning experience, under the direction of my Dissertation Chair, Elisabeth E. Bennett, Ph.D.

As a participant, you would be asked to share your service learning experiences through an interview process and any reflective documents relative to your experience. The interview process will include:

- Three audio-recorded interviews: one 45-minute interview, one 60- to 90-minute interviews and one 30-minute interview.
- The first 30-minute interview will focus on demographics and contextual understanding.
- The second 60- to 90-minute interview will focus on the details of your S-L experiences reflecting on meaning /translation. Upon completion of the second interview the transcriptions will be emailed to you for review of accuracy. Once the transcription is member checked and confirmed, the student researcher will begin the narrative analysis. The narrative analysis when completed will be mailed to the participant for review one week before the final interview.
- The final 30-minute interview will be reserved for a member-checking the narrative and to co-generate the narrative to ensure the narrative represents an authentic account of the participant’s voice, statements and thoughts.
- All information you provide will be confidential. The audiotapes will be transcribed and coded. Prior to conducting my research, you will be provided with two informed consent forms; one for the student researcher’s file and one for your files. The consent form will detail how your identity will be protected and your confidence maintained.

Participation is entirely voluntary. If you are interested in participating and sharing your service learning experiences collaboratively in this research endeavor, I can be reached by email at fritze.c@husky.neu.edu or by phone at (978) 376-1014. My research is in compliance with the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University. Should you have any questions about my research, please contact my advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett by email at el.bennett@neu.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration; the privilege of retelling your stories; and honor of sharing this research journey with you.

Sincerely,

Colleen J. Fritze
Ed.D. Candidate
College of Professional Studies,
Northeastern University, Boston, MA
Appendix C

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Graduate School of Education
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Elisabeth Bennett, Principal Investigator; Colleen Fritze, Principal Student Investigator

Title of Project
Opening the Door: S-L Teaching Assistants Explore the “Unfamiliar” and the Meaning Made from Their S-L Experience - An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this study because you are an S-L teaching assistant (S-LTA) and have expressed an interest in sharing your S-L story and written reflection papers, journals, or blogs that would inform the process.
Also, you meet the sampling matrix for this study.

This matrix includes the following:

Sampling Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Sampling Parameter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Traditional college age students age range (18 to 25 years of age)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Level</td>
<td>At least sophomores who have completed at the minimum one S-L course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-L commitment as S-LTAs</td>
<td>Have completed at least one semester as an S-LTA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiographic Perspective offered</td>
<td>Participants can provide a rich detailed account of their S-L experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td>A representative sample will be pursued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>A representative sample will be pursued</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why is this research study being done?
This qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study aims to explore how S-L teaching assistants (S-LTAs) make meaning from experiencing the “unfamiliar” in their personal S-L experience at a private research university located in the Northeast sector of the United States. One research question will guide this study:

*How did S-L teaching assistants (S-LTAs) experience and process the “unfamiliar” to make meaning in their S-L experience?*

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to consent to:

- One 45-minute interview, one 60- to 90-minute interview, and one 30-minute interview. All interviews will be audio-recorded professionally, confidentially transcribed, and then analyzed;
- The student researcher will send the interview transcription to you via e-mail to review for accuracy. You will be asked to confirm the transcriptions via e-mail to fritze.c@husky.neu.edu.
- Also, if you wish to provide any written reflective documents from your S-L class that would be helpful to the study;
- Finally, the participant will be asked to confirm the final written case narrative analysis.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed three times in an interview room on the first floor of the library at Sage University (pseudonym) or at a time and place that is convenient for you.

- **The first 45-minute interview** will be audio-recorded focusing demographics and contextual understanding. In one week, the second interview will take place;
- **The second 60- to 90-minute interview** will be audio-recorded and focus on the details of your S-L experiences reflecting on meaning/translation. Upon completion of the second interview the transcriptions will be e-mailed to you to review for accuracy. Once the transcription is member checked and confirmed, the researcher will begin the narrative analysis per interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). In one week, you will be provided the written narrative to review before the final interview.
- **The final 30-minute interview** will be audio-recorded reserved for a member-checking the narrative analysis and to co-generate the narrative analysis if needed to ensure and reflect the authenticity of the participant’s voice, statements and thoughts.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
As with any research study there are potential inherent risks. You may feel some discomfort answering interview question. You may choose to skip a question or withdraw from the study any time until the data collection is complete. The benefit of your participation includes the opportunity to reflect upon your experiences and to contribute what is known about S-L in the
However, there seems to be no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study. The focus of the research is the reflection on the “unfamiliar” and the meaning made from their S-L experience. It seems unlikely that harm would be present as this type of reflection inherently occurs at the academic classroom as well.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help educators understand how S-L teaching assistants (S-LTAs) explore the “unfamiliar” to making meaning from their S-L experience.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your confidentiality will be ensured by assigning a pseudonym in place of your real name and by removing any identifying factors from all documents in this research. Materials gathered (audio-tapes and released documents) will be protected in password protected folders accessible only to the research team and hardcopies secured in a locked file box in my possession only.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student and as a teaching assistant.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Colleen Fritze (fritze.c@husky.neu.edu), the student researcher and the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Elisabeth Bennett, Ph.D (el.bennett@northeastern.edu), the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, (617) 373-4588, Email: n.regina@northeastern.edu You may call anonymously if you wish.
Will I be paid for my participation?

The participant will not be paid.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There will be no cost incurred by the participant

Is there anything else I need to know?

At this point, there is no further information to include. The student researcher will be open to any concerns or questions that you may have regarding the study.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________ ______ __________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

_____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

_____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent Date

_____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix D

Interview One

(Focused Contextual Understanding): Protocol and Schedule

Interviewee (Pseudonym):
Interviewer: Colleen Fritze
Date: ______________
Location: ______________

INTRODUCTION
Part I: Introductory Questions Objectives (5 to 7 minutes): Build rapport, describe the study, answer any questions, review and sign IRB protocol and consent form for audio tape recording.

Introductory Protocol
You have been selected to speak with me today because you have identified as someone who has self-reflect on their S-L experience. Through this study, we hope to explore the notion of the “unfamiliar” in your S-L experience and how you constructed meaning/translation of your S-L experience. The “unfamiliar” for this study is defined as any context, situation, or event in the S-L process that was unexpected, new, different, or surprised you and you needed to make sense of it.

Because your responses are important, I want to make sure to capture everything you say I would like to audio tape our conversation. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [Wait for response or if necessary provide written confirmation]. Thank you, I will begin recording now [Wait for recording to start]

I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all written responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. The tapes will be transcribed professionally, with only a pseudonym used to identify the tapes. I will be the only one privy to the transcripts and the information and the tapes will be destroyed after they are transcribed.

To meet our human subjects’ requirements, you must sign the informed consent document that I have emailed you. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop or choose to skip questions at any time you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm [Allow time to review form]. Do you have any questions at this time about the interview process or the informed consent document? [Wait for response]. Thank you.

We have planned this interview to last approximately 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. However, please feel free to bring up topics that you feel are related. If time runs short, it may be necessary to politely interrupt to move forward with the line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?
Introduction to Interviewee

Interviewer Background
My name is Colleen Fritze and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. My dissertation focus is to explore the “unfamiliar” from your S-L experience and through critical reflection understand how that shaped your meaning/translation of that experience.

Interview One
Focused contextual understanding: Participant in relation to classroom and community

1. Tell me about your current major.
2. Can you tell me how you were first introduced to S-L?
3. Tell me more about your understanding of S-L at the beginning of the course?
4. Can you discuss the context (classroom and community partner) of your S-L experience? Follow-up: How was it selected and what can you tell about the role you played in selecting the experience?
5. Can you tell me what and how were you prepared to enter the context of your service learning experience?
6. Can you provide me with some examples of how were you challenged (within yourself or by others) to reflect and articulate about your experience . . . in the classroom, in the community?
7. Can you tell me what you think you brought to the experience?
8. Tell me more about how the experience affected you? Potential follow-ups: Tell me more about that. Can you share a story about that?
Appendix E:

Interview Two (Details of Experience): Protocol and Schedule

Interviewee (Pseudonym):
Interviewer: Colleen Fritze
Date: ______________
Location: ______________

INTRODUCTION
Thank you for joining for our second conversational interview for this research study. This interview will focus on more concrete details of your S-L experience relative to exploring the unfamiliar and to share those moments that caused you to question and reflect.

We have planned this interview to last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. However, please feel free to bring up topics that you feel are related. If time runs short, it may be necessary to politely interrupt to move forward with the line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Interview Two
Details of your S-L experience: The critically reflective moments on meaning and translation.
1. Tell me about a time when you faced an unfamiliar environment or situation during S-L. Follow-ups: What was it like? How did you learn from this experience? Tell me about any examples when you realized that you had actually changed your perspective or assumptions about something based on your experience? What was surprising to you? What did you think about this?
2. How did this experience inform your role as an S-LTA?
3. What is your understanding of S-L at the completion of S-L course experience? What implications does this experience have for your personal, professional future and for future community involvement?
4. Is there anything else that you would like to share regarding your S-L experience?

Concluding Comments
I will be providing you with a copy of the written transcription from this interview. Please review it for accuracy and confirm via e-mail to fritze.c@husky.neu.edu that it accurately represents our discussion. Once confirmed, I will begin the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in a narrative form which we will discuss at our final interview. Thank you for your participation as we co-generate this study.
Appendix F

Interview Three

(Member Checking and Co-Generation of Narrative Analysis)
Protocol and Schedule

Interviewee:
Interviewer: Colleen Fritze
Date: ______________
Location: ______________

INTRODUCTION
Thank you for joining for our third conversational interview for this research study. This interview will focus member checking the narrative analysis, debrief on additional questions regarding the study, and co-generate the narrative account in further detail if necessary.

Introductory Protocol

We have planned this interview to last approximately 30 minutes. During this time, I will provide you with the written narrative analysis of our previous interviews. Please read and confirm that it represents your statements and thoughts and confirm that it meets your expectations and understanding for the study. In addition, any questions that you wish to add on about this study will be more than welcomed.

Questions

1. You’ve had the chance to read your case narrative. How well does it capture your experience with the unfamiliar in service-learning?
2. Do you have any additional reflections since our last conversation?
3. What else would you like to add?

Thank you for contributing to this study through sharing your story. It has been my privilege to co-generate this work with you.
Appendix G

Recruiting Poster for Participants

Calling All S-L Teaching Assistants (S-LTAs) to Participate in a Research Study!

For further details

Please contact

Colleen Fritze

fritze.c@husky.neu.edu

Your participation and insight will be greatly appreciated.

Thank You