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Instructors' Perceptions of Epistemological Development and Transformative Learning in Online Adult Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Though distance higher education instructors may attempt to facilitate meaningful learning in their adult undergraduate students, their efforts are unaddressed in the literature. This study addressed the perceptions, experiences, and intentional practices of distance higher education instructors in facilitating and observing epistemological development and transformative learning within distance higher education adult undergraduate students. Constructivist views on epistemological development theory and on transformative learning theory formed the conceptual framework. The guiding research questions addressed ways that distance higher education instructors intentionally support epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate students and best practices for doing so. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 distance higher education instructors familiar with theories of epistemological development and transformative learning. Data were analyzed through open coding, leading to identification of emergent themes. These themes included extensive dialogue, meeting students where they are, relationships, supportive and challenging environment, making room for reflection, access to multiple perspectives, and the continued growth of the instructor. By clarifying educational practices that can lead to outcomes such as enhanced epistemological development as well as skills such as critical reflection associated with the field of transformative learning, this study can foster a sense of agency and abilities to construct and reframe approaches to positive social change in adult undergraduate distance higher education students as well as in larger society through their lives and work.

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Dedication

To my greatest supporters and joys – my husband, my mother and father, my

sister and brothers, my nieces and nephews, and my wonderful friends and colleagues.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

With the expansion of distance higher education to online formats in recent years (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016), application of constructivist learning practices such as those fostering epistemological development and transformative learning to online settings has become a timely innovation. Epistemological development comes with the growth of an individual's beliefs and assumptions related to the expansion of knowledge (Schraw, Olafson, & VanderVeldt, 2012), whereas transformative learning involves a deep and lasting shift in the way an individual makes meaning (Mezirow, 1996). Facilitating epistemological development and transformative learning in online settings contributes to the development of individual students and guides toward a more inclusive, integrated, egalitarian society (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1996). For instance, through promoting epistemological development educators can better understand the experiences of women, which would help bring about greater equality in both academic and work arenas as well as greater meaning and depth in the intellectual lives of women (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). Transformative learning has also been found to nurture equality and a problem-solving dialogue within society by increasing critical reflection skills (Cranton, 2016; Stucky, Taylor, & Cranton, 2014).

Online formats represent the latest evolution of distance learning platforms that have evolved over many years of practice (Harasim, 2017; Kentnor, 2015). In this study I explored perceptions and experiences of distance higher education instructors who seek to facilitate epistemological development and transformative learning outcomes with the adult undergraduate students they teach and mentor. The results of this exploration can

support current and future instructors working in distance settings in developing these practices. In this chapter, I introduce the background for the study, the problem statement, and study purpose. I list the research questions, the study's conceptual framework, and the main concept of the study. Chapter 1 closes with a dialogue about the nature of the study, the assumptions, limitations, scope and delimitations, and the study's significance and social change implications.

Background of the Study

As greater numbers of students pursue higher education, distance higher education has increased, underlining the need to identify useful practices for teaching from a distance (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Provident et al., 2015). Constructivist theories such as epistemological development and transformative learning have guided instructors in supporting deeper, less superficial learning and change in higher education students since Mezirow (2000) and Belenky et al. (1997) introduced their respective variants of research on constructivist learning. Transformative learning creates deep, lasting change in the way the individual makes meaning (Quinlan, 2016). By way of epistemological development and transformative learning, students may advance through phases of growth during academic experiences, creating changes in the nature of the individuals and the way they see the world (Belenky et al., 1997).

An individual's experience, critical self-reflection, and discourse are at the heart of transformative learning (Taylor, 2009, 2017; Walters, Charles, & Bingham, 2017), whereas relationships and environmental influences combine as individuals progress in epistemological development (Belenky et al., 1997). Considering epistemological

development and transformative learning invites distance educators to explore the possibilities of aiding deeper growth and development in their students (Eschenbacher, 2017). When students encounter viewpoints or experiences outside of their own frame of reference, educators can encourage self-reflection and to increase dialogue, thereby enhancing transformative opportunities (Cranton, 2016; Spronken-Smith, Buissink-Smith, Bond, & Grogg, 2015). As educators promote epistemological development such as with the use of connected teaching, students gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their world, freeing their voices and strengthening sense of self and equality in society (Belenky et al., 1997).

Some methods that may have a place in both face-to-face and distance higher education to promote epistemological growth and transformative learning include student-centered, or learning-centered, teaching (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015), service-learning (Guo, Yao, Zong, & Yan, 2016), critical reflection (Walters et al., 2017), study abroad (Clifford & Montgomery, 2015; Smith, McAuliffe, & Rippard, 2014), and the use of fiction in coursework, presenting other paradigms and worldviews to students (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Spronken-Smith et al., 2015). But the transformative learning process requires more focus on instructional design, educators, and learners than on any specific method of delivery (Hoskins, 2013). Effective educators provide a safe environment, build trust, and guide and support learners in ways that encourage them to analyze their beliefs (Hoskins, 2013; Provident et al., 2015). Distance education can produce a safe environment, along with educator guidance and support, and relationships built on trust (Henderson, 2010; Provident et al., 2015). It is important for an instructor

and student to be colleagues in the learning process, rather than authority and learner (Belenky et al., 1997). Being colleagues in the learning process allows students to trust themselves and come to know themselves as they make meaning of the world, instead of setting the instructor up as the only knower.

Both epistemological development and transformative learning involve a shift in the way individuals make meaning (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Research into higher education classrooms and learning environments indicates that deep, lasting change takes place in students' lives as transformative learning occurs (Nichols, 2016; Taylor, 2009; Weimer, 2012). Improved epistemological development through education can create power, integrity, and community (Belenky et al., 1997). Because this type of transformative learning takes place one learner at a time, instructors in distance higher education who mentor their students directly may play a key role in observing it happening in individual students. Distance higher education instructors are well positioned to learn how to facilitate and support such learning among the students they work with and observe directly in the distance learning context (Cranton, 2016; Palmer & Bowman, 2014; Smits & Voogt, 2017).

Many instructors in distance higher education familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories hope to facilitate developmental experiences, yet the challenges and opportunities of facilitating epistemological development and transformative learning in distance higher education have not been as widely addressed as those of face-to-face settings (Nichols, 2016). Distance higher education instructors attempt to conquer the concerns of quality, quantity, and lack of

face-to-face connections by seeking out practices useful in distance settings (Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). Further, a gap exists in the literature regarding how experienced distance educators who seek to support epistemological development and transformative learning in distance higher education adult undergraduate students understand their practices for facilitating epistemological development and transformative learning in their students. Distance higher education instructors may attempt to foster epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate students, but their efforts are unaddressed in the literature.

Problem Statement

Online instruction is just the latest in a series of technologies used in distance education (Black, 2013; Kentnor, 2015). Instructional methods in distance higher education are well researched (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2015), yet the methods and approaches used to foster epistemological growth and internal transformation in distance higher education adult undergraduate students have not received equal attention (Cranton, 2010; Morris, Xu, & Finnegan, 2005). Though distance higher education instructors may attempt to support meaningful learning in their adult undergraduate students, their efforts are unknown in the literature. Therefore, it is important to understand and document the successful practices that contribute to epistemological development and transformative learning to make this information available to other distance higher education instructors.

To address this gap, I endeavored to identify perceptions and experiences of distance higher education instructors familiar with supporting epistemological

development and transformative learning with distance higher education adult

undergraduate students. I wanted to discover how they intentionally facilitate and

promote student epistemological development and transformative learning in the distance

higher education setting. I aimed to add insight that practitioners might employ to

enhance the growth of their adult undergraduate distance higher education students. An

investigation into distance higher education instructors' perceptions and experiences of

epistemological development and transformative learning among their adult

undergraduate students can provide understanding in advancing practices supportive of

fostering students' transformative learning in the context of distance higher education.

Purpose of the Study

In this basic qualitative study, I examined perceptions, experiences, and practices

of distance higher education instructors, who are familiar with epistemological

development and transformative learning theories in relation to adult undergraduate

distance students. I explored these perceptions, experiences, and practices to elucidate

practices that are useful to educators and institutions in deepening this dimension of

teaching, mentoring, and learning The goal is to foster deeper developmental learning

among adult undergraduate distance higher education students.

Research Questions

I was guided by two research questions in my study:

- Research Question 1: How do distance higher education instructors familiar

  with epistemological development and transformative learning theories

describe the learning they have witnessed in their adult undergraduate students in light of these theories?

- Research Question 2: What do these instructors perceive as best practices for intentionally supporting epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate distance higher education students?

Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework, residing in a constructivist context, incorporates intellectual and epistemological development theory in particular, Belenky et al.'s (1997) theory of connected knowing. In addition, I used the developmental approach from transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000). Epistemological development theory is a theory tradition that exists on its own as well as being claimed as a subset of transformative learning theory. Scholars of epistemological development promote the deepening of the individual's world view through a systematic accrual of knowledge, and scholars of transformative learning acknowledge that individuals can change through experiences that challenge their existing understanding of the world. These two separate approaches allow for exploration into the varied results of, and motivations for, individual development.

In this study, I explored the central phenomenon of distance higher education instructors fostering epistemological development and transformative learning in adult undergraduate distance higher education students. The conceptual framework for this study provided a basis for understanding how distance higher education instructors, with varying perspectives on epistemological development and transformative learning,

understand epistemological development and intellectual growth in their adult

undergraduate students as well as how they frame their practices in relation to this

understanding. A further discussion of the key elements of the conceptual framework is

in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative interview design to gather perceptions and experiences

of distance higher education instructors who work in light of constructivist theories of

epistemological development and transformative learning. The basic qualitative approach

lends itself to studies seeking to discover knowledge such as descriptions or experiences

and the meaning of the subject to the participants or other interested individuals

(Merriam, 2009). A basic qualitative study permits the researcher to explore "(1) how

people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what

meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). I used an expert

panel to identify potential study participants. The panel, recommended by my doctoral

committee, consisted of two veteran distance higher education instructors with published

literature in the fields of transformative learning and epistemological development. These

experts gave me contact information for seven distance higher education instructors who

are familiar with intellectual and epistemological development theories as well as

transformative learning theory and who use the idea of fostering growth within adult

undergraduate distance higher education students. After contacting the initial seven

potential participants, I found additional participants through the snowball method of

asking participants for contact information of other educators that met the criteria who

might be interested in participating. I collected the data through one-on-one interviews with each participant. After transcribing the interviews, I performed thematic analysis (Patton, 2014; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013), looking for themes within the gathered data. I discuss further details of the methodology in Chapter 3.

Definitions

I use the following operational definitions of main terms within this study.

Adult education: Formal education for adults stemming from academic institutions once the education of childhood and youth has occurred, including undergraduate and graduate levels (Illeris, 2017).

Adult learners: Learners who are over 25 years of age, typically have more experience than traditional learners, and must juggle the competing responsibilities of school, family, and work (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000).

Catalyzing event: An experience that creates emotional discomfort within the individual and precipitates critical self-reflection of beliefs and values (Cranton, 2016).

Connected knowing: A way of knowing that integrates the effects of relationships, empathy, a nonjudgmental environment, and the acknowledgement of the validity of others' interpretations (Belenky & Stanton, 2000).

Disorienting dilemma: An individual crisis caused by emotional disorientation brought on through experiences that do not fit the individual's view of the world (Mezirow, 1991).

Distance education: Distance education involves any method of learning in which the instructor and the learner are not physically together. Learning may happen

synchronously or asynchronously and involves the use of some distance-bridging technology (Kentor, 2015).

Distance education instructor: An instructor who works with students synchronously or asynchronously through some form of technology without being in the same location as the student at the time of instruction (Bozkurt et al., 2015).

Distance higher education: Postsecondary academic pursuits that occur through some distance technology and not in a face-to-face setting (Bozkurt et al., 2015).

Distance higher education instructor: A higher education instructor who works with students from a distance through some form of technology, whether synchronously or asynchronously (Bozkurt et al., 2015).

Epistemological development: The growth of an individual's beliefs, assumptions, and world view related to the accrual and systematic expansion of knowledge (Schraw et al., 2012).

Intellectual development: An individual's growing ability to think and make sense of the world through reason. This capability develops through life, measured through various benchmarks, such as Perry's (1970) scheme of intellectual and ethical development.

Meaning making: The process of systems by which individuals understand their world and make sense of themselves and their life experiences (Kegan, 1980).

Online learning: A form of distance education that uses the internet and technologies such as computers, videos, and electronic textbooks to connect, study, and instruct (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016).

Assumptions

At the foundation of this research were five plausible assumptions. First, I assumed that intellectual and epistemological development theories as well as transformative learning theory shed light on the growth and development of adult learners. Second, I assumed that intellectual and epistemological development as well as transformative learning does take place in the context of distance education. Third, I assumed that at least some distance education practitioners experienced with these theories, make use of them as they work to facilitate the learning of their adult undergraduate students. Fourth, I assumed that participants would provide distinct perspectives about their efforts to support intellectual and epistemological development as well as transformative learning within adult undergraduate distance higher education students and that they would also share elements that facilitate or hinder their attempts to effect deeper growth within adult undergraduate distance higher education students. Finally, I assumed that participants would appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences related to supporting epistemological development and transformative learning in distance higher education. These assumptions facilitated the practicality of this study. In the absence of any one of them, this study would not have been possible.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study addresses experiences of distance higher education instructors in attempting to support intellectual and epistemological development as well as transformative learning in adult undergraduate distance higher education students. The delimitations of my study include several elements. First, I discovered the distance higher

education instructors in this study through a panel of experts, recommended by my doctoral committee, who knew appropriate individuals to be participants. I limited the number of interviews to 11, which provided a limited sample of practitioners. Second, I selected participants based on their extensive experience working in distance higher education settings, which left out those with less depth of experience. Third, I explored participants' experiences in supporting epistemological development and transformative learning in adult undergraduate distance higher education students, but I did not examine either the short-term or the long-term effects of these experiences, as I intended to clarify practitioners' perceptions of their practices rather than advocate for these theories. Fourth, I did not question the motivation of participants involved in distance higher education. Fifth, I did not focus on any one specific method or practice used to facilitate epistemological development and transformative learning. This study did not include higher education instructors and adult undergraduate students in a non-distance setting. The potential transferability of this study is in informing other distance higher education instructors attempting to support epistemological development and transformative learning in adult undergraduate distance higher education students.

Limitations

Framing research within a consideration of its limitations means that the transferability of research conclusions to other settings and contexts are questioned (Patton, 2014). I confined this study to data from 11 interviews with distance higher education instructors. I emphasized perceptions and experiences of these distance higher education instructors who are familiar with intellectual and epistemological development

theories as well as transformative learning; therefore, the study findings may not directly apply outside the experience of these practitioners. Nevertheless, my findings may interest higher education practitioners, researchers, and theorists with an interest in enhancing the developmental learning of adult undergraduate students in distance higher education in general as well as those with an interest in epistemological development and transformative learning in distance education settings.

As the researcher, I needed to consider and acknowledge my biases to minimize any influence on the results of the study. For example, I assumed that I had observed transformative learning in my own adult undergraduate online students, which drove my interest in pursuing this study. To recognize my own biases, I used a modified bracketing procedure (Tufford & Newman, 2010) and responded to my own interview questions in a notebook setting prior to conducting interviews. This allowed me to acknowledge my own opinions and experiences regarding epistemological development and transformative learning. In addition, I explored my relationships with any potential participants to avoid familiarity bias. I did not have a relationship with any of the participants of the study. Though I am a member of the participant group as a distance higher education instructor familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theory, I did not interview anyone related to the institution where I work.

Significance

In this study, I explored perceptions and experiences of distance higher education instructors. I included elements that facilitate and hinder their efforts in supporting intellectual and epistemological development as well as transformative learning in adult

undergraduate distance higher education students. This investigation can provide understanding in advancing practices supportive of fostering adult undergraduate students' deeper growth in the context of distance higher education. This adds another facet to the existing knowledge about epistemological development and transformative learning in distance higher education. This research may help educators better understand how distance higher education instructors can encourage and facilitate epistemological development and transformative learning within their adult undergraduate students. This may also interest higher education instructors who seek to facilitate growth within their adult undergraduate non-distance students as well as educators generally who seek to foster epistemological development and transformative learning in adult learners.

Implications for Social Change

This study contributes the understanding of distance higher education instructors' perceptions and experiences in observing and intentionally facilitating intellectual and epistemological growth as well as transformative learning among their adult undergraduate students. This clarification of practice may provide new avenues for current and future distance higher educators to understand and potentially adopt practices supportive to observing and facilitating transformative learning experiences among their adult undergraduate distance higher education students. Creating increased critical reflection skills and epistemological development in adult undergraduate students may result in a sense of agency and ability to change. Positive social change, such as greater equality in society and the breaking of prejudicial barriers, may result from deeper developmental outcomes among adult undergraduate distance higher education students.

Deeper developmental growth can change individuals, and thereby has the potential of changing communities and even our country. Distance higher education instructors may also become best practice guides toward advancing the spread of epistemological development and transformative learning within their institutions and larger fields of practice. Creating change in instructors and institutions, and thereby individuals, also has the capability of causing a trickledown effect to families and groups, communities, and the country.

Summary

With the increasing popularity of distance higher education (Allen et al., 2016), investigations into epistemological development and transformative learning theories in distance higher education gain importance in facilitating transformative experiences for adult undergraduate distance higher education students. In this study, I researched perceptions and experiences of distance higher education instructors who are familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories in supporting growth experiences for adult undergraduate distance higher education students. In Chapter 1, I introduced the study, provided a background to the study, and defined the problem statement, the purpose of the study, research questions, the conceptual framework for the study, and the central concepts. I closed this chapter with a conversation on the nature of the study, my assumptions in the study, limitations of the study, the scope and delimitations, the significance, and social change implications of this research. In Chapter 2, I review relevant literature, including a discussion of the conceptual framework, distance education, transformative learning in higher education,

and efforts used to support epistemological development and transformative learning in

distance higher education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research indicates that epistemological development and transformative learning occur in distance higher education (Nichols, 2016; Provident et al., 2015). As distance higher education continues to expand and concentrates in online formats, research into epistemological development and transformative learning in adult undergraduate distance higher education students holds the potential to support distance higher education instructors in furthering their practices.

Educators generally have not received training on how to teach from a distance, often resulting in reliance on the methods used in on-campus settings, including tests, exact objectives, and autocratic leadership (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Cranton, 2016; Illeris, 2015). Although theorists of transformative learning hold that educators do not "teach" learners how to develop, practitioners promote the possibility of transformation and development by optimizing the student learning environment and learning experiences to support transformative learning (Illeris, 2015; Kegan, 1994; Meijer, Kuijpers, Boei, Vrieling, & Geijsel, 2016). Facilitating epistemological and transformative learning in distance higher education can support deeper, more developmental learning than superficial memorization and manipulation of course content specified in a course syllabus or set of learning objectives related to subject matter (Cranton, 2016; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Nagle, 2017; Schapiro, Wasserman, & Gallegos, 2012).

This chapter summarizes the scope of the literature review search strategies and contains a brief review of adult learning theory for background, followed by a concise

review of current literature on epistemological development and transformative learning to establish the relevance of this problem. The remaining sections include currently established research about epistemological development and transformative learning in a distance higher education environment and faculty support of epistemological development and transformative learning in higher education.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review for this research included studies regarding intellectual and epistemological theories, transformative learning theory and practice as well as methods by which distance education promotes epistemological development and transformative learning. The words and descriptors used to create library searches included *transformative learning, transformational learning, connected knowing, meaning making, epistemological development, epistemological development theory, intellectual development, adult education, adult learning, adult developmental learning, constructivist adult learning theory, distance education, distance learning, higher education, web-based education, e-learning,* and *online education.* I found applicable literature using the following databases: Education Source, ProQuest, Google Scholar, SAGE, and ERIC. Strategies for collecting research for the literature review included accessing articles from current peer-reviewed journals, reviewing texts from experts in the field, and surveying dissertations from the Walden University library database. In addition, I searched scholarly websites and mined reference lists for additional resources.

Synopsis of the Literature

Piaget (1950) first introduced the idea of epistemology as a theory describing intellectual development, creating a combination of psychology and philosophy focused on the nature of human knowledge (Lloyd, 2018). Epistemological theory moved into higher education with Perry's (1970) study of Harvard college students' intellectual development, Belenky et al.'s (1997) gender-focused exploration of female epistemological development, and Baxter Magolda's (1992) epistemological reflection work (Crooks, 2017).

Meaning making through transformative learning has grown in importance since the theory developed from adult learning theory by Mezirow in 1978. The theory centers on an adult learner's capacity to reflect, think critically, and create new meaning from events and observations, resulting in an altered worldview and identity (Illeris, 2017; Mezirow, 1981). Transformative learning is more than just adding knowledge, information, or skills to previously held ideas and thoughts (Quinlan, 2016). It changes the individual into a new being, changing the learner's basic understanding of themselves in profound ways (Cox, 2015; Illeris, 2018). Transformative learning has the potential to strengthen and further epistemological and intellectual development within students. With the experiences undergraduate students have during their studies, many instructors have the hope that students have opportunities to transform themselves through coursework (Cranton, 2016; Pratt & Collins, 2014; Quinlan, 2016).

I reviewed literature centered on educators' efforts to promote intellectual and epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate

students within distance higher education. Instructors working to promote epistemological development often presents a challenge in instigating an evaluative aspect to student learning (Crooks, 2017). Some propose openly addressing epistemology with students, creating dialogue about knowing and knowledge (Hofer, 2001), or inviting students into the knowledge construction process and helping them feel validated and accepted as knowers (Baxter Magolda, 2002). Transformative learning efforts typically fall within one of four approaches to transformative learning: the cognitive and rational approach (Illeris, 2014; Kroth & Cranton, 2014); the related developmental approach, including connected knowing (Belenky et al., 1997; Daloz, 1999; Dirkx, 1998; Perry, 1970); the depth psychology or extrarational approach (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013; Quinlan, 2016); or the social-emancipatory approach with a focus on social change and ideology critique (Brookfield, 2017; Kroth & Cranton, 2014).

Distance educators may work at each of the levels, or perspectives, of learning and development (Cranton, 2010). An examination of these perspective foci revealed an assortment of methods by which distance educators may facilitate and foster epistemological development and transformative learning in their students. Whatever the method or means, educators supporting intellectual and epistemological development and transformative learning amongst distance students increased the possibility of growth that may be considered transformative within the individual student, and perhaps in the very identity of the student (Illeris, 2014, 2017; Meijer et al., 2016).

Conceptual Framework

For this study, I brought together intellectual and epistemological development theory and transformative learning theory. Epistemological and intellectual development theory addresses the ways of knowing, including various approaches to the stages, or levels, of development (Perry, 1970). Transformative learning theory involves the changes that individuals experience as a result of jarring information and critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1991). These two sets of theories are separate and distinct, yet they also overlap in branched off approaches to the main theories. For example, the epistemological developmental approach to transformative learning (Belenky et al., 1997) is also found within the category of intellectual and epistemological development theory (Perry, 1970). Therefore, I decided to term this a multi-theoretical conceptual framework rather than a narrower framework focusing on variants of a single theory.

Intellectual and Epistemological Development

For over 50 years, researchers have investigated methods of individuals coming to know, beliefs individuals have about knowing, and the way that individuals' understanding about knowledge affects their thinking and reasoning development (Muis, Chevrier, & Singh, 2018). Other elements of focus include justification of knowledge, truth and evidence, and knowledge sources (King & Kitchener, 1994). Many developmental theories interpret epistemological development as advancement through a sequence of phases or levels of understanding (Muis et al., 2018).

First is some form of absolutism (Kuhn, 1991) where individuals decide knowledge is either right or wrong, and authorities know the difference. A multiplist

viewpoint follows, with individuals recognizing the validity of conflicting ideas and crediting all opinions equally (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). The final general stage of this developmental process is an evaluatist phase where the value of knowledge is ambiguous, and any claims need evaluating (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997).

Absolutist level. An absolutist level of knowing indicates a knower's belief in authorities and in one correct answer (Hofer & Pintrich, 1993). Based on Perry's (1970) findings from a 4-year study, students may hold a dualist position believing that authorities have the truth and needed to pass it along to the learner (Merk, Rosman, Muis, Kelava, & Bohl, 2018). Like Perry, King and Kitchener (1994) also found a dualist aspect of knowing in their research, labeling it pre-reflective. The pre-reflective level includes phases from childhood acceptance of concrete reality, moves to a reality where truth is only known by authorities, and proceeds to a level where some uncertainty enters and knowers doubt that authorities have all the answers all the time (Hofer & Pintrich, 1993). Researchers have also suggested the term *received knowledge* to refer to those who believe in an either/or thought process where only one correct answer existed, and authorities alone could tell truth from error (Belenky et al., 1997).

Baxter Magolda (1992) confirmed an absolute knowing phase with knowers believing that authorities held all answers and that an absolute right and wrong existed. Finally, the argumentative reasoning model adds to the absolutist notion by showing that absolutists doubt their own knowing, and therefore stress the expertise of authorities (Kuhn, 1991).

Multiplist level. A multiplist stage of knowing occurs once knowers have experienced conflicting viewpoints and have come to consider various ideas as equally valid, creating the notion that all views are merely opinions (Muis et al., 2018). Though King and Kitchener (1994) addressed the beginning stages of multiplist thinking in their pre-reflective thinking, they followed it up with quasi-reflective thinking. Stage 4 of quasi-reflective thinking hints at the need to justify knowledge yet acknowledges that everyone is allowed an opinion. Stage 5 begins to enter the next level of knowing with an intimation of relativism (King & Kitchener, 1994). In contrast, Belenky et al.'s (1997) version of multiplist thought is subjective knowing, and it does not leave the dualist view completely behind in that participants still believed in a correct answer but only believed that this truth would come from within the individual. This allows for the variance of opinion according to the multiplist level but ignores the possibility that others may have better opinions than the knower herself.

Perry (1970) as well found that some knowers in the multiplicity period clung to the idea that they could still know truth, yet with a hint of uncertainty, whereas more advanced multiplists began to doubt that absolute answers existed (Merk et al., 2018). For instance, Baxter Magolda (1992) termed the multiplist level of epistemological reflection as transitional knowing. Here, knowers come to realize that authorities are not absolute experts and knowledge became more uncertain in the eyes of the knowers. Kuhn's (1991) evaluation of multiplist knowers also identifies skepticism and uncertainty about authority, with knowers' feeling increased validity for their own opinions. Multiplist knowers do not feel that they have become experts, but rather they recognize that

authorities are not experts either, and all opinions have the possibility of carrying equal weight and validity (Muis et al., 2018).

Evaluatist level. In contrast with multiplist knowers, evaluatist knowers recognize the potential value of expertise in the search for knowledge and accept that knowers scrutinize and assess viewpoints for validity (Kuhn, 1991). This level of knower used argument and dialogue to influence the evaluation of ideas in other knowers' viewpoints (Kuhn, 1991). The ability to reflectively consider and judge contradicting ideas and information is evidence of metacognition on the part of the knower (Hofer & Pintrich, 1993). Perry (1970) labeled this level of knowing as contextual relativism and indicated that relativists finally left dualism behind, valuing their own perceptions of knowledge and meaning making. Relativist knowers consider all knowledge as contingent on circumstances and worthy of individual appraisal, which prepares the knower for a commitment making phase. In the final stages of Perry's scheme, knowers step into commitments based on these evaluations of knowledge, binding themselves to viewpoints, organizations, relationships, and careers aligned with the knowledge that they have constructed for their personal identity (Haave, Keus, & Simpson, 2018).

Independent knowing is the term that Baxter Magolda (1992) used for the evaluatist level, suggesting that these knowers that uncertainty obtaining knowledge solely from authorities. They begin to value their own knowledge, like Perry's (1970) multiplists, but Baxter Magolda found that a gender difference may arise, with some knowers finding knowledge individually and other knowers finding knowledge interindividually (Hofer & Pintrich, 1993). This mirrors the findings of Belenky et al.

(1997) in relation to their evaluatist level, which they labeled procedural knowledge.

Belenky et al. also found a split between two aspects of knowing: separate knowing and

connected knowing. Separate knowers use detachment and critical thinking to evaluate

each opinion and idea, including their own, whereas connected knowers take a personal

approach to evaluating knowledge, using empathy and care to arrive at understanding

(Galotti, Schneekloth, Smith, Mansour, & Nixon, 2018).

Other theorists have also identified a level beyond the evaluatist, though many

qualified these advanced levels by indicating fewer knowers had reached these levels

(Kuhn, 1991). King and Kitchener (1994) found that reflective judgment, reached by a

small number of knowers, created a space for the reevaluation of knowledge and

systematic justification, allowing knowers to recognize the most valid conclusions of all

options (see also Hofer & Pintrich, 1993). Contextual knowing, the level beyond

independent knowing in Baxter Magolda's (1992) work, involves knowers pulling from

many authorities and experts to determine their own understanding within varying

contexts (see also Hauke, 2019). Again, this type of knowing was rare and more common

amongst knowers that had more education (Hofer & Pintrich, 1993). The constructed

knower in Belenky et al.'s (1997) model actively constructs and reconstructs knowledge

and truth based on context, combining both subjective and objective approaches to

knowing.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning theory reflects a constructivist approach to learning

(Kroth & Cranton, 2014; Taylor, 2017) where the learner actively creates their world by

interpreting the knowledge that comes from individual life experiences (Belenky et al., 1997; Kroth & Cranton, 2014). These individual lenses affect how people understand and assign meaning to their learning experiences. The various views on transformative learning encompass this phenomenon, with various theorists interpreting the theorem in their own way based on their understanding of the world (Ludwig, 2017). The main branches of transformative learning include Mezirow's (1981) cognitive approach, the developmental approach (Daloz, 1999), incorporating Belenky et al.'s (1997) connected knowing and Perry's (1970) scheme of epistemological development, the depth psychology or extrarational approach (Boyd, 1989; Dirkx, 1997), and the social change or social emancipatory approach (Brookfield, 2000; Freire, 1970).

The various approaches to transformative learning theory assist in understanding the richness and complexity of the transformative phenomenon; however, recognizing the interconnectivity and overlapping nature of these perspectives is important (Stuckey et al., 2014). The literature reflects a need for a unifying view of transformative learning to connect the field, while continuing to acknowledge the various perspectives that help to maintain the nuances needed in adult education (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; D'Addelfio, 2017). Utilizing transformative learning as a context for adult education embraces the objectives of improving the "goal setting, needs assessment, and instruction" of adult educators (Zeuner, 2017, p. 234). Educators in distance higher education work through one or more of the approaches to transformative learning with students at any one time (Cranton, 2016).

Cognitive approach. Though transformative learning is a theory "in progress" (Mezirow, 2000), Mezirow conceptualized the original model for transformative learning with a focus on individual growth leading from the cognitive and rational approach. Mezirow specified a 10-step process, summarized through the citing of four main phases: cognitive dissonance, critical reflection, rational discourse, and action (Hoskins, 2013; Mezirow, 1991). He characterized a cognitive, analytical emphasis for growth as an individual's change in "meaning perspectives" or in the individual's framework for making sense of the world (Mezirow, 1981).

Alternate interpretations of these transformative phases include Nohl's (2015) five phases, based on a comparative analysis of the phenomena in various groups and settings: the "nondetermining start" phase when something new enters an individual's life; the "experimental and undirected inquiry" phase with the individual exploring the novel experience; the phase of "social testing and mirroring," in which the individual shares the new practices or beliefs with others; the "shifting relevance" phase where the individual focuses on the experience; and the phase of "social consolidation and reinterpretation of biography" when the process is complete and a new equilibrium is established.

Mezirow's definition of transformative learning is similar to Rogers' theory of significant learning or Jarvis' concept of disjuncture (Illeris, 2017). The idea of transformative learning, however, stands in contrast to Piaget's definition of assimilative learning in that Mezirow limits transformative learning to significant changes and learning, whereas assimilative learning is additive (Illeris, 2017). Illeris (2017) pointed

out that Piaget dealt largely with children's learning, but transformative learning mainly occurs in adults. In addition, critics of Mezirow propose that the transformative experience is not as linear or as individualistic as he suggests (Baumgartner, 2012).

Developmental approach. Parallel to Mezirow's focus on describing the dynamics of specific instances of transformative learning, there is a constructivist developmental approach , compatible with Mezirow's theory, that focuses on shifts in ways individuals make meaning, moving from a basic belief and dependence on authority towards an increasingly complex way of knowing or heightened consciousness (Cranton, 2010; Kroth & Cranton, 2014; West, 2017). Perry's (1970) theory of undergraduate male epistemological development emphasized the journey from a dualist viewpoint through multiple stages to an integrated understanding of commitment. Belenky et al. (1997) and Belenky and Stanton (2000) tracked a similar advancement of epistemological development, though they accentuated connected knowing instead of independent and autonomous knowing, exploring the effect of relationships and the acknowledgement of others' interpretations.

Recently, gender differences in education have received increased attention (Buskirk-Cohen, Duncan, & Levicoff, 2016; English & Irving, 2015; Jones & Stewart, 2016). Most developmental learning theories imply general linear progression (Kohlberg, 1969; Perry, 1970; Piaget, 1997), yet some researchers argued that these theories suggest that gender differences leave women at lower developmental levels when compared with men (Daloz, 1999). Subsequent theories of women's development accentuated connectedness, caring, social contexts, and constructed knowing (Belenky et al., 1997;

English & Irving, 2015; Gilligan, 1982). These collaborative methods of knowing imply

caring and emotional labor, two necessary societal elements disproportionately associated

with women and generally devalued and unnoticed (Bernhagen & Gravett, 2017).

Perry's (1970) research tracked male college students at Harvard through nine

positions of intellectual and epistemological development. The journey of male students

in this study took them from the stage of finding the "right" answer (dualism), to trying to

figure out how they were "supposed" to think or explain their thinking (relativism) to

"win the academic game" (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 101). Perry indicated that these

students completed their epistemological development journey with a single purpose and

goal, usually focused on a career (Belenky et al., 1997). Belenky et al. found that some

women traveled a similar intellectual path, but even those that adhered most strictly to

reason and academic methods were reluctant to completely leave behind family and

friends in their path towards epistemological development. Thus, the female completion

of this journey ended with aspirations to contribute to improving the quality of life for

others and choosing inclusion of others rather than exclusion (Belenky et al., 1997).

Belenky et al.'s exploration (1997) of women's methods of knowledge

construction, uncovered patterns that revealed five viewpoints through which women

interpret life, arriving at conclusions about reality, knowledge, and expertise. These five

perspectives included:

- silence, indicating a complete disconnect from knowledge and knowledge

  sources;

- received knowledge, in which women received complete knowledge by listening to voices of perceived experts;

- subjective knowledge, whereby knowers believe in their own voice as that of the authority;

- procedural knowledge, which is a realization that knowledge can come from multiple sources and that the knower must evaluate the merit of knowledge, resulting in separate knowing where the knower uses critical evaluation methods, or connected knowing where the knower recognizes the value of multiple voices and the relevance of context; and

- constructed knowledge, indicating that the knower recognizes that knowledge is flexible based on context, the knower, and the knowledge being obtained (Belenky et al., 1997).

Belenky et al. (1997) revealed an account of how female adults create understanding and support within communities of valued relationships. Through this empowering process, women find their own voice, thereby coming to full adult authorship, with an emergent personal power allowing them to create transformations in their lives (Belenky et al., 1997; Tisdell, 1995). These accomplishments reveal key developmental achievements consistent with transformative learning.

Theories on women's growth and development are of special importance with the current gender trends in higher education. Female post-secondary enrollment surpassed male enrollment in the late 1970s, and in 2015, approximately 1.3 females enrolled in post-secondary education for every male (NCES, 2015). Recognizing that gender

differences exist in ways of knowing and learning, as explored by Perry (1970), Belenky et al. (1997) and other theorists, is relevant in the discussion of transformative learning (English & Irving, 2015). Mezirow acknowledged this through the inclusion of Belenky and Stanton's (2000) chapter, "Inequality, Development, and Connected Knowing," in the reader, *Learning as Transformation* (2000).

As part of the developmental approach to transformative learning, Kegan called for an added definition of transformative learning with the critical question of "What form transforms?" (2000, p. 35), resolving on a proposal for a constructive-developmental approach to transformative learning. Illeris (2014) indicated that the lack of clarity around the definition of transformative learning is problematic in that it becomes difficult to properly identify and develop transformative learning pedagogy. Adult educators desire to help change the lives of their students (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). In contrast with educators of young people concerned with formation of individuals, adult educators largely attempt to transform individuals. With a more solid definition of transformative learning, transformative pedagogy in higher education becomes more focused and potentially more powerful in the hands of educators of adult learners (Illeris, 2014; Kroth & Cranton, 2014).

Extrarational approach. The extrarational, or depth-psychology, perspective on transformative learning accentuates the emotional, spiritual, imaginal, intuitive, and artistic aspects of the learning process rather than the critical reflection aspect (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013; Quinlan, 2016; Stuckey et al., 2014). This approach emphasizes elements of the learning process that go beyond the rational, into the

subconscious realm. What Mezirow described as a disorienting dilemma effectively causes emotional disorientation according to Taylor and Jarecke (2009). The emotions produced by this disorientation serve as a catalyst, pushing the individual to view a situation through a new lens, potentially to see a new self or worldview (Laros, 2017).

Some extrarational theorists follow the Jungian notion of individuation, including the concept of the development of the self as increasingly differentiated from others, but also seeing the self as increasingly integrated with the collective whole of humanity (Boyd & Meyers, 1988; Stuckey et al., 2014). Another dimension of extrarational theory involves the spiritual perspective, viewing the disorienting dilemma or catalyzing event, and subsequent individual changes, as cultivating spiritual development (Taylor, 2008; Tisdell, 2017). This viewpoint perceives spirituality as the lens for making meaning of life (Klobučar, 2016). The spirituality aspect may also involve aspects of cultural perspectives as many cultures embrace spiritual rituals (Moyer & Sinclair, 2016; Tisdell, 2017). Many cultures value spirituality and faith, and some spiritual practices, prayer for example, involve aspects of reflection that can produce learning (Moyer & Sinclair, 2016). As learners embrace change through "shimmering moments" of spiritual learning (Tisdell, 2008, p. 31), they need time to make sense of these spiritual learning experiences (Foote, 2015).

Extrarational theorists emphasize the role of emotions in transformative learning, considering the learning process a matter of "see-feel-consider-change" instead of "analyze-think-change" as the cognitive theorists propose (Quinlan, 2016, p. 107). Although emotions may considerably enhance learning in the positive sense, emotions

can also inhibit learning in a negative sense such as in the case of anxieties about learning

specific subjects (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013). This is significant in that it lends a more

holistic view to transformative learning. A holistic sense of the process of transformative

learning is valuable in that it does not encourage categorization of the various

approaches. All lend a distinct view of what occurs during transformative learning, which

leads along the path to a unified understanding of this phenomenon (Stuckey et al., 2014).

Social emancipatory approach. Another approach to transformative learning is

the social emancipatory perspective with the ultimate purpose of creating social change.

This approach stemmed from Freire's (1970) work to raise critical consciousness and

increase literacy amongst the poor in Brazil, thus introducing a critical perspective into

adult education (Dirkx, 1998). Hoggan (2016) indicated that transformative learning

theory originally had the purpose of exploring learning that arose through "broad social

change" (p. 59). Learning at the individual level is necessary to produce substantive

social change (Hoggan, 2016).

Adult education that fosters critical consciousness aims to produce political

freedom and liberation from oppression. Learners transform as they reflect on their

situations and the world around them, resulting in a new view of social structures and a

greater understanding (Stuckey et al., 2014). Transformations then occur on an individual

level and on the societal level (Brookfield, 2000; Mejiuni, 2017). Hassi and Laursen

(2015) argued that personal emancipation through deep engagement and collaboration in

mathematics education is also a form of transformative learning, creating self-

empowerment, cognitive empowerment, and social empowerment. The social-

emancipatory approach to transformative learning aims to create a more equitable, sustainable, and free world for all (Saravanamuthu, 2015; Singleton, 2015).

Stuckey, Taylor, and Cranton (2014) identified four main concepts for promoting social change through transformative learning as: (a) reflecting critically to identify power structures and aid adult learners to create a feeling of agency and a feeling of ability to change society and their own lives, (b) utilizing an emancipatory approach to teaching by fostering transformative thoughts rather than by the sharing of information solely, (c) applying a pedagogy involving the identification of problems and solutions through dialogue, and (d) nurturing equality in teacher-student relationships. Saravanamuthu (2015) found that implementing a focus on sustainability, utilizing transformative learning pedagogy, allowed accounting students to recognize the importance of questioning assumptions inherent in accounting theory, and appreciating sustainable goals. Some theorists see little purpose in critical reflection and transformative learning unless it leads to social action and a new moral order (Brookfield, 2000; Lange & Solarz, 2017). Lotz-Sisitka, Wals, Kronlid, and McGarry (2015) noted that the original view of transformative learning did not complete a relationship between individual cognitive change and social action or agency, specifically regarding collective transformation and societal activity.

Relationship of the Conceptual Framework to the Current Study

Epistemological development and transformative learning result in more than merely the gathering of knowledge or the assumption of new skills, but rather it implies that an individual has changed and their method of making meaning of life has

progressed (Quinlan, 2016). In distance higher education, students participate in many forms and types of learning across various courses, however, many distance higher education instructors desire that individual students experience epistemological development and transformative learning, to emerge from their university studies as a different person (Quinlan, 2016). The conceptual framework for this research underscored the four main approaches to transformative learning as well as the pathways and hoped-for results of each to address the diversity of thought related to transformative learning theory (D'Addelfio, 2017; Stuckey et al., 2014). Transformative learning implies the ability for adult learners to critically reflect, to conceptualize of a different world, to reframe their thinking, and to create a new way of being and of making meaning. Adult learners need transformative learning to optimize their potential as individual beings, and for societies to change and benefit from increased equality and opportunity for all (Cranton, 2016; English & Irving, 2015).

In this study, I assumed that epistemological development and transformative learning can occur in distance higher education, though the extent and intensity of development or transformative experiences is unclear (Nichols, 2016). In addition, I acknowledged that transformative learning is but one category of learning that may occur in higher education, distance or otherwise. Illeris (2015) expressed that the type, or kind, of learning that is best for adult learners is the one that is most applicable to their current understanding and situation. He emphasized that the choice of learning method is completed inside the individual unconsciously based on current motivation and past experiences. In addition, Illeris noted that educators cannot teach transformative learning,

but rather learners must process it internally. Nichols (2016) compared experiences of distance and on-campus theology students, finding that both groups of students discussed their educational experiences in terms reflecting transformative learning, though students had not been taught transformative learning theory. Students experienced similar cognitive and formational growth through distance and on-campus study, though perceptions as to why growth occurred differed.

The conceptual framework for this study gives a basis for educators of different perspectives on epistemological development and transformative learning to interact and work together towards a cohesive view. This research takes the main perspective of developmental transformative learning yet recognizes the great value of the other perspectives and the need for all approaches to synchronize together into a vibrant and complete whole (Kroth & Cranton, 2014; Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013). Not only do the approaches remain separate, but Kegan's (2000) question remains unanswered, that of identifying the real focus and area of change when transformations occur and creating clarity for what remains outside of the focus of transformative learning (Illeris, 2014).

In a move to propose a new definition for "the target area of transformative learning," Illeris (2014) submitted "the identity" (p. 152) as the aspect of the individual that changes. The term "identity" includes aspects of the self, but also includes the individual's environment and social interactions and influences. "Identity" incorporates the self-perception of the learner, as well as the reactions and internal actions in response to external relations and influences (Illeris, 2014, 2017). Another advantage that Illeris identifies with "identity" as the form that transforms is that it excludes many aspects that

could be misconstrued as part of transformative learning, setting a boundary to help theorists focus only on changes occurring in an individual's identity, rather than in knowledge or skills. "Identity" is also a commonly used word, which may facilitate research into transformative learning by creating a mutually shared language between researcher and subject.

Technological advances in distance higher education have led to easier and ever-growing access to higher education across the United States and globally. These developments have increased the potential for adult undergraduate student growth by interacting with educators and through involvement in courses and texts. Bringing transformative learning into distance higher education is critical as increasingly larger numbers of university educators and instructors teach partial or entire courses from a distance (Allen et al., 2016). This study is relevant in that it sought to illuminate areas of distance higher education that facilitate transformative learning in adult undergraduate distance higher education students. Improving educators' abilities to create growth in adult undergraduate students has the potential to increase equality in society by cultivating individuals' ability to change their thinking and their identity, as well as to critically assess society and level the power playing field.

Literature Review

The literature review for this study includes the context surrounding epistemological development and transformative learning theories and the setting of distance higher education. Increases in distance education opportunities and technologies have created greater possibilities for higher education to influence individuals and

societies. Thus, I reviewed applicable literature on distance higher education to gain a better understanding of the setting (Kentnor, 2015), and epistemological development and transformative learning in higher education (Quinlan, 2016), with an emphasis on distance higher education (Provident et al., 2015). This review allowed for identification of a gap within the body of literature. The original focus of transformative learning was adult learning, eventually with an emphasis on higher education, making it important to further explore the fostering of transformative learning within distance higher education settings. Therefore, to highlight the gap in the existing literature surrounding epistemological development and transformative learning in distance higher education, the review focused on efforts that foster epistemological development and transformative learning in adult undergraduate distance higher education students.

Origins of Distance Education

Distance education is a multidisciplinary field that has absorbed and applied changes in technology for the delivery of education across short or long distances when educator and learner cannot meet face-to-face (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Yuzer & Kurubacak, 2010). Distance educators continue to expand and evolve in response to new technological opportunities and new principles of education (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Yuzer & Kurubacak, 2010). According to Kentnor (2015), investigations into the origins and progression of distance education are necessary to increase the efficiency and quality of today's education as well as to improve education moving into the future. Understanding the path of distance education methods and tools can assist modern educators to better motivate, inspire, and teach students (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Kentnor, 2015).

Technologies of distance education. Distance education technologies have changed drastically from the beginning, with letter correspondence courses being offered almost 300 years ago and continuing through to today. These correspondence courses became popular with adult learners in the latter 1800s with the advent of the Chautauqua Movement in the United States (Kentnor, 2015). Radio technology allowed distance education to expand and to transmit to learners around the world, with courses offered in the United States as early as 1906 (Kentnor, 2015). Although radio courses were extremely popular, learners accessed them more heavily in countries with unreliable postal service and lower literacy rates, compared with courses taken within the United States. Radio could immediately reach masses of individuals inexpensively.

Movies and television, with their capacity for visual technology, supplanted the popularity of audio education via radio, though educational movies and television programs never gained the strength that many advocates expected (Kentnor, 2015). For example, in 1913 Thomas Edison erroneously predicted the obsolescence of educational books in schools in favor of motion pictures within 10 years (Smith, 1913). Though television technology developed in the late 1800s, it was not until much later that commercial television became feasible (Kentnor, 2015). In 1927, then Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover referred to the "first long-distance live video and voice transmission" when he stated, "Human genius has now destroyed the impediment of distance in a new respect and in a manner hitherto unknown" (Bryson, 2013, p. 372). Whereas this made distance education possible in a way never before achieved, television courses were only moderately successful and generally did not take advantage of the full

capabilities of visual education, with most courses simply showing an instructor teaching as they would in a classroom (Kentnor, 2015). It is worthy of note, however, that audio and visual aids became widespread tools for classroom instruction as additional methods of training and demonstrating for face-to-face students. Though some distance educators conceived of the use of teleconferencing between instructor and student, televised dialogue for the use of distance education never truly gained extensive usage (Kentnor, 2015).

Distance education universities were at the forefront of developing audiovisual material for courses, with these courses becoming more prevalent post World War II (Laaser & Toloza, 2017). Multiple forms of media were used to communicate course material to distance students, though printed text remained the most widely used medium. Once audio and video cassettes were developed, the possibilities for audio visual instruction multiplied, yet the expense was enough to hinder most instructors, and when the expense was not too much, the time needed to create an audio or visual course was yet another roadblock (Laaser & Toloza, 2017). In addition, distribution of audiovisual packets was costly and difficult.

The capability to digitize audio and video tore down many of the difficulties of audiovisual forms of delivery in distance education (Laaser & Toloza, 2017). Just as face-to-face universities began adapting courses to include the use of CD-ROM and DVD technology, so did distance education universities. This was the first time in history that a full integration of text, sound, video and still graphics in one technology existed (Laaser & Toloza, 2017). Even with the advances in technology, producing a course for disc

required specialized staff and equipment, including the finances to pay for these services, which lengthened production times and delayed distribution. All of these factors resulted in little impact on students' learning generally as instructors typically made the audiovisual productions alternative sources for a course (Laaser & Toloza, 2017). Over time, audiovisual productions became smaller and shorter, requiring lighter production methods and evolving into less sophisticated media that became linked to text-based digital courses on the Internet.

Online education is the latest advance in the technology of distance education, challenging educators to respond to constantly advancing methods of education delivery (Harasim, 2017; Kentnor, 2015). Online distance education involves the use of computers and the Internet to deliver instruction with at least 80% of material delivered through the Internet (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Hybrid or blended online courses deliver between 30% and 79% of course content via the Internet (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Cahill, 2014). For-profit distance education began utilizing online educational programs in 1989, with universities and colleges started delving into online course delivery in 1998 (Kentnor, 2015). An association of governors founded the first wholly online non-profit university, Western Governors University, in 1998 (Kentnor, 2015), and a consortium of over 100 colleges and universities offering online courses later created California Virtual University. Many smaller programs arose, hosted largely by brick-and-mortar universities and colleges, though few survived into the 2000s. Some scholars (Kentnor, 2015; Marcus, 2004) attributed this in part to the misunderstandings around distance learning styles and pedagogy, in addition to the failure to gain faculty buy-in for online courses.

Online education has changed the discipline of distance education and heavily impacted education around the globe, becoming mainstream in the process (Cahill, 2014; Kentnor, 2015). It is larger than any other delivery system in distance education and is commonplace at universities and colleges at all levels, including undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Growing to meet demand while keeping quality high is the ongoing challenge for online education institutions, requiring continuous improvement and adaptation (Kentnor, 2015). The emergence of online distance learning has revealed an urgency for colleges and universities to increasingly use innovation and embrace change (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Marcus, 2004). Although online education increases academic choices, decreases travel time, and allows for fewer interruptions in learners' personal lives, it also presents challenges in the form of increased isolation with less community feel, decreased feedback and personal assistance, and more technical issues for learners (Provident et al., 2015). With rapid growth in technology and great increases in distance higher education learners, distance education is not new, and the evolution of distance education has upset earlier theories and created new areas of exploration (Kentnor, 2015). Continued development of distance education theory allows distance educators to improve and advance the quality of today's distance education.

Development of the field of distance education. Pioneering research in distance education began in the early 20th century with Noffsinger attempting to describe correspondence courses in a systematic way (Black, 2013). Mid-century, Childs continued research into correspondence courses in public schools. He also began researching educational television and correspondence course completion rates.

Wedemeyer operated in the distance education industry via extension programs, and he

became an early advocate of the independent learner in higher education, creating

theoretical constructs that heavily influenced distance education theory development

(Simonson et al., 2015). He believed that with the accessibility of educational

telecommunications, distance education would expand to allow students to learn

wherever they chose and whenever they could. Speaking on the future of extension

programs within distance education, Wedemeyer (1965) predicted that future distance

learners would not attend classes but would instead have the learning opportunities come

to them. These learners would "attend" class through learning materials used at work, at

home, at a library, and so on. Wedemeyer proved himself equally prophetic about

distance educators. He believed that distance educators would have a national reach

through technologies that removed the barriers of time and space. Teaching would

become convenient for the teacher in regard to location and work hours, and learning

would become convenient for students as they learned at places and at times available to

them.

Moore furthered distance education theory by incorporating Wedemeyer's ideas

on autonomous learners into research with self-directed distance students and the

resulting theory of transactional distance (Black, 2013). Moore (2013) theorized that it is

not merely physical distance that creates difficulty for the distance learner, but that

psychological distance may also play a factor. He postulated that increased instructor

structure and control of the teaching process resulted in greater pedagogical distance

between instructor and learner, whereas greater student autonomy resulted in decreased

pedagogical distance between instructor and learner (Moore, 2013). Student "autonomy"

in this sense reflects the level of control that learners retain over what to learn and how to

do so.

In the 1960s, Peters sought to define distance education in a different way after

analyzing over 30 distance education institutions and their systems (Black, 2013). He

created value in a new way of viewing distance education by comparing distance

education organizations with industrial counterparts, creating the theory of

industrialization of teaching (Peters, 1967; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). Peters argued

that the traditional form of education with students and instructor in a classroom was a

pre-industrialized form of delivering education. He also implied that distance education

in its true form did not exist prior to industrialization.

Peters (1967) introduced new terminologies into the field of distance education

through which theorists could examine distance education organizations and processes,

namely rationalization, division of labor, mechanization, assembly line, mass production,

preparatory work, planning, organization, scientific control methods, formalization,

standardization, change of function, objectification, and concentration and centralization.

With these added terminologies, Peters advanced the idea that in order for distance

education institutions to take advantage of economies of scale, distance education must

carefully plan, prepare, and organize courses prior to distributing instructional materials,

thereby creating savings advantages through increased production, and producing higher

quality educational materials than were produced in a "craftsman" education system such

as traditional face-to-face universities and colleges with professors producing one-off lectures and course syllabi (Peters, 1993).

With much of the research into distance education focused on discovering which learning technology or medium was most effective (Black, 2013), some distance educators, including Moore, called instead for a clarification of the definition and description of the theory of distance education, and for attention on these "macro factors," or various components, of the field (Schlosser & Simonson, 2006, p. 16-17). When distance education started, all student-instructor interactions were asynchronous, so Keegan (1996) began to question the role of time-synchronous technologies on the field of distance education as many were now available with the advent of teleconferencing, the computer, and the Internet. Whereas previously Keegan had questioned whether distance education could truly exist without a shared experience and common zeal between learner and educator, with time-synchronous learning opportunities becoming feasible, the answers to these questions may change (Schlosser & Simonson, 2006).

Distance education separated the teaching and the learning in time and space, but once real-time communication possibilities were developed, an entirely new aspect for distance education occurred in which the teaching and learning moments reintegrated in time. Keegan questioned whether distance education was a form of conventional education, or whether it was truly an educational activity (Keegan, 1996). In searching for a new definition and theory of distance education, Keegan concluded:

Distance education is a form of education fraught with problems for

administrators, teachers, and students. It is characterized by the fragility of the

non-traditional in education. These difficulties concern the quality, quantity, and

status of education at a distance. Good practice in distance education seeks to

provide solutions for these inherent difficulties. (Keegan, 1996, p. 12)

Transformative Learning in Higher Education

Transformative learning encompasses a profound shift in an individual's

worldview through which the individual makes meaning, thereby earning new

perspective and more openness to change (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger, 2015;

Cranton, 2016). In essence, a transformative learning process begins when individuals

encounter worldviews different than their own, ones that are at odds with their current

beliefs. When experiencing such learning, students have the chance to reflect on and

analyze the new perspective, potentially adapting a new worldview of their own, or to

reject the new perspective and ignore the experience (Christie et al., 2015). When

learners choose to reflect on and examine previously held beliefs, the potential for

transformative learning exists. Simply reflecting and analyzing the new or different

perspective is not the growth, but transformative learning has occurred when both a shift

in perspective and an observable change in behavior results from the change in viewpoint

(Cranton, 2010).

Transformative learning in higher education has sometimes been on the outskirts

of awareness in post-secondary pedagogy, however, in the last 15 years, transformative

learning has become such a focus in the field of adult education that it has become a

standard of practice for higher education pedagogies (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Despite

the increased focus and value placed on transformative learning, the actual development

of courses and experiences to foster transformative learning in undergraduate students

remains fairly obscure (Christie et al., 2015; Eschenbacher, 2017; Kuennen, 2015;

Taylor, 2009). Post-secondary educators come from a variety of backgrounds and teach

in a variety of settings, adding to the complexity of the issue. Palmer and Bowman (2014)

observed that transformative educators teach similar content to other educators, but they

convey content with an additional objective, that of changing the student and not just

adding to the knowledge gained by the student. The search for clarity about

transformative learning has broadened the scope of transformative literature, including

methods outside and inside of the higher education setting. Educators and institutions

need to undergo a continual process of questioning pedagogical objectives, institutional

resources, and support systems to foster transformative learning in students (Clifford &

Montgomery, 2015).

      An individual's experience, critical self-reflection, and discourse are at the heart

of transformative learning (Harvey, Coulson, & McMaugh, 2016; Liu, 2015; Taylor,

2009; Walters et al., 2017). When students encounter viewpoints or experiences outside

of their own frame of reference, educators can encourage self-reflection and to increase

dialogue, thereby enhancing transformative opportunities (Belenky et al., 1997; Cranton,

2016; Harvey et al., 2016; Spronken-Smith et al., 2015). Some educators have found that

different levels of reflection foster students' transformations, creating scaffolded

development (Bass, Fenwick, & Sidebotham, 2017). Mezirow's original theory hinged on

the individual taking time to critically reflect on new experiences and working internally

to resolve dissonance, resulting in a grand transformation, however some educators have

found value in fostering smaller changes in students (Heddy & Pugh, 2015; Kuennen,

2015).

Heddy and Pugh (2015) argued that educators succeed in creating even smaller

transformations by way of transformative experiences. In these cases, learners take all or

part of a lesson with them outside of the classroom and reflect on how their experiences

in class have changed their viewpoints about objects, events, or issues. For example, a

physics lesson may have transformative power within a hockey-playing learner as the

student reflects on how the physics of inertia affects the game of hockey. (Heddy &

Pugh, 2015). Although transformative learning produces a much deeper change in the

student, transformative experiences still hold value in that they alter the learner's

perception of the world.

Mezirow (1991) indicated that a disorienting dilemma typically produced a crisis

that could lead to transformative learning. Disorienting dilemmas or catalyzing events

create discomfort or disequilibrium within learners when their new experiences conflict

with existing frames of reference (Laros, 2017; Walters et al., 2017). The habits of mind

that the individual previously held from childhood, prove distortions or partial

assumptions when faced with new realities (Cox, 2015; Kokkos, 2017; Nicolaides &

Dzubinski, 2016). Cranton (2016) encouraged educators to take advantage of these

catalyzing events when learners have the opportunity to change their perceptions. She

urged educators to not leave the possibility of change to chance, but rather to encourage

students' self-reflection, leading potentially to increased self-awareness and growth.

Cranton (2016) proposed three main types of reflective questions for educators to

use as they facilitate critical self-reflection in learners: content, process, and premise

questions. Content reflection questions focus on learner's assumptions and beliefs,

fostering awareness of individual perspectives and knowledge. For example, what

attracted you to this topic? (Cranton, 2016). Process reflection questions refer to the

methods used for an individual to arrive at specific perspectives. For example, what lead

you to see yourself in this way? Premise reflection questions spur learners to delve into

the heart of their beliefs and to examine the reasons for their personal viewpoints. For

example, why do you feel this topic is important? Cranton encourages educators'

sensitivity as they ask probing premise questions because students may have beliefs

resulting from difficult emotional experiences.

Postsecondary educators have used critical reflection in multiple settings to

encourage transformative learning (Harvey et al., 2016; Schoo, Lawn, Rudnik, & Litt,

2015; Spronken-Smith et al., 2015). Hoggan and Cranton (2015) found that utilizing

fiction in coursework fostered critical reflection within the reader. Reading stories

presented other paradigms and worldviews to students, encouraging them to question

their own perspectives as well as the world as they understood it. Not only did students

experience cognitive critical reflection, but they also had emotional responses as they

read fictional works, often finding role models in the readings (Hoggan & Cranton,

2015). Mock interviews in a written environment have also been shown to facilitate deep

transformative learning through reflective self-assessment in health science students (Schoo et al., 2015). Another method of opening learners' eyes and presenting alternative worldviews to them is via an international experience (Walter, 2016).

Studying abroad has long been acknowledged as a way to open a student's mind to new experiences and ways of understanding the world, helping them see that not everyone lives the way they do (Clifford & Montgomery, 2015; Smith et al., 2014; Stone & Duffy, 2015; Vatalaro, Szente, & Levin, 2015; Walter, 2016; Walters et al., 2017). International experiences can help students become global citizens, becoming empowered agents for change in society as well as in their own lives (Clifford & Montgomery, 2015; Stone & Duffy, 2015). Vatalaro et al. (2015) found that pre-service teachers during a two-week study abroad in Italy gained in content knowledge of specific teaching approaches, had enlarged views of cultural differences, and emerged with heightened self-awareness. Cross-cultural experiences such as trying local food and attempting to speak a foreign language, as well as facing the various challenges associated with travel, create opportunities for transformative learning (Walter, 2016). However, the length of programs, as well as the expense, has limited their effectiveness to a small population of students. As study abroad programs have experimented with shorter trips, they have become accessible to a more diverse population instead of the mainly white, female students that traditionally attended.

Walters, Charles, and Bingham (2017) found that critical reflection caused transformative learning in these shorter periods of time when students were in study abroad settings, potentially resulting from increased opportunities for disorientation,

coupled with encouragement by educators for self-reflection and journal writing. They noted that critical reflection can bring about a type of transformative learning that so completely changes the learner, that the growth not only encompasses learning that allows for course mastery but includes a heightened level of personal maturation and professional learning, which impacts society on an altruistic and humanitarian level (Walters et al., 2017). Bromberg (2017) also cited the value of engaging students in dialogical discourse, allowing students to grapple for understanding of their experiences.

Critical reflection has also been a main component of service-learning experiences in higher education (Guo et al., 2016; Sturgill & Motley, 2014). Service-learning continues to increase in popularity on American college campuses, being used as either a course-based activity or in co-curricular programs (Richard, Keen, Hatcher, & Pease, 2016). Intentional reflection related to service-learning is a powerful method for change, and the main cause for learning through service, rather than just providing service (Carrington, Mercer, Iyer & Selva, 2015; Hullender, Hinck, Wood-Nartker, Burton, & Bowlby, 2015; Sturgill & Motley, 2014). Reflection creates a deeper level of critical thinking for students regarding their new experiences, yet educators must plan for effective reflection and this is often something that is neglected in service-learning (Sturgill & Motley, 2014). Critical reflection is the link between service-learning experiences and transformative learning for students (Carrington et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2016).

Service-learning often creates a situation that is outside of the life experience and comfort zone of most higher education students (Carrington et al., 2015; Guo et al.,

2016). Serving challenges students physically, cognitively, and emotionally, often producing situations and conflicts that force them to confront prejudices, previously held perceptions, and personal beliefs. Coupled with reflection and dialogue, these circumstances have the potential to foster transformative learning in students (Guo et al., 2016; Hullender et al., 2015). Through critical self-reflection on experiences of service-learning, students' viewpoints change (Carrington et al., 2015). Kiely's (2005) and Jones, Rowan-Kenyon, Ireland, Niehaus, and Skendall's (2012) studies both provided evidence that service-learning opportunities facilitated transformative learning experiences.

Student-centered teaching, also known as learner-centered teaching, is another pedagogical innovation in the pursuit of fostering transformative learning in higher education settings (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015; Weimer, 2012). College teachers have found that student-centered teaching approaches often produce experiences that lead to permanent change and transformation within students. Traditionally, higher education contained teaching approaches that focused on delivery of material, rather than on student learning (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015). Moreover, the transmission of information occurred largely through lecture, which caused student disengagement and demotivation, whereas student-centered teaching approaches concentrate on developing student autonomy, promoting the students to take responsibility for their own growth and learning (Weimer, 2012).

With student learning at the heart of transformative learning, moving instruction beyond lecture-centric and teacher-controlled methods of teaching towards student-centered methods is necessary to produce deep and lasting change within students

(Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015). Student-centered learning allows educators to encourage critical reflection and inquiry through dialogue as pedagogical approaches rather than stifling students' experiences that would result in transformations. Weimer (2012) proposed that when students have more control over their learning objectives and processes, they work harder and do not avoid challenging tasks. Having a say in classroom procedures and focus is energizing to students and transformative learning usually occurs because of a series of student-centered exercises, possibly at the end of a course (Weimer, 2012). In turn, seeing the growth in students is energizing for educators and motivates them to incorporate more student-centered assignments in future courses.

As with previously discussed approaches, student-centered learning better promotes transformative learning when student experiences involve critical reflection and questioning dialogue (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015; Weimer, 2012). Thoughtful questioning applied in student-centered learning, such as Cranton's (2016) three types of reflective questions, can lead directly to transformative learning experiences (Weimer, 2012). Going one step beyond thoughtful questioning by encouraging students to develop their own questions creates an atmosphere of learning, welcoming questions, and student-centered learning applicable to student interests (Spronken-Smith et al., 2015).

Transformative Learning in Distance Higher Education.

In this study, I focused on the perceptions and experiences of educators who have an interest in helping adult undergraduate distance higher education students move through the phases of epistemological development or experience transformative learning, by fostering students' questioning of held beliefs and their critical reflection of

current experiences. Some research reports distance higher education courses and programs as unequal in transformative power when compared with on-campus learning experiences (Naidoo, 2012; Nichols, 2015), yet the literature is unclear on the differences in student growth and development (Nichols, 2016). The process of promoting transformative learning takes skill, forethought, and authentic effort (Illeris, 2015). Taylor (2006) proposed that educators should not label themselves as transformative educators without deep personal reflection and sincerity. Producing potential rewards for both learner and educator requires a great amount of effort, ability, and resolution.

Experiencing epistemological development and transformative learning in a distance higher education environment requires that students and educators work together openly, with educators trusting the students and being aware of situations that may cause catalyzing events for students, precipitating an opportunity for a transformative experience (Cranton, 2016; Provident et al., 2015). Encouraging and actively supporting students' critical reflection through coursework can help them process emotions and propel learners into a new mindset and worldview (Liu, 2015). This process can happen in distance higher education, just as it can happen in traditional higher education on campus (Nichols, 2016).

Hoskins (2013) noted that the transformative learning process requires more focus on instructional design, educators, and learners than on a specific method of delivery. It is important to provide a safe environment for learners in which they may analyze their beliefs; and guidance and support are important for students throughout the learning process (Hoskins, 2013; Provident et al., 2015). Distance education has the ability to

provide a safe environment, along with educator guidance and support, and relationships

built on trust (Henderson, 2010; Provident et al., 2015). Distance education can also

reproduce another important element of transformative learning, the continued growth of

educators (Parra et al., 2015). Educators must become aware of their own personal

perspectives and perpetually work to continue their growth within the academic setting

(Cranton, 2016; Parra et al., 2015). Cranton (2010) identified a valuable strategy for

distance educators, that of modeling critical self-reflection and critical reflection on the

educators' own beliefs explicitly exploring subsequent thought processes.

　　　　With the proliferation of distance higher education options, literature about

distance higher education has also expanded and grown to reflect the face of modern

distance education. In a review of the literature related to distance higher education,

Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) found various themes running through the research for

teaching in distance higher education. Some research focused on prescriptive guidelines

and suggestions for effective distance education, whereas some investigated anecdotal

evidence of educators' experiences in distance higher education (Smits & Voogt, 2017).

The literature explored elements of distance higher education such as the roles of distance

higher educators, the policies and practices of distance higher education institutions, and

the products of distance higher education teaching (Morris et al., 2005; Tallent-Runnels

et al., 2006). Amongst the teaching products discussed in the literature are affective and

cognitive results.

　　　　With such variety in teaching strategies and complexity of issues involved in both

on-campus classrooms as well as in distance education settings, many instructors find it

intimidating to use epistemological development theory or transformative learning pedagogy to frame courses in the online learning environment (Lee & Brett, 2015; Palmer & Bowman, 2014). However, many of the aspects of distance education lend themselves to transformative learning. Cranton (2010) indicated that distance educators may already work at all levels of transformative learning, namely, the cognitive-rational approach by encouraging students to reflect and question the content rationally in a cognitive way; the depth psychology approach by supporting learners in examining personal values and belief systems to evaluate their sense of self; the developmental perspective by encouraging learners to recognize their own growth and learning over time and explaining that learning is a complex developmental process instead of a process of finding definitive answers; and the social change aspect which has educators occupied in challenging the status quo and institutional or social norms.

Distance education naturally challenges the conventional norms of power and authority held in the classroom model used by most universities (Meyers, 2008; Palmer & Bowman, 2014). Cutting-edge technologies assist epistemological development and transformative learning in distance education by allowing for integrated strategies and experiences from day to day life to interact with technologies where powerful changes may occur (Lee & Brett, 2015; Yuzer & Kurubacak, 2010). Learners often feel more willing to disclose personal information in a distance setting, possibly because of an environment of empathy and empowerment, but also because of the anonymity afforded by the situation (Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011; Palmer & Bowman, 2014). Cranton (2010) named this the "stranger on the train" phenomenon (p. 4). Meyers (2008) noted that

online courses can have a more collegial, informal feel to them than face-to-face courses, creating a uniquely egalitarian environment. This may also encourage students to share personal stories and thoughts that they typically do not share, especially with an instructor that is similarly open and searching instead of acting as the expert with all the answers (Belenky et al., 1997; Cranton, 2010). Instructor encouragement is important in the transformative process in distance education (Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011).

Other aspects of distance education that may foster epistemological development and transformative learning include the perpetual nature of many of the courses, with resources and course materials remaining accessible for long periods of time, and a sense of community created through the process of learning together (Bradshaw, 2009; Cranton, 2010). With online courses, many contain discussion posts that remain available for review anytime a student wants to read them again, which is completely different from a face-to-face discussion in a campus classroom. This allows more time for reflection and processing of information (Henderson, 2010). Conversations may take place over days or weeks rather than over minutes, creating the potential for deeper thoughts and responses.

In addition, Nichols (2015) found that distance students did not show any statistical difference in formational maturity and growth when compared with on-campus students. Some evidence indicates that distance students, who are largely part-time students, have an advantage in their daily lives as they have a richer environment within which to participate and engage (Nichols, 2015, 2016). Additionally, distance educators can use teaching strategies, such as learner decision-making, artistic expressions, and

projects, to promote transformative learning possibilities in distance education (Cranton, 2010, 2016).

Summary

In this chapter, I explored the research problem as well as the purpose of this paper. An outline of the scope of the literature review search strategies and a concise synopsis of current research from the literature that supports the problem's significance follows. I explored current literature that relates to my research questions and to the conceptual framework that informs this inquiry. This discussion included background related to the conceptual framework, as well as connections from the conceptual framework to the current research. This chapter concluded with a literature review, emphasizing the origins and development of distance education including changes in delivery technology, epistemological development and transformative learning in higher education, and transformative learning in distance higher education, focusing on practices educators may use to support epistemological development and transformative learning. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology of this research.

Chapter 3: Research Method

In this research, I studied perceptions and experiences of distance higher education instructors in facilitating and observing epistemological growth and transformative learning within adult undergraduate distance higher education students. To fulfill this purpose, I used a basic qualitative research method. This study may help educators and academic institutions involved in distance higher education by shedding light on instructors' practices in teaching, mentoring, and learning, which can facilitate developmental learning among adult undergraduate students.

Chapter 3 provides a description of methodology I used in this study. I describe the basic qualitative interview approach and offer a rationale for my choice of this qualitative research method. I also address details of my role as researcher, including an explanation and justification for participant selection, choice of instrument, and other details specific to participant consent. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of data sources, data collecting methods, data analysis procedures, and methods followed to ensure trustworthiness within the study.

Research Design and Rationale

I was guided by two research questions:

- Research Question 1: How do distance higher education instructors familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories describe the learning they have witnessed in their adult undergraduate students in light of these theories?

- Research Question 2: What do these instructors perceive as best practices for intentionally supporting epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate distance higher education students?

In order to explore the central phenomenon of fostering epistemological development and transformative learning in distance higher education, I used a basic qualitative research interview design (see Merriam, 2009). The basic qualitative approach lends itself to studies seeking to discover knowledge such as descriptions or experiences (Patton, 2014), and the meaning of an area of experience to the participants (Merriam, 2009). A basic qualitative approach focuses on answering a central research question that asks for description, exploration, practical knowledge learned, or meaning constructed by interviewees.

A basic qualitative interview study involves interviews that provide the researcher insights and understanding through interactions with study participants (Merriam, 2009). The basic qualitative approach also accentuates the reflective experience of interviewees and how they interpret their own behavior as well as the meaning they attach to their actions and others' actions (Merriam, 2009). This approach does not frame the meanings as separate and disconnected but rather constructed and evolved through daily experiences of individuals and groups (Merriam, 2009). Constructionism is at the root of basic qualitative inquiry, meaning that "individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds" (Merriam, 2009, p. 22). Basic qualitative research also stems from a combination of philosophical and phenomenological research traditions, emphasizing the way experiences transform into consciousness (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2014).

In determining the approach to use for this study, I considered alternative

qualitative options including a case study method, ethnographic method, and

phenomenological method (Patton, 2014). Case study research is used to search for

learning through investigation of a limited unit of analysis containing the desired

phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). By identifying a bounded system, the researcher can

explore the *how* and *why* of events within that system, gaining insights through coding

and analysis (Patton, 2014). I did not select the case study approach because a clear

bounded system was not available through which to answer the research questions for

this study. An ethnographic approach is focused on the discovery and understanding of a

culture or shared pattern of a specific group of people (Patton, 2014). Through participant

observation and fieldwork, ethnography allows for researchers to gather rich, descriptive

data about a group of people with a shared culture. This approach was not applicable to

my study due to the focus of my research questions on perceptions and experiences of

distance higher education instructors generally. Finally, a phenomenological study

focuses on uncovering the essence of a lived experience, typically one shared by a

homogenous group of individuals (Patton, 2014). My interest addressed a more general

group of practitioners, seeking to clarify experiences and meanings associated with

limited aspects of widespread practice rather than uncovering the essence of lived

experience among them.

Role of the Qualitative Researcher

The researcher plays the main role in collecting and analyzing the data in a basic

qualitative study approach (Merriam, 2009). The qualitative researcher frames the study

and obtains data to discover and interpret the meanings people attach to their experiences before presenting the resulting conclusions (Merriam, 2009). I obtained data through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with participants. To perform this role with integrity, I had to be self-reflective, continuously self-critical, and to proceed with honest and open personal awareness. Because the researcher is an instrument in the study, they must consider their bias (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183). I continuously clarified my own dispositions, biases, and assumptions to bracket my own personal subjectivity (Merriam, 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2010). I kept research notes to help articulate and assess the effects that my opinions and experiences might have on the research (Merriam, 2009).

I recruited my initial interviewees from among those recommended by participants in an expert panel of practitioners recommended by my doctoral committee. I recruited additional interviewees by way of asking at the conclusion of each interview for additional nominations for my sample. I avoided interviewing anyone with whom I had a current or former supervisory relationship or who were my own current or former students. In all my interactions with participants, I maintained an appreciative respect, recognizing that these individuals were my partners in exploring my research questions. I sought to establish harmonious relations with participants in the hope of obtaining the maximum benefits through dynamics emerging from respectful interactions (Schoorman, 2014).

Methodology

This section explains the guiding methodological approach for researching the problem under investigation. It includes information on how I gathered data, how I

analyzed the data, and how this research complies with generally accepted basic qualitative inquiry practices. In the next sections, I describe the methods used and the data collection process.

Participant Selection Logic

The participant selection logic includes the justifiable decisions surrounding participant selection and sampling procedures (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Determining the appropriate sample size for the research purpose, and the correct sampling method for the research approach, are the two main issues that researchers address in selecting samples. To ensure credible results, I chose 11 as an appropriate size for my group of interviewees. This size provides enough material to reach data saturation, a point at which the ability to gather new information is reached and a researcher could replicate the study based on the material obtained (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Population. The population for my study was higher education instructors working in distance higher education who are familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories. All instructors interviewed for this study had lengthy experience working with adult undergraduate students in distance higher education including, but not limited to, online settings. I limited my search to participants with a working knowledge of epistemological development and transformative learning theories.

Sampling strategy. Qualitative research typically involves purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009). Purposive sampling entails the researcher recognizing the importance of finding participants that best serve the purpose of the study and help discover the

answers to research questions (Patton, 2014). The sampling strategy I employed was to recruit my initial interviewees from among those provided by participants in an expert panel of practitioners recommended by my doctoral committee. After inviting the initial seven potential participants, I used the snowball sampling method (Patton, 2014) to obtain references for additional potential participants meeting the same criteria. Snowball sampling allows the researcher to obtain participants invited for reason of their specific qualifications for the study (Patton, 2014). This aligned with my study, as the participants had to be familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories.

Criterion for selecting the sample. As this study delves into perceptions and experiences of distance higher education instructors familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories, it was important to find the population from which I obtained my sample through acknowledged members of this population providing nominations for other acknowledged members of the population. In order to do this, I recruited my initial interviewees from among those provided by participants in an expert panel of practitioners recommended by my doctoral committee. I initially received seven recommendations for potential participants from the expert panel, and then used the snowball sampling method to obtain references for additional potential participants meeting the same criteria.

Sample size. Identifying the correct sample size is a significant part of qualitative research. Arriving at an appropriate sample size for a research question and research approach allows the researcher to find sufficient participants to uncover the issues

surrounding the subject under investigation (Patton, 2014). This lends confidence to the

findings of the research. However, numbers do not substantiate qualitative research as

they do in quantitative research, so researchers do not need to focus solely on finding a

certain number for a sample size (Patton, 2014). Researchers should determine sample

size by the study's timeframe, the available resources, and the goals of the study (Patton,

2014). The number of participants also depends on what is needed to answer the central

research question (Merriam, 2009). For the purpose of this study, selecting 11 individuals

to interview created variety in responses.

Selecting participants. I recruited my initial interviewees from among those

recommended by participants in an expert panel of practitioners recommended by my

doctoral committee. These experts gave me contact information for seven distance higher

education instructors who are familiar with intellectual and epistemological development

theories as well as transformative learning theory and who use the idea of fostering

growth within adult undergraduate distance higher education students. After contacting

the initial seven potential participants, I found additional participants through the

snowball method of asking participants for contact information of other educators that

met the criteria who might be interested in participating. This led to a total of 11

participants. I e-mailed an informed consent form to educators that responded positively

to the invitation to participate. They responded to the e-mail by typing "I Consent,"

referring to the steps and procedures for the study. With the signed consent form

obtained, I scheduled an interview as conveniently as possible for each participant.

Data saturation. Using the purposive sampling method of recommendations from an expert panel and subsequent snowball sampling, or chain sampling (Patton, 2014), allowed me to monitor the data saturation as the study progressed. I began finding reiterative information after eight interviews but completed the 11 scheduled interviews.

Instrumentation

For data collection, I used semi-structured, guided interviews based on a set of specific and open-ended questions that reflected my research questions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes. I conducted interviews via Webex conference sessions, as in-person engagement was difficult due to issues such as distance and COVID-19 virus quarantine. I sought to obtain in depth information pertinent to my research questions (Merriam, 2009). For this purpose, I developed an interview guide (Appendix) with mostly open-ended questions, allowing for expansive follow-up questions as needed. This provided my interviewees with many avenues of response to explore (Turner, 2010), and gave myself as interviewer consistent opportunities to clarify and probe for meaning and understanding. The interview guide began with a general background question section, permitting the participants to share about themselves and become comfortable in the interview setting (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

My interview questions evolved from my literature review in light of my research questions. Some of the questions invited the participants to tell a story, leaving room for impressions or ideas as they felt they wanted to share (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). As the interview guide progressed, the questions remained open-ended and broad allowing the participants to respond freely (Turner, 2010).

I scheduled interviews at times convenient for participants, with an e-mail reminder being sent a few days ahead of each appointment. With participant permission, I audio recorded each interview with the Webex recording software. This allowed me to transcribe the data accurately by providing an initial digital transcription via the software, which I then reviewed multiple times to ensure the correctness of the transcription. I also took notes during each interview, recording my impressions of the interviewees' words and emotions (Merriam, 2009). I analyzed the interview data with attention to identifying major themes. Prior to each interview, I reminded the participants that their identities would remain confidential and they could opt out either during or at the conclusion of the interview, and that if they had any problems or concerns, they should contact the IRB at Walden University. I maintained a friendly demeanor throughout the experience to provide as comfortable an environment as possible.

Data Collection

Once I received approval from Walden IRB, I contacted an initial set of potential participants coming from the population of educators working in distance higher education with an acknowledged understanding of epistemological development and transformative learning theories. I informed the potential participants that they could check their interview transcripts for accuracy, thereby using member checking to authenticate my interpretation of the interview transcripts. I collected data through semi-structured Webex software interviews (see Appendix). I recorded each interview in the software, listening and taking notes during the interview. I reviewed each recording

multiple times while reviewing the transcripts, which permitted me to note my own

reflections as I listened again to the words of each participant.

Duration of data collection. Collecting data through qualitative means can be a

lengthy process (Merriam, 2009). However, out of respect for the participants' time, I

held one interview per individual, lasting 45 to 90 minutes. I collected these interviews

over the period of one month.

Recording data. I recorded all interviews via Webex software, producing

recordings that are completely private and inaccessible without my password. Recording

the interviews allowed me to focus on the participants' comments, without having to

worry about writing every word in my notes. I also made notes during the interviews, as

appropriate, and completed my field notes after each session to help me capture the

shared information as accurately as possible.

Follow-up plan for recruiting participants. The expert panel provided seven

initial recommendations, but only three of those consented to meet with me, the other

four indicating a lack of time to be interviewed. So, I used the snowball procedure of

asking for additional referrals from interviewees, resulting in 13 additional referrals of

which I succeeded in interviewing eight more participants.

Exiting the study. I notified participants, prior to any agreement to participate,

that they could exit the study at any time. I reminded them of this immediately before

starting the interviews as well. I sent participants their interview transcripts to review for

precision and clarification as needed. Three participants responded with minor revisions,

four participants responded with no changes, and the remaining four participants did not

respond to the transcript review. After finalization of this study, I will create a private

website containing a summary of the study results and share the information with all

participants.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to identify themes within the data (Vaismoradi et al.,

2013). To conduct my data analysis plan, I first organized and condensed, or reduced, the

data contained in the interview transcripts, removing information that was not applicable

to the research questions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This procedure helped

ensure that the data I processed in subsequent steps related only to my research questions.

Next, I assigned categories, or themes, in a procedure Merriam (2009) terms category

construction. I made comments as they occurred to me in places where the theme was

underlying or not easily seen (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). From this point, I identified

patterns and irregularities, gathering similar themes together into categories, grouping

comments and data pieces that "go together" (Merriam, 2009, p. 179). As I continued this

coding activity, I followed Merriam's recommendation to keep a separate list of themes

that appeared to go beyond a single interview. Some themes became subcategories as the

work progressed. Once the themes appeared solid, I assigned all data pieces a category. I

did this by hand as I only had 11 interviews, making the data manageable without

software.

I organized the data by color coding similar information. This allowed me to

identify motifs and relationships, and to further uncover themes in the data, comparing

participants' responses. As the next analytical step in my study, I drew conclusions and

created categories (Miles et al., 2014). I examined the data coding produced in the previous step to help reveal meanings inherent to the data, allowing me to draw conclusions verifiable through the data and group similar pieces of data.

In regard to discrepant data or cases that vary from the main information collected, I acknowledged that these pieces of information existed in the data. However, discrepant data did not negate the themes and conclusions found in the body of the data collected. Variants to main themes can clarify and bring completion to the research that would not exist without the discrepancies if they exist (Creswell, 2013).

Issues of Trustworthiness

In discussing the significance of trustworthiness in qualitative research, Merriam (2009) noted that having an ethical and trustworthy study would allow practitioners to apply the new information in helping people with confidence. Another hallmark of trustworthy research is the use of multiple perspectives to produce a balanced and fair study (Patton, 2014). Following is a discussion of the four attributes of trustworthiness needed in qualitative research, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

In order to ensure the credibility, or internal validity, of my study, I used the strategies of member checks and comparison of data (Anney, 2014; Merriam, 2009). I compared data with the interview transcripts, my interview notes, and any follow-up comments of the participants. I shared the interview transcripts with the appropriate participants and asked them to review the data for interpretation and accuracy. I used

iterative questioning methods, delving further into pertinent comments with follow up questions and probes, expanding on unclear or incomplete points. These well-accepted qualitative research methods, such as the ability to refuse participation, add to the credibility of the research (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability

Transferability poses a challenge for qualitative researchers because much of qualitative work involves a smaller sample size and pertains to particular environments and individuals (Merriam, 2009). In order to aid the transferability of study findings, researchers must collect as much information as possible in each study, including background data and highly detailed descriptions of the subject observed and discussed (Shenton, 2004). This allows readers of the research to assess the findings within the proper context and determine what applications might be of value in other settings. In this study, I inquired about the background of each interviewee prior to moving into the remainder of the interview guide. Knowing the experience of each participant aids in evaluating the transferability of the study findings. In addition, I encouraged interviewees to share stories during the interview process to produce highly detailed descriptions of the subject. Not only does this add to the transferability, but examples invite the imagination of the reader. This allows the study to come alive in a way that more mundane data does not. I used focused sampling to provide a similarity of participants that makes evaluation of the study's findings easier for readers (Anney, 2014).

Dependability

Dependability is achieved when the researcher uses methods that would allow the same results if the study were repeated in the same way (Shenton, 2004). Anney (2014) represented dependability as ensuring that the data supports the interpretation and recommendations of the study. In order to increase the dependability of my study, I specified the scope and delimitation of the study and described in detail the steps taken when conducting the study. This can help readers to imagine potential future researchers using the same methods and techniques that I used (Shenton, 2004). In addition, I kept what Anney (2014) terms an audit trail to track and explain the decisions that I made along the way in conducting the study.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability, I implemented measures to safeguard the results of the study. In other words, methods that helped me find real results and not just what I thought I would find (Anney, 2014). I was clear on my methods, motives, and emotions and beliefs (Shenton, 2004). These methods should allow other researchers to find results consistent with mine (Anney, 2014). I used both an audit trail and self-reflective notes during the data collection process to clarify my own emotions and beliefs regarding the target subject (Merriam, 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2010). I analyzed data collected from a variety of methods, not just interview transcripts (Anney, 2014).

Ethical Procedures

Before I started this research, I obtained IRB approval to proceed with this study. In addition, I e-mailed the informed consent form to participants and had them read

through the information and provide their consent via e-mail. Any individual

participating in this research did so voluntarily as evidenced through the informed

consent form. In the analysis and conclusion portions of this study, I sought to make a

truthful and clear representation of the interviewees' experiences and opinions.

In order to protect the participants during recruiting, I sent each participant a

separate e-mail with no references to any other participant I attempted to recruit. During

the data collection process, I removed names from any written data as well as used

pseudonyms for any identifying information in the interview transcripts. During the

debriefing process, I again sent separate e-mails with no connection to other participants.

I did not invite any individuals under age 18 to participate in this research. I used a laptop

with password protection throughout the research process. I housed recordings and

transcriptions of interviews either on my password-protected laptop, within password-

protected files, or in the cloud in a password-protected website. I will destroy all the

recordings, transcripts, field notes and any other data after five years. Throughout the

research process and the subsequent five years, I have been and will be the only person

with access to the data.

Summary

This chapter provided justification for the choice of a basic qualitative research

design, explaining why other research approaches were not appropriate for this study. I

described my role as a researcher, along with the sample selection, data collection and

transcription, and data analysis processes. I described and stated a rationale for the

selection of participants. I provided justification for the selection of interviews as means

of collecting data in this study. I reviewed elements of the informed consent process and

interviewing procedures, including an explanation of how I addressed ethical issues and

ensure trustworthiness throughout the study. In Chapter 4, I detail the findings of my

research.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this qualitative study I explored the perceived experiences of distance higher education instructors related to epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate students. I also sought to identify the perceived best practices for fostering epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate distance higher education students. At the time of the writing of this chapter, distance higher education has taken on a greater significance due to the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, with calls for dramatic improvements in distance education (Craig, 2020).

I interviewed 11 distance higher education instructors familiar with the theories of epistemological development and transformative learning. All 11 of my respondents had significant experience working with adult undergraduate students in distance learning contexts. The interviews were guided by the following questions:

1. How do distance higher education instructors familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories describe the learning they have witnessed in their adult undergraduate students in light of these theories?

2. What do these instructors perceive as best practices for intentionally supporting epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate distance higher education students?

This chapter comprises an overview of the data collection, a presentation of the study's results, and a summary of findings.

Setting

All the participants have worked with adult undergraduate distance higher education students. All participants had experience in either hybrid or completely online higher education, with six participants also having experience teaching in non-online distance higher education. All participants were interviewed via phone and I audio recorded each interview.

Demographics

The participants were a set of veteran educators with between 14 and 40 years of experience instructing in distance higher education. Ten of the participants were female, one was male. Five participants lived in New England, two participants lived in mid-Atlantic states, two participants lived in Southern states, one participant lived in the Midwest, and one participant lived on the West coast.

Data Collection

I obtained Walden University IRB approval (11-20-19-0173024) and then I recruited my initial interviewees from among those recommended by participants in an expert panel of practitioners recommended by my doctoral committee. I recruited additional interviewees by way of asking at the conclusion of each interview for additional nominations for my sample. As a result, I was able to recruit and interview 11 distance higher education instructors as participants for a proposed 1-hour, audio recorded telephone interview. I used a list of interview questions that I had developed as the data collection tool (see Appendix). The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. I recorded the interviews in password-protected files using Webex online

meeting software. I used planned interview questions as well as probes to obtain

clarification and examples of the information the participants shared. I followed up via e-

mail within a couple of days of the interviews to give participants an opportunity to share

any additional thoughts. None sent any additional thoughts. I also gave all participants

the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and make changes as needed for

correctness. Three participants made minor clarifications, four okayed their transcripts,

and there was no response from the remaining four participants.

Data Analysis

I reviewed each audio recording multiple times and transcribed the interviews into

Microsoft Word documents. After determining that I had reached saturation with 11

interviews, I went forward with my proposed approach of coding the data by hand to

enhance my feel for the gathered information. As planned, I reduced my data by

removing information that was not applicable to the research questions. I transferred all

data into one Microsoft Word document. I reread all interviews, coding and noting

themes as I identified them, then constructing categories. I used colored highlights to

track recurring keywords and themes from one interview to another. I used track changes

to make comments as I categorized to identify a theme or pattern that was not easily

found by keyword. I also kept a separate list of themes and patterns that I saw emerge

from the data.

As I coded, I worked to find points of comparison and contrast within the

interview data. I used color coding throughout the data to represent individual categories.

When I sensed the emergence of a new category, I would assign a new color and

highlight all appropriate text. When I came on data that appeared in only one interview, I made a note to myself to pay special attention to include this as divergent data in the Results section. I reviewed the recordings and transcripts multiple times to guarantee that I captured all themes and patterns. As I reviewed and analyzed the data, I tried to keep my own words, thoughts, feelings, and my experiences and beliefs bracketed to maintain as reliable an interpretation of the data as possible.

Category codes and themes that emerged from the data are listed in Table 1. In the left column are shown examples of open codes derived from the transcripts. The right column describes the individual themes. The codes led to emergent themes, including the importance of extensive dialogue between instructor and student, meeting students at the point of their own development, understanding, and construction of the world, establishing a productive relationship with the student, the need for instructors to respect and show respect for each student as an adult peer, creating a supportive yet challenging environment, patience and understanding, assigning reflection time to create space for change, peer cohorts and interactions to provide different perspectives and voices, and instructors valuing and modeling lifelong learning in themselves. Respondents also indicated the excitement that they experienced as practitioners from witnessing transformations among their adult undergraduate students, as well as the value of periodic face-to-face residencies in building trust with their adult undergraduate students. Discrepant data were identified and included in the analysis. If participant responses did not match other participants' responses, they were not included in the main results for

each theme, but they are mentioned and indicated as individual, or smaller group,

responses.

Table 1

Examples of Codes Leading to Emerging Themes and Theme Descriptions

Codes	Theme Descriptions
Iterative process Instructor's tone Extensive feedback	Importance of extensive dialogue between instructor and student
Knowing students Personalization Student's motivation	Meeting students at the point of their own development and interest
Treat students as peers Building trust Adult students have lives	Importance of establishing respectful relationships with students
Student's anxiety Critique of student work Using the right resources	Creating a supportive yet challenging environment
Modeling reflection Reflection assignments Feedback on progress	Assigning reflection time to create space for change
Discussion boards Access to other instructors Students from all walks of life	Providing access to different perspectives and voices
Patience in the process Continued learning Support of colleagues	Instructors valuing and modeling lifelong learning

Evidence of Trustworthiness

My research questions grew out of my 14 years of experience working in distance

higher education mentoring adult undergraduate students, as well as working alongside

hundreds of other distance higher education instructors and the theories I encountered in

my previous studies in my doctoral program. This background guided me as I developed

my research questions and interview protocol. I followed consistent procedures in

conducting my interviews, including audio-recording the interviews and keeping them to

a reasonable time frame of 45 to 75 minutes. I asked participants the same pre-established

questions, supplemented by follow up questions to probe for clarification or greater

detail. In addition to recording the interviews, I made a set of interview notes describing

each interview and reflecting on points that stood out for me, while the experience

remained fresh.

Credibility

I worked to establish credibility by reviewing and comparing the interview

recordings with my transcriptions. I used the Webex software to break the audio into

small chunks, which allowed me to review sections easily so I could transcribe with

accuracy. Once the transcripts were finalized, I secured the integrity of the research

through follow-up e-mails and participant transcript reviews for member checking. I

analyzed the transcribed interviews, identifying patterns, trends, and themes, and noting

illustrative stories of concepts as well as participant perceptions and experiences. I

collected the data using iterative questioning methods, probing further into areas that

were unclear or of particular applicability to the study. I compared the data from the

interview transcripts, my interview notes, and additional e-mail commentary from

participants.

Transferability

I sought to promote transferability by inquiring about the experience and background of each participant working as a distance higher education instructor. This permitted me to apply the proper context to comments made by the participants as well as allowing them to refer to their experiences more briefly during other parts of the interview. In addition, I asked participants to share stories and memories of specific students during the interview process. These stories may allow readers to locate parallels in their own experience in the interest of transferability. Subsequent studies could focus on a greater number of participants or narrow the requirements to focus on distance higher education instructors whose practice has been exclusively online or who work in specific types of institutions, such as public or private, trade or specialty schools, or competency-based institutions.

Dependability

All participants were encouraged to review the transcript of our discussion to confirm that their perceptions and responses were correctly transcribed. I asked the participants to clarify any discrepancies they found to ensure the most accurate data for the study. I clearly described the scope and delimitations of the study and give detailed steps taken as I conducted the study. I employed an audit trail to track the usage of the data collection instrument, my interview notes, transcription process, and data analysis. I ensured dependability by using participants' responses verbatim and was cautious to not ignore emergent themes or pertinent data as well as not to impose my own thoughts or interpretations of participant responses.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability, I used an identical interview guide to direct the interviews, which allowed for a preponderance of collected data relating back to the study's research questions. As themes and patterns emerged during data analysis, I kept detailed notes of conclusions I derive from these patterns in the data. I used this process to aid in clarifying and bracketing my own beliefs about the research questions. This allowed for clarity and consistency as I compared the data between transcripts, my interview notes, and additional information provided via e-mail by participants.

Results

Throughout the data analysis process, I identified multiple themes and patterns in response to the two research questions:

- Research Question 1: How do distance higher education instructors familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories describe the learning they have witnessed in their adult undergraduate students in light of these theories?

- Research Question 2: What do these instructors perceive as best practices for intentionally supporting epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate distance higher education students?

I studied the responses of my participants to note responses that stood out and searched for patterns among these responses. I then combined the emergent results into several themes, which I present in the following sections: extensive dialogue, meeting students

where they are, relationships, supportive and challenging environment, making room for

reflection, access to multiple perspectives, and the continued growth of the instructor.

Extensive Dialogue

Participants reported using several media in working with their adult

undergraduate distance higher education students such as feedback applied directly to

and/or commenting on student work by mail or e-mail, phone calls or video chats, and

occasional face-to-face meetings. All spoke of the importance of extensive dialogue. The

back and forth conversation occurred in some cases in lengthy monthly letters back and

forth between instructor and distance student, sometimes in more frequent e-mail

exchanges or extensive track changes threads, in long phone calls or video chats, or in

occasional face-to-face encounters during short term residencies or scheduled visits.

These featured wide-ranging discussions focused on students' progress, understanding of

concepts, or the evolution of written assignments. In all cases, the primary form of

fostering student development came down to interactions between the instructor and the

student. Instructors found interaction valuable, even at a distance, as they worked to help

and guide students not only in understanding assignments and concepts but also in

supporting each student in opening up to new depths of understanding about their own

way of knowing and other realities beside and beyond their own.

When reflecting on the extensive letters she would exchange with students, Jamie

said, "That's where I really did the teaching in terms of developing their own voice and

epistemology and thinking about transformational learning." Giving extensive feedback

took time and effort but also provided a means for instructors to help students along in their thinking. Barb shared,

> Be mindful of it. Don't take shortcuts. It's easy to. It's tempting, but don't. Don't do it in your feedback to students. They need the chance to push themselves cognitively, and if you don't nudge them in the feedback, that's where the thinking lives. That's where it's visible. You've got to get in there. You've got to show them you care. Show them you're reading everything and you want it to be better for them.

Discussions not only gave instructors a way to pass along information and requests to their adult undergraduate students but provided a way for them to hear first-hand their students' thoughts and reflections on the learning process, the concepts, and how they perceived their world based on new learnings. Amy stated,

> I think sometimes it's rare for them to just have somebody listen to them, and my colleagues don't always agree with this, but I've always treated the students as human peers and I mostly ask questions about what they're saying and say whatever comes into my mind. I don't try to steer them. And so sometimes their degrees take longer, but I've really watched them grow… I ask a lot of questions and then they do most of the talking. And I think that's how I see them grow to where they are not afraid of questions and they don't give me stock answers and they don't go in the directions that I would have expected. And so that forces me to change my opinions and then their work grows that way. I love that.

Dialogue also presented space for adult undergraduate students to reflect and share with an interested, supportive party. Interviewees identified the iterative process of going back and forth with students as valuable. Most participants recognized that their main technique in these interactions was to ask a lot of questions. Some mentioned this process as the Socratic method. It was less of providing answers and more of asking the questions and helping the student to hear their own answers. This would provide a way of laying students' thoughts open to critical analysis and discussion of underlying assumptions. A few participants discussed the fact that some adult undergraduate students wanted to be told what to do instead of having a dialogue, and it was challenging when instructors would not tell them exactly what to do. Lisa described,

> Some people know they're stuck, and some people don't know they're stuck. And that's when I get, "What you need to do is just teach me. Just teach me. Stop asking so many questions and just teach me." I know it gets frustrating for the students sometimes, but I do say, "Okay, so what about this?" or "Have you considered this?"… And they can be very unhappy with me for a little while, and I've got to roll with that. Usually they figure it out and we keep talking, or at least corresponding.

The process of helping an adult undergraduate student to a new developmental level was exciting to most participants. They mentioned being thrilled when a student experienced an "aha" moment or when a student had a breakthrough in their progress.

Meeting Students Where They Are

The theme of meeting adult undergraduate distance higher education students where they are emerged as participants described how they interacted with students. They knew their students as individuals, not just as members of a large class. Many of the participants used a phrase such as "start where the student is at" as a way of describing using familiar settings, subjects, and ideas for the student as they started their transformative journey. Natalie mentioned this is a type of scaffolding and "building upon what students already know and know how to do." Patty said, "I would call on what I assumed, and then learned, about their life experience to kind of draw them in and help them feel even more committed to their studies." Other participants felt it was important to understand the student's personality and motivation before starting to work towards developmental growth. Amy said, "When they sense that I'm interested in what they're doing genuinely, then they will succeed, and they see that I will ask them hard questions because I really want to understand." Susan commented, "For me, a lot of the excitement and the challenge is figuring out where they're starting from. And to me that's the whole key, to figure out where each student is starting from."

Although instructors had the goal of fostering epistemological developmental and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate students, they recognized that they had to start where each student was before they could move them further along the path. Tim related, "I have a constructivist framework because you try to build on what they know…. My assumption is that they know something before they come in here. And what I want them to do is to be able to build on what they know. They don't all bring the

same thing." A few of the instructors described their first conversations with students as asking the student what they were interested in, what their life was like, or what they did for a living. Participants did not assume that they knew what the student needed, wanted, or knew. They took their cue from the student. Dawn said,

> The thing is to begin with the passion or interest or question of the student. That has always been at the heart of adult learning for me. You don't need to take a 30-year-old adult and go into History 101. You need to find out what they care about, what interests them. If they say, for example, "women artists," find out what it is about women artists that interests them. Have them use that topic as a way to learn about history and how to write a great paper. So, you use the topic first and then let the basics flow out of that.

Jamie described a student that she felt experienced the biggest transformation of all students she has worked with. She described the student as withdrawn and overweight when she began her program. The instructor found out that this student was upset by a recent occurrence of a niece being sexually abused by another family member. So, they began developing a learning plan around this critical question in the student's life, including reading material about sexual harassment, sexual abuse, psychology, child psychology. The student also had family that were in law enforcement and struggled to reconcile the two sides of this issue. Jamie said that most faculty did not want to address these issues and so would not work with the student, but she was curious and committed to helping the student. By the end of four years of undergraduate work, the student was "completely transformed" in the words of Jamie, not just intellectually, but physically she

had lost considerable weight. The student went on to obtain a law degree and spent her career assisting those that could not afford a lawyer. Jamie went on to say,

> Those are the stages that I think about – starting from what you know yourself, the questions that are burning in you, and then trying to relate them to the broader world. And that whole process is very transformative in terms of developing your own voice.

Some participants noted that taking a cue from adult undergraduate students did not always work in every academic setting. Some programs were rigid in what students needed to learn, whereas other programs were quite flexible and allowed for more creativity on the part of the instructor to meet each student where they were. Natalie at one point was a math professor and her students would come into the program at varying ability levels. Professors from other disciplines criticized her that she was not making students learn to the same level before passing them, but she felt that she could see how much her students had grown in their understanding of math and she had seen their effort, and felt it was sufficient for the degree being gained. She explained,

> I would tell them, 'Look, I cannot make people do college level math when they don't know what a fraction is. I need to start where they are.' And if I can get them to the point that not only do they know what a fraction is and they understand how to divide things, but that they now know that they can learn mathematics, and they can understand when they read a statistical study and their brain doesn't shut off, to me that is such a huge leap that I'm going to give them a

college degree for that. So, you have to start where the student is. If they're

terrified, you have to start with that. You can't terrify them more!

Some participants indicated they felt restrained from pursuing personalization for their

students by administrative policies or practices such as having too many students in a

workload. This hampered the practice of engaging individual students that they would

like to have done.

Relationships

All participants referred to the importance of having a personal relationship with

their adult undergraduate distance higher education students. One participant said that if

the first rule of real estate is "location, location, location" then the first rule of adult

education is "relationships, relationships, relationships." Amy noted that she does not

make a hierarchy between herself and her adult students. "I figure that they're living

complex lives and so am I, and we're both trying to get to where we understand each

other and know that we respect each other's ideas." Some of the instructors worked in

programs where they were able to have an in-person experience with students such as at a

retreat or residency, and they cited these experiences as making the relationship-building

easier. They felt that beginning the relationship in person allowed for a faster

development of the working relationship at a distance.

Respect. Many participants mentioned a second aspect of the importance of

respect for adult undergraduate students. As Lisa stated, "I think it comes from the basis

of the relationships and the mutual respect development. I mean, it's important when

you're working with kids, but you can't get anywhere really with adults if you don't have

it." Patty explained her admiration for her adult students and all that they were juggling, saying, "I used to call them everyday heroes. I was always aware that this was a huge energy sink and a huge commitment that they were making. And so I was very respectful of that." Barb went so far as to mention that she considered every one of her adult undergraduates to be an expert in "their own right," and she tried to treat them that way. She went on,

There's got to be a way that I can understand and recognize that my students know a lot more than I do… I need to tap into their wisdom, recognize their professional experience, and help them put their ideas into words.

The general feeling as participants discussed their relationships with students was as a respectful, peer friendship, but not a personal friendship. Amy explained,

It's the conversation. And not one where you're instructing, but where you are really sharing appropriate aspects of yourself with them. I mean, I don't talk about my husband or any of that stuff, except you know, something silly. And I try not to share emotional issues. I welcome anything they want to tell me, but I don't let it go into any kind of interpersonal counseling… I found that I had good boundaries with the students after a while… I would just praise them for their strength and getting through it, or something like that, but I just don't share too much that's too personal.

She was personable, but not personal. Although the interactions were respectful and did not reflect the potential inequity of an instructor/student relationship, it was still a professional relationship.

Most participants indicated that they enjoyed the relationship aspect of fostering development in adult undergraduate distance students. One instructor used the phrase "simply fascinating" to describe her students. Others indicated their admiration and care they had for their adult students. One participant indicated that if she could see the direction her student was going in, even if they did not reach the end goals of the course, she would often pass them. She wanted to reward the progress and effort made, not punish the lack of reaching a specific end point by a certain date. As a divergent attitude, a couple of participants seemed to retain a more traditional student/instructor dynamic, with more of a reward and punishment element connected to student progression and achievement. Their relationships maintained the element of extensive dialogue but relied more heavily on grading and points. For example, Tim was not lenient with his students on deadlines and assignments, and although he offered understanding, he did not offer flexibility.

Presence. Some participants specified "presence" as another way that instructors build relationships with their adult undergraduate students. For example, Barb highlighted the importance of having a social presence online and connecting with students from a distance when she said,

> If you're teaching at a distance, you haven't got the kind of laughs and smiles to exchange, and that eye contact with people to help them feel more comfortable with you. So, it's really different. It is difficult. And how do we do the proxy for those warm touchstones? I want everybody to feel seen and heard… I get that this is tricky to do, but in my experience, the people who are good online teachers

have organically incorporated that strong social presence that people feel. If you

go into my [online] classroom, it's going to feel different than someone else's

[online] classroom. Yes, it's just a bunch of clunky boxes and links, but you'll

know you're in my classroom… I'm all over the place.

Barb mentioned that she did not want any student to feel she was connecting to them

because it was dictated by the faculty handbook, but that she wanted them to feel "like a

normal human being in a class."

Joan mentioned the importance of consistent tone in the instructor's voice,

whether that was through writing or verbal communication, showing a social presence to

the adult undergraduate distance student. She said that a student could tell it was her

communicating because of their relationship and her "sassy" tone. She mentioned this in

contrast to the static or canned communications that sometimes come from instructors in

distance courses. Barb indicated that there needed to be a certain "voice within feedback,

but if it's not gentle and instructional, [it] can feel punitive… We can tell when we've

been scanned as a reader and as a thinker and as a writer… I don't want anyone to feel

that way." She would give more effort to give individual feedback and will never copy

and paste feedback. She wants to honor the student as an author and never take a shortcut

to engaging with the student.

Supportive and Challenging Environment

Most participants indicated that they tried to maintain a supportive learning

environment, while also giving challenges for the adult undergraduate student to

overcome at appropriate times. They all seemed to base this balance between support and

challenge on their previous experiences as instructors, and in some cases, also their experiences as adult learners. Natalie said, "You have to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable." Patty explained,

My whole teaching method was one of encouragement that really they were in the prime of life… adult development is very special, and you don't truly develop to the height of your potential until you reach 35 or 40, sort of what some people call middle age. And so I assumed that they needed encouragement….[From Women's Ways of Knowing] I always took to heart that people need to know that they have good minds. So, I would start out with that level of encouragement and I would start out with the assumption always that I wanted to help them. I wanted to further their intellectual development.

When asked, Patty agreed that knowing when to push an adult undergraduate student to help them reach a deeper level of understanding was more of an "artform informed by theory" than a precise science. Although some participants mentioned trying to encourage students as frequently as possible, Joan mentioned that she does not spend a lot of time making encouraging comments on papers, but prefers to do that in face to face or videoconference environments instead. A few participants referred to the need to reduce adult students' anxiety before they could make much progress developmentally.

Communicating individually helped to create that supportive and challenging environment, and further bolstered the relationship between instructors and adult undergraduate students. Participants acknowledged the time commitment to doing this and recognized that is largely why so many instructors did not feel they could tailor all

communications. Joan emphasized the importance of honest and specific feedback, "People want challenge, and they want to know how they can do better. They don't like margin notes that say "good job" or "bad job." So, I try to be very honest and really challenging and to give people examples." Barb said, "There's that voice within feedback, but if it's not gentle and instructional, it can feel punitive."

Most participants mentioned that it took patience and understanding to foster epistemological development and transformative learning in adult undergraduate students, and that progress was not always apparent. Amy said, "It would appear like they were doing nothing, but I could just feel them growing." Participants said that transformation is a process and that a developmental mindset can help instructors see a potential epistemological shift on the horizon. At the same time, transformation can come from painful experiences, and the supportive help of an instructor can make all the difference. Barb shared,

> Deep learning facilitates those changes. It is not comfortable. It is not easy. Very
> few people like transformational learning. We look back at our life and when
> were we transformed? Not when we were binge-watching Netflix and licking
> Cheeto dust off our fingers. It was divorces. Death. A child with a very scary
> chronic illness. Our transformational events that dot our lives are never ones that
> are done without very uncomfortable discombobulations. And that's why a lot of
> people leave… Because that deep learning is scary sometimes. It's unnerving. It's
> uncomfortable… We all feel the same things that the people who drop out maybe

felt too, but it was just they couldn't deal with it at that time. . . . I could be

wrong, but that's how I feel.

Barb went on to relate a story of an adult undergraduate student that attended a

couple of study abroad experiences with her. On the first trip, the student refused to try

any new food, instead seeking out McDonald's or KFC restaurants at every stop to eat the

"safe" food she was familiar with from home. On a subsequent trip, the group met for the

first time at a restaurant. When Barb saw that this same student was in her group, she

started thinking about where she had seen a McDonald's for the student. To her surprise,

the student ordered escargot. The instructor thought the student must not know what it

was, so let her know it was snails. Barb said that the student exclaimed, "Oh, no. You're

not dealing with the same person you were dealing with who only ate at McDonald's. Oh,

no. I'm the most adventurous eater in my group. I've been changing and blowing

people's minds." Barb said this student had been trying so many new things since her

previous experience abroad that she had substantially transformed and it was exciting.

She said, "I have goosebumps all over. You never know as a teacher what is going to be

that thing that allows a person to change the trajectory and be transformed and become a

more curious person about the world." Barb said she believed that the changes occurred

from the disorienting experience (see Mezirow, 1981) of being in a completely different

environment than what was familiar to them, from being uncomfortable and having to

make sense of their experiences and emotions. In the case of this initially unadventurous

student, if the instructor had pushed her too hard on the first trip to go outside of her

comfort zone, she may have shut down and never tried something else. But by allowing the student to explore at her own pace, true growth occurred.

Tim shared an experience about seeing an adult undergraduate student change in the course of a semester through experiences in his class. At the beginning of the course, he would have the students take a published matrix and rate themselves with their current proficiency in each area. Some students marked that they were "distinguished" in every category. The instructor felt that this meant the students felt they could not be any better. When he proposed that most people are at a "basic" level, the students generally did not like it. The participant pushed back that "distinguished" means the student is perfect in that aspect. At the end of the course, the same self-evaluation was re-administered and some students would lower their evaluation of themselves. Tim commented, "It's amazing to me that by the end of the term some of them have gone back and lowered their grade… That's just what people do. You realize, 'Hey, I don't know all this and I'm still learning.' So, I really use that as a teaching opportunity to say nobody is perfect. None of us, and we're all going to be learning. We are lifetime learners." This also shows another important piece of fostering epistemological development and transformative learning, that of helping adult undergraduate students to self-reflect.

Another aspect of creating a supportive environment lies in helping adult undergraduate students find and use resources. Appropriate tools can facilitate epistemological shifts and transformations by ensuring that courses and experiences occur in the way the instructor designed. Joan said that she pushes for students to use the library sooner. It help them "find and digest empirical articles so that they can come to

this understanding about how there's a lot of differing assumptions that you can make from different articles, you just have to read enough of them to realize that no one is the truth." Multiple participants mentioned the importance of helping students use new technology as soon as possible, such as helping them understand how track changes works or helping them create a system for naming their computer files. For example, Barb said she helps first term students know what a browser is, how to upload a file, helping save in Word, helping double space documents, and similar skills, which she felt was necessary to help students get to the point where they could truly interact with their program and get into "the process of discovery."

Making Room for Reflection

A basic tenet of developmental literature is reflection. Whether directly or indirectly, every participant referred to helping their adult undergraduate distance higher education students to reflect. Susan noted, "You're trying to encourage some reflective thinking in there. Asking questions, giving them ideas, but not doing the whole idea. Just getting a seed started so to speak." Patty mentioned that she preferred written correspondence with students "because the feeling was that you would have to be more thoughtful and considered if you had to do it in writing. And then you could also go back and have a record of it." In a couple of cases, the direct mention of reflection was not brought up until the end of the interview when I would ask if there was anything else they wanted to add. Jamie said that she should have included it as it was vital, "Ah, a big piece we have not talked about is reflection, and that is critical. So, the transformation process is all about being able to reflect."

Reflection creates space for adult undergraduate students to change or to recognize their changes. Kathy related a story about a student that wrote of his changes over a term. The instructor would always have the class write a reflection paper at the end of the course asking, "What did you learn from this? How did you change?" One of her students had worked for many years at a school as a coach and was coming back to the university to obtain an alternative certification. He had previously never seen much purpose in instructional techniques or strategies and felt he was a good teacher. Kathy began the course by failing him in many assignments. She would give him feedback and ask him to redo the assignment, but he would say that his work had always been good enough for everyone else. Over the course of the term, she would push back on his perception of his work and realized he was a poor writer, and he would rather talk than write. So, she encouraged him to write as he would talk, and eventually something clicked for him. She said,

> Now it took him a while, but once it clicked, it clicked with him. And his papers exponentially, exponentially improved! It was just such a wonderful thing to watch. And then in his reflection, even he knew that his writing had improved, his thought processes had improved. He now understood when all of the teachers around him were talking about all of these things that teachers talk about when they get together, and he had just been ignoring them. He understood now why those were a concern in the classroom…. And it was in my differentiated instruction class and I think that is why it stuck with me. It's because he finally

understood that all children did not learn the same way. And he was modifying

for those students! And I was just like, "Light bulb!" It was wonderful!

A few participants also mentioned the importance of modeling reflection for their

adult undergraduate students, whether directly, during the extensive dialogue, or through

storytelling. This helped students to see an example of the process of reflecting and gave

them the confidence to try. Jamie said, "It's the modeling of my own reflection about

their work and about things that were going on in my life related to that, that made it

possible." Space to reflect could be offered as part of a course assignment or encouraged

through the extensive dialogue and questioning that all participants mentioned. A couple

of participants felt it was important to reflect back to students when the instructor heard

reflective insights, or to give feedback when a student had inadvertently been reflecting.

Access to Multiple Perspectives

A minor theme that arose in many of the interviews was that of allowing adult

undergraduate distance higher education students access to multiple perspectives.

Largely, this was provided through interaction with the instructor, through group

discussion in courses or seminars, and through exposure to various voices in the content.

Dawn mentioned coteaching in order for students to hear different perspectives on the

same topic, "We would meet between residencies to plan assignments and joint work

projects. Coteaching of sorts with half of the paper read by one faculty member and I

would read the other so the student would get two perspectives." Patty explained that in

their distance program's residency experience, students had to meet with three different

faculty members as well as meet in small groups with other students to share their ideas.

Participants felt that facilitating their adult undergraduate students working with other students on projects, but more importantly joining in regularly in discourse on a discussion board or other communication device, brought together so many voices that students otherwise would not have access to. Adult undergraduate students, even in the same program, tended to come from such different backgrounds that these interactions alone went a long way towards opening students' eyes to other perspectives. Dawn said, "The learning community is an extremely important part of transformative learning. You tend to learn more from the peer that is just beyond you than even from the instructor that may seem too high away from your thinking." She would have students respond to each of their peers' work and post their own ideas as well. Susan reflected,

> I do think that the group work and the degree to which as an instructor or teacher you can encourage that kind of communication, also leads to people's learning and growth. Because they're learning from each other, and you have to provide the access points for them to actually get to know each other in that disorienting kind of way where they may not have been able to think of that on their own, or they wouldn't naturally gravitate towards that.

She shared an experience that she had in an online class for women writers. She participated in the discussion posts and would find herself writing almost the exact same thing as another student in the course. "They were typing the same thing that I was thinking." Susan went on to say, "Now that was quite an eye opener, particularly when I later learned who the person was, which was just their identity in terms of demographics. And it was not anybody I would have normally just said we could probably be friends."

Continued Growth of the Instructor

Most of the participants indicated a lifelong love of learning, and a few went as far as to say that it was important to continue learning to be an effective educator. Some interviewees had taken, or were currently taking, distance courses extraneous to their work assignments or degree programs, such as a chemistry course or a Native American history course. They indicated that being an adult distance learner helped them understand their own adult undergraduate students' experiences and mindset to a degree, and also to see what works and what does not work in distance education. Patty mentioned that she found all of the pre-recorded videos in online courses difficult. She went on to say of one of her courses, "I've been amazed at how it completely duplicates that model of standard classroom teaching where three or four people dominate, which I think is terrible. . . . I would have different viewpoints. So, right now we're only getting one set of viewpoints."

Some participants also mentioned the value of having the support of likeminded colleagues. Finding a fellow instructor to discuss developmental theory and approaches helped some participants feel more appreciated and less alone in their desires to help adult undergraduate students grow developmentally.

Most participants mentioned the excitement they felt when adult undergraduate students experienced a developmental shift. Joan noted, "And that's the part of me that's the developmental educator – that it excites me to know that it is not just that they're better at it, but it's a shift into a new way of knowing."

Some participants talked about helping train new faculty colleagues. This experience gave them the opportunity to share their viewpoint and ideas on fostering developmental growth in adult students, in a way acting as an advocate for the developmental approach. Jamie reflected, "I'm not sure that we really talked that much about epistemological development or transformative learning. It was really trying to get the faculty, more than anything else, to understand the developmental processes for adult students."

Summary: The Significance of Dialogue and Engaging Individual Students

Eleven distance higher education instructors familiar with the theories of epistemological development and transformative learning were recruited to participate in this basic qualitative study. Participants had between fourteen and forty years of experience instructing in distance higher education, with 10 participants being female and one male. Five participants lived in New England, two participants lived in mid-Atlantic states, two participants lived in Southern states, one participant lived in the Midwest, and one participant lived on the West coast. Although participants came from varied content areas, they all seemed to hold a desire to help undergraduate distance higher education students move beyond content learned, to a new level of thinking and way of perceiving the world.

In summarizing the responses to the interview questions, the most consistent and resonating answers were those concerning extensive dialogue and the need to personalize to the individual adult undergraduate student. All interviewees referred to importance of the lengthy questioning and feedback discussions held with students, whether this was

through a written medium such as letters or track changes or spoken via technology or in person at a residency or retreat. This was clear in Jamie's remark on her lengthy letter exchanges with students, "That's where I really did the teaching in terms of developing their own voice and epistemology and thinking about transformational learning." All participants also mentioned the benefit of starting where the student is to make the academic experiences applicable to the individual's life. This allowed for meeting students where they are, as Patty mentioned, "I would call on what I assumed, and then learned, about their life experience to kind of draw them in and help them feel even more committed to their studies."

Interviewees also described the importance of having a respectful and personal relationship with their adult undergraduate distance higher education students. Not all participants used the term respect, but they all described it to some degree. Seeing adult undergraduate students as adult peers allowed the participants to show their respect for their adult students and consequently, they were able to have greater influence on the students as they guided them in their growth. Recognizing the sacrifice and commitment of the students was valuable in developing this relationship and "mutual respect" as Lisa referred to it.

Participants believed that the process of developmental growth was best fostered within a supportive and challenging environment. Instructors needed to be there for their adult undergraduate students at times that were difficult, but also needed to create challenge for students that were not progressing. Barb said, "Deep learning facilitates those changes. It is not comfortable. It is not easy. Very few people like transformational

learning." She went on to describe the excitement that could come after supporting a student through their disorienting challenge, "You never know as a teacher what is going to be that thing that allows a person to change the trajectory and be transformed and become a more curious person about the world."

Many participants mentioned including time for reflection in their interactions with adult undergraduate students. Susan commented, "You're trying to encourage some reflective thinking in there. Asking questions, giving them ideas, but not doing the whole idea. Just getting a seed started so to speak." Those that did mention reflection felt that it was crucial to the entire process of transformation. Also, of importance was the instructor modeling how to reflect for the students to observe and better understand their own reflection process.

Some participants included their goal of providing adult undergraduate students access to multiple perspectives, whether that was by having them work with other instructors or by collaborating with other students. The goal of this is for students to recognize that their viewpoint is not the only viewpoint, and for them to hear other voices besides their own. Dawn commented, "The learning community is an extremely important part of transformative learning. You tend to learn more from the peer that is just beyond you than even from the instructor that may seem too high away from your thinking."

Although most elements of participants' responses concerned their interactions with their adult undergraduate students, some participants mentioned additional aspects of their own preparation including being lifelong learners, finding likeminded colleagues,

being continually excited by their students' progress, and passing along learnings as they helped to encourage other faculty members to understand the developmental processes of adult students.

Chapter 5 comprises a reiteration of the purpose and nature of the study and a summary and interpretation of key findings, including a comparison of the findings to the body of research that I reviewed for this study. Chapter 5 also contains recommendations for further studies and the social change implications of the findings of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions, experiences, and intentional practices of distance higher education instructors in facilitating and observing epistemological development and transformative learning within distance higher education adult undergraduate students. By clarifying educational practices that can lead to outcomes like enhanced epistemological development and skills, such as critical reflection, I aim to foster a sense of agency and abilities to construct and reframe approaches to positive social change in individual adult learners as well as society.

I interviewed 11 distance higher education instructors ranging in experience between 12 and 40 years. The participants' institutional settings included fully distance organizations as well as hybrid schools, which required face-to-face, short-term residency experiences. The participants were asked a series of questions intended to explore in their own words their observations of the deeper learning experienced by their adult undergraduate distance higher education students, their intentional practices for fostering epistemological development and transformative learning in their adult undergraduate students, and their perceptions of best practices for fostering this deeper learning in their adult undergraduate students. They were also asked to pinpoint the most important thing a distance higher education instructor can do to foster epistemological development and transformative learning and to describe the challenges or the most difficult part of fostering this kind of deeper growth in their adult undergraduate students. Participants'

descriptions of their adult undergraduate students' experiences and growth often had

similar themes, though their words used to convey their observations varied.

In regard to my first research question, how distance higher education instructors

familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories describe

the learning they have witnessed in their adult undergraduate students, participants shared

many instances and stories of transformed students. Many of these stories are included in

Chapter 4. They described students' transformations through physical evidences such as

weight loss, through emotional means such as becoming more independent in a marriage,

through expansions of a comfort zone such as becoming an adventurous eater, and

generally through a deeper understanding of themselves as a student, a knower, and an

individual in the world. Participants described students has having grown in many ways,

but Jamie summed this up by saying that she saw the whole process as very

transformative in terms of students developing their "own voice."

In responding to my second research question, what do these instructors perceive

as best practices for intentionally supporting epistemological development and

transformative learning in their students, participants provided responses from which I

identified seven themes: extensive dialogue, meeting students where they are,

relationships, supportive and challenging environment, making room for reflection,

access to multiple perspectives, and the continued growth of the instructor.

Every interviewee mentioned the back and forth communication between

instructor and adult undergraduate student to some degree, from the most common

sentiment of extensive dialogue being required to support deeper learning to the less

common feeling that it was just important to let the adult student know they were there for them and offer multiple modalities of communication. Participants found exchanges between instructor and adult undergraduate distance student essential for guiding adult students to question and discover new ways of seeing the world and themselves.

All participants engaged in a practice of meeting adult undergraduate students where they are, with most participants mentioning how important it is to discover adult students' interests and life situations to better reach them through the topics and focus of the dialogue. Interviewees also referred to the importance they placed on having respectful, peer-type relationships with their adult undergraduate students. Recognizing that adult students and instructors had complex lives was at the base of developing these relationships.

Most participants also discussed the idea of providing adult undergraduate students with a supportive yet challenging environment. Many talked about encouraging adult students through verbal or written feedback and pushing students when it felt right. Helping adult undergraduate students to see where their work or their thinking needed more emphasis seemed to be important. All participants agreed that providing this type of environment, including the extensive dialogue, and meeting adult undergraduate students where they are, can take a lot of time whether it is in a synchronous conversation or asynchronous methods.

Further, every participant considered it important to encourage and support adult undergraduate students' use of reflection to connect the dots, to form understanding, and to look back on their journey. Reflection allows adult undergraduate students to change

and to recognize their changes. Many participants commented on the importance of reflection in the transformation process. A few interviewees mentioned modeling reflection for their adult students as a part of their efforts to help students reflect themselves. Many participants stressed the importance of exposing adult undergraduate students to multiple perspectives, and supporting them to reflect on the differences and similarities of their own viewpoints with those of others, challenging them to recognize that their perspective on things was not the one and only way to view the world. In addition, many participants mentioned ways that they keep themselves sharpened as an instrument for change working with their adult students. Many participants shared that they consider themselves as lifelong learners, actively participating as adult students in distance courses of their own. A couple of participants described the value of training other instructors, and some found it important to have the support of likeminded colleagues.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this portion of Chapter 5, I interpret the themes that I identified and illustrated in Chapter 4 in light of the conceptual framework for this study and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. For this study, I brought together sets of constructivist theory that I have found compelling in my own work as an online educator: intellectual and epistemological development theory and transformative learning theory. Epistemological and intellectual development theory addresses ways of knowing, including various approaches to the stages, or levels, of development. Transformative learning theory involves the changes that individuals experience as a result of critical self-reflection in

the face of experience that runs counter to their assumptions or beliefs. Transformative learning theories largely focus on the process of constructivist change, whereas developmental theories are concerned with the broader structural changes that occur as the result of these processes.

Many developmental theories interpret epistemological development as advancement through a sequence of phases or levels of understanding (Muis et al., 2018). Generally, theorists have found that youth, including children, experience reality as pure knowledge, not recognizing a difference between the two. The next phase is some form of absolutism (Kuhn, 1991), where individuals decide knowledge is either right or wrong, and authorities know the difference. A multiplist viewpoint follows, with individuals recognizing the validity of conflicting ideas and crediting all opinions equally (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). The final general stage of this developmental process is an evaluatist phase where the value of knowledge is ambiguous, and any claims need evaluating (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997).

Transformative learning theory reflects a constructivist approach to learning (Kroth & Cranton, 2014; Taylor, 2017). Constructivism maintains that individuals create, or construct, meaning from their life experiences, with difference individuals seeing and interpreting the same occurrence in multiple ways (Belenky et al., 1997; Kroth & Cranton, 2014). These individual lenses affect how people understand and assign meaning to their learning experiences as well. The various views on transformative learning encompass this phenomenon, with various theorists interpreting the theorem in their own way based on their understanding of the world (Ludwig, 2017). The various

approaches to transformative learning theory assist in understanding the richness and complexity of the transformative phenomenon; however, recognizing the interconnectivity and overlapping nature of these perspectives is important (Stuckey et al., 2014). Educators in distance higher education work through one or more of the approaches to transformative learning with students at any one time (Cranton, 2016).

Extensive Dialogue

Extensive dialogue appeared as a theme throughout the participants' responses as they spoke of lengthy back and forth conversations happening in person, via phone or video conference, or in writing via letters, e-mail, or track changes on documents. The technique of critical reflection and inquiry through dialogue is a pedagogical technique found in the student-centered, or learner-centered, teaching approach (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015; Weimer, 2012). This type of student experience, along with thoughtful questioning by the instructor, has been found to promote transformative learning (Cranton, 2016). Every interviewee referred to the importance of moving beyond lecture-centric methods of teaching towards student-centered methods, which produces deep and lasting change within adult undergraduate students (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015).

Participants claimed that through dialogue they were able to push their adult undergraduate students' thoughts and ideas forward in that students had to decide for themselves where the answers lay and what steps to take next, though the dialogue supported them in doing so through questions and reflective responses. They indicated that these interactions helped support adult undergraduate students in their epistemological development along the path from an absolutist level of knowing where

students believed the instructor was the expert and held the right answer, to a multiplist approach, which is found through exposure to conflicting viewpoints and a recognition that all views are merely opinions, and on to the evaluatist level of knowing where students come to recognize and value expertise knowledge. This level of knower uses argument and dialogue to influence the evaluation of ideas in other knowers' viewpoints (Kuhn, 1991).

Many participants shared that they would gently guide the dialogue, but often use the adult undergraduate distance higher education students' own interests and experiences to encourage new understandings instead of merely to convey content. They would encourage adult undergraduate students to reflect on their own writing and answering of questions, rather than simply be given answers. This is similar to Stuckey et al.'s (2014) proposal that instructors can promote social change through transformative learning by using an emancipatory approach to teaching that fosters transformative thoughts and by applying a pedagogy involving the identification of problems and solutions through dialogue.

Though not all participants alluded to the importance of written dialogue, a couple of participants mentioned the value they held for written discussion over spoken or recorded. In online education, written communication remains accessible for long periods of time when compared to a classroom discussion or even a synchronous distance experience (Bradshaw, 2009; Cranton, 2010). For example, discussion posts remain available anytime a student would like to read them again, which allows for more time to reflect and process the information (Henderson, 2010). Some participants mentioned that

they required extensive dialogue to play out in writing for precisely this reason, and for the reason that conversations may take place over days or weeks rather than over minutes, creating the potential for deeper thoughts and responses.

Meeting Students Where They Are

I found this theme repeated in the responses of each participant as they took the effort to get to know each adult undergraduate student and their individual situation. The process of promoting transformative learning takes skill, forethought, and authentic effort (Illeris, 2015). Educators should not label themselves as transformative educators without deep personal reflection and sincerity (Taylor, 2006). Focusing on meeting adult learners where they are at and moving students forward in their development was intentional on the part of these instructors. They did not assume that all adult undergraduate students in one course were starting at the same point and had the same needs and interests. Knowing the students allowed participants to be aware of situations that may cause catalyzing events for the students, providing an opportunity for the instructor to facilitate a transformative experience (Cranton, 2016; Provident et al., 2015).

Meeting adult students where they are is an important method for providing this safe environment (see Provident et al., 2015). As participants shared ways of meeting adult students where they are, they touched on emotional situations students experienced and how they were able to help students focus their studies and gain clarity and understanding. Most participants also encouraged students to take control of their studies by focusing on topics that were significant to them personally. Having a say in class procedures and focus is energizing to students and transformative learning can occur

(Weimer, 2012). Taking time to encourage students to identify and frame their own goals and questions can lead to an atmosphere of learning, welcoming questions, and student-centered learning applicable to student interests (Spronken-Smith et al., 2015).

Relationships

Every participant described experiences that involved some level of focus on relationships with adult undergraduate distance higher education students. Although not every participant used the words "relationship" or "respect" in their responses, most participants made it clear that relationships and respect were important for fostering growth and learning in their adult undergraduate students. Effective educators provide a safe environment, build trust, and guide and support adult learners in ways that encourage them to analyze their beliefs (Hoskins, 2013; Provident et al., 2015). Distance education can produce a safe environment, along with educator guidance and support, and relationships built on trust (Henderson, 2010; Provident et al., 2015). The relationship between instructor and student is a collegial one, or a partnership, rather than authority and learner (Belenky et al., 1997). Being colleagues in the learning process allows adult students to trust themselves and come to know themselves as they make meaning of the world, instead of setting the instructor up as the only knower (Clinchy, 1989). One participant, Barb, illustrated this in her story about the student that moved from relying on the instructor to find "safe" places to eat during study abroad to becoming an adventurous eater and making her own decisions of where and what to eat when abroad.

Nurturing equality is also important in instructor-student relationships (Stuckey et al., 2014). A few participants echoed this in referring to an equal power structure,

mentioning that they thought of adult undergraduate students as peers or experts in their own right. Another element of a respectful relationship mentioned by participants is fostering trust. Participants felt that they needed to be authentic and personable with adult undergraduate students to gain their trust and establish a positive relationship. Provident et al. (2015) found that relationships built on trust between instructor and student created a safe environment followed up by instructor guidance and support (Henderson, 2010; Hoskins, 2013). Joan, an interviewee, explained that she would create trusting relationships by keeping a consistent tone in written feedback and providing positive support verbally when communicating with students.

Supportive and Challenging Environment

Adult educators desire to help change the lives of their adult students (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). Participants reflected this desire as they described providing students with encouragement and positive interactions, yet also giving important feedback on student work and student progress. Some participants indicated the need to push students into uncomfortable situations to help them see deeper growth, similar to the disorienting dilemma described by Mezirow (1991) that creates space for new learning and new perspectives. Barb described this in explaining how one of her students changed significantly through study abroad experiences. However, the overall sense from interviewees reflected more of an assimilative or additive learning that is in contrast with the significant changes described by Mezirow. This is more in line with Illeris's (2017) description of a Piagetian definition of learning. Tim described this type of change in his student that viewed himself through different eyes by the end of a course of study.

Participants also described the need to support students throughout these experiences, providing personable relationships with instructors and devising methods of connecting students with each other whether though study groups or discussion boards, similar to Belenky et al.'s (1997) account of women creating understanding and support within communities of valued relationships. A supportive and challenging environment appeared to nurture equality in teacher-student relationships, noted as significant by Stucky, Taylor, and Cranton (2014), as participants described respectful relationships with students, not an imbalance of power between instructor and student.

Making Room for Reflection

An individual's experience, critical reflection, and discourse are at the heart of transformative learning (Taylor, 2009, 2017; Walters et al., 2017). Mezirow (1991) identified critical reflection as one of the four main phases of transformative learning. Every interviewee referred to their attempts to intentionally make space for adult undergraduate students' critical self-reflection. As instructors encourage self-reflection, they are able to enhance transformative opportunities (Cranton, 2016). Many participants shared that they would ask questions inviting reflection but tried not to be too leading in the questions they offered. A couple of participants also mentioned that they encouraged reflection in writing as it produced more thoughtful and considered responses.

One benefit of adult undergraduate students' increased reflection skills is a sense of agency and the ability to change. Some participants spoke of assignments for adult students to reflect on their entire course, recognizing how they had changed and what they had learned. Encouraging and actively supporting adult students' critical reflection

through coursework can help them process emotions and propel them into a new mindset and worldview (Liu, 2015). Cranton (2016) proposed that educators take advantage of catalyzing events when adult learners have the opportunity to change their perceptions, but that they not leave the possibility of change to chance, but rather that they should encourage students to self-reflect, leading to potential increased self-awareness and growth.

One participant mentioned the power of having adult undergraduate distance higher education students reflect on a study-abroad experience. Walters, Charles, and Bingham (2017) found that critical reflection caused transformative learning in these shorter periods of time when students were in study abroad settings, potentially resulting from increased opportunities for disorientation, coupled with encouragement by educators for self-reflection and journal writing. A couple of interviewees mentioned their goal to model self-reflection for their adult undergraduate students. This aligned with Cranton's (2010) identification of a valuable strategy for distance educators, that of modeling critical self-reflection and critical reflection on the educators' own beliefs explicitly exploring subsequent thought processes.

Access to Multiple Perspectives

Most participants spoke of facilitating exposure to multiple perspectives among their adult undergraduate students. I provided illustrations of this theme in Chapter 4. When students gain access to multiple perspectives, these can influence a student's framework for making meaning of the world (Mezirow, 1981). Belenky et al. (1997) cited connected knowing as a recognition of the value of multiple voices. This phase

comes after knowers have experienced finding their own voice and learning to evaluate

knowledge from multiple sources, as well as recognizing the relevance of context. A

transformative learning process begins when individuals encounter worldviews different

than their own, ones that are at odds with their current beliefs. Many participants shared

that they made efforts to give adult undergraduate students opportunities to hear other

voices and perspectives through discussions with the instructor, having adult students

work with another instructor, encouraging informal peer interactions, or requiring formal

peer interactions such as in discussion posts or group assignments. When experiencing

multiple perspectives, students have the chance to reflect on and analyze the new

perspective, potentially adapting a new worldview of their own, or to reject the new

perspective and ignore the experiences (Christie et al., 2015). When adult learners choose

to reflect on and examine previously held beliefs, the potential for transformative

learning exists. Simply reflecting on and analyzing the new or different perspective is not

the growth, but transformative learning has occurred when both a shift in perspective and

an observable change in behavior results from the change in viewpoint (Cranton, 2010).

Continued Growth of the Instructor

Some participants referred to elements of their instructor role that were not

directly related to instruction, such as their engagement in ongoing training and education

and continued self-reflection and growth, as well as learning from and drawing from the

support of colleagues, and mentoring and training other instructors. Parra, Gutierrez, and

Aldana (2015) noted that distance education can support an important element of

transformative learning, the continued growth of educators. Educators must become

aware of their own personal perspectives and perpetually work to continue their growth within the academic setting (Cranton, 2016; Parra et al., 2015). Many participants indicated that they had continued their own education or connected with like-minded colleagues to continue the discussion of developmental education.

Cranton (2010) identified a valuable strategy for distance educators, that of modeling critical self-reflection and critical reflection on the educators' own beliefs explicitly exploring subsequent thought processes. A few participants explained that they would try to model reflection by sharing their own progress or by explaining their understanding of the adult student's work to help the student better grasp the critical reflection process. It also allowed them to encourage adult undergraduate students' honest reflection as they saw and heard the process instructors went through and came to accept that it was okay to see that instructors did not know everything. One interviewee mentioned that it was important for instructors to share only appropriate aspects of themselves and to create boundaries as they shared their experiences. These findings did not differ from what is in the literature.

Limitations of the Study

Applicability of my findings to other settings is limited by the small sample and the lack of diversity, such as gender, locale, and experience level, among the 11 participants in my study. I interviewed distance higher education instructors who were familiar with intellectual and epistemological development theories as well as transformative learning theory, with a preponderance of participants from the northeast United States and only one participant being male. Also, the study was based on

perceptions of the effects of instructors' own actions, with no examination of short or long-term effects of these adult undergraduate student experiences being conducted. The conceptual framework of the study included the theory of connected knowing (Belenky et al., 1997), and whereas a number of participants referred to this theory and Belenky et al.'s work, none of the participants mentioned treating male and female adult students differently, and the theory of connected knowing was based on work with females.

Instructors willingly participated in the interviews and provided distinct perspectives about their efforts to support intellectual and epistemological development, as well as transformative learning, within their adult undergraduate distance higher education students. All participants appeared to appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences related to supporting their adult students' development.

Recommendations

My recommendations for future research include enlarging the participant pool to include more diversity, namely gender, experience level, and locale. A more inclusive group of participants could include instructors with equal representation from genders, from across the country, as well as distance higher education instructors with less experience. A future study might also include a focus group of instructors from institutions across the country, perhaps through the use of a medium such as Zoom or as a session at a national conference.

Repeated interviews of the same distance higher education instructor participants focused on real-time experiences with current adult undergraduate distance higher education students would also add depth to the data. Being in a longer-term study with

repeated contact would have the potential of increasing participants' observations and provide greater detail in the interviews as the experiences would be fresher in their minds. Reviewing adult undergraduate distance higher education students' work over time might also shed light on the effects of the instructors' efforts towards developmental growth of the adult undergraduate students. The use of another type of qualitative study could provide greater understanding, such as a case study following one distance higher education instructor's attempts at fostering epistemological development in one group of students over a certain period of time and the resulting changes in the students.

Implications for Social Change

As distance higher education continues to expand and concentrates in online formats, this research into epistemological development and transformative learning with adult learners in distance higher education holds potential to support distance higher education instructors in furthering their practices. With the advent of COVID-19, the potential for impact from this study is increased by the continued effects of the pandemic on higher education (Magda, Capranos, & Aslanian, 2020). Clarification of distance higher education instructors' intentional practices for facilitating and supporting intellectual and epistemological growth, as well as transformative learning, in their adult undergraduate students may provide new or improved avenues for understanding and adopting supportive practices directly improving the outcomes of adult learners and their contributions to society.

As more distance higher education instructors have access to this information and implement best practices, the results of increased adult undergraduate student

developmental growth may include improved critical reflection skills, a greater sense of agency and the ability to change or create change. As individuals experience deeper understanding through transformative learning and epistemological development, positive social change may result, such as greater equality and the breaking of prejudicial barriers. The trickledown effect from these changes can flow from adult undergraduate distance higher education students to families and communities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions, experiences, and practices of distance higher education instructors who are familiar with epistemological development and transformative learning theories, in facilitating and observing epistemological development and transformative learning within adult undergraduate distance higher education students. For this study, I interviewed 11 distance higher education instructors, and though these educators' efforts working with adult undergraduate distance higher education students were individual, they shared experiences and observations that allowed me to identify common themes, including the importance of extensive dialogue between instructor and student, the benefits of meeting students where they are, the value of having relationships with students, the need to create a supportive and challenging learning environment, the importance of making room for reflection, the value of providing access to multiple perspectives, and the need as educators to keep themselves growing and learning. Additional research needs to be conducted with a larger and more diverse participant pool, with a possible longitudinal aspect. Higher education institutions should consider providing space and resources for

distance higher education instructors to foster and encourage the deeper growth and development of adult undergraduate students. If American adult undergraduate students can meet their academic goals through distance higher education, their experiences in school and their future worldview can be broadened and improved as institutions support their epistemological development and transformative learning. Ultimately, this has the possibility of creating a better future not only for these adult undergraduate distance higher education students and their families, but for their communities and beyond.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Interviewee (Name and titles):

Interviewer: Sydney M. Rombola

<u>Introduction Protocol</u>:

I appreciate you spending time with me today. As you saw in my consent form, you were

recommended as an educator in distance higher education that has experience with

epistemological development and transformative learning theories. I would like to discuss

your experiences with you to obtain data for my study on fostering epistemological

development and transformative learning in distance higher education adult

undergraduate students. I will record our session as well as make some notes as we talk.

After our conversation, I will transcribe our discussion and share a copy of the

transcription with you within a week to ensure that I have captured your information

accurately. Please know that I will not include your name, or any student's name that you

may mention, in my study to guard your privacy. This interview will take approximately

60 minutes, but no longer than 90 minutes. Are you comfortable with the parameters of

this interview as I have outlined it to you? Do you have any questions before we start? If

not, let us begin.

Interview Questions

Question 1: Tell me about your background in distance higher education.

Question 2: What is your background in epistemological development and

transformative learning?

Question 3: Tell me about a time that you experienced epistemological development or transformative learning.

      Probing Question: What did that experience mean to you?

Question 4: Tell me about one or more of your distance higher education adult undergraduate students that experienced epistemological development or transformative learning.

      Probing Question: What did that experience mean to your student(s)?

Question 5: What is your experience working to support epistemological development or transformative learning in distance higher education?

Question 6: What practices have you used in attempts to promote epistemological development or transformative learning in distance higher education?

Question 7: What is the most important thing a distance higher education instructor can do to foster epistemological development or transformative learning?

Question 8: What is the most difficult part of fostering epistemological development or transformative learning in a distance higher education setting?

Question 9: How have you perceived your students' epistemological development and transformative learning experiences as you have mentored them?

Question 10: Is there anything else you would like to tell me before we finish the interview?

Question 11: Who would you recommend I interview next in conjunction with this topic?