

SIGNIFICANT LEARNING OF PEER-MENTORS WITHIN A LEADERSHIP LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITY:

A Basic Qualitative Study

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the learning experienced by second-year undergraduate students serving as peer mentors to first-year students within a leadership-themed living-learning community. A basic qualitative approach was used, with data collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with participants at the beginning and end of their year-term as peer mentors. The interview transcripts were coded using Fink's (2003) taxonomy of significant learning, where lasting change is a consequence of the learning. Five of the six categories of significant learning were evident, suggesting that the experience of being a peer mentor within a leadership-themed living-learning community creates lasting change within the peer mentors. Additionally, this study reinforces Fink's (2003) claim of the interactive rather than hierarchical nature of learning.

Introduction & Background

Two of the goals of post-secondary education are to develop critical thinkers (Jessop & Adams, 2016; Wendt & Ase, 2015), and to develop the next generation of leaders who have the skills necessary to undertake and ultimately solve the increasingly complex and interdisciplinary problems society faces (Owen, 2015b). To achieve these goals, educators must use pedagogies that challenge students to deepen their thinking, and students must accept the challenge to take increased ownership of their learning and education. Likewise, institutions of higher education must provide opportunities where students' deeper thinking and learning is expected and clearly articulated rather than the mere memorization and subsequent regurgitation of facts (Fink, 2003).

An important aspect of deeper thinking and learning

is the ability to connect knowledge across disciplines and life experiences (Huber, Hutchings, & Gale, 2005; Owen, 2015b; Richards-Schuster, Ruffolo, Nicoll, Distelrath, & Galura, 2014). Making connections between learning from different domains is referred to as integrative learning and includes four areas: "(a) values and beliefs, (b) academic and personal interests, (c) knowledge and skills, and (d) learning experiences" (Richards-Schuster, et al., 2014, p.133). Huber and Hutchings (2004) reported that developing the capacity to integrate knowledge, or integrative learning, is important "because it builds habits of mind that prepare students to make informed judgements in the conduct of personal, professional, and civic life" (p. 1). Yet, the ability to be an integrative learner cannot be learned effectively through a single experience. Rather, students need multiple opportunities or venues in which to practice integrating the knowledge they are learning, if they are to be successful (Huber &

Hutchings, 2004).

Finding effective ways to promote integrative learning and deep thinking is increasingly important. As disciplines become less constrained by defined boundaries and interdisciplinary programs and initiatives increase on college campuses (Huber, Hutchings, Gale, Miller & Breen, 2007; Klein, 2005), the need for deep thinkers capable of integrative learning grows. Moreover, the expanding fluidity of the workplace ecosystem points to the need for a flexible workforce ready and able to synthesize and integrate information with ease (Chan et al., 2012). Yet, helping students develop the capacity to be deep thinkers and integrative learners cannot be one person's job, or even the job of one campus department. Instead, educators need to work together to create and maintain integrative learning environments to help students "develop a more holistic view of their world and to better understand the way they each can navigate in it" (Carmichael & LaPierre, 2014, p. 55).

The academically-themed living-learning community (LLC) is an example of a collaborative, high-impact practice to create an engaging environment for integrative or connected learning (Huber & Hutchings, 2004; Inkelas et al., 2006; Rocconi, 2011). Building upon the curriculum-focused learning community concept, the LLC model provides additional opportunities for students to connect their academic pursuits with various other aspects of their college experience, as participants live near and with others with whom they attend classes (Dunn & Dean, 2013; Workman, 2015). Similarly, the common living experience associated with the LLC provides opportunities for increased peer interaction and coordinated learning activities (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).

Typically, within a LLC there are older students who have previously participated in the program, who then return to serve as peer-mentors or leaders (Priest & de Campos Paula, 2016; Rieske & Benjamin, 2015).

Students who choose to return as peer mentors with a LLC have a connection or commitment to the LLC and therefore want to fulfill the purpose of a peer mentor, which is to help subsequent students integrate learning in and outside the classroom (Priest & Clegorne, 2015). Research has also shown that this integrative learning is more likely to happen when students are passionate about learning or when a subject area or program ignites their enthusiasm (Huber & Hutchings, 2004).

One such LLC where peer mentors are utilized is the Leadership Living Learning Community (L3C) at Texas A&M University. The L3C is a collaborative endeavor between the Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications department and the Department of Residence Life within the Division of Student Affairs. Grouped in pairs, the peer mentors' main responsibility is to coordinate and lead weekly discussion-based meetings for a small group of program participants called a buddy-huddle. The focus of these meetings is to connect the concepts and topics from the leadership class the L3C participants take to life outside the classroom, all while building leadership knowledge and community through shared experiences.

In an academically-themed living-learning community, like that of the L3C, the particular academic discipline offers the framework for the curricular and co-curricular aspects of the community. Yet each living-learning community has unique, individual characteristics, making comparative analysis between communities, even similar themed communities difficult (Inkelas et al., 2006). As a result, leadership-themed LLCs are the subject of limited research (Dunn, Odom, Moore, & Rotter, 2016). Moreover, the predominant focus of research on living-learning communities has remained on the participants of the programs, typically first-year students, rather than the older students who serve as peer mentors or small group leaders (Cambridge-Williams, Winsler, Kitsantas, & Bernard, 2013; Dunn

et al., 2016; Inkelas et al., 2006; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Jessup-Anger, Dowdy, & Janz, 2012; Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010).

Additionally, the cognitive process or thinking aspect of leadership development has not been the focus of much research. Society today demands leaders who are mentally flexible, adaptable, and able to solve multi-disciplinary problems; therefore, leadership educators must pay attention to the processes and ways our students think about and develop their leadership competencies and capacities (Torrez & Rocco, 2015). Exploring the kinds of learning related to leadership as a discipline, not simply if learning related to leadership occurred, while serving as a peer mentor within a LLC, is a relatively recent line of inquiry. Thus, this study provided an opportunity to expand the literature regarding the types of learning experienced by the peer mentors as a result of their experience as a peer mentor within a leadership-themed LLC.

Theoretical Framework

Historically, when educators want to describe their students' levels of learning, most rely on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy; a hierarchical and cognitive approach to learning, beginning with knowledge and ending with evaluation (Fink, 2003). Bloom's (1956) taxonomy remains quite useful in evaluating and measuring the linear levels of critical thought, but it is not as useful when measuring an individual's learning related to applied skills or competencies such as ethics, leadership, or being adaptable to change. All of these skills are necessary to effectively navigate the current post-industrial economy (Fink, 2003). Thus, Fink (2003) proposed a taxonomy where learning is viewed as an integrated and interdependent process to enhance the evaluation and measurement of learning beyond the cognitive scope of Bloom's taxonomy.

The basis of Fink's taxonomy is that learning is cumulative and involves change in a person. For learning to be significant, Fink proposed two

requirements: first, the change lasts beyond the event that inspired or required the learning, and second, the change is important to the individual or has some specific meaning (Fink, 2003). Fink's (2003) taxonomy is comprised of six categories, or kinds of learning: foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. As learning is an integrated and interdependent process, the six categories are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, growth and development in one learning category can influence growth or development in one or more of the other categories. Fink's (2003) contention was that for true significant learning to occur, evidence of all six learning categories must be present. Each category is discussed below.

Foundational Knowledge. To be successful, learners should begin with the basic and fundamental aspects of the subject or discipline in question. Beginning with the fundamental concepts, theories, models, or perspectives provides a strong foundation on which learners can build as they continue their exploration of the subject matter. Knowledge is achieved when an individual not only understands the concepts, but can recall them accurately at a later date (Owen, 2015a). Fink (2003) labeled this ability to understand and recall the basic perspectives and information of a subject or discipline foundational knowledge. But understanding the concepts and being able to recall the knowledge is not enough; one must also know how to apply what they have learned.

Application. Application learning is defined as knowing what to do with the foundational knowledge one has acquired (Fink, 2003). Fink's (2003) contention is that understanding and the ability to recall information does not directly translate into significant learning. Instead, successful learners know how to use what they have learned, as they have the ability to put theory into practice (Owen, 2015a). Over time, they develop greater competency in what they know, moving from novice to expert. Successful learners also develop the capacity and competency to engage in multiple types of learning. From critical applications, like the ability to analyze or evaluate, to creative releases, like the intent to design or develop

new applications, to practical solutions in the vein of problem-solving and decision-making, Fink (2003) suggested that application learning is vital because, it “allows other kinds of learning to become useful” (p.31).

Integration. Closely tied to application is integration. As individuals apply what they know in new contexts and situations, they find ways to integrate their learning, by making connections between various and potentially disparate aspects of their lives (Fink, 2003). Two popular examples from higher education are interdisciplinary courses or majors, and learning communities. Intentionally bringing together diverse students and faculty in formal learning environments encourages students to think critically and view their foundational knowledge from new and different perspectives. Yet, integration goes beyond the classroom. It also applies to connecting what is learned in the classroom to other aspects of life, be it a job, relationships, or other organizational activities (Fink, 2003).

Human Dimension. As individuals begin to make connections between various aspects of their lives, a new kind of learning takes place. Fink (2003) labeled this learning the human dimension. To know others, one must first know themselves. Therefore, Fink (2003) proposed that human dimension learning starts with learning about self – either the self of today or the self of tomorrow. In this way, human dimension learning is the roadmap to help individuals on their path to self-authorship and control of their destinies. However, human dimension learning also includes learning about others. The successful learner is aware of how they relate to others and the context in which they find themselves (Fink, 2003). As an individual learns more about those around them, they in turn learn more about themselves. The opposite is also true. By learning more about self and how one relates to the world, the individual gains greater insight into the behaviors of others.

Caring. In terms of significant learning, caring centers on developing a deeper concern for, or interest in, a subject or topic area. As one’s caring increases, so

does the esteem placed on that subject. Hence, caring is about finding new interests or becoming more curious about an aspect of one’s lived experience (Fink, 2003). At times, caring is simply getting excited about the learning process. Yet, caring also has a human component to it. From increased attention paid to the impact they want to make to a recognition that new and diverse people or thoughts are enriching to all, caring is more than a desire to learn objective facts. When caring increases, ownership and control for one’s learning and education shifts from the teacher to the learner; thus, the learner puts forth extra effort and goes above and beyond minimum requirements to make the most of the learning environment (Fink, 2003).

Learning How to Learn. If individuals are to take ownership successfully of their own education and learning, they must learn how to learn. Fink (2003) defined learning how to learn as becoming a better student, learning how to ask and answer complex questions, and learning how to be a self-directed learner. While the way to become a better student is specific to the individual, learning how to learn revolves around one’s ability to increase their knowledge base without relying on another to detail the way. Thus, successful students have the skills and ability to make meaning of their experience through critical reflection (Fink, 2003). Successful students are also inspired to seek out and critically reflect on information beyond the material or perspective presented, to determine what additional information they need to know to be effective or successful.

Purpose/Research Questions

With this study, conducted as part of a larger study, the researchers sought to explore and describe the significant learning experienced by the L3C peer mentors throughout the year they spent in the role of a peer mentor. The following research question guided the development and execution of this research study:

1. What evidence of significant learning was shown by the L3C peer mentors?

Methods

For this qualitative study, a descriptive and interpretive research design was used that focused on the importance of understanding how those who are involved in a particular phenomenon place meaning in and gain meaning from their experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, a basic qualitative approach was utilized focused around the personal learning of the peer mentors within the context of the L3C. The participants shared what they learned through their experience of being a peer mentor within the L3C via individual semi-structured interviews conducted near the beginning and end of their time as peer mentors. The interview questions were piloted with a previous group of L3C peer mentors not included in this study to ensure the questions were related to the research question being explored. The first set of interviews occurred approximately ten weeks into their official term as a peer mentor (interview A), and the second set of interviews occurred within the last four weeks of their term as a peer mentor (interview B).

Participants. In an effort to gather maximum variation in the data, the fourteen 2016-2017 L3C peer mentors were invited to participate in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following approval of the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University, one of the co-directors of the L3C program granted the researchers access to the peer mentors by providing their university email addresses. Each of the peer mentors were invited three times via email to participate. Ten of the fourteen students responded to the invitations, and five chose to participate in the study. Of the participants, four self-identified as female and one self-identified as male. Participant's voices were expressed through the use of representative quotes, which provided potential for transferability of the study.

Data Collection. Data were collected at two separate points in time during the peer mentor's tenure within the L3C. The first set of interviews occurred within the first ten weeks of the fall semester, while the second set of interviews occurred within the last four weeks

of the spring semester. Utilizing two data points enabled the researchers to examine how the peer mentors were affected by their experience as a peer mentor within the L3C. The same semi-structured interview protocols were used for both the first and second interview sessions, where a series of broad questions related to their experiences as a peer mentor and what they had learned were explored. An alteration for time, i.e. how do you expect to utilize what you have learned versus how did you utilize what you learned, was the only structural difference in the interview protocol from the initial interview sessions to the latter. An emergent design was utilized within each interview to increase the depth of exploration of the participant's answers. Each interview session lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in a neutral setting, apart from the L3C offices. The interviews were conducted by a researcher familiar with the L3C but not the L3C co-instructors to control for social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985).

Data Analysis. We examined the participants' self-identified learning as it related to their experience as a L3C peer mentor through an interpretive design. As such, content analysis was the appropriate methodological frame (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After gaining participant permission, each interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The responses were then analyzed and coded using Fink's (2003) taxonomy of significant learning as the theoretical frame. Through this open coding process, the researchers were able to dissect each interview into the component parts of the categories of significant learning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research Quality and Trustworthiness. Establishing and preserving trustworthiness is important in qualitative research. An audit trail was maintained to increase dependability. The transcripts were coded Participant #.A for the first interview and Participant #.B for the second interview. All interview questions asked, including follow-up and explanatory questions, were included in the interview transcripts to provide context and connect specific responses to the larger interview. No additional insights were gained by

the conclusion of the fifth interview during the first session, thus, it was determined that data saturation had been reached and no additional peer mentors needed to be recruited to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participant reflections and peer debriefing were also utilized to increase credibility in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within three weeks of each interview, the interviewer emailed each individual participant their interview transcript for their review, feedback, corrections, additions, and/or clarifications. As needed, corrections and edits were made until each participant indicated their agreement with the transcript. After the second set of interviews were complete and once each participant was satisfied with the transcription of their interviews, each interview was analyzed using Fink's (2003) significant learning taxonomy as the sorting frame. Representative quotes from the participants were then catalogued into Fink's (2003) categories of learning. Once the quotes had been sorted, the interviewer debriefed with another researcher familiar with the L3C, leadership education, and qualitative methods, who after review of the sorted data, concurred with all coding and categorization of the data.

Findings

All interview responses were examined through the lens of Fink's (2003) significant learning taxonomy, in order to gain deeper insight into the categories of learning the students experienced during their time as peer mentors with the L3C. Although evidence of five of the six categories was demonstrated, foundational knowledge of leadership learning and application learning were most prevalent. Indications of human dimension learning and caring were moderately prevalent, while integration learning was not well represented in the data. Evidence supporting learning how to learn was not found in the data. Representative quotes from the interviews are the means for discussion for each learning category.

Foundational Knowledge. The central tenant of foundational knowledge as a learning category is an individual's ability to understand and recall the primary ideas and concepts associated with a specific discipline or field of study (Fink, 2003). As all participants were peer mentors in a leadership-themed living-learning community, the major themes they reflected upon were leadership as an academic discipline and the role of a peer mentor within a residential learning community.

Leadership as an Academic Discipline. The majority of the peer mentors mentioned how surprised they were with the breadth and depth of leadership as an academic discipline. One student mentioned, "I was surprised by the amount and variety of leadership theories. I guess I didn't think leadership was that studied. But then you see this class and you see that it's really a very studied thing" (2.B). This perspective was echoed by another student when they commented:

I never knew that [how much thought and effort has gone into studying leadership]. And we still haven't figured it out, but I don't think it is something that ever can be figured out. I think that countless studies can go and try, but things are always changing, people are changing so there's not one answer. (1.B)

Still, another student mentioned how even though they had been part of the L3C the year before, "there was so much I didn't know about leadership" (4.A). This same student commented at the end of their time with the L3C, "I've realized that you don't truly understand leadership until you actually sit down and read about it. Just because you have a position does not make you a leader" (4.B). The feelings of the peer mentors may be best summed up by the thought, "leadership is harder than I expected initially" (2.B).

The Role of Peer Mentor. Many of the peer mentors commented on the challenges they faced as a peer mentor. For some it was finding balance and not focusing

all of their time and energy into building friendships and relationships with the first-year students in the program. This theme was best depicted in the following quote: "I need to be a friend to the freshmen, but I also need to understand that I am their mentor. They need to be able to look at me and come to me, and understand that I do not [favor any student over another]" (4.A). For another peer mentor, the challenge was meeting the varied responsibilities of being a peer mentor, while not giving off the perception that the peer mentors did not care about or were 'better' than the first-year students. "One thing I really hate about [being a peer mentor] is that it seems elitist in some respects" (3.B). However, one student provided the positive aspects of being a peer mentor when they commented, "helping them [first-year students] find their way through their freshman year and to start developing them into people who could be peer mentors, that's really cool" (2.B).

Application. Application learning is the ability to put into practice the foundational knowledge one has gained (Fink, 2003). For the peer mentors, the themes reported as foundational knowledge learning resurfaced as the themes within the application category. In terms of leadership theories, one student responded, "I was surprised by how applicable [leadership theories are], which sounds so ridiculous. I think I was more surprised by how many people don't actually use these things [leadership theories] that are so simple and easy to implement" (4.B). But just because some leadership theories appear to be easy to implement, does not mean there will be recognition of the theory while it is being applied. One peer mentor commented:

I feel like we do [apply what we learned in class into our buddy-huddles] but we don't recognize that we do at the time, because if we know it, subconsciously we're going

to apply it. But we're not going to have the big thought, of oh, I just used French and Raven's powerbase idea to apply to how I'm going to do whatever. (3.A)

Likewise, applying the principles of effective mentoring did not come as easily as first thought. One peer mentor reported, "I think facilitating conversation was really something that completely caught me off guard. You think that if you're in a leadership organization, you have something to say and you're not afraid to say it" (1.B). This sense that being a mentor is not as easy as it may appear was shown in the following quote.

[I'm still] learning how to sit back and watch the situation unfold instead of running head-first. I'm learning to step back as a leader and let them [the freshmen] handle the situation, and you guide them through or give advice if they need it, but you're not here to baby them, you're here to mentor them. (4.A)

Human Dimension. Gaining a better understanding of self and others are the two main aspects of human dimension learning (Fink, 2003). Overwhelmingly, the peer mentors mentioned how their experience helped them learn more about their personal leadership styles and philosophies, as well as who they are as individuals, both for good and ill. One related sub-theme that emerged was that leadership is highly contextual, and so, leaders must be able to shift to meet the needs of their followers. As one student commented, "[I've realized] that I'm a different leader in the L3C than I am in my other student organizations" (1.A). A second reflected that,

I'm not a very confident person so sometimes I'm hesitant to say certain things or I say the wrong things because I wasn't quite sure. But since I am in a leadership position, I want to be there for them [the student participants], so I become more confident in order to give them what they need as a leader. (3.A)

But the understanding of self was not only limited to how the peer mentors performed as leaders. One student commented that “[being a peer mentor] has reinforced the change I saw in myself [last year as a freshman]” (4.B). A different student reflected that through working with the program participants, “I realized I was more prejudiced than I had originally perceived me to be” (5.A).

Also, the peer mentors reported that this experience had helped them gain insight and understanding into different life experiences other than their own. One commented,

Being in a mentor position and talking to my freshmen each week has definitely opened my eyes to experiences I would never consider happening to me, but this is happening to them and this is real and actually something people have to deal with. (1.B)

A second peer mentor’s comment demonstrated the reciprocal nature of human dimension learning. “I think allowing me to define what I want to do with leadership in the future and my own personal standard for what leadership is has certainly helped me impart that with the freshmen” (2.A).

Caring. Caring is focused on developing new interests or becoming more curious about a subject, topic area, or people (Fink, 2003). Thus, where the increased time and effort is invested indicates the subjects, topic areas, or people held in highest value. Being a peer mentor takes time and effort. One peer mentor commented that the desire to lead was already there, but investing the time to be part of the L3C caused that desire to grow.

I think I would have had the desire to lead without the L3C, but not as much. I think it has definitely heightened that desire and made it more prevalent, but I think a lot of that has to do with all of the different styles and ways to lead. I think that’s really interesting and being able to try different styles on different groups, that’s what has really increased my interest in leadership

positions. (1.B)

Although this peer mentor’s desire to lead was well documented, not all peer mentors held the same commitment level to the L3C, which was concerning to several students. One peer mentor commented that they were frustrated with “[others’ lack of commitment/passion for the organization], so that’s my problem and I need to get over [it]; that they don’t view the organization the same way I do” (3.A). A second peer mentor echoed this theme when they commented, “I don’t lead just to add it to my resume. I lead because I feel like there’s a purpose. And it’s not to my advantage, it’s a mutualistic thing” (5.A). A third peer mentor tried to find balance to being involved on campus and fulfilling their duties as a peer mentor. They commented, “I think it [mentors who are super involved on campus] is a little bit of both [enhances L3C for the freshman as well as damages it]. It can be enhancing, but at some point, you’re involved in too many organizations” (2.B). Care of others was also reported by the peer mentors when one mentioned, “I think I’ve become more tolerant as an individual of others’ ideas that I thought were harmful at the beginning” (2.B).

Integration. Integration is taking knowledge application one step further by finding connections between different disciplines or seemingly divergent aspects of one’s life (Fink, 2003). Since the peer mentors are sophomores in college, many comparisons were made to high school and their first year of college. Some comparisons dealt with the differences between leadership and management. “I definitely think high school leadership positions were definitely more management and this opportunity to be a peer mentor is definitely more leadership” (1.A). While other comparisons focused on how the context of the L3C remained the same, a new role within that context provided opportunities to view things differently. “I thought freshman year [being a servant leader] made me weak, because I was very much trying to help other people or do things for other people, that that made me weak in leadership. [Now, I know differently]” (4.B). Yet, as the students reflected on their experience as a peer mentor within

a living-learning community, one student summed it up best when they mentioned, “life experiences pretty much beat anything in the classroom” (4.A).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research led to a deeper understanding of the peer mentor experience within a leadership-themed LLC and provided insight into the kinds of learning the peer mentors experienced through their time as a peer mentor in the L3C. Findings of this study showed the peer mentors were changed as a result of their peer mentor experience, a requirement of significant learning according to Fink (2003). Specifically, the peer mentors showed learning within five of Fink’s (2003) six categories of learning included in this taxonomy. However, examining how many students mentioned all six learning categories was beyond the scope of this study.

Fink (2003) suggested that significant learning comes with lasting change and created his taxonomy as interactive rather than hierarchical to reinforce the cumulative and non-linear aspects of learning. Findings of this study support such an assertion as the foundational knowledge and application categories were the most prevalent categories identified and were often described in relation to each other. The fact that evidence of the integration, human dimension, and caring categories of learning were also evident is encouraging as it indicated the peer mentors were able to move beyond simply acquiring foundational knowledge, in this case foundational knowledge of leadership as an academic discipline, during their time as peer mentors. This suggests that the peer mentor experience served as a means for developing significant learning for the peer mentors. It also suggests that the peer mentor experience could be categorized as an integrative learning environment, where deeper thinking is supported and encouraged.

Fink (2003) asserted, “when a course or learning experience is able to promote all six kinds of

learning, one has had a learning experience that can truly be deemed significant” (p. 32). One of Fink’s (2003) categories of significant learning, learning how to learn, was not readily apparent in the experiences of the participants in this study. It is interesting to note that the peer mentors were able to view leadership as a concept worth learning about and that they were in fact learning, but were not able to describe if and how such learning was helping them learn in one of the three ways described by Fink (2003): (1) learning how to be a better student, (2) learning how to inquire and construct new knowledge, or (3) learning how to be a self-directing learner (p. 50). The question must be asked if this was because of the questions we asked within the semi-structured interview protocol or because the peer mentors were not able to readily connect their experience to what learning is and how they learn. Future research should be conducted to examine if and how peer mentors learn about the learning process such that they can continue to learn and be more effective learners in other endeavors.

While beyond the scope of the present study, it is interesting to note that many of the comments directly relating to Fink’s (2003) categories of significant learning were from the interviews conducted at the end of the peer mentor experience (responses labeled #.B) rather than at the beginning (responses labeled #.A). While some of the categories were evident in the earlier interviews, this may suggest that it was the peer mentor experience itself that contributed to the significant learning, or at the very least augmented what was learned when participants were members of the L3C as freshmen.

Also beyond the scope of this present study, but important to consider, is the peer mentor’s identification of learning community membership and how that identification influences learning. As is typical for a LLC, the peer mentors live with other peer mentors and among the participants of the L3C. The peer mentors’ experience is less structured than their experience as a participant of the L3C the previous year. Yet, the peer mentors constitute

a learning community unto themselves, as they continue to take a common leadership course each semester. However, does focusing their effort on the learning and development of the first-year students in the L3C overshadow their own learning? Could this focus on others instead of self be a reason why the learning how to learn category did not manifest in the data? More research is needed to explore the influence the experience of being a peer mentor has on the peer mentor's learning and development and how they balance their own learning while guiding the learning of other community members.

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