TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN ONLINE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF AN ONLINE PROGRAM AT A THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY


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Using Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory as a framework, this qualitative case study investigated conditions conducive to transformative learning experiences among theological students in an online program at a seminary. Learning Activities Survey developed by King in 1998, a community of inquiry framework proposed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer in 2000, and semi-structured interviews were employed. Emails were sent to 85 students (81 current In-Ministry M.Div. students and 4 recent graduates), and 38 (44.7%) took the online survey. A typical participant in this survey was a married White male in his 30s. Of the 38 survey respondents, 30 (78.9%) indicated having experienced transformation during their study. Among those 30, class assignment (66.7%) and a person (60.6%) were two factors that influenced them the most in their transformative learning experiences. Data collected from the online survey and two online courses shed light on the semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 students. A qualitative analysis software ATLAS ti. and Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory were utilized to analyze the data. This resulted in a proposed integrative learning condition model which proposed two conditions conducive to transformation, being in-ministry and using integrative learning strategy. These two conditions were significantly influenced by physical presence. A surprising result was that physical presence does not indicate a three- or four-year stay on campus at a traditional seminary, but is a by-product of a blended, online program which gives students more opportunities to develop quality relationships both during their on-campus intensives and in their local ministries. This study provides empirical evidence
supporting the idea of online theological education using a blended model which promotes integrative learning strategy and learners being in-ministry.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Equipping and training Christian ministers has long been my passion. In fact, I left my country for that very purpose. While pursuing my doctorate in the U.S., I was asked to teach several online courses in Vietnamese for Union University of California. To my surprise, it was a rewarding experience that opened my eyes and caused me to reconsider this high-tech yet questionable venue for training clergy.

More people are pursuing their education through the online venue. Allen and Seaman (2007) reported that almost 3.5 million students in the U.S. took at least one online course during the fall 2006. This is a nearly 10% increase compared to the number reported the previous year. The internet has proved to be a powerful and convenient tool for those who want to pursue an education but are dutifully limited by time and place (Rovai, Ponton & Baker, 2008). In the area of theological education, on-the-job training is preferred according to researcher David Garrison (2000) who found that one of the ten common factors that contribute to the movement of church growth around the world is the fact that church leaders are most effective where they are without leaving their churches for an extended period of time to pursue theological education.

However, the next question which usually rises from skeptics is, “Is online education a suitable venue to train clergy?” Among these skeptics, Carroll and his colleagues (1997) from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) expressed their concerns that what is considered important in theological training may be lost in new forms of education which include extension education, accelerated programs, and teaching and learning via technological means. In particular, Carroll et al. (1997) argued for the need of “being there,” meaning a student’s
physical presence in a campus of an institution in order to receive the full benefits of the school culture which in turn shapes that person’s educational and professional formation.

Background of the Study

A Personal Experience

An attempt to link transformative learning theory with online theological education can be compared to walking in an uncharted territory. Up to this point (fall 2010), I have not found any dissertation or major study focused primarily on this combination. However, my own experience with teaching theological education online at least has given me a positive sign to explore this promising relationship.

Diversity is the most notable characteristic in online classrooms (Rovai, Ponton & Baker, 2008, p. 149). The Vietnamese students from the college I teach whose ages range from 18 to 60 live in different countries around the world including Australia, Germany, Belgium, Korea, and Vietnam. A mixture of all walks of life coming from different parts of the world uniquely contributes to the diversity of the class. Asynchronous discussions and bi-weekly reflective journals stand out as significant learning activities in my class. The students share what they have learned and how their views have changed. In Mezirow’s term, they have experienced perspective transformation.

A Link between Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory and Online Theological Education

In a critical review of the empirical research on transformative learning theory, Taylor (2007) stated that factors of life experience and having time to reflect on written accounts during
asynchronous discussions seem to contribute to the transformative experience. Even though the findings reported in Taylor’s review were drawn from nursing and community building courses, this is where I saw a connection with online theological education. I then began a quest to investigate an intersection where online theological education and transformative learning theory might meet.

Despite the fact that "ATS faculty expressed considerable resistance to Internet based education and its implementation" (Shelby, 2006, p. 102), this quest has found support from others who are teaching online classes in seminaries. For instance, Russell Haitch from Bethany Theological Seminary in Indiana has discovered the advantages of distance education. He observed that, “Distance learning promotes sustained conversation. It helps quiet students find their voice. It lets students around the world enroll in your seminary, and thus it may help foster world peace” (Haitch, 2007, p. 73). Rovai, Ponton and Baker (2008) also noted that asynchronous discussion, the dominant delivery mode for online instruction, has proved to help students develop their critical thinking skills.

These three above-mentioned elements of online education- critical thinking, fair participation, and diversity- closely reflect three central themes in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory which are critical reflection, rational discourse and experience (Taylor, 1998). In Mezirow’s words, learning is “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). However, an individual must learn to “negotiate meanings, purposes, and values critically, reflectively, and rationally instead of passively accepting the social realities defined by others” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 3). According to Mezirow, "uncritically assimilated meaning perspectives, which determine what, how, and why we learn, may be transformed
through critical reflection.” He also emphasized, “reflection on one's own premises can lead to transformative learning” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 18).

In theological education, critical reflection is promoted in the pedagogy of contextualization, one of the signature pedagogies in theological education identified by Foster and his colleagues (2006). In fact, Pauw and Williamson, two professors highlighted in Foster, Dahill, Golemon, and Tolentino’s *Educating Clergy* (2006) who used pedagogy of contextualization, noted that their purpose is to make students aware of the deeply rooted, the taken-for-granted, or the unexamined assumptions which may lead them to alternative perspectives. Their goal comes closest to that of transformation defined by Mezirow (1991). It is this meaning of transformation that I am using in this study.

**An Overview of the Study**

This proposal develops a case study of an online graduate program aimed at training clergy in the U.S. and around the world. It particularly seeks to take a fresh look at Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (1991) in relation to the issue of online teaching and learning in theological education. These three overlapping and interrelated core elements- transformative learning theory, theological education, and online education- specify the foundation, discipline and means of the online theological education experience respectively. In other words, transformative learning theory provides a theoretical framework to describe and possibly explain the learning experience for students in online instruction. The discipline in which their learning experience is examined is theological education, and the means through which this learning takes place is the online environment. The marriage of transformative learning theory and theological education is not new (Bailey, 1996; Bayles, 2000; Fewell, 2001; Wollert, 2003; Hietala, 2003;
Gale, 2005; Weinski, 2006), nor is the exploration of this theory in the online setting (Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo & Casey, 2001; Ziegahn, 2001; Boyer, Maher & Kirkman, 2006; Wansick, 2007). However, the combination of a primary emphasis on transformative learning theory with the online setting in theological education makes this study unique among the literature of transformative learning research.

The word “transformation” is often used to describe the desired outcome of theological education. Delamarter (2007) admitted that it is indeed a big word that may be slightly overused in theological education, but the fact is “no one wants to give up on the term” (p. 64). As a result of their teaching, theological educators hope their students’ thinking and behavior will be transformed. Delamarter (2007) called this transformation the developmental student outcomes of theological education.

In fact, Merizow (1994) viewed transformation as “the engine of adult development” (p. 228). Since his seminal work on perspective transformation in 1975, transformative learning theory has been critiqued and expanded to give explanations of how adults learn. Mezirow (1990) believed learning in adulthood has to do with reassessing the assumptions established during an adult’s formative years. Thus according to Mezirow, transformative learning involves “reassessing the presuppositions on which our beliefs are based and acting on insights derived from the transformed meaning perspectives that results from such reassessments” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 18).

Even though adult education has embraced the benefits of online technologies (Ziegahn, 2001; Woo and Reeves, 2007; Rovai, 2001; Rovai, Ponton, and Baker, 2008; Gunawardena et al., 2006), theological educators are still hesitant in adopting online teaching at their seminaries. Given the nature of theological training, they expressed a legitimate concern that a loss of real
and physical presence means a lack of educational and professional formation which, they assume, can only be achieved in face-to-face classrooms (Carroll et al., 1997; Kelsey, 2002; Shelby, 2006). However, some have enthusiastically supported this new form of theological education (Delamarter, 2005; Nysse, 2004; Hess, 2005; Haitch, 2007). In fact, recognizing the importance of the concept “presence” in educational setting, Russell Haitch (2007) from Bethany Theological Seminary even likened distance learning in theological education with the Apostle Paul’s biblical phrase “absent in body, but present in spirit” (1 Corinthians 5:3). Palloff and Pratt (1999) discussed the ‘presence’ issue in traditional versus virtual classrooms as follows: “In the traditional classroom, if a student experiences mind drift it may not be noticeable to the instructor or to the other students in the class. The student may be physically present but psychologically absent. In the virtual classroom, however, if a student drifts away, that absence is noticeable and may have a profound impact on the group” (p. 7).

Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) proposed a framework in which they identified three presences crucial in an online classroom. They argued that cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence are the three essential elements leading to a successful learning experience in online education. Garrison and his colleagues (2000) also claimed this framework “appears to have considerable potential for creating an educational community of inquiry and mediating critical reflection and discourse” (p. 103). Thus, the uniqueness of this framework is not only can it reflect similarly important themes proposed by Mezirow in his transformative learning theory, but it can also reveal these themes operationally in an online setting.

The study will, first of all, implement King’s Learning Activities Survey which has two major purposes: “identifying whether adult learners have had a perspective transformation in relation to their education experience; and if so, determining what learning activities have
contributed to it” (King, 1998, p. 5). To provide more data about these learning experiences especially in the online setting, the study will then, drawing on Garrison et al.’s community of inquiry framework, use content analysis methods to measure the levels of cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence in two online courses in the program. The finding will reveal which elements are present and to what extent they are present for an online course to have potential in being a means leading to transformation. Lastly, data drawn from the last two methods will guide the semi-structured interviews to confirm and seek more understanding about online theological students’ experiences which may not be able to obtain from survey and content analysis methods.

Research Concern

While the number of online students is growing at many theological seminaries and transformation is a high-priority goal of theological education, a combination of online education and the goal of transformation in training clergy through the lens of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory has posed at least two problems. The first problem relates to the means of theological education (online instruction), and the second problem derives from the epistemological aspect of theological education (critical reflection).

In a study of transformational learning in a doctoral face-to-face program at a seminary, Bailey (1996) found the structure and culture of that program was the most significant factor leading to perspective transformation. In fact, she described the culture of this program as that of a learning community that fostered “cooperative learning, collegiality and dialog; respected and valued the learner; encouraged perspective taking; accommodated the student’s learning agenda; created a culture of inquiry; and provided a climate safe for exploration” (p. 210).
While acknowledging the increasing dependence on technology in higher education, Bailey (1996) also expressed her concern asking, “Can electronically based education adequately reproduce conditions conducive to transformational learning?” (p. 215). Of six studies conducted after Bailey’s regarding the relationship between transformative learning theory and theological education (Bayles, 2000; Fewell, 2001; Wollert, 2003; Hietala, 2003; Gale, 2005; Weinski, 2006), none has attempted to answer Bailey’s legitimate question. Although these studies have shown that theological education has, to some extent, welcomed Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, they have not explored theological education using transformative learning theory in an online setting. With continuing advances in internet technology today, an important question still remains unanswered, “Can theological education using transformative learning theory achieve its transformational goal in the online setting?” It is this inquiry that prompted me to the research problem for this dissertation.

The second problem this study addresses is Mezirow’s critical reflection in online theological education. Since critical reflection is a basic tenet of Mezirow’s theory, exploring this issue in online theological education will help answer the first question, “Can theological education using transformative learning theory achieve its transformational goal in the online setting?” Researchers agreed that critical reflection may create fundamental challenges regarding the nature of theological education (Bayles, 2000; Weinski, 2006; Hwang, 2004; Wollert, 2003). The question is, then, how can theological education utilize critical reflection and still be faithful to the nature of this discipline? Furthermore, if theological education adopts critical reflection to some extent, does the online environment help promote the use of critical reflection? Even though this study is not aimed at responding to these two questions directly, its results may provide more specific materials for others to explore and answers these questions.
Problem Statement

While the goal of transformation lies ultimately in the will of the learner, Mezirow (1990) believed “every adult educator has a central responsibility for fostering critical reflection and transformative learning” (p. 358). Bailey’s study (1996) has shown transformative learning could be fostered in a face-to-face doctoral program at a theological seminary. She, however, raised a significant question, “Can electronically based education adequately reproduce conditions conducive to transformational learning?” (p. 215). Taking Mezirow’s goal of transformation and Bailey’s concern for theological education into account, the study is designed to answer two main questions, “Can transformation occur in an online program at a theological seminary?” If it can, the next question is, “What conditions are conducive to transformation for theological students in an online setting?” Thus, this study seeks to understand Mezirow’s transformative learning theory in an online setting, particularly the conditions or factors conducive to transformation for theological students in an online program.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate conditions conducive to transformational learning for theological students in an online setting. To achieve this purpose, the study will examine if there is any perspective transformation among the participants through King’s Learning Activities Survey. Suppose there are instances of perspective transformation among the participants, the study then probes the online conditions using Garrison and his colleagues’ community of inquiry framework (2000). Finally, the use of semi-structured interviews will confirm and clarify the findings from King’s and Garrison et al.’s instruments, as well as reveal data on Mezirow’s critical reflection, specifically its role in online theological education.
Research Questions

The five questions guiding this study are:

- To what extent have online theological students from an online graduate program at a seminary experienced transformation according to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory?
- What learning activities contributed to transformation as indicated by these students?
- Based on a content analysis of online transcripts, how are the elements of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence revealed in the courses reported by these students?
- To what extent does critical reflection contribute to the transformative experiences of theological students in their online program?
- What conditions are conducive to transformation for theological students in an online setting?

The research questions are designed to be answered in this order to achieve the goal of the study which is to investigate conditions conducive to transformational learning for theological students in an online setting. The main question asked is not whether transformation happens among these students, but rather what conditions are conducive to transformation. Thus, the study cannot proceed further if there is no transformational experience among the participants. In other words, the existence of transformation will permit further study into conditions conducive to transformation among these online theological students. Therefore, the question about transformational experience should precede questions about other factors including the three presences of the community of inquiry framework. Even though these elements may serve as primary conditions leading to transformation, there might be other factors
that need to be examined. A list of questions designed in this order will help investigate other factors other than these three presences.

Significance of the Study

The result of this study will shed light on how Mezirow’s transformation theory describes transformative learning in theological education, specifically in online classroom theological learning through the lens of the community of inquiry framework (2000) proposed by Garrison and his colleagues. In other words, the unique combination of transformative learning theory and online theological education will contribute to the literature of transformative learning, theological education and online learning or any combination of each area.

Williams (2002) noted that “serious reflection on practices of teaching and adult learning in theology and religion using new technologies has been lacking. That is especially important, and unfortunate, because the study of theology and religion is closely related to the goals of transformation in the liberal arts and to professional and spiritual formation in seminaries” (p. 1). Attempting to answer the question, “what are the conditions conducive to transformation in online theological education?” this study will seek to fill this critical gap identified by Williams.

Online learning in the area of theological education is growing. In fact the number of courses offered online through ATS seminaries increased by 600 within five years with the enrollments in online courses of 6,661 students in 2003 to 22,023 in 2008 (Personal communication, ATS Information Technology Department, 2009). This fact urges more empirical research and evidence to present a clearer picture of theological education in an online setting, and if possible to uncover some myths about this issue. The study will particularly help
inform administrators and faculty at seminaries of the practices of transformative learning theory aligning with the goal of transformation in theological training.

This study will also add the discipline of theological education to the increasing body of research on community of inquiry framework, enlarging its generalizability to fields other than the education discipline (Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007).

Definitions

Community of inquiry framework: a framework that provides “a collaborative-constructivist perspective to understanding the dynamics of an online learning experience” (Arbaugh et al., 2008, p. 133-134). It consists of three overlapping presences-social, cognitive, and teaching- which are highly interdependent. “At the heart of the overlap of these elements was a deep and meaningful educational experience” (Arbaugh et al., 2008, p. 134).

Conditions or conditions conducive to transformation: learning environments, settings or culture that enable participants to join in critical reflection and discourse freely and fully that may result in transformation. In this study, the conditions are shown in the learning activities that promote transformation and three presences in Garrison et al.’s community of inquiry framework. Other conditions can be identified through the interviews. Following is a brief description of the three presences in this study.

- Social presence is “the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally in a community of inquiry,” and this presence is revealed through affective responses, interactive responses, and cohesive responses (Rourke et al., 1999).
• Cognitive presence is meant “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). This presence can be seen in one of these categories: a triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution.

• Teaching presence is the binding element that monitors and encourages the coexistence of cognitive and social presences. Teaching presence is revealed through the categories of instructional design, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction.

Critical reflection: "Critical reflection addresses the question of the justification for the very premises on which problems are posed or defined in the first place. We very commonly check our prior learning to confirm that we have correctly proceeded to solve problems, but becoming critically aware of our own presuppositions involves challenging our established and habitual patterns of expectations, the meaning perspectives with which we have made sense out of our encounters with the world, others, and ourselves." (Mezirow, 1990, p. 12).

Operationally, critical reflection, adapted from Neuman’s study (Neuman, 1996, p. 141), is defined as:

1. Ability to identify personal assumptions underlying beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors
2. Ability to discover relationships between the above items and their relationship to current practices in church ministry
3. Ability to identify assumptions and explore alternatives to basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors
4. Ability to look inward and outward while engaged in reflection

5. Ability to recognize and explore discrepancies between the way we are currently thinking or acting and how we should think or act if we are to be in sync with reality, and then acting on that awareness

*Online learning:* An online course is a course where most (more than 80 per cent) or all of the content is delivered online. Typically it has no face-to-face meetings (Allen and Seaman, 2007).

*Online theological education:* An education for church leaders in an online setting.

*Online transcript:* a record of messages posted and exchanged online among students and their instructors (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer, 1999).

*Theological education:* “It includes degree and non-degree programs for the education of church leaders” (Aleshire, 2008, p. 21). In particular, it provides an opportunity for intensive education in three areas: formation, understanding the Christian faith, and equipping for ministry.

*Theological students:* Students who pursue a theological education

*Transformation:* A person experiencing transformation may go through some variations of these following phases:

1. A disorienting dilemma

2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame

3. A critical assessment of assumptions

4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions

6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans

8. Provisional trying of new roles

9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)

Transformative learning “Learning that transforms problematic frames of reference-sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)- to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58).

Assumptions and Biases

I assume the participants’ responses via written words and spoken words truly reflect what is going on in their lives. By administering King’s Learning Activities Survey, I assume I will find instances of perspective transformation among these theological students. Finally, I assume they would recall exactly what they had experienced within the last two years.

I have positive experiences with online teaching, and I have high regard for the seminary where I will conduct my research. In other words, I expect a positive outcome from this study which will be in favor of online theological education.

Limitations

The term theological education refers to theological education of the Christian faith. This distinction was made merely from the epistemological purpose which is crucial for studying the issue of critical reflection in this study.
Delimitations

The study does not focus on religious education within the church context. It only aims at the training of church leaders in one seminary. Specifically, this study limits itself to only one online program at a Christian seminary in the U.S.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to investigate conditions conducive to transformational learning for theological students in an online setting. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory provides a theoretical framework to describe the students’ learning experience while online instruction serves as a means to deliver a particular discipline in education, namely theological education in this case. Thus the study simultaneously examines these three overlapping and interrelated layers including transformative learning theory, online education and theological education. The main focus of this literature review is not to review each layer separately but to show what has been done in the areas where these layers intersect and the problems emerging in these areas with an emphasis on conditions conducive to transformation. Since there has been no research conducted in these three layers altogether, this literature review will seek to present studies focusing on these following combinations: transformative learning theory and theological education, transformative learning theory and online education, and theological education and online education. The review of literature in these combinations will lay a foundation for the unique purpose of this study.

Transformative Learning Theory and Theological Education

Conditions Leading to Transformation in Theological Seminaries

Several studies (Bailey, 1996; Bayles, 2000; Fewell, 2001; Wollert, 2003; Hietala, 2003; Weinski, 2006) have been done to shed light on how transformative learning theory serves as a theoretical framework for theological teaching and learning. Among these studies, Bailey’s and Weinski’s were most helpful in providing relevant data pertinent to this study. Coming from
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, both were interested in exploring the conditions and practices that foster transformation in theological students in face-to-face programs. Bailey (1996) conducted a case study of a doctoral program at an American seminary while Weinski (2006) studied transformation at four evangelical theological schools in Germany. In her findings, Bailey (1996) listed three types of factors contributing to transformation in the program including factors in the educational environment, factors outside the program and internal factors. Bailey stated that “the factors cited most often by students as important in perspective transformation were the structure and culture of the Ed.D. program” (p. 141). This learning community “fostered cooperative learning, collegiality and dialog; respected and valued the learner; encouraged perspective taking; accommodated the student’s learning agenda; created a culture of inquiry; and provided a climate safe for exploration” (p. 210).

Factors outside the program contributing to perspective transformation are therapeutic relationships (emotional pain, working toward self-understanding) and other factors including working while studying which may lead to experimentation on the job and reflection on experience. Bailey (1996) also listed internal factors leading to transformation such as intuitive knowledge, readiness for change, feelings, cognitive dissonance and search for congruence. Bailey concluded that “an educational design such as the learning community or collaborative model, which incorporates principles of adult learning, fosters transformative learning” (p. 211).

Similar to Bailey’s study in terms of the main focus on the nature and conditions of transformation among theological students, Weinski’s however had some noticeable contributions. Conducting the study with twenty-eight students in theological schools in Germany, Weinski found ten domains of transformation which can be grouped under two major categories which are self-knowledge and knowledge of God. Weinski (2006) noted that “most
students experienced transformation in five to seven domains. Mostly one or two domains stood at the center of transformation and functioned as catalyst for transformation in the other domains” (p. 81-82). Concerning self-knowledge, six domains of transformation are listed: (1) human sinfulness and human finiteness; (2) self-understanding as socialized beings; (3) personality development; (4) becoming adults; (5) finding and defending own identity; (6) becoming a critical thinker. Under the category of knowledge of God, these domains are listed: God’s unconditional love; (2) balancing God’s and human’s responsibility; (3) God’s sovereignty and trustworthiness; (4) God’s empowerment through the Holy Spirit (Weinski, 2006, p. 82-83).

Weinski (2006) also found several factors contributing to transformation including dialogue and discussion among students, with instructors, and with family and friends; personal support and guidance through counseling and mentoring; a supportive social context; modeling (mostly of instructors but also of fellow students); the living relationship with God and a spiritual assessment of experiences; courses in systematic theology, exegesis, and courses that deal with models of Christian life and ministry practice today or in the past (church history, missiology, evangelism, etc.); an interactive instructional design of classes; planned ministry experiences; and life in the dormitory. Besides recurrent themes such as dialog, a supportive social context, interaction, and challenging courses found in Bailey’s, Weinski’s study particularly emphasized the spiritual dimension of the transformative process. In her conclusion, Weinski (2006) stated:

In contrast to Mezirow’s theory which primarily sees cognitive and evaluative processes at the center of transformative learning- and only on a limited level considers social and emotional processes- this study brought out that transformative learning consists of a complex interrelation of cognitive, emotional, evaluative, social, and also spiritual processes which play a crucial part in all phases of transformative learning. Especially since Mezirow’s theory completely leaves out a spiritual dimension of transformative learning and only considers spirituality as another possible content of reflection it does
not account for the centrality of a spiritual worldview and a living relationship with God (or, generally speaking, a connection with transcendence). (pp. 303-304)

Adding to Bailey’s study, Weinski’s included factors that hinder transformative learning. “The strongest themes were an unsupportive social context, unresolved conflicts, overwork, and a strained relationship with God” (Weinski, 2006, p. 200). The pressure to conform to a group creates an unsupportive social context in which the students do not feel accepted as a person. Unresolved conflicts appear in emotional, spiritual and evaluative dimensions. Unresolved conflicts in an emotional dimension occur when a person tries to shy away from acting upon certain knowledge supposed to lead to transformation. Similarly, in a spiritual level, the “old nature” or “old ego” does not want to be corrected or yield to God’s will. On the evaluative level, the students are not sure “if the transformative process was “good” or if the new perspective would be “right.” This experience results in an attempt to withdraw or postpone their transformation. Weinski’s contribution regarding hindering factors of transformative learning was unique because these factors unveiled the essence of theological education which presents an intricate dynamic between God and humans in a transformative process.

Fewell (2001) studying women seminarians pursuing ordination in the United Methodist Church believed that “the spiritual is an aspect of adult life that should be included in any attempt to understand the complete development of an adult” (p. 162). Citing Dirkx’s work as her supporting literature, Fewell viewed a concept of “call” in the participants as an extra-rational aspect in the holistic nature of transformative learning. She explained, “the women would not have been in the seminary at all if they had not believed they were called to be there” (Fewell, 2001, p. 162). Since Mezirow’s theory lacks this extra-rational aspect, Fewell suggested it should be added to the model for a more holistic adult learning theory.
Critical Reflection as an Indispensable Condition in Transformation

Critical Reflection and Distortions

Pivotal to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory is critical reflection, a concept that has been embraced yet with caution by many theological schools. The issue of critical reflection and theological education will be explored in the next section. Mezirow defined reflection as “the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 104). It is premise reflection or critical reflection that leads to transformative learning. Mezirow (1990) explained “reflection on premises involves a critical review of distorted presuppositions that may be epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic” (p. 18). Instances of epistemic distortions include (1) a presupposition that there is a correct solution to every problem if we could find the right person; (2) seeing a social phenomenon as immutable such as the law, the government; and (3) judging a person using certain standards described by experts. Sociocultural distortions can be seen in assumptions that do not question the validity of existing social norms which reflect “the collective, mainstream meaning perspective and existing power relationships that actively support the status quo” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 16). Brookfield (2000) noted this idea is called “hegemony,” a term developed by Gramsci which “describes the process whereby ideas, structures, and actions come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, preordained, and working for their own good when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves these interests so well” (p. 138). Psychic distortions include “unwarranted anxiety that impedes taking action” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 16). Citing Gould’s theory of adult development, Mezirow believed adults can cope with today’s challenges successfully by identifying the source of inhibition and anxiety originating from their
childhood. Skilled adult counselors and therapists play an important role in helping adults in this area, especially those who are experiencing life transitions such as job loss, death of a loved one, divorce, moving to a new place, etc.

In summary, justifying and validating one’s ideas and presuppositions of prior learning are crucial in adult learning. However, uncritically assumptions “may distort our ways of knowing, involving epistemic assumptions; our ways of believing, involving social norms, cultural or language codes, and social ideologies; and our ways of feeling, involving repressed parental prohibitions from childhood that control adult feelings and behavior through anxiety” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 5). By critically examining these distortions which are usually taken for granted, a person may see the world and understand their experiences differently. It is not merely a new insight that a person has learned, but it is a new perspective that causes that person to look at himself or herself and the outside world differently from a very basic level, or in Brookfield’s words, experiencing “a fundamental reordering of assumptions” (Brookfield, 2000, p. 139).

Perspective Transformation

Definition

This fundamental reordering of assumptions is called perspective transformation in Mezirow’s theory. Mezirow (1990) defined perspective transformation as “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (p. 14). It is this transformation that the study seeks to investigate among theological students in an online setting. According to
this definition, if the students simply draw on what they already know to guide their action, it is
not reflection. It is what Mezirow called a ‘thoughtful action’ which is different from a
‘reflective action,’ or “an action predicated on a critical assessment of assumptions” (Mezirow,
1990, p. 6). In other words, the students may experience some changes in their thinking as they
acquire new information and reflect on their problems at the content and process level, but they
will not experience perspective transformation until they reflect on the very premises of these
problems. For Mezirow, “a transformation is a transformation in perspective, in a frame of
reference, in a personal paradigm, and in a habit of mind together with its resulting points of
view” (Brookfield, 2000, p. 139). To be able to pinpoint a perspective transformation from other
regular learning experiences, one needs to understand the differences between meaning schemes
and meaning perspectives.

Meaning Perspectives and Meaning Schemes

Since learning is a “social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised
interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to action,” the process of learning is
limited and delimited by our frames of reference or meaning structures. According to Mezirow,
these meaning structures have two dimensions including meaning schemes and meaning
perspectives. Mezirow (1978) explained:

A meaning perspective is the structure of psychocultural assumptions within which new
experience is assimilated to past experience. It is a way of seeing yourself and your
relationships. More than that, it establishes the criteria that determine what you will
experience- criteria for identifying what you will find interesting, for deciding which
problems are of concern to you, for determining what you are prepared to learn and from
whom, for determining values, for setting priorities for action, and for defining the
meaning and direction of self-fulfillment and personal success. (Mezirow, 1978, p. 11)
A more specific dimension of a meaning structure is called a meaning scheme, “the constellation of concept, belief, judgment, and feeling which shape a particular interpretation (e.g. when we think of abortion, black people, the Muslim religion, free market capitalism, or liberalism). Meaning schemes are specific manifestations of our meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 1994, p. 223). Meaning schemes are points of view that can be changed as a person acquires everyday insights, while meaning perspectives are “less permeable, and more elusive habits of mind” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 168). For instance, interactions among students in a typical classroom can influence meaning schemes or specific applications of values, feelings, attitudes and concepts of a person, while a meaning perspective or “an established set of predispositions” can only be influenced indirectly by these immediate social forces (Mezirow, 1996, p. 168). When certain sets of meaning schemes no longer fit comfortably into long held meaning perspectives, disorienting dilemmas may occur which can lead to critical reflection upon taken-for-granted assumptions which in turn provides conditions for a perspective transformation to emerge.

Critical Reflection and Transformation

Critical reflection and transformation seem inseparable. Brookfield explained this complicated relationship between critical reflection and transformation:

Critical reflection is certainly a necessary condition of transformative learning, in that the existence of the latter depends on the presence of the former. However, it is not a sufficient condition; in other words, just because critical reflection is occurring does not mean that transformative learning inevitably ensues. An episode of critical reflection on practice does not automatically lead to transformation. As Mezirow acknowledges, the assumptions one holds can be exactly the same after critical reflection as they were before. (Brookfield, 2000, p. 142)
It is this cognitive dominance in Mezirow’s theory that is prone to other criticisms. Fewell (2001) studying women seminarians in a United Methodist Church contended that Mezirow’s strong emphasis on reflection and not on experience, intuition, or spirituality gives way to the possibility of a gender bias. Being aware of Mezirow’s theory emerging from a study of women returning to college, Fewell still insisted that “with critical reflection at its core, it may be a theory conceptualized upon what is viewed as a masculine characteristic and with little consideration of feminine thinking.” Drawing on her findings, Fewell argued that the calls to ministry for the women in her study “was not just the result of a rational and critical reflection; it was essentially an intuitive, emotional, spiritual event nurtured in the context of the seminary” (Fewell, 2001, p. 155-156).

Not as a strong advocate for feminism as Fewell, Weinski (2006) also found that transformation is not simply a transformed perspective resulting from critical reflection. She asserted that “transformative learning consists of a complex interrelation of cognitive, emotional, evaluative, social and also spiritual processes which play a crucial part in all phases of transformative learning” (p. 303-304). Knowing that critical reflection should occur in a learning community to seek a consensus in an attempt to validate one’s beliefs or values, Weinski found the participants in her study included God in that community and gave that being a significant role in their discourse. When they arrived at a more appropriate view of reality, these participants “also considered it to be God’s working in them...For this reason, their emancipation did not only happen in the context of an interdependence with people in discourse but also in the context of a trusting and loving relationship with God to whom they freely (learned to) submit” (p. 304-305). According to Mezirow, this expression of relying on or submitting oneself to a certain being for seeking the truth violates a set of ideal conditions set out for an effective rational discourse. In
particular it is inconsistent with an important condition in a discourse in which a participant should be free from coercion (Mezirow, 1994, p. 225). This fundamental difference caused a friction in Mezirow’s theory and theological education.

In his study to better understand perspective transformation among Mainland Chinese intellectuals (students, scholars and professionals) who claim to have undergone Christian conversion since coming to the United States, Temple (1999) came to a more subtle finding concerning the idea of critical self reflection in Mezirow’s theory. The participants in this study became more open and sought out supports from others instead of looking inward via critical reflection of assumptions while experiencing disorienting dilemmas. Evidence found in this study gave more weight to the emotional and social aspects than to the rational and cognitive aspects of the transformation process.

Hwang (2004) investigating the relationship between learning in the process of discipleship training and transformative learning in Korean Presbyterian congregations also supported Temple’s findings. Hwang found that “the transformative learning experiences in this study do not rely upon rational discourse for critical reflection of assumptions, as Mezirow (2000) has defined it. Instead, participants experienced transformative learning through relational dialogue based on the relationships among group members and the relationship with God” (Hwang, 2004, p. 148). Hwang then listed three distinctives in this kind of relationship including (1) sharing life stories, hearing and seeing changes in others which may lead to insights and motivations for a person to make changes; (2) other members acting as role models in some aspects of their lives; and (3) peers helping one another “implement changes in their lives through encouraging, admiring, trusting, supporting, challenging, accepting, giving wisdom and practical insights, and respecting each other” (Hwang, 2004, p. 115). Even though critical
reflection still exists in this finding, it has become dwarfed by other social factors in which a loving relationship is highlighted.

Interviewing 25 graduate international students from East Asia who are studying in the United States, Park (2002) also found the role of relationships including modeling and friendship as a major factor facilitating perspective transformation. He described modeling as seeing someone live out their lives consistently in all areas of life. Friendship is seen as support, care, encouragement received from others. Coming from collectivistic societies where community is treasured, the participants in Park’s study have shown that relationships play a key role in transformation. An important finding in this study is that Park acknowledged the role of critical reflection in transformation, but he noted that the emotional reaction usually preceded critical reflection. In other words, strong emotional distress served as “a driving engine” prompting the students to engage in critical reflection on their assumptions.

The themes of feelings, emotions and relationships are not reserved for religious disciplines only. In fact, they are supported by many studies conducted outside the disciplines of religion and theology. Taylor (1998) in his substantial review of literature over two decades on transformative learning maintained that “rationality seems to be significant to transformative learning, though possibly not any more significant than the role of emotions and feelings” (p. 35). Again in an update on transformational learning, Baumgartner (2001) stated that “transformational learning is not an independent act but is an interdependent relationship built on trust” (p. 19).

Recent research offers more insight into the nature of these relationships. Taylor (2008) citing Eisen’s study listed seven relational qualities: trust, non-evaluative feedback, nonhierarchical status, voluntary participation and partner selection, shared goals and
authenticity. Taylor also noted that the equalization of power, learner autonomy and the
development of trust are particularly important in establishing authentic relationships. The
dialogue in these relationships “is not so much analytical, point-counterpoint-dialogue, but
dialogue emphasizing relational and trustful communication” (Taylor, 2008, p. 179-180). As
such, recent research on transformation has overwhelmingly challenged Mezirow’s overreliance
on critical reflection as the most important factor leading to transformation.

*Critical Reflection and Theological Education*

Transformation is an attractive word to any kind of education. It is especially more
appealing to theological education whose main purpose is to form and transform a person who in
turn hopes to bring this transformation into the lives of those he or she ministers to. Bailey’s,
Weinski’s, Fewell’s and others’ studies not only revealed a significant contribution of Mezirow’s
theory in investigating learning experiences of theological students in seminaries, but also
pointed out some discrepancies in this theory, especially when it takes into consideration the
unique nature of theological education.

Bayles (2000) conducted the study at Church of God Theological Seminary in Tennessee
where he interviewed seven graduates and thirteen students to seek to understand how and to
what extent principles of transformational learning theory can be applied to theological
education. A major difference he found between transformative learning theory which takes root
in constructivist approach and theological education is the epistemological problem. Bayles
transformation in constructivist thought presents major problems for theological
education…Conservative seminaries, such as the Church of God Theological Seminary,
encourage questioning and inquiry, but always ground that inquiry in the fact that absolute truth does exist in God” (p. 145). Bayles then concluded transformative learning theory was an inadequate approach to theological education. Wollert (2003) also saw this problem, saying that people need to have something to hold on to when questioned. In the theological education context, Wollert said “if one removes the Bible from one's theological explorations, then he or she is just floundering around” (p. 212).

Mezirow (2003), however, believed that “all conclusions remain open to the possibility of a future assessment by a larger, more diverse group” (p. 61). Clearly, Mezirow resisted an idea of a fixed truth and placed his confidence on humans’ ability to come closer to the truth. On the contrary, Hwang (2004) holding a different perspective on human nature, viewed the absence of truth as great danger. He explained,

Constructivism, on which the transformative learning theory is based, sees truth as tentative and relative. Thus, the epistemological basis for constructivism must enlist personal and social strategies for world-making since external absolutes, such as truth, are merely relative to the changing context. However, individual and shared life cannot be lived without some sort of shared basis for what is normative to provide a goal toward which transformation through learning might be directed. Transformative learning holds continued potential for great destruction, given the absence of truth and the skewed world. (p. 153)

Wollert (2003) observed that the grounding idea in theological education is somewhat equivalent to Mezirow’s fourth phase of perspective transformation in which a person recognizes that his or her discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. For the participants in Wollert’s research, Mezirow’s communally-based grounding is only partially true because they still consider the biblical text as their primary anchor “even though their thinking about the canon and their understanding of its development and writing may undergo drastic changes” (Wollert, 2003, p. 125).
In the context of theological education, while acknowledging the important role of critical reflection, Bayles (2000), Fewell (2001), Wollert (2003); Hietala (2003) and Weinski (2006) confirmed that it cannot and should not be the only factor leading to transformation. Since the very role of critical reflection is to question one’s own premises to seek the truth, this constructivist approach is open to new facts and truths constructed by those involved with the purpose of making a person’s frames of reference more inclusive, discriminating, and open (Mezirow, 2003). In other words, the truth in Mezirow’s theory is relative. This poses a serious problem for theological students who are supposed to acknowledge the existence of the absolute truth which guides their profession as clergy.

Sensing a need for an epistemological anchor for adult learning, Wollert (2003) maintained, “there are some things in a person's life which are beyond suspicion, and there has to be some foundation from which to do one's questioning” (p. 212). Aware of this problem, conservative theological educators acknowledged the role of critical reflection yet approached it within a certain boundary called faith. Banks (1999) put it this way, “We can pursue truth critically within the framework of “faith seeking understanding.” Doubt – “faithful” doubt as opposed to “skeptical” doubt- has a legitimate place in this” (Banks, 1999, p. 31-32). The phrase ‘faith seeking understanding’ came from a quote of the eleventh-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury in which he said, “For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand” (cited in Wood, 1985, p. 85). This ‘faith seeking understanding’ is interpreted as “an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God.” (Williams, 2008). For Anselm, faith is the foundation on which reason rests. According to this view:

faith comes through submission to the revealed Word of God, which in turn involves an acknowledgement of the weakness and deceitfulness of our own understanding. True understanding- the theological habitus or the intellectus fidei – is a divine gift, not a
human achievement; it requires a “conversion of the intellect,” in which our ordinary ways of thinking are transformed under the impact of a new knowledge of divine things. (Wood, 1985, p. 84)

While the fact that faith precedes reason establishes a safer ground for many, this view seems to conflict with the nature of critical inquiry which “rationally tests all alleged bases of truth” (Kelsey, 1992, p. 83). Critical reflection then becomes a challenge to faith itself. Wood (1985) recognized the conflict between critical inquiry and theological education: “Critical reflection upon theological matters might well appear to be contrary to the spirit of humility and receptivity which is necessary for any genuine acquaintance with God’s word and will. The conviction that faith and critical inquiry are essentially opposed is often rooted in an identification of critical thought with prideful self-assertion” (p. 84). Wood, however, citing Calvin’s statement that “all right knowledge of God is born of obedience,” reasoned that critical inquiry is in fact an act of obedience because it is an exercise in self-criticism which demands patience, humility, and compassion (Wood, 1985, p. 86-88). Wood then promoted his view of Christian theology “as a critical inquiry into the validity of Christian witness” (p. 21). By Christian witness, Wood meant a broad sense of “Christian tradition,” “that is, one embracing both the activity of bearing witness (or handing on the tradition) and the substance of what is borne or handed on” (p. 21). As such, the goal of theological education, according to Wood, is to establish theological “formation,” or theological *habitus*, the capacity and disposition to make theological judgments. Wood maintained that by participating in self-critical inquiry one is “truly formed” in that understanding of faith which constitutes the theological *habitus*” (p. 87). In particular, this self-criticism brings to conscious “scrutiny behavior which might otherwise be governed by habit, or convention, or unconscious motives, or various other factors” (Wood, 1985, p. 87). Wood’s self-criticism reflects Mezirow’s principles in his transformative learning
theory where reflection upon taken-for-granted assumptions may trigger transformation (Mezirow, 1990, p. 6). For Wood (1985), being critical is more like a “character-trait” than like a skill, because “there is also the matter of disposition.” He believed that “the sort of person one is helps to determine the extent to which one is likely to become critical or reflective.” In other words, “learning to be critical involves a kind of self-formation or self-transformation” (p. 88). Since learning is an endless process, “learning to exercise these capacities—learning theological judgment, learning to discern and envision—is indeed a kind of personal formation” (p. 88).

With critical inquiry at the center of his view on theological education, Wood’s understanding of theology is critiqued as reductionistic (Martin, 1998, p. 142). Martin challenged Wood’s emphasis on critical inquiry by raising some legitimate questions:

How would Wood characterize other methods of inquiry which are not primarily critical in nature? Are there not other types of inquiry—e.g., didactic, aesthetic, contemplative, even mystical, etc.—in which the mode of inquiry is more appreciative than critical? Are there not modes of inquiry which go beyond the cognitive faculties of the mind such as the spiritual disciplines of prayer, service, koinonia, and the like? Spiritual disciplines such as these assume the validity of the subject matter. The ultimate purpose of prayer and charitable service and contemplation and all other practices of devotion is to deepen awareness of and participation in the life of God. However uncritical spiritual disciplines may be, are they not ways of increasing our knowledge? These modes of knowing are not primarily evoked by doubt nor concerned with epistemological justification. Rather, they are modes of acquaintance, indeed of involvement, that may lead to further correction and revision of one’s subjective framework. Do not appreciative and familiarizing modes of inquiry cultivate the personal and corporate context in which criticism itself operates? Is not greater understanding and participation the precondition for the telos of critical analysis? If these modes of inquiry are not included in what is properly called theological inquiry, then what are they? (Martin, 1998, p. 142)

The problem, Martin (1998) clearly pointed out, is that by not including all modes of inquiry into curricular pedagogy, critical inquiry which has dominated the curriculum and pedagogy in most theological schools, especially those in the Berlin model, tends to overlook “particular Christian traditions of worship and discipleship, and the particular self-
understandings of those traditions” (p. 151). Martin (1998) believed that critical inquiry has an important place in theological education, but he also maintained that critical inquiry needs to take into account the context of the life of the church. He asserted, “if theology is to be rational inquiry, it must acknowledge and orient itself to its ecclesial context. Ecclesia, as I understand it, refers to all the particular communities of Christians who gather in Christ to worship and serve the God who transcends any and every Christian tradition and community” (p. 151).

Focusing on Christian congregations is an indirect way to know God which, for Kelsey, should be the ultimate goal for theological education. In his book *To Understand God Truly*, Kelsey (1992) stated that “a Christian theological school is a community of persons trying to understand God truly by focusing study of various subject matters through the lens of questions about the place and role of those subject matters in diverse Christian worshipping communities or congregations” (p. 110). For Kelsey (1992), Christian congregations are understood as “sets of social practices governed by the worship of God” (p. 163). He further explained, “what unifies this set of practices, making them genuinely “theological” practices and providing criteria of excellence, is that they are all done in service of one end: To understand God more truly by focusing on study about, against, and for Christian congregations” (p. 164). While recognizing the important of critical reflection on Christian congregations, he did not utilize this tool apart from the context of the life of the church. Considering self-critical reflection as an integral part of a practice, Kelsey (1992) noted that “critical reflection does not involve a movement from detached theory to practical application. Rather, it involves a circular movement from practice to critical reflection and back to corrected practice, or to radically transformed practice.” He understood that “as socially established cooperative activities, practices are historically and
culturally relative, to some degree institutionalized, materially based, and inherently critically self-reflective” (Kelsey, 1992, p. 123-124).

Arguing that Kelsey’s model and others’ are dominated by critical thinking, Chopp (1995) offered her perspective of feminist practices in the literature of theological education, saying, “‘knowing’ for women has to be understood in terms of physical presence, relationships with students and faculty, and connections between feelings and ideas” (p. 104). She introduced the practice of narrativity which “stresses the ongoing activity of writing one’s life” (p. 99). Those engaged in the practice of narrativity “value connections, embodiment, creativity, and difference” which, Chopp believed, are ways of interpreting the world (p. 100). Contending that theological education is not just about justice but it is justice itself, Chopp suggested that theological education should pay more attention to ‘cultural problematics’ such as changes in women’s lives, the problems of patriarchal oppression, multi-culturalism, racism, global concerns and so on. She noted that these problems, which are present in the lives of both the teachers and students, can serve as possibilities for reflection and construction; in other words, “they provide the material through which learning can be about praxis, or reflective, intentional living in Christian community” (p. 112).

Banks (1999) in reviewing other models of theological education concluded that there still exists a gap between action and reflection. He asserted that “only by overcoming this can we do as well as learn theology, indeed do we actually learn theology in the fullest sense” (p. 159). Drawing on the life of Jesus, Banks (1999) maintained that,

the culmination of Jesus’ teaching in and through the cross reminds us that transformation of others ultimately comes primarily through self-sacrifice on their behalf. Ideas, no matter how profound or persuasive, are not enough: it is only in lives that embody and on occasions risk all for the truth that this happens. Yet, it is precisely here that divine wisdom is most fully revealed (1 Cor. 1:21-25). (p. 172)
In contrast to the Berlin model which overlooks the requirement of conversion of those who teach, Banks’ missional model emphasized the importance of role model or even the transformation experience of the teachers. Banks (1999) put it succinctly, “We do not just present truth, we must represent it to others” (p. 174). Still, the results, he believed, do not rest on human efforts but on divine grace. As such, Banks credited divine involvement as the ultimate factor in the transformation process in the context of theological education.

Concluding Thoughts on Transformative Learning Theory and Theological Education

Transformation is particularly coveted by all theological schools whose primary subjects deal with humans’ most cherished, long-seated, and sensitive areas that are their values and beliefs. Several models of theological education have been reviewed to shed light on how the goal of transformation can be achieved. Wheeler (1993) reviewing major views on theological education noted that even though there were some disagreements among the writers about theological education, all of them agree on “the central point: theological education must be more than a “clutch of courses” in academic and practical subjects. It must be an intense, focused process whose goal is theological capacity and understanding” (p. 88-89).

For Wood (1982), this theological capacity and understanding is called theological habitus which is formed in students as they cultivate their ability (techniques and skills) and disposition (character trait) in critical reflection and self critical reflection process. Martin (1998) pointed out that Wood heavily focused on critical inquiry as the only mode of inquiry at the expense of the particularities of Christian congregations and their expressions. Martin (1998) reclaimed the important role of the life of the church in theological education. Kelsey (1992) was
also deliberate about studying Christian congregations through which one can know God more truly since he argued God cannot be studied directly. Kelsey (1992) considered Christian congregation as sets of social practices situated deeply in history and culture. Thus, being an excellent model, it requires self criticism, which should be an integral part of a practice as he proposed. Seeing from the lens of feminist theorists, Chopp (1995) described her predecessors’ views as too cognitive thinking dominated. One of the practices she introduced is the practice of narrativity which reflects more fully how humans especially women learn and interpret their world. Banks (1999) found that these above-mentioned models still left a significant gap between reflection and action which he considered a uniqueness of theological education. He particularly emphasized the necessity of role model in teaching and the divine involvement as the ultimate factor in bringing about transformation in a person’s life.

Since critical reflection plays such an important role in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, yet it causes some frictions with the discipline of theological education, this research seeks to understand how theological education approaches critical reflection in online education offered by theological seminaries and to what extent it contributes to the transformative experiences of theological students in an online setting.

Theological Education and Online Instruction

This section will first of all (1) present the critiques of those who questioned the possibility of online instruction in theological education, then (2) lay out some responses to these critiques, and finally (3) highlight some major issues pertinent to this debate, specifically the themes of theological students as adult learners and theological educators facing a major shift in their pedagogies. The literature reviewed in this section came mostly from reflective papers or
articles written by theological educators in their context. Thus the need for more empirical research on online teaching and learning in theological education is more urgent.

**Critiques of Online Theological Education**

According to its website, the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (hereafter, ATS) is a membership organization of more than 250 graduate schools that conduct post-baccalaureate professional and academic degree programs to educate persons for the practice of ministry and for teaching and research in the theological disciplines. The Commission on Accrediting of ATS accredits the schools and approves the degree programs they offer. An increasing number of online students in ATS accredited seminaries has brought some significant changes in the landscapes of theological education today. Online theological students have increased from about 6,000 in 2003 to more than 20,000 in 2008 (Personal communication with ATS personnel, February 2009). This growth has influenced both ATS standards on distance education and those who teach at seminaries. Previously, ATS only allowed one-third of a program online (Cannell, 1999), but this association has changed its standards and allowed up to two-thirds of a program online (Delamarter, 2004). For faculty members in seminaries, online theological education has challenged their old ways of teaching. Wabash Center in Indiana just held a conference about “Reflecting on the Pedagogy of Online Theological Education” (October 9-11, 2009). The goals of this conference were to share practices and questions about online learning and teaching and develop a community of reflective practitioners of online teaching and learning.

Although the number of theological educators supporting online instruction is growing, this only represents a small percentage of ATS faculty. Shelby (2006) conducted a survey to
investigate the concerns faculty in theological schools have about the use of Internet-based education and found that “the faculty clearly displayed a negative attitude toward this innovation and seemed unconvinced that it was the optimal solution” (p. vii). They cited several reasons including lack of personal interaction, loss of dynamic of interpersonal relationship, loss of spiritual formation, and loss of building community. In other words, they assumed face-to-face interaction in a classroom is the optimal solution to build a learning community and to cultivate a person’s spiritual formation.

Community Building and Spiritual Formation

Amos (1999) observed that, "Community building and spiritual/personal formation continue to be two of the most significant issues for theological schools as they develop distance education programs and courses" (p. 131). It is especially true for those who had had positive experience of living in campus: breathing the air of a caring and learning community, spending long nights debating a controversial issue, and enjoying wonderful time of worship and fellowship with one another. It is these people who would have a hard time adopting the idea that such wonderful things they had experienced can be achieved without face-to-face interaction.

Carroll and his colleagues (1997) conducted a three-year study at several seminaries in which they spent at least thirty days a year at these institutions to collect data. Their purpose was to find out “what affects the way students are formed by the educational process” (p. 4). They “lived in student dormitories, attended classes and chapel services, ate with students and faculty members in dining halls, hung out with students in their various leisure spots, attended faculty and occasional trustee meetings, and observed various ceremonial occasions” (p. 7). Their findings present these following observations:
1. The culture of educational institutions plays a powerful role in how students are actually shaped, but institutional culture is not easily changed or manipulated.

2. Faculty dominate the students’ experience of their school. For the students, the school and its culture are best and most completely represented by the faculty.

3. Formative education requires prolonged and intensive exposure to an educational institution. (p. 270-274)

Carroll et al. (1997) concluded their study with a caution, that they have doubts about "virtual" education even though they are not opposed to technology. The reason is "teaching and learning by computer and various video technologies cannot duplicate the intense and various experiences available to a student who physically attends a school" (p. 276). They expressed their concern that “the new formats make it less rather than more likely that students' minds, characters, attitudes, and commitments will be profoundly shaped by their educational experience” (p. 278).

In her study of a face-to-face doctoral program at a seminary, Bailey (1996) noted that most factors facilitating transformation are relational in nature. She then asked, "Can community, cooperation, and collegiality be developed online? Can feelings of mutual respect, the value of persons and the importance of student agendas be cultivated apart from face to face interaction? Can viewing professors on video tape have the same impact as personally observing the way they interact with other faculty and students, their attitude and demeanors, the way they model the values and principles of the discipline? If as one student claimed "learning is best done together," does distance education provide a context for students to come together to learn” (Bailey, 1996, p. 216)?
Kelsey (2002) questioned distance education on the grounds of its ability to fulfill the goal of theological education. He argued, "if coming to understand God involves deep changes in personal bodies, then teaching and learning that aims at deepening understanding of God inherently involves the organic personal bodies of both teachers and learners" (p. 9). He concluded that "our day faces us with a choice between either concurring with one strand in our culture that we are basically spiritual machines or explicitly adopting the view, perhaps to the culture's astonishment, that we are personal bodies" (p. 9).

Superficial Learning

While Carroll, Kelsey and their colleagues focused on the theological side of online theological education, Cannell (1999) citing Miller (1987) listed a critique aimed at the educational side of online education. Since the majority of online students are nontraditional students, the critique said these students are “experience rich but theory poor” (Cannell, p. 15). They have doubts that the quality would not be as good as classroom education (Nysse, 2004).

Emotional Support

Understanding that education is not just knowledge delivery, Patterson (1996) raised an important issue of faculty meeting student’s emotional needs in an online setting:

Education at its best moves the learner from one state of understanding to another, and that process will necessarily include times of disequilibrium. At such times, when the learner's emotional state is unsettled, and particularly when dealing with matters of faith, it is incumbent on the teacher to serve as monitor, guide and reassuring presence. The commitment of a theological faculty to educate must include a commitment to contain and to offer support in such disruption. The classroom offers a more immediate setting for such containment: nonverbal student cues, the opportunity for students to learn from one another, the faculty member's ability to deal with apparently threatening questions...
while continuing to model a mature faith stance. Distance education will need to find the
means to meet this responsibility. (Patterson, 1996, p. 68)

Practical Skills

Distance learning also has to wrestle with the question of how seminarians learn practical
skills they need to assume their roles as clergy in a community of faith. Bellinger (2003) raised
this question:

Acquiring knowledge of texts and traditions is one aspect of that formation, alongside
other aspects such as developing skills in preaching, teaching, counseling, and spiritual
direction. How does one develop skills such as these without in-person interaction with a
professor and other students? How does one learn to be a leader of a community of faith
if one is not a part of an actual community while one is studying? (p. 150)

Responses to the Critiques

Community Building and Formation

Cannell (1999) citing Kemp (1999) reasoned that the question is not ‘being there’ but
‘being where.’ The real question, Cannell (1999) pointed out, is ‘where can formation take
place?’ Is the campus community better than the local communities? She argued that since the
students are already in their communities, “distance education experiences can maximize the
benefit of the real communities of which students are a part” (p. 19). Using a biblical idea of
discipleship, Le Cornu (2003) conceded that “full involvement with the world is surely called
for, as opposed to separation, even if this latter is only for a temporary period” (p. 22). She then
questioned the long-cherished value of campus community, saying that “to insist that an
educational monastic community is the only appropriate, or even the ‘best’, educational
experience does not stand up to theological scrutiny” (p. 22). She maintained that online students
can apply their learning immediately and share it with their local communities. Besides, Palloff
and Pratt (1999) believed that a learning community can be built in cyberspace. They noted that “our communities today are formed around issues of identity and shared values; they are not place-based” (p. 25). In fact, Esselman (2004) teaching some online courses has found that “the web format offers students opportunities to directly assist one another” (p. 168). He listed an occasion where two students shared with one another what they were struggling and encouraged one another to trust God more in their life. He believed that when members of this community have grown in trust, they “often take the lead in forming one another” (p. 168). In Baxter’s study (2004) the students also reported that they had experienced spiritual formation through their online class, especially they noted that their professor was more available than in traditional courses and that the professor had made spiritual formation a part of his teaching style.

Learning Outcomes

Nysse (2004) argued that the question should not be about face-to-face or online learning, but it should be “what maximizes student learning?” He argued that theological educators “need to ask this question for every environment in which teaching and learning can be undertaken” (p. 204). For Nysse, he found that threaded discussions have potential to create richness in online instruction. He listed several benefits of threaded discussion in online learning as follow:

1. The amount of exchange and interaction among students exceed that in a face-to-face classroom. The reasons are:
   a. No bell rings at the end of each class session
   b. A threaded discussion allows time for everyone to contribute and the teacher can "hear" the contribution of every student
c. Full transcript of the entire exchange can be retrieved and made available for later review

d. Vying for faculty approval is limited since their body language and nonverbal cues are limited

e. Corrections or input can be done more privately and timely

2. Writing to peers helps develop collegial and collaborative practice

3. Writing in online classes is more real because it has real audience and real problems compared with theoretical approach in writing papers in regular classes

4. It reaches across learning styles and personality types

5. Shy students can participate more readily

6. Reflective time is available between comments

7. Talkative students have to think more before expressing their views (Nysse, 2004, pp. 204-205)

Nysse (2004) conceded that "online teaching and learning is only one more avenue by which we pursue educational transformation" (p. 206).

Student Support

To respond to Patterson’s concern about how faculty meet students’ emotional needs in an online setting, Shore (2007) suggested that establishing social presence in online courses is one way to meet that need. She explained that social presence is particularly needed when students are going through critical moments where they feel lost. Therefore, “recognizing that their teacher is a real person- and a person of faith- offers a degree of such assurance” (p. 94). In
an online setting, Shore created a threaded discussion forum for prayers and prayer requests and established an atmosphere where students felt welcome and accessible to one another.

Hybrid Instruction

Hybrid instruction has been practiced in the cases of Bethel Seminary’s InMinistry Program (Anderson, 2007), Western Theological Seminary’s Master of Divinity Program (MacLeod and Cannell, 2008) and other seminaries including Fuller Seminary, North Park Theological Seminary and so on. Brunner (2006) stated that “hybrid courses have certain potential advantages over both face-to-face courses and online courses that can concretely improve the quality of student learning in theological education” (p. 229). He also noted that seminaries adopting this model have to sort out which learning modality proves most useful in realizing the student learning outcomes of a course and of a program (p. 234).

Major Issues in Online Theological Education

The characteristics of the students and the mode of instruction (online instruction) have changed many theological educators’ traditional views of their pedagogical practices. This section will briefly describe the students as adult learners and highlight a significant shift in pedagogical practices among theological faculty.

Students as Adult Learners

According to ATS 2008-09 annual data, more than 85% of male students pursuing an M.Div. in the U.S. are 25 and older, and about 50% of female students are 40 and older. Ricciuti (2003) observed that the majority of theological students today do not have the “luxury of
pursuing academic study as their major or primary life focus” (p. 146). They may have weekly pastoral responsibility or full-time job outside of school. Theological educators must realize that “theological study and the practice of ministry are no longer sequential for most students, but simultaneous” (Ricciuti, 2003, p. 147). While acknowledging the challenges and difficulties one must overcome to pursue this education, Ricciuti argued that this situation should be viewed as an opportunity for enriching the student’s learning experience:

If a sermon can be prepared not only for the seminary classroom but for the congregation gathered the following Sunday, so much the better; if an exegesis paper or research project in church history can flex to address challenges within his or her day job or parish ministry, the student will emerge from his or her formal theological education with a much more richly integrated and deeply-fixed learning of subject matter. (p. 150)

Incarnational Model of Teaching

Kelsey’s argument that physical presence is required in theological education, otherwise the students become ‘spiritual machines’ does not stand up to the principles of incarnational pedagogy. Shaw (2004) noted that “the incarnational model of theology reminded those teaching and learning in seminaries that "church" or "seminary" is not just a building or set of buildings where people gather but is also the people dispersed in the world” (p. 93). The idea of being in the real world supports viewpoints of advocates of online theological education. Gresham maintained that “virtual instruction can be incarnational if it points students toward response to the gospel in their daily lives and if the instructor communicates his or her own lived participation in the truth” (p. 27). In other words, a campus environment may offer fewer opportunities for the students to put into practice what they learn than that from a local community where real life situations are encountered daily. In considering community building and spiritual formation, the traditional emphasis on instructor and institution has been shifted to
learner and the outside world. This significant change, however, has met strong opposition from the faculty who have adopted a ‘classical paradigm of theological education.’ Delamarter (2004) described this classical paradigm as follows: (1) full immersion for at least three years in a (2) residential program in which senior members of the community instruct, inspire and form junior members primarily through (3) lecture-based pedagogies and where students learn the art of theological reflection through (4) face-to-face community discourse, (5) library research and (6) writing (p. 135). With these deep ingrained assumptions, theological educators find it hard to change their methods. In addition, working in a theological community and carrying out the work under the direction of the Holy Spirit, they somehow have come to consider these traditional methods as "theologically imbued and, thus, less susceptible to change" (p. 136). The challenge is, according to Le Cornu (2003), “to remove the notion of community from the institution and to place it on people.” She persisted, “not only is this theologically sound, it coheres with a learner-centered model” (p. 22-23).

Concluding Thoughts on Theological Education and Online Instruction

While online theological education shares many aspects of a typical online instruction, it also reveals some unique elements of a theological training. In particular, critics of online theological education have shown concerns about the issues of community building and spiritual formation in an online setting. Proponents of online theological education responded by first of all turning the attention away from the forms (online or face-to-face) of instruction and toward the goals or objectives of theological education. They argued that a threaded discussion and other medium can foster a community and enrich student’s learning experience. They also believed that campus community does not have to be the best environment for spiritual formation. In fact,
by bringing in the idea of discipleship and incarnational model, advocates for online theological education conceded that local communities can provide real life situations and opportunities for theological students to apply the truth and cultivate spiritual formation in their daily life. A fundamental shift happening in theological education which moves from teaching to learning, from instructor to learner, and from institution to the outside world needs the accompaniment of a radical change in the mindset of theological faculty who have held deep assumptions about how to train a person in a theological seminary.

Mezirow’s Transformative Learning and Online Instruction

Two dissertations (Lewis, 2005; Wansick, 2007) and an article (Boyer, Maher, and Kirkman, 2006) were identified as major empirical work related to Mezirow’s transformative learning and online instruction. Other articles (Cragg et al., 2001; Meyers, 2008; Ziegahn, 2001) also mentioned Mezirow’s theory and online instruction but did not consider this integration as their primary focus.

Lewis (2005) conducted her case study in the Interdisciplinary Studies Program at the University of San Francisco. Through telephone interviews, emails, electronic questionnaires and daily observation of three online courses, Lewis attempted to answer the question: ‘what are the success factors for transformative learning in the field of adult distance education using a learning community model?’ In her findings, Lewis reported that “collaborative online learning requires dialogue skills and being able to engage them in textual form.” She also suggested that students need to learn how to create a human online presence including their cognitive, emotional and spiritual aspects in textual form. The three best practices Lewis identified were (1) the instructor’s flexibility; (2) good communication skills; and (3) the ability to create courses
using multiple ways for the student to access the subject. By flexibility, Lewis meant the instructor’s willingness to let his students choose how to complete an assignment “within wide guidelines” to “draw upon students’ interest in and understanding of the subject” (p. 162). Good communication skills include “the ability to ask critical questions that open the student to new possibilities as well as being a good listener” (p. 162). Last but not least, Lewis noted that “educational administrations have an important role in guiding and facilitating the process of creating a vibrant learning environment” (p. 174). Due to a low number of returned questionnaires, this case study relied on data collected from the researcher’s observation of online discussion and interviews with instructors. Thus, the findings from this research did not fully reveal the experience of the students in their own voices which in turn should be an important indicator to show whether transformative learning occurs in their learning experience.

Using King’s Learning Activity Survey (1998), Likert type scale questions, and open-ended questions, Wansick (2007) conducted her research with an online Master’s level program to discover if transformative learning was evident. With a 18.2% useable response rate which included 76 students, Wansick reported in her findings that 38.5 % of the participants demonstrated evidence of transformative learning. She also indicated that “while age and gender did not have a statistically significant association with transformative learning, the number of semesters the students had been enrolled did show an association” (p. 59). Two most common themes emerged in the open-ended questions were related to participants becoming more open to other opinions and cultures and more reflective in their educational studies. Despite the low response rate, this study showed that deep learning or transformative learning did occur in an online setting.
Boyer, Maher and Kirkman (2006) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to “both confirm the earlier results and expand the scope of the study in terms of population, time, geography, and number of researchers involved” (p. 339). In a web-based course required for completion of a master’s degree in educational leadership, the 59 students (out of 70) who completed the course had at least 2 years of professional experience in education. The researchers conducted a systematic content analysis of the students’ reflective writings collected at four distinct intervals throughout each course semester. Based on Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (2000), the researchers identified four phases including a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, validating discourse, and reflective action. A coding rubric was developed specific to each phase. These researchers then set up the operationalized criterion for experiencing a perspective transformation: “indication of all four phases in one thematic area” (p. 346). Of the 59 learners, 20 (34%) were found to have experienced a perspective transformation (Boyer, Maher, and Kirkman, 2006). These authors also noted that the instructional design, requirements for interaction, reflection, dialogue, and the role of the facilitator have triggered a large number of learning transformations. Limitations were also listed in this study including a relatively short period of time of study and the limitation of expression through textual form. Boyer et al. (2006) noted that a short period of time may not be able to capture perspective transformation which can occur incrementally. Also, the researchers were aware of “additional experiences and feelings that students did not encode into words that might have been just as meaningful and important as what was garnered from the transcripts” (p. 355). A case study which includes content analysis of online transcripts and interviews with the participants may yield more significant data.
Concluding Thoughts on Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory and Online Instruction

Even though each study utilized different methods (qualitative case study, quantitative survey, and content analysis), these three empirical research (Lewis, 2005; Wansick, 2007; Boyer et al., 2006) concluded there was evidence of student’s transformative experience in an online setting. Lewis (2005) emphasized the communication skills of both instructors and learners in textual form to create a learning community, while Wansick (2007) noted the importance of length of study in association with transformation. Last but not least, Boyer et al. (2006) presented an operationalized and systematic method to identify perspective transformation in an online environment.

Conditions Conducive to Transformation

Mezirow (1990) maintained that “it is through dialogue that we attempt to understand-to learn- what is valid in the assertions made by others and attempt to achieve consensual validation for our own assertions” (p. 354). For that reason, he conceded that “education for adults may be understood as centrally involved in creating and facilitating dialogic communities to enable learners to engage in rational discourse and action” (p. 354). He listed certain conditions for optimizing adult education:

- More accurate and complete information
- Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception
- Openness to alternative points of view: empathy and concern about how others think and feel
- The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively
• Greater awareness of the context of ideas and, more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own

• An equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse (Mezirow, 2000, p. 13).

He acknowledged that these are ideal conditions that are never fully realized in practice. For Mezirow, hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute, and intimidated people cannot participate fully and freely in discourse. He warned that “power relationships and cultural inequalities can distort the validity of a reasoned outcome” (Mezirow, 2003, p. 61).

Focusing on the classroom environment, Taylor’s reviews of literature over a decade listed specific conditions under which transformative learning may take place including “the need for teachers to be trusting, empathetic, caring, authentic, sincere, and demonstrative of high integrity; emphasis on personal self-disclosure; the need to discuss and work through emotions and feelings before critical reflection; the importance of feedback and self-assessment; the need for experiential hands-on learning activities; and the importance of solitude and self-dialogue” (2000, p. 313). Looking beyond the physical classroom, Daloz (2000) understood the importance of conditions that help facilitate transformation in an individual’s life:

Although the capacity to develop more adequate meaning-making frameworks is always there, transformative learning is by no means inevitable and depends strongly on the particular environmental and cultural forces at work in the individual’s life. In effect, people have the potential to make the kinds of deep shift described here, but whether they will or not depends on the particular conditions in their lives. Clearly some conditions, such as an effective education and good friends, are more conducive to transformation than, say, growing up alone in a hostile world. (Daloz, 2000, p. 104)

Daloz listed four conditions under which transformation might occur: the presence of the other, reflective discourse, a mentoring community; and opportunities for committed action. In studying the life of Nelson Mandela, Daloz noted that Mandela’s realization that “there were
others out there quite different from himself” became gradual. She maintained that even though
the nature and significance of the difference may vary with each individual, the encounter with
the other will cross some earlier boundary resulting in a different voice that challenge the earlier
assumptions about how life is and what constitutes a new individual. Daloz also agreed that “for
mature transformation to occur, at some point there must be conscious, critical reflection on our
early assumptions” (Daloz, 2000, p. 113). This process is considered successful when
participants “are able to articulate their own voices clearly and to recognize each other’s voices
as valid (Daloz, cited Rothman, 1996, p. 351). A mentoring community is “an ecology of
relationships with people who value diversity and transformative discourse” (Daloz, 2000, p.
116). In the case of Mandela, he had a network of mentors, helpers, colleagues, and friends “who
shaped his values, strengthened his resolve, and supported, challenged, and inspired his work”
(p. 116).

The Three Presences of Community of Inquiry Framework
as Equivalent Conditions in an Online Setting

Meyers (2008) using Mezirow’s transformative learning theory suggested ways faculty
members who teach online courses can effectively use transformative pedagogy including (1)
creating a safe environment; (2) encouraging students to think about their experiences, beliefs,
and biases; (3) using teaching strategies that promote student engagement and participation; (4)
posing real-world problems that address societal inequalities; and (5) helping students implement
action-oriented solutions. These strategies can be summed up into three presences listed in the
community of inquiry framework proposed by Garrison and his colleagues (2000). The social
presence is revealed through emotional expression, open communication and group cohesion.
The existence of social presence in an online setting creates a safe environment where real emotions and different ideas can be expressed. The cognitive presence expresses itself through a triggering event, an attempt to explore an idea, a desire to integrate that idea into real life and a resolution to act upon the idea learned. If cognitive presence exists in an online course, one can see students trying to think about their experiences, beliefs and ask hard questions about their own assumptions resulting in an action. Teaching presence is defined as an essential element that balances cognitive and social issues within intended educational outcomes. Boyer et al. (2006) believed that the facilitator or online instructor holds ultimate responsibility for establishing the means by which ideal conditions can be achieved. As such, the conditions investigated in this study are mostly equivalent to the three presences listed in the community of inquiry framework.

Conclusion

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate conditions conducive to transformational learning for theological students in an online setting, the literature review has identified both theoretical and empirical work related to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, online instruction, theological education and specifically any integration of these fields. As a theoretical framework of this study, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory has provided insights into the learning experiences of both undergraduate and graduate students in the field of theology and others. A transformation examined in this study, according to Mezirow, is a perspective transformation which consists of a critical reflection upon one’s own assumptions, an expansion of one’s perspective about self or the world and a concrete decision. Mezirow believed adult learners’ prior learning is full of distortions which may influence their ways of knowing, believing and feeling as an adult. Triggered by a disorienting dilemma, an individual begins to
reflect critically on his or her own assumptions. Under ideal conditions in a rational discourse, that person’s perspective, frames of reference or habits of mind will be transformed and become more inclusive, discriminating, and open. A cognitive dimension once having dominated Mezirow’s theory has given way to emotions, feelings, and relationships as important elements contributing to transformation as well. In the field of theological education, the spiritual dimension was acknowledged as vital to the process of transformation.

For Mezirow, critical reflection plays an important role in transformation. Even though it is not a sufficient condition for transformation, it is a necessary condition. In other words, if transformation occurs, one can assume the existence of critical reflection in that process. If critical reflection exists, one cannot, however, conclude that transformation will happen. The issue of critical reflection has been viewed from different angles by theological educators. For some, it is a challenge to faith. For others, it is a necessary trait. Some acknowledged an appropriate place of critical reflection in theological education but also promoted other modes of inquiry and suggested one should focus on the life of the church as its primary subject. Overall, studies have shown theological education can use Mezirow’s theory to explain changes in students’ learning experiences, yet there existed a gap as to how critical reflection can be used and in what area.

Research on Mezirow’s theory and online instruction confirmed that transformation happened in an online environment. With only two dissertations and one article, the evidence is, however, too small to build a convincing case for the integration of these fields. More empirical research is needed to successfully establish a body of knowledge concerning Mezirow’s transformative learning theory in an online setting.
A review of the literature regarding theological education and online instruction shed lights on some challenges as well as opportunities in this integration. Opponents of online theological education presented four major concerns including community building and spiritual formation, superficial learning, emotional support and practical skills. In response, proponents of online theological education gave evidence of empirical research on how a learning community can be built online, presented many advantages of threaded discussion as a helpful tool in student learning, and promoted hybrid models to accommodate unique goals of theological education. Advocating an incarnational teaching model, these proponents of online theological education conceded that online instruction is better for today adult learners since they can be ‘in the world’ and apply what they have learned more effectively in their daily lives while taking online courses. In other words, they are in a better position to practice the concept of discipleship than those in residential campuses. Again, since empirical research is much less than theoretical papers supporting the idea of online theological education, it is too soon to determine if theological education in an online setting brings significant benefits to theological students. Theoretically, the literature review implied that transformation can occur among theological students in an online setting. Empirically, however, the question this study seeks to respond, “Can transformation occur among theological students in an online setting?” still remains open.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative case study about an online graduate program at a theological seminary in the U.S. This study was, particularly, designed to investigate conditions conducive to transformation among theological students in an online setting.

Research Questions

Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that the questions should “represent the facets of an empirical domain that the researcher most wants to explore” (p. 23), and that they should be researchable. Since empirical research found that under certain conditions transformation may occur (Mezirow, 1990, 2000, 2003; Taylor, 2000; Daloz, 2000), the researcher in this study was most interested in investigating conditions conducive to transformation for theological students in an online setting. Five questions were generated to achieve this purpose. These questions were, however, not necessarily definitive. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that researchers should keep the research questions in hand and review them during fieldwork in case they need to refine or reformulate these questions while collecting the data. The five research questions were:

- To what extent have online theological students in two different cohorts from an online graduate program at a seminary experienced transformation according to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory?
- What learning activities contributed to transformation as indicated by these students?
- Based on a content analysis of online transcripts, how are the elements of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence revealed in the courses reported by these students?
• To what extent does critical reflection contribute to the transformative experiences of theological students in their online program?

• What conditions are conducive to transformation for theological students in an online setting?

Research Strategy

To research the three interconnected layers—transformative learning theory, theological education and online education simultaneously, this case study relied on three methods of data collection including (1) King’s Learning Activities Survey (1997) which examined the perspective transformation index (PT-Index) of a person, (2) Garrison, Anderson and Archer’s community of inquiry framework (2000) which measured the three presences regarding teaching and learning in a typical online class, and (3) semi-structured interviews which confirmed and explored data collected through the two previous methods. In other words, detailed and in-depth data were collected through multiple sources: a survey, a content analysis of online transcript and a semi-structured interview. As a result, it yielded rich information in the context of an online setting. Following is a chart indicating each research method used to answer respective research questions.
Table 3.1

Research Questions and Research Methods

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<td>To what extent have online theological students from an online graduate program at a seminary experienced transformation according to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory?</td>
<td>King’s Learning Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What learning activities contributed to transformation as indicated by these students?</td>
<td>Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on a content analysis of online transcripts, how are the elements of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence revealed in the courses reported by these students?</td>
<td>A content analysis based on Garrison et al.’s community of inquiry Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent does critical reflection contribute to the transformative experiences of theological students in their online program?</td>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What conditions are conducive to transformation for theological students in an online setting?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Setting

As the nation’s leading accredited seminary distance learning program, In-Ministry program at Bethel seminary was first launched in 1995. Its combination of online and face-to-face learning aimed to maximize education and minimize time away from ministry. Since its
inception, the program has served many students from North America and around the world.

With an attempt to convey timeless truth by timely methodologies, Bourgond (1999), dean of academic affairs of Bethel Seminary, stated clearly that “our objectives are transformed leaders equipped for the year 2000 and beyond who are biblically sound, spiritually formed, transformationally active, and who possess enhanced technological skills for the ministry” (p. 122). Anderson (2007) noted four central commitments of the program including student involvement in ministry, cohort-based communities of learning, faculty leadership of courses, and technology that serves teaching and learning.

The In-Ministry Master of Divinity program was designed for nonresident students already in ministry using a mixture of distance courses, local on-site mentored leadership courses and on-campus intensives taught at the main campus. Students came to the campus twice a year (winter and summer quarters) to attend two one-week intensives during each session. They also took fully online courses during the other two terms of the year. Taking advantage of intensive courses and fully online courses offered each year, a student could complete seven courses per year and finish their 144-credit degree in approximately five years. Since the year was divided into four ten-week terms, a typical year for a student in this program was as follow:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>September-December</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online courses</td>
<td>10 weeks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January-March</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preload</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive #1 (course #1)</td>
<td>1 week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive #2 (course #2)</td>
<td>1 week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postload</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

59
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>April-June</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online courses</td>
<td>10 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July-August</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preload</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive #1 (course #1)</td>
<td>1 week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive #2 (course #2)</td>
<td>1 week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postload</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In an online course, conference calls, emails, and discussion forums were utilized to maintain ongoing interaction between faculty members and students. Slightly different from an online course, an intensive course started with the first 4 weeks of introductory and preparation for the course delivered online including some learning activities. Then the students came to the campus to attend a week-long intensive to interact with the professors and fellow students. It concluded with the last 4 online weeks of independent research or activities focusing on synthesis and integration of materials from the course.

Population

The InMinistry M.Div. program had 81 students with 44 full-time and 37 part-time (Personal communication with Bethel Seminary, August, 2010). The average age was 36 with 73% males and 27% females. Whites consisted of 80.24% of the population while Asians and Hispanics had very small percentages of 1.23% and 2.46% respectively. Non-resident alien had 1.23% and other races 14.81% of the M.Div. program population.
Selection of Participants

This was a qualitative case study about an online graduate program at a theological seminary in the U.S. Creswell (1998) defined a case study as” an exploration of a “bounded system” or a case (or multiple case) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (p. 61). The case was an online graduate program aimed at training clergy in the U.S. and around the world. It is a bounded system because it only focuses on one online graduate program (the In-Ministry M.Div. program) at Bethel seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Since the focus of this study was on transformative learning experiences of online theological students in an online program at a seminary, students currently attending the In-Ministry M.Div. program and those who were just graduated from this program were qualified to participate in this study. Thus, the selection of these participants followed the method of purposeful sampling in qualitative research (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Research Procedure

After receiving a web survey link and a password from the researcher, the director of the program sent these electronically to the students who were currently in the program. There were 81 M.Div. students and 4 recent graduates participating in this survey. Providing the password had two purposes. First of all, it assured the students the information they had provided was confidential and secure. Secondly, the researcher was also able to make sure all the responses were only from the students from this particular school and program. SurveyMonkey.com allowed the researcher to look at individual response and sort out legitimate ones. The researcher then used King’s A Guide to Perspective Transformation and Learning Activities to score and
analyze the data (King, 1998). From this self-reported data, the researcher was able to tell how many students had experienced transformative experiences and which learning activities had contributed to these experiences. An interview provided in King’s instrument was modified into a semi-structured interview and was conducted after collecting and analyzing data from the survey and the online transcript. This semi-structured interview was described in more detail in the “Semi-structured Interview” section.

Attempting to look at this phenomenon from a more objective angle, the research moved to examining online transcript data of the two courses which these students had taken. The purpose was to investigate three presences- social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence- in these online courses. It revealed a more objective data compared to self-reported data obtained from King’s survey instrument.

Transcripts from two online courses were analyzed using content analysis method. Coding procedure utilized tools provided by Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer (2001) for assessing teaching presence, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001) for cognitive presence, and Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer (1999) for teaching presence. Each tool was described in later sections with specific categories and indicators for coding. Data analysis of these two online courses resulted in the estimated levels of social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence in these courses.

After obtaining self-reported data from the survey and getting an overall picture of the learning conditions revealed in these two online courses, the researcher conducted an interview with these students to gain more understanding about the phenomenon which might not be evident in the survey and transcript. In particular, the researcher focused on the issue of critical
reflection in online theological education, a crucial element in transformative learning theory according to Mezirow (1990).

Research Methods

Each research method used in this study is described in this section including King’s Learning Activities Survey, Garrison et al.’s community of inquiry framework, and semi-structured interview.

*King’s Learning Activities Survey (Research Questions 1 and 2)*

Using the works of Mezirow, Cranton and Brookfield, King (1998) created a Learning Activities Survey to assist adult educators in their effort to identify perspective transformation experience in adult learners and what contributed to it. This tool has been used primarily by King and her colleagues since 1997 to study perspective transformation in the context of higher education, professional development, adult ESL experience, women in the workplace, technology, sexual identity development and societal crisis (King, 1997, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; King & Biro, 2006). The validity of this instrument was accomplished through several pilot studies, and a panel of experts (King, 1998). Also, King (1998) reasoned that since “having the instrument completed at different points in time might elicit responses about different perspective transformation experiences,” a test-retest format was not appropriate (p. 23). Therefore, she addressed the reliability of the instrument from a hermeneutical perspective, that is “several individual evaluations are used to arrive at the final evaluation” (p. 23). Specifically, several items in the survey are evaluated separately before an index on perspective transformation is determined.
The Learning Activities Survey (1998) consists of 14 objective and free response questions. To identify perspective transformation, the researcher relied on items 1, 2, 3, and 5. Based on Mezirow’s ten-step transformation process, item 1 helped the participants to identify specific steps they have been through. Item 2 rephrased the question and focused on one transformative experience. Item 3 was a free response question in which the participants could briefly describe their experiences. Item 5 confirmed if the experiences they had were the result of their being in school.

Items 4 and 7 sought information about the participants’ learning activities and their life changes that might contribute to their transformative experiences. Item 6 provided information about reflection among the participants while items 8 through 14 presented a demographic picture of the participants.

The PT-Index, a score of perspective transformation in the Learning Activities Survey, is a three-point scale where a category of “3” indicates the participant has had a perspective transformation while being in school; a category of “2” indicates they have had a perspective transformation but not related to their being in school; and a category of “1” indicates the participant does not have a perspective transformation. Learning activities reported in responses with PT-Index of 3 were analyzed to see the correlation between these activities and perspective transformation.

King (1998) also suggested modification of the original assessment tool be made to adapt to different adult education settings. In this study, the learning activities and demographic questions were modified to fit the context of online theological education. Then the survey package was retyped and reformatted using SurveyMonkey.com tool. After that step, the researcher conducted a pilot survey to check the wording and functionality of the survey for its
accuracy compared to the original assessment and its internet user friendly capacity. Data analysis yielded the result of how many students had experienced perspective transformation, what perspective transformation index (PT-Index) they had, and what learning activities contributed to their experiences. This answered Research Question 1 “To what extent have online theological students from an online graduate program at a seminary experienced transformation according to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory?” and Question 2 “What learning activities contributed to transformation as indicated by these students?”

Community of Inquiry Framework (Research Question 3)

In their initial article titled “Critical Inquiry in a Text-based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education,” Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) attempted to lay out a conceptual framework that “identifies the elements that are crucial prerequisites for a successful higher education experience” (p. 87). As of May 2007, it has become the most cited article in The Internet and Higher Education journal (Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007).

Three interrelated elements identified in this framework are cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. If cognitive presence exists in an online class, critical thinking is likely to happen. Social presence indicates levels of interaction among learners which in turn shows if a learning community exists in this online class. The last element, teaching presence, reveals if the class is a community of inquiry for educational purposes through the ability to organize, facilitate and instruct shown by the instructor or the students.

This framework has great potential to accomplish the purpose of this study with two main reasons. The first reason is this framework theoretically shares with Mezirow’s transformative
learning theory the common themes and goals for adult education. The other reason is that the framework can show these themes operationally in an online setting.

The existence of these presences will create an online learning community where meaningful learning happens. Rourke and Kanuka (2009) called the three presences the independent variables and deep and meaningful learning the dependent variable. Operationally, categories and indicators for each presence have been developed to analyze online transcript using content analysis (Rourke et al., 1999; Garrison et al., 2001; Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007).

Social presence is defined as “the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally in a community of inquiry” (Rourke et al., 1999, p. 50). The three categories listed in the social presence are affective responses, interactive responses, and cohesive responses. Indicators often categorized as affective response include the use of emoticons, humor and self-disclosure. Indicators of interactive responses are “using the “reply” feature to post messages, quoting directly from the conference transcript, and referring explicitly to the content of others’ messages” (Rourke et al., 1999, p. 7). The cohesive responses are usually seen in “phatics and salutations, vocatives, and addressing the group as “we,” “our,” or “us”” (Rourke et al., 1999, p. 7).

Cognitive presence is meant “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). Four categories describing cognitive presence are triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution. A sense of puzzlement is seen as an indicator for a triggering event. Information exchange in an online course shows a sense of
exploration. The ability to connect ideas is considered an indicator of integration and a plan or action of applying new ideas indicates the category “resolution.”

Teaching presence is the binding element that is responsible for the establishment of a community of inquiry based on the coexistence of cognitive and social presence. The element ‘teaching presence’ can be categorized under instructional design, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Examples of instructional design include defining and initiating discussion topics, setting curriculum, establishing time parameters, utilizing medium effectively and establishing netiquette. Indicators for facilitating discourse are identifying areas of agreement/disagreement, seeking to reach consensus/understanding, encouraging, acknowledging, or reinforcing student contributions, setting climate for learning, drawing in participants, prompting discussion, and assessing the efficacy of the process. The last category ‘direct instruction’ can be seen in presenting content/questions, focusing the discussion on specific issues, summarizing the discussion, confirming understanding through assessment and explanatory feedback, diagnosing misconceptions, injecting knowledge from diverse sources, and responding to technical concerns.

Identifying unit of analysis was a challenging task. Rourke et al. (1999) suggested choosing a unit that would “combine the flexibility of the thematic unit, which allows coders to capture a unit in its natural form, with the reliable identification attributes of a syntactical unit” (p. 8).

Transcripts obtained from two courses identified by the students as having an impact on their experiences were analyzed using content analysis. King (1998) believed “the evaluations of perspective transformation can be best examined over the span of several courses” (p. 13).
Choosing these two courses increased a chance to see and evaluate more transformative experiences.

Since coding a transcript of an entire class was time-consuming, the researcher chose the transcript of two mid weeks of each course to study. Akyol and Garrison’s study (2008) showed that discussion postings in weeks 5 and 6 are highest in a 9-week course. Also, the level of social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence during these two weeks seem to reflect the mean of the frequency level of the whole course. For that reason, analyzing transcript from these weeks gave a relatively accurate picture of the entire course which was verified by scanning through the transcripts from other weeks. It should be noted that the purpose of transcript analysis is not to look for transformational experiences, but to grasp the overall picture of each presence in these courses only.

After obtaining a transcript of these courses, the researcher located the two middle weeks of the courses and began the process of coding using the software ATLAS.ti version 6.1.1. Relying on the categories and indicators of each presence mentioned above, the researcher coded appropriate units and recorded the frequency of each occurrence. After analyzing the data, the researcher presented the levels of each presence in these courses which answered Research Question 3 “Based on a content analysis of online transcripts, how are the elements of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence revealed in the courses taken by these students?”

*Semi-structured Interview (Research Questions 4 and 5)*

Merriam (1998) stated that “interview is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 72). Patton put it more succinctly, saying that the purpose of interview is “to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective”
(in Merriam, 1998, p. 72). Thus, in this study an interview served as a better tool in seeking information about how one’s perspective has been transformed.

A less structured interview or a semi-structured interview allowed the researchers to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). Since the issue of transformative experiences in online theological education is still new to field of adult education, a semi-structured interview was more suitable for the nature of this study.

Building on King’s instrument, this semi-structured interview served three purposes. First of all, it confirmed and explored in more detail the findings obtained from the survey and the online transcript. Secondly, it sought information about the issue of critical reflection in theological education via the online setting. Lastly, it attempted to answer the main question “What conditions are conducive to transformation for theological students in an online setting?”

To answer Research Questions 4 and 5, I conducted 45 to 60-minute semi-structured interviews specifically with students who have experienced perspective transformation (PT-Index 3) in person on the school campus and through the phone. In addition, I also considered interviewing those who have PT-Index 1 and 2 to minimize biases (Mile and Huberman, 1994). For the first purpose stated above, I used interpretive questions which can check on what the researcher has found in the findings and “provide an opportunity for yet more information, opinions, and feelings to be revealed” (Merriam, 1998, p. 78). This set of questions cannot be generated until the findings are obtained. For the second purpose, devil’s advocate questions as well as other types of questions will be use to investigate the sensitive issue of critical reflection in theological education. Merriam (1998) maintained using devil’s advocate questions will likely result in the respondent’s personal opinion or feeling about the issue concerned. For the third
purpose, hypothetical questions and ideal position questions were used to seek information about a person’s actual experience and to reveal both the positives and the negatives of a program (Merriam, 1998).

Interview Protocol

The purpose of this interview is twofold: (1) to confirm and expand the data collected for Research Questions 1, 2, and 3; and (2) to answer Research Question 4.

1. These following questions are asked to confirm and expand the data collected for Research Questions 1, 2 and 3:

   • Suppose I am in the middle weeks in this ___________ course. What would it be like in terms of learning and interaction among students and between students and the instructor? Would you say this atmosphere is conducive to a significant learning experience? Why or why not?

   • Since you have been taking online courses at this institution, have you experienced a change in your insights, beliefs, values, opinions or expectations?
      o Did you have an experience that caused you to question the way you normally think or act?
      o Did you have an experience that caused you to question your beliefs or assumptions about yourself as a Christian, a pastor, a seminary student, a father/mother…or any social role?
      o Where did this experience come from?
      o What did you do with this experience?
2. Research Question 4 “To what extent does critical reflection contribute to the transformative experiences of theological students in their online program?”

- For the purpose of clarifying the concept of critical reflection, I will briefly tell you what critical reflection is and then ask you some questions about this. Critical reflection is a reflection that questions the very foundation or premise of one’s knowledge, practice or belief. For example in the context of Christian global leadership, critical reflection may prompt a question such as, “Why do I have to embrace globalization? Why does a church have to be missional? Is there any other alternative to fulfill God’s mission?” The questions I want to ask you are:
  
  - Would you say the change you have described above is the result of your process of critically reflecting on your assumptions, values, or beliefs? Is there any other important factor that caused this change?
  
  - How did the online course methods foster or limit your critical reflection during your study in this online program?

While trying to rely on these questions for direction in an interview, I also used probes to follow up potentially useful information. Probing can come in the forms of silence, sounds, a single word or a complete sentence for clarification or for more details (Merriam, 1998). The interviewer should, however, keep in mind that “the participant is being interviewed, not interrogated” (Merriam, 1998, p. 80).

After reviewing the first 4 research questions and their answers, the researcher inferred factors that learners report as conducive to transformation in response to Research Question 5 “What conditions are conducive to transformation for theological students in an online setting?”
Findings, analysis, and observations obtained from the first 4 research responses shed light on the conditions conducive to transformation.

Data Analysis

Three sets of data were analyzed in this study. Transcripts obtained from online courses were analyzed first using Garrison et al.’s community of inquiry framework (2000). Responses collected from King’s survey were then be sorted, labeled and analyzed by SurveyMonkey website. Lastly, transcribed data from interviews, syllabi, school catalog and the researcher’s memos were analyzed using constant comparison approach to develop themes and constructs responding to the problem of this study.

In the first stage, I coded each message in online transcripts based on category indicators prescribed in the community of inquiry framework (Rourke et al., 1999; Garrison et al., 2000). Each message carried one or more categories. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each category and each presence across the weeks of each course and across the two courses. I then evaluated each presence according to its frequency and percentage. The result responded to Research Question 3 “How are the elements of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence revealed in the courses taken by these students?”
Table 3.2

*Community of Inquiry Coding Template*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Presence</td>
<td>Triggering Event</td>
<td>Sense of puzzlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Information exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Connecting ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>Apply new ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Presence</td>
<td>Affective Responses</td>
<td>Use of emoticons; humor and self-disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interactive Responses</td>
<td>Using the “reply” feature; quoting directly from the transcript; and referring to the content of others’ messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cohesive Responses</td>
<td>Phatics and salutations; vocatives; addressing the group as “we,” “our,” or “us”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Presence</td>
<td>Instructional Design</td>
<td>Defining and initiating discussion topics; setting curriculum; establishing time parameters; utilizing medium and establishing netiquette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitating Discourse</td>
<td>Identifying areas of agreement/disagreement; seeking to reach consensus/understanding; encouraging, acknowledging, or reinforcing student contributions; setting climate for</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(table continues)*
After coding the transcripts, the researcher processed data collected from King’s survey. There were two steps in this process. The first step was simple and straightforward while the second one required some computations. First of all, to identify who have experienced perspective transformation, I looked at Item 2 in which the participants had checked Yes or No depending on their experiences. Items 1, 3, and 5 gave more details as to the nature of the participants’ perspective transformation experiences. In particular, the PT-Index (perspective transformation index) specified whether a given case was a result of the participants being in school or that not related to their being in school. This stage answered Research Question 1 “To
what extent have online theological students from an online graduate program at a seminary experienced transformation according to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory?”

The second step was to create a data summary table using SurveyMonkey and SPSS program for analysis. By examining the frequencies and rankings of the data, I had an overview of the characteristics of the participants including their age, denominations, years of experience, etc.

Items 4, 6, and 7 yielded data regarding individual learning activities and how they were related to perspective transformation. Each learning activity selected by those with the PT-Index 3 (i.e., those who have experienced perspective transformation as a result of their being in the program up to this point) was counted and converted to percentages. Each was categorized and ranked accordingly. King (1998) listed three major categories: classroom assignments, support, and life changes. Under classroom assignments there are five subcategories including critical thinking assignments, class discussions, student self-assessments, discovery of one’s voice, and miscellaneous learning activities. The support category consists of support gained from students and/or instructors. The percentages of each category and subcategory were listed to reveal learning activities that promoted perspective transformation in an online classroom according to the participants in this study. This answered Research Question 2 “What learning activities contributed to transformation as indicated by these students?”
Table 3.3

*King’s Survey Learning Activities Categories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>Term papers/essays, personal journals, periods of deep thought, assigned readings, and personal reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class discussions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Class/group projects, and discussions of concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student self-assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-evaluations in courses, and Personal Learning Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery of one’s voice</td>
<td></td>
<td>Writing about concerns, class discussions, and personal journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-traditional structure of courses, class activities or exercises, internship or Co-ops, lab experiences, and “other class assignments”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td></td>
<td>Support by teacher, advisor, student, classmate, or other person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life changes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Marriage; birth/adoption of a child; moving; divorce/separate; death of a loved one; change/loss of job; retirement; others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from King’s *Learning Activities Survey* (1998)

In the last stage of data analysis, transcribed interview data were entered into ATLAS.ti, a computer program for qualitative analysis. The researcher used an interpretational analysis.
approach to analyze the data. Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) defined interpretational analysis as a process of “examining case study data closely in order to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied” (p. 466). They listed several steps in this process including segmenting the database, developing categories, coding segments, and coding category segments. In coding category segments, the researcher used constant comparison method to redefine categories, create new categories, discard or combine categories and eventually decide which categories are most important to the study. Merriam (1998) listed five criteria for naming a category. First of all, “categories should reflect the purpose of the research” (p. 183). Usually these categories answer one of the research questions in the study. Also, Merriam (1998) noted categories should be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent. A category is sensitizing when it adequately captures the meaning of a particular aspect of the phenomenon. Last but not least, all categories should be conceptually congruent, meaning they should be at the same abstract level. While coding for a category, the researcher constantly compared each incident with previous incidents coded in the same category using Glaser’s constant comparative method (1965). The researcher stopped coding categories when the data did not reveal new aspects of the previously coded categories. In other words, the categories listed became theoretically saturated and created well-established constructs grounded in the data. A diagram was produced to present these constructs and their relationships meaningful to the purpose of the study. As a result, the final analysis answered the last two research questions “To what extent does critical reflection contribute to the transformative experiences of theological students in an online setting?” and “What conditions are conducive to transformation for theological students in an online setting?”
Experienced qualitative researchers maintained data analysis should be done simultaneously with data collection (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998). In fact, Glesne offered specific advice for novice researchers through four steps including “writing memos to yourself, developing analytic files, applying rudimentary coding schemes, and writing monthly reports” (p. 148). Writing memos helped the researcher develop his thought as he tried to capture any ideas or connections reflectively. Developing analytic files includes important categories such as subjectivity, thoughts for introductory and concluding chapters, and quotations from the literature.

In analyzing data, Strauss and Corbin (1990) gave a caution that since “each of us brings to the analysis of data our biases, assumptions, patterns of thinking, and knowledge gained from experience and reading,” these can block us from seeing what is significant in the data (p. 95). Strauss and Corbin suggested five techniques both novice and experienced researchers can use to minimize their assumptions and biases about a phenomenon. These techniques are: the use of questioning; analysis of a single word, phrase, or sentence; the flip-flop procedure; the making of comparisons; and waving the red flag.

In the use of questioning, the basic questions such as who, when, where, what, how, how much, and why played an important role in stimulating “a series of more specific and related questions, which in turn lead to the development of categories, properties, and their dimensions” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 77). Analysis of a word, phrase, or sentence was helpful in teaching the researcher “how to raise questions about possible meanings, whether assumed or intended, by a speaker and those around him or her” (p. 81). By turning a concept upside down, “and imagining the very opposite,” the flip-flop technique helped the researcher to think analytically, generate provisional categories and to think about generative questions (Strauss and
Corbin, 1990, pp. 84-85). The use of systematic comparisons of two or more phenomena created questions that were different from the standard ways of thinking and gave new insights into the problem being studied.

‘Waving the red flag’ technique was used when the researcher heard certain words including “never,” “always,” “everyone knows that’s the way it is done,” “there is no need for discussion,” etc. The reason why people say these words is because people from the same cultural background mostly think the same way. In other words, they do not question these taken-for-granted assumptions. Strauss and Corbin (1990) warned researchers “never to take anything for granted” (p. 93). They explained further, “The minute that you do, you foreclose on many possibilities that may be the key to uncovering the answer to one of your research problems” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 93). These five techniques were “especially useful in analyzing the first few interviews, field observations and documents, because they help to “see” what is in the data” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 94).

Validity and Reliability

Three specific strategies were employed in this study to enhance internal validity including triangulation, member checks and researcher’s biases. Miles and Huberman (1994) listed several types of data triangulation including “triangulation by data source (which can include persons, times, places, etc.), by method (observation, interview document), by researcher (investigator A, B, etc.), and by theory” (p. 267). Since this study used King’s Learning Activities Survey, Garrison et al.’s community of inquiry framework and semi-structured interviews to investigate conditions conducive to transformation in an online setting, the data were triangulated from various sources to verify the findings. Also, since the data were collected
from the participants’ self-reports as well as from their observed behaviors and activities in an online setting, the quality of the data became stronger (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

To conduct member checks, the researcher sent emails to the participants asking them to verify if the interpretations matched their perspectives after each interview and after the final analysis. The advantage of conducting feedback after final analysis was since the researcher had gained more knowledge into the issue under investigation, he or she “can get feedback at a higher level of inference: on main factors, on causal relationships, on interpretive conclusions” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 276).

To minimize the researcher’s biases, this study has, first of all, listed the researcher’s biases in chapter one under the section “Assumptions and biases.” In addition, the study followed some specific techniques and suggestions offered by other experienced researchers in the field. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggested that researchers should periodically step back and ask: “What is going on here? Does what I think I see fit the reality of the data?” (p. 44). They also recommended that researchers maintain an attitude of skepticism when making explanations, proposing hypotheses, or asking questions. Miles and Huberman (1994) encouraged researchers to include people with different points of view from the mainstream and keep thinking conceptually by translating “sentimental or interpersonal thoughts into more theoretical ones” (p. 266). Following their advice, the researcher kept his memos to note and record his train of thoughts as to how he came to any conclusion or interpretation.

The term “reliability” in qualitative research is not quite similar to that of quantitative research. Merriam (1998) explained the term ‘reliability’ in qualitative research does not mean the results will be the same if a study is replicated, but it means “whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 206). Thus, the reliability of this study depended on the
investigator’s position, triangulation and audit trail. The investigator attempted to state as clearly as possible his assumptions and theories behind the study and his position on the issue being studied. Also, the investigator described “in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry,” so that others can authenticate the findings of this study (Merriam, 1998, p. 207).
This study investigated conditions conducive to transformative learning experiences among online theological students in an online program at a seminary. Three methods: King’s Learning Activities Survey, content analysis of online transcripts, and semi-structured interviews were employed to achieve this goal. The conceptual framework of this study is Mezirow’s transformative learning theory which argues that under certain conditions transformative learning may occur. As a result, a person’s perspective, frames of reference or habits of mind are transformed and become more inclusive, discriminating and open. While previous literature has provided research on transformation and theological education, this study particularly focused on conditions conducive to transformation in an online program at a seminary. This chapter presents results drawn from the survey, online transcripts and semi-structure interviews. The combined results culminate in a proposed diagram which describes the conditions for transformation among theological students in an online program.

The five questions that guided this study were:

- To what extent have online theological students in an online graduate program at a seminary experienced transformation according to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory?
- What learning activities contributed to transformation as indicated by these students?
- Based on a content analysis of online transcripts, how are the elements of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence revealed in the courses reported by these students?
• To what extent does critical reflection contribute to the transformative experiences of theological students in their online program?

• What conditions are conducive to transformation for theological students in an online setting?

Students currently attending the In-Ministry M.Div. program at Bethel Seminary and recent graduates were selected for this study. Before an email was sent to this population, the researcher asked for two In-Ministry M.Div. students in this program to participate in a pilot test to check for functionality and the wording of the survey. A survey link and a password were provided to these two students after they agreed to participate. Upon receiving positive feedback from these students, I sent a consent form, the survey link and password to the associate director to be included in her email before she sent her email to this population introducing the researcher and asking for participation. Two reminder emails were also sent after three weeks and six weeks later. The online survey return rate was 44.7% with 38 responses out of 81 current students and 4 recent graduates.

The results from this survey were used to guide the researcher in his next steps, particularly in selecting two courses that had meaningful impacts on the students and in revising his questions for the semi-structured interviews. Biblical Hermeneutics and Self in Community were identified as the top two courses listed by the students as having had an impact on them and their study. The researcher then asked the school to provide the online transcripts of these two courses for content analysis.

While waiting for the transcripts, the researchers also prepared for a visit to the school’s main campus in St. Paul, MN. The associate director introduced the researcher to a group of potential interviewees through an email. Those interested in the study contacted the researcher
directly through email. The researcher then arranged the time and place to meet with the participants for interview through email three or four weeks before they came to the campus for their intensive courses. The researcher was also introduced by the associate director during chapel time while in campus. Several more students came to the researcher in person expressing their interest in participation. Eleven interviews were conducted with eight in an empty classroom, two in an eating area, and one by phone. All interviews were recorded with the consents of the participants. Two or three interviews were conducted per day between break-time or after class. The researcher reviewed the questions before each interview and made notes each time an interview was conducted. While in campus, he also observed two classes and joined the students and professors during their lunch time to observe the interactions and conversations among students and their professors.

Online transcripts, field notes, and interview audio files were entered into a qualitative software program called ATLAS.ti. Online transcripts were coded according to Garrison and his colleagues’ community of inquiry template. The researcher also consulted an expert who was listed in the community of inquiry website to help with coding techniques. This expert worked as a research assistant under the supervisor of Dr. Garrison, one of the main authors of the community of inquiry framework. Through email exchange, this expert guided and gave feedback to the researcher during his coding process. After running Output/Codes-Primary Documents-Table/Quotation Count Report command, the researcher obtained statistics about the frequencies of each category in each transcript (‘primary document’ in ATLAS.ti).

The ATLAS.ti software also allowed the researcher to code and analyze different types of documents, video and audio files in the same place. After coding the transcripts for three presences, the researcher started coding all collected data for transformation guided by this
primary question “what conditions conducive to transformation for theological students in this online program.” Field notes, syllabi, catalog, survey results, online transcripts and interview audio files were entered into the ATLAS.ti software for analysis. During the preliminary coding, the researcher developed 264 descriptive codes. Using the function “Family” in ATLAS.ti, the researcher grouped these descriptive codes into more abstract categories guided by the main question of the study. The list was then reduced to 33 codes. While coding, the researcher also kept memos and noted relationships as well as major themes and patterns among categories and subcategories. During this process, codes were constantly reevaluated and relabeled in light of new information and new emerging patterns.

At this time, the researcher used related literature to compare the code list with published research in the literature. Then he restarted the coding process to make sure the new code list was grounded in the data. At this stage, the researcher also kept in mind the development of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in which the focus is “on specifying a category (phenomenon) in terms of the conditions that give rise to it; the context (its specific set of properties) in which it is embedded; the action/interactional strategies by which it is handled, managed, carried out; and the consequences of those strategies” (p. 97). After going through the revising process including rereading memos, code comments and the research questions, the researcher produced a list of 16 codes, listed in Table 4.1, and their relationships including the causal conditions, the phenomenon, the intervening conditions, the strategies and the consequences under study: (A) CAUSAL CONDITION ⇒ (B) PHENOMENON⇒(C) CONTEXT⇒ (D) INTERVENING CONDITIONS ⇒(E) ACTION/INTERACTION STRATEGIES ⇒(F) CONSEQUENCES (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 99).
Table 4.1

*Categories in Strauss and Corbin’s Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Causal conditions</td>
<td>Critical reflection</td>
<td>Reflection on one’s own assumptions</td>
<td>“…and then I start questioning the books, going ‘what if the book isn't right, the book has great points but what if it's not going to work in my ministry context or what I'm doing.’ “…If you don't critically reflect, then it doesn't have the power. When you see a statement, and you think it's worthy of critical reflection, that's the only time it does change&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Setup</td>
<td>Nature and structure of the program including subcategories in-ministry and integrative learning strategy</td>
<td>“My being in school was certainly the catalyst for this change. The experience I had through these lectures and in-class experiences, along with conversations with classmates, and communication with friends who serve in ministry…”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Phenomenon     | Transformation  | Change in perspectives                              | "It was an adjunct professor who is missionary in the Middle East. And so our conversations after hearing some of the Muslim speakers, I think, really helped us to recognize how we kind of syncretized
Table 4.1 (continues).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strauss and Corbin’s paradigm</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Context                     | In-ministry | Being active in ministry, including subcategories multiple perspectives, integration focus, and intrinsic expectations | American culture with what we understood about following Jesus”  

*Multiple perspectives:*  
“I've loved the experience of having people from other backgrounds and denominations. It's been a cool thing to see how churches like that work, the things they stress on, the way they do things...that's been really an encouraging thing for me, to see people that are on similar road and journey that I'm on but they come from such different places.”

*Integration focus:*  
“…One thing that is nice about this course format is that it allows me to stay in my ministry context which forces me and I think other students in my classes to keep things real practical.”

*Intrinsic Expectations:*  
“In our first quarter, we had a great hermeneutics class that was clearly built to help us not just learn academically but have scriptures transform us and our professor continually reminded us of that purpose…”

*(table continues)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strauss and Corbin’s paradigm</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inter­­­­­­­­­­­­­vening conditions</td>
<td>In-ministry</td>
<td>Being active in ministry, including subcategories multiple perspectives, integration focus, and intrinsic expectations</td>
<td>“…so I think that the format of courses allows us to stay in the ministry context, also forces us to be continually evaluating the things that we're learning not only on the academic level but on the practical level and I think that's helpful.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Physical Presence

Including classroom physical presence and local physical presence. Classroom physical presence involves professors, students, staff...while local physical presence indicates contacts students establish with people in their local ministry context.

*Classroom physical presence:*

“I look forward to being able to interact with my classmates again in a new class setting, I look forward to being to see them all during intensives, so I really look forward to that which makes it that much easier to continue the program”

*Local physical presence:*

“I don't think that I would have had that opportunity if everything was taught online and I also think that if I would have been in a more traditional setting I would never have had opportunity to invest that much time in meeting with someone.”
I am very aware that I have bias’s that are hard for me to break. Furthermore when I approach a passage (especially this passage), I come from a culture of both backgrounds ironically. This makes interpretation for me very difficult. I have to remember that ultimately I need God and his Spirit to help me interpret. Even though there are skills that I can bring, what is most important is trusting God to reveal what He would desire, thus bring him the Glory.”

“…One thing about this program, can't speak for traditional or other programs, they use a lot of vehicles to get us there: we do readings, we interact with articles, we interact with each other and then lecturing, I think it's a little bit of everything…”

“…Two areas that changes really happened are: one is my view of God and how I interact with God personally, but then because of that it also changed how I view myself communally with people in the church and outside of the church"
Two areas that changes really happened are: one is my view of God and how I interact with God personally, but then because of that it also changed how I view myself communually with people in the church and outside of the church.

“…becoming able to be very listening, very accepting through love, not necessarily accepting through agreement, saying “okay, I understand where you are, and I accept where you are right now.”

The remainder of this chapter consists of two major sections. The first section describes the overview of demographic information including the demographic information of survey participants and interview participants. The second section presents findings related to each research question including a diagram that attempts to answer the main question of this research.

### Demographics of the Survey Participants

Emails were sent to 85 students (81 current In-Ministry M.Div. students and 4 recent graduates), and 38 responded by taking an online survey. Five demographic factors characterized these participants. Male participants numbered 68.6% and female, 35.5%. Most were married (88.6%) and some were single (11.4%). No divorced/separated or widowed was reported. Thirty-
four participants were white (97.1%) and only 1 was Hispanic (2.9%). A total of 84.8% of the students had finished their first year. Those who were in their third year had the highest percentage (24.2%). Only 6.9% were in their first year and 9.1% were in their sixth year.

Regarding age, students aged 30-39 represented almost half of the sample (48.6%). No student was younger than 24. Only one student (2.9%) was in the 60-69 age range. Students ages 25 to 49 comprised 85.7%.

Table 4.2 describes sex distribution for all participants taking the survey.

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 38. Missing values, 3.
Table 4.3 presents the marital status of these participants.

Table 4.3

*Marital Status Distribution by Percent of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced/separated</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $n = 38$. Missing values, 3.

Table 4.4 lists the percentage of each race represented by the participants.

Table 4.4

*Race Distribution by Percent of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>97.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $n = 38$. Missing values, 3.
Table 4.5 describes how many quarters the participants have finished.

Table 4.5

*Enrolled Quarters Distribution by Percent of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 38. Missing values, 5.*
Table 4.6 lists age range by percentage of participants

Table 4.6

*Age Range Distribution by Percent of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 70</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $n = 38$. Missing values, 3.

Demographics of the Interview Participants

Below is the list of interview participants and their demographic information. Included in the list are their names, time and date when they were interviewed, the place where the interview took place, the length of the interview, their age, how many quarters they had completed and any ministry position they had at the time of the interview. Half of the participants were from 30 to 39 years old. Nearly 40% of the interview participants were from 25-29 years old and only 18.1% were in their fifties. There is only one female out of these eleven participants.
Table 4.7

*Demographics of the Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Quarters in the Program</th>
<th>Position in Ministry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>July 21st</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>30:19</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>12 quarters</td>
<td>Associate pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12:30 p.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>July 21st</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>39:11</td>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>14 quarters</td>
<td>Middle school teacher (science and religion) at a Christian school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4:45 p.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>July 22nd</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>33:14</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>4 yrs in the program</td>
<td>Pastor of a campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9:30 a.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>July 22nd</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>30:08</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>5 quarters</td>
<td>Full-time youth pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1:15 p.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>July 22nd</td>
<td>Dining hall</td>
<td>33:08</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>12 quarters</td>
<td>Pastor of Ministry Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4:45 p.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>July 23rd</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>41:03</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>13 quarters</td>
<td>Youth minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9:30 a.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>July 23rd</td>
<td></td>
<td>29:53</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>10 quarters</td>
<td>Director of Adult Program/Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12:40 p.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(table continues)*
Description of Results of Each Question

Question 1: To What Extent have Online Theological Students from an Online Graduate Program at a Seminary Experienced Transformation according to Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory?

The researcher relied on the participants’ responses to Items 1, 2, 3, and 5 in the survey to determine what percent of the participants experienced transformation and to what extent they experienced it. Various educational experiences reported based on Mezirow’s ten-step transformative learning process appear in the following table.

Table 4.7 (continues).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Quarters in the Program</th>
<th>Position in Ministry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chuck</td>
<td>July 26th</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>36:48</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>13 quarters</td>
<td>Associate Pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7:15 a.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>July 26th</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>33:00</td>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>5 quarters</td>
<td>Student ministry pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12:37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>July 26th</td>
<td>Dining hall</td>
<td>1:00:02</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>13 quarters</td>
<td>Military chaplain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4:45 p.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>Phone call</td>
<td>45:22</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>12 quarters</td>
<td>Nurse/Church planter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21, 2pm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4.8

*Students’ Educational Experiences Based on Mezirow’s Ten-Step Transformative Learning Process at This Institution*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I had an experience that caused me to question the way I normally act.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had an experience that caused me to question my ideas about social roles.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Examples of social roles include what a mother or father should do or how an adult child should act.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As I questioned my ideas, I realized I no longer agreed with my previous beliefs or role expectations.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or instead, as I questioned my ideas, I realized I still agreed with my beliefs or role expectations.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I realized that other people also questioned their beliefs.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I thought about acting in a different way from my usual beliefs and roles.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt uncomfortable with traditional social expectations.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tried out new roles so that I would become more comfortable or confident in them.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tried to figure out a way to adopt these new ways of acting.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I gathered the information I needed to adopt these new ways of acting.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I began to think about the reactions and feedback from my new behavior.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I took action and adopted these new ways of acting.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not identify with any of the statements above.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 38.*
Based on these data, the researcher concluded that since 6 students did not identify with any of the statements listed above, only 32 students \((38 - 6 = 32)\) might have experienced transformation. In Item 2, which is “since you have been taking courses at this institution, do you believe you have experienced a time when you realized that your values, beliefs, opinions or expectations had changed?” respondents who answered ‘yes’ to this question numbered 34 or 89.5% out of 38 participants. Even though the number is higher in Item 2 (34 respondents) than Item 1 (32 respondents), the researcher still maintained only 32 students might have experienced transformation. The reason is Item 1 specified Mezirow’s ten original stages of perspective transformation (King, 1998) while Item 2 was more general and the respondents might have experienced change through different processes than Mezirow’s criteria for transformation. Therefore, Item 1 carries more weight in determining the number of respondents having experienced perspective transformation according to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory.

From the previous two items, the researcher determined 32 students might have had perspective transformation which might be the result of being in school (PT Index 3) or outside school (PT Index 2). Items 3 and 5 helped the researcher to determine how many had experienced perspective transformation as a result of being in school (PT Index 3) and how many had experienced perspective transformation from other sources rather than in school (PT Index 2). In Items 3 and 5, the students briefly described what happened in their transformation and the source of their transformation. By looking at Item 5, the researcher learned that 30 students reported being in school affected their experience of change. Relying on the combination of Items 1, 2, 3 and 5, the researcher, therefore, concluded that thirty students had PT Index 3 (in school), four students had PT Index 2 (outside of school), and four students had PT Index-1 or no perspective transformation.
Below are the excerpts of these open responses from Item 3 and 5. Each respondent was identified by the date and time they took the survey.

- **4 Jun 28, 2010 1:12 PM**
  My beliefs about God, Jesus, and others changed. I became more accepting, compassionate, and less judgmental.

- **5 Jun 30, 2010 1:32 PM**
  For me, it is more a general evolution of thought. Some has been confirmed, some has been highlighted in a different manner than I had previously considered.

- **6 Jul 2, 2010 11:28 AM**
  My very first class on hermeneutics showed me that there was a wide range of interpretation of the Bible even among conservative Christians. It kind of knocked me out of my box. I also took a class on Islam, and it really changed my thinking and my actions.

- **7 Jul 5, 2010 11:48 PM**
  I think that I previously had very strong feelings that doctrines were right or wrong, that it was incredibly important to believe the right doctrines, and those people with wrong doctrines should be educated until they have the right doctrines. After a few of my classes I came (at some point) to a place where I didn't feel that I needed to combat these people, but that I would grow more by trying to understand where they are coming from rather than change them. It's the Holy Spirit that does that stuff, anyway.

- **1 Jun 21, 2010 9:21 PM**
  For starters, I had never been in a place where I had to question why I believed what I believed. That challenge was only posed to me because I was in class. Had it not been for
that class, I probably wouldn't have had the journey I've had since then. I guess you could say that being in class made all the difference!

- **2Jun 22, 2010 4:08 AM**
  My greatest personal challenge came through Community Class. So, the class was the catalyst for the change.

- **3Jun 26, 2010 12:07 PM**
  My classes and all that they involved made me think about things that I had not thought about before or didn't recognize were "wrong" or "negative" ways of thinking.

- **4Jun 28, 2010 1:13 PM**
  While significant events were happening in my life, seminary was challenging my paradigm of thinking.

- **5Jun 30, 2010 1:33 PM**
  I returned to school to learn more and knew that it would change me - knowledge does whether we recognize it or not.

- **6Jul 2, 2010 11:32 AM**
  I never would have even looked at my perspective on certain things if not for the school setting. In order to be a good student, I had to actively engage the material and the activities...and being a good student is what I do, so I dove into the material and God changed my mind and my heart.
Question 2: What Learning Activities Contributed to Transformation as Indicated by These Students?

To answer this question, the researcher used the function “crosstab” in SurveyMonkey Website and chose those who responded “Yes” to the question, “Since you have been taking courses at this institution, do you believe you have experienced a time when you realized that your values, beliefs, opinions or expectations had changed?”

When asked what influenced the change, the students were given three options including significant change in their lives, a person, or a class assignment. Of these three class assignment received the largest number of responses (66.7%). The second factor influenced the change was a person (60.6%). Only 21.2% reported a significant change in their lives influenced their perspective transformation.

Table 4.9 lists the percentage of participants who responded to the question “Was it a significant change in your life that influenced the change?”

Table 4.9

| Was It a Significant Change in a Student’s Life that Influenced the Change |
|-----------------------------|--------|----------------|
|                             | n      | Percent        |
| Yes                         | 7      | 21.2%          |
| No                          | 26     | 78.8%          |

Note. n =34. Missing value, 1.
Table 4.10 lists the percentage of participants who responded to the question “Was it a person who influenced the change?”

Table 4.10

*It Was a Person that Influenced the Change*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $n = 34$. Missing value, 1.

Table 4.11 lists the percentage of participants who responded to the question, “Was it a class assignment that influenced the change?”

Table 4.11

*It Was a Class Assignment that Influenced the Change*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $n = 34$. Missing value, 1.

When asked which class assignment influenced the change, the students reported assigned readings as the highest percentage that contributed to that change (86.4%). “Verbally discussing your concerns” and “Personal reflection” came second (72.7% and 72.7% respectively). Data from the semi-structured interview later shed light on why the students chose these categories. These three categories “assigned readings,” “verbally discussing your
concerns” and “personal reflection” belong to a category named “Integrative learning activities” which will be explained and discussed later.

Table 4.12

A Class Assignment that Influenced the Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assigned readings</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>86.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbally discussing your concerns</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal reflection</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion forums</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term papers/essays</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing about your concerns</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep, concentrated thought</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class/group projects</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional structure of a course</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal journal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation in a course</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship or co-op</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab experiences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal learning assessment (PLA)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 34. Missing value, 12. Two entries in “Other” include (1) Reading assignments-ideas from people all around the world; (2) Discussion outside class with co-learners
Question 3: Based on a Content Analysis of Online Transcripts,

*How are the Elements of Cognitive Presence, Social Presence and Teaching Presence Revealed in the Courses Taken by These Students?*

Data from the survey guided the researcher to identify two courses that had significant impacts on their learning and ministry. These two courses, Biblical Hermeneutics and Self in Community, are both intensive courses. In the preload section, students meet and interact online for 4 weeks. Then they come to the main campus for one week for each course. After that, in the postload section, they continue to meet and finish their coursework online for that last four weeks.

In Biblical Hermeneutics course, the researcher chose two middle weeks including Week 4 and Week 5 for coding while in Self in Community, the researcher chose Week 3 and Week 9 after skimming through other weeks to see if it would be more likely to find transformation experiences toward the end of a course.

In Social Presence Coding, category “Affective” had the highest percentage (61.64%) while “Interactive” had the lowest (15.1%) in the course Self and Community. Compared to the course Biblical Hermeneutics, the category “Affective” was lowest (24.4%) while “Interactive” as the highest (41.9%).
Table 4.13

Social Presence in Self in Community Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Week 9</th>
<th>Two weeks total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.12%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.14

Social Presence in Biblical Hermeneutics Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Week 4</th>
<th>Week 5</th>
<th>Two weeks total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesive</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>22.43%</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (1999) also analyzed Social Presence based on its density by combining all social presence incidents, multiplying by 1,000, which yield a unit of
incidents per 1,000 words, and divided by the number of words in a transcript. Using this approach I computed the density indexes for the two courses under study. In the Self in Community Course, the density was higher in Week 9 (14.4) than Week 3 (11.4), but overall, it was lower (12.0) than the overall density in Biblical Hermeneutics course (21.2).

Table 4.15

*Social Presence Density in Self in Community Course*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>Social Presence Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>2719</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>2922</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Weeks Total</td>
<td>5640</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.16

*Social Presence Density in Biblical Hermeneutics Course*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>Social Presence Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>6788</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>11780</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Weeks Total</td>
<td>18568</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cognitive Presence was coded according to four categories including Triggering Events, Exploration, Integration and Resolution.

In the Biblical Hermeneutics course, category “Integration” had the highest percentage in Week 4 (55.6%) but went down to the lowest percentage in Week 5 (17.9%). The overall picture
of Biblical Hermeneutics course revealed “Exploration” as the category appeared the most (36.3%) in these online transcripts and “Integration” came second (28.0%).

Table 4.17

*Cognitive Presence in Biblical Hermeneutics Course*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Week 4</th>
<th>Week 5</th>
<th>Two weeks total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>$n$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggering</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Self in Community course, category “Integration” had the highest percentage in both Week 3 (45.5%) and Week 9 (62.5%). Category “Resolution” came in second with 21.1%, much higher than 0.6% from the Biblical Hermeneutics course.
Table 4.18

**Cognitive Presence in Self in Community Course**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th></th>
<th>Week 9</th>
<th></th>
<th>Two weeks total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggering</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teaching Presence consists of three categories including Instructional Design, Facilitating Discourse, and Direct Instruction.

In Biblical Hermeneutics course, “Direct Instruction” was highest (51.1%) in Week 4 but dropped to the second place (37.4%) in Week 5. The overall picture of this course indicated “Facilitating Discourse” was the highest percentage category and Direct Instruction was not far from the first place with 41.0%.
Table 4.19

*Teaching Presence in Biblical Hermeneutics Course*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Week 4</th>
<th></th>
<th>Week 5</th>
<th></th>
<th>Two weeks total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Design</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating Discourse</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Instruction</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Self in Community Course, “Direct Instruction” maintained the highest percentage in both weeks and overall (57.9%), which is higher than that in Biblical Hermeneutics course (41%). Instructional Design was absent in both weeks in Self in Community course.

Table 4.20

*Teaching Presence in Self in Community Course*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th></th>
<th>Week 9</th>
<th></th>
<th>Two weeks total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Design</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating Discourse</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Instruction</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 4: To What Extent does Critical Reflection Contribute to the Transformative Experiences of Theological Students in Their Online Program?

While most participants (9 students) acknowledged the role of critical reflection in their transformative experiences during their study, some (2 students) didn’t mention critical reflection in their change. Two major themes emerged from the data when the researcher asked these theological students how critical reflection contributed to their transformative experiences in their online program. The first theme is the boundaries of critical reflection in theological education, and the second theme is the means that promoted critical reflection in online theological education.

Boundaries of Critical Reflection in Theological Education

The first boundary in critical reflection for theological students is the content of the reflection. The students acknowledged the important role of critical reflection in their study, but they also drew a line as to how critically they wanted to think or reflect. For them, certain issues are nonnegotiable. Chuck said his belief about God and Jesus as the way, the truth and the life will not be changed but deepened when he came to seminary:

I don't know change is always the goal. You know, someone comes in believing God is three in one, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, that's not something you want to change, but it is something you want to deepen.

Scott did not state what specific issues are nonnegotiable but he affirmed that "there are certain things I divorce myself from...You know, I'd say: " I understand where you stand on that and that's great...but anything you have to say is not going to change my mind."

Paul gave an explanation of why critical reflection on basic issues concerning theology does not occur very often in seminary:
I haven't seen most of the critical reflection be happening at really foundational level because I think by the time people get into the program whether they're looking for a Masters of Divinity or they're already involved in some sort of ministry, they've kind of solidified, okay I believe the Bible is God's Word, I believe Jesus is the Son of God, you know they've got the basics pretty well solidified in their own lives, so I think that as far as reflecting back on those things, I don't see a lot of that and I think that's fine, but I think there are fair amount of critical reflection on presuppositions of even what it means for me to be in ministry, what does it mean for me to be a child of God.

Thomas believed there had to be a boundary and that the text or what is written in the Bible is the boundary:

One of the things that Hermeneutics says all the time is you have to bring it back to the text, what is the text saying. And so, there is a boundary. If it's outside of what the text is trying to say, if it's outside of what I know to be true from what I understand the text to be saying, then I can't go with it just because everybody else is.

Later, he acknowledged that this is a hard question and that the boundary is not very clear. He said, “there has to be a line but I don't think that line is so hard set...that’s a hard question. There has to be but I don't know where the boundary is.”

Also being very cautious, Scott mentioned the word "safely" when he was talking about critical reflection. I asked him to explain further what he meant. He responded, "I don't want to go so far [pause] create a god that isn't there." He believed what we need to know about God had been given to us through the Bible.

Scott, acknowledging the boundary is hard to see, maintained that a personal relationship with God can help a person to discern that boundary:

As long as you're spending time with God in a situation, you'll get there. You'll know when you're about to cross [that boundary]...He wants you to succeed; He wants you to come back to Him. I don't think there is any argument about that. Everything He's ever done is to try to reconcile our relationship to Him. I think if you're pursuing that relationship, He'll keep you within that boundary.

For these theological students, they agreed there is a boundary as to where they want to draw a line for their critical reflection. Some listed certain unchanging beliefs or foundations
vital for their learning process and some argued that a personal connection with God can help discern the boundary which is hard to see for many people.

Having said that, they still think critical reflection occupies an important place in their study. In fact, they use critical reflection as a filter or safeguard in dealing with various beliefs and perspectives presented to them in seminary. Apart from those nonnegotiable issues or boundary mentioned above, other issues are open to change. Thomas was certain that critical reflection is vital to any change:

Critical reflection is foundational in the change. The reason why I say that is because, for instance my Systematic Theology I class I grew up in a certain way of thinking about things and then he introduced us a whole new thing, like my teacher all of a sudden says "maybe you should think of the Trinity like this instead of the way you grow up the whole entire time. If I simply sit there and just say, "okay, I'm going to abandon this and go with him, how does that cause change in me? It doesn't. It just means I drop one and pick up another without even thinking about it...We have to have some sort of critical analysis, critical thinking. I've got to have a process...now I have this filter that I can filter. "Okay, what was my presupposition before this...this is what my teacher is saying now, how can I make a connection here between these two and not leave this just behind and hanging but really fix this presupposition so that it can be viewed in a right way, so that I know this is why I believe and this is how I believe it, so I'm making connections with how I'm coming to things.

Paul had the same thought:

As I'm learning stuff I've got to figure out how to integrate that into what I already know, and sometimes it doesn't fit really easily. So I have to kind of reevaluate some stuff I know or I thought I knew about myself, about my faith, about the Scripture. And if I've learned something new and I'm not willing to just discount it and say, 'no, it's not really true' If I come across something and I'm like 'oh, this is really true, I'm going to make this fit, then fitting into my presuppositions into my worldview is what makes me use that critical reflection.

Thomas also saw critical reflection as a filter for him to evaluate what he knew and what he was doing in ministry:

Critical analysis helps me to know what things work for my ministry context, what things don't...When I first started seminary, every book that I read, I thought it was the best, like, this is right, this is correct, this is perfect, this is awesome and then I went to my pastor
one time and I said, "Oh man, you've got to read this truth, it's amazing, it is opening my eyes, and he said, "well, what about this , and then I start questioning the books, going 'what if the book isn't right, the book has great points but what if it's not going to work in my ministry context or what I'm doing. Then I have to really critically think about it. I can't just take it at face value whereas before I was saying 'this is right, this is correct' you know, I think critical analysis is one of the filters I use to see ministry through…

Thomas explained how he reconciled the idea that critical reflection has a boundary in his theological study context and the fact that he was also pursuing an education that supports critical reflection:

You know, I can't just set my boundaries and go, "I'll not absolutely listen to this,” but my critical analysis has to allow everything into my boundaries and then my filters can begin to happen.

David asserted “"If you don't critically reflect, then it doesn't have the power. When you see a statement, and you think it's worthy of critical reflection, that's the only time it does change.” The term “power” is unique for David. He explained something is powerful when it has the potential or the power to change a person. Thus, a person is more likely to change if he or she reflects on something critically according to David’s perspective.

Overall, boundaries of critical reflection in theological education indicated certain issues or contents that theological students do not want to cross. On the other hand, they welcomed critical reflection and believed it was vital in any change.

Means Promoting Critical Reflection in Online Theological Education

Two major factors identified in the data related to means that promotes critical reflection in this online program were discussion boards and integration. Discussion board is a useful tool for critical reflection among these students because they are forced to think through a problem very carefully in the midst of multiple perspectives for or against theirs. Larry likened discussion
board with hanging out with friends at lunch time in college and talking about what they learn, only the standard is higher and the quality is better because online discussion is more structured and intentional:

the online is like here's the instruction, like a class period, and the discussion board is almost like, ‘ok now go talk to your friends at lunch and wrestle with them about what you believe and all that kind of stuff, so it feels a lot more like you have a structured way of doing that online.

Larry clarified because students have to interact with others, they have to wrestle with their own thoughts and know how to present them in a way that can persuade others. As a result, they are forced to think more critically about their own perspectives in the online format. Fred also said that critical reflection is promoted through the discussion board format because “it forces you an opportunity to really interact with other peers who may or may not agree with how you see things.”

Integration is an indirect factor of being online. It is actually a by-product of being in ministry. In other words, the online program requires or increases a chance for students to be in ministry which in turn leads to integration of what they learn into what they are doing in their ministry context. Jeff put it very clearly: "I think online education forces me to always ask the application question, the pragmatic question, and figure out how to integrate it.” In contrast with a traditional seminary where students just learn the theories and wait until their graduation before they can actually apply what they learn, this online program excited many students because of its immediate applicability. Jeff said, “I just love the delivery system because it allows me to always apply what I'm learning instead of stuffing away hoping I'll remember it once I actually start doing what I plan to do.” Integration is not an end in itself. Fred’s perspective showed that integration helps deeper learning:
I like the online interaction, reading materials and then having good questions posted by the instructor that I interact with, and interact with other students with those same questions. I like that aspect, I mean, it's challenging. It makes you think, it makes you have to articulate what you believe and why you believe and evaluate, 'oh, maybe I didn't have that right and, so I just find that very helpful and I also find that, I think that being in a local context and walking through things brings a level of maturity and a level of more issues to deal with and apply all of our learning with as we go. If you come to a seminary for a few years, you'll get all these stuff, but you don't really apply it, and so it just make the learning deeper and I think it sticks better.

In summary, being in ministry, which forces integration on the students’ side, serves as a condition conducive to critical reflection which is, in turn, facilitated constructively by the online discussion boards in the online environment.

*Question 5: What Conditions are Conducive to Transformation for Theological Students in an Online Setting?*

Taking into account the four previous answers, the response to this last question seeks to address the main concern of this study. Grounded from the data collected through the survey, online transcripts and the interviews, an integrative learning condition model was constructed as follows.
Figure 4.1. Integrative learning condition model.
Using Strauss and Corbin’s procedures in qualitative research (1990), this network view attempts to answer the question 'what conditions conducive to transformation for In-Ministry M.Div. student in an online program at Bethel seminary.' A brief description of this network view is presented first, and then a more detailed description of each category with illustrations will follow.

The phenomenon under study is transformation. The causal conditions leading to transformation are the program setup and critical reflection. For critical reflection, this category is influenced and triggered by divine element. This divine element is considered God's intervention, guidance or the Bible, or a view about God. This was reported as having influenced changes in the students. Two other categories highlighted in this section are the program setup and physical presence.

For the program setup, this category has two subcategories: integrative learning strategy and in-ministry. Integrative learning strategy is the strategy employed to facilitate transformation while in-ministry is the intervening condition embedded in the nature and structure of the program itself. The school deliberately uses this strategy in hope of transformation in the students' lives since they have a definite goal, which is to train “whole and holy ministers of the Gospel.” Reading assignments, discourse including online discussion board, interaction among students and professors online and face-to-face, and community revealed through intentional cohort building and relationship building among students and professors are three expressions of the integrative learning strategy.

The category "In-ministry" consists of three subcategories including multiple perspectives, integration, and intrinsic expectation. Being in ministry naturally forces a person to constantly integrate what he or she learns. Furthermore, being exposed to many different
perspectives challenges his or her previous long-held assumptions about certain beliefs or perspectives. He or she also expects change coming from a constant contact with the Bible which is believed to bring change and transformation in their religious context. These above-mentioned factors can lead to critical reflection upon current practice or assumptions, and thus may lead to change or transformation.

Physical presence, especially, plays a critical role in this change. The students reported that face-to-face interactions or in-person contacts had triggered critical reflection which eventually led to change. Therefore, this finding suggests that transformation in an online program does not exclude the physical presence element.

Following is a more detailed presentation of each category and subcategory from the learning condition model found on page 117. The order will be from bottom to top and from right to left except for physical presence which will be presented last. This is the order of each category presented in the following section:

- Transformation
- Critical reflection
- Divine element
- Program setup
- In-ministry with three subcategories including multiple perspective, integration focus and intrinsic expectations
- Integrative learning strategy with three subcategories including reading assignment, discourse and community
- Physical presence
Transformation

The following table describes each participant and their transformative learning experience during their study.

Table 4.2

*Description of Participants’ Reported Changes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description of reported change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>David described his change came from two particular courses namely Self in Community and Ethics in which the professors asked challenging questions and conducted a productive conversation among students in a face-to-face setting during intensive. David identified two areas of change including his view of God and his view about himself in community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Larry’s change resulted from (1) the experience he had with his middle school students and (2) a relationship he built with a Muslim friend. Upon finding out that his middle school students believed the doctrine of Trinity was very important in Christianity, he became more excited about the topic and treated this topic more seriously in his study. Coming in contact with a Muslim man has changed his perspective about Muslim. Before he had a feeling that “the reason Islam exists is to destroy America. But now this perspective has changed very much.” He recognized “we’re a lot more the same than different.” He in fact invited his Muslim friend to come to his class to talk about Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>The biggest thing for Ray is the community including the students and the professors. Because of the diversity in his community plus the physical presence he experienced with this community, he said it made him more humble. Since intensive time helped him connect with his community in person, he could connect ‘faces to things.’ He realized that “there are people out there who I love view it differently than I do and that’s okay.”</td>
</tr>
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*(table continues)*

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120

Table 4.21 (continues).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description of reported change</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>A full-time youth pastor, Jesse came to seminary with a background in biblical studies. He, however, acknowledged that his view of himself as a pastor has changed. He came to realize that his role is not to fix or change people but to point people to God and only God can change them. He credited his change through one of his readings and face-to-face lectures during one of his intensive weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>Through his encounters with missionaries in the Middle East, Jeff realized how he had mixed American culture with what it really meant to follow Jesus. This caused him to be more critical in looking at the concept of following Jesus in his life and ministry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Thomas pointed out Hermeneutics class as a foundational factor causing changes during his study. Seminary helped him to be more confident in dealing with various situations in ministry. He said he no longer approach a situation with old clichés but with understanding and thoughtful process. Also he reported a question posed by one of his professors had changed his perspective on prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Fred said he became less legalistic and came to focus more on God rather than himself. He no longer “tried to drive people to do the godly things” but encouraged them to come to God and trusted God’s grace which would help them to do what is right. His current seminary experience was just one of many other factors including God and his home church that led to this change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuck</td>
<td>Chuck reported he had been through the process of critical reflection on major issues during his college years. He, however, said that his seminary education helped him to be more willing to be open to others. In particular, this change came from his understanding of <em>imago dei</em> and his friend’s example.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(table continues)*
Paul reported he became more open to some issues in ministry including a Bible translation and evangelism approach. Through reading a book and a class that used that book, he came to know more about non-Christians and he wanted to build his life and ministry from that understanding.

Scott said he became stronger in what he had believed. His understanding about God and ministry had been deepened. He also said he became more accepting, willing to listen to other viewpoints. His cohort provided an ideal environment in which he could process his thinking.

Mary became more pessimistic about denominational structures and being exposed to various perspectives in seminary. Mary came to be more careful and objective in reading her Bible. She wanted to know what the Bible really said rather than how a denomination interpreted the Bible. She planned to open a house church in her area.

**Table 4.21 (continues).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>Scott said he became stronger in what he had believed. His understanding about God and ministry had been deepened. He also said he became more accepting, willing to listen to other viewpoints. His cohort provided an ideal environment in which he could process his thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Becoming more pessimistic about denominational structures and being exposed to various perspectives in seminary, Mary came to be more careful and objective in reading her Bible. She wanted to know what the Bible really said rather than how a denomination interpreted the Bible. She planned to open a house church in her area.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mezirow (1990) defined perspective transformation as “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (p. 14). To differentiate between meaning schemes and meaning perspectives, Mezirow noted meaning schemes are points of view that can be changed as a person acquires everyday insight while meaning perspectives are “less permeable, and more elusive habits of mind” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 168). Based on these guidelines, a person is considered having experienced perspective transformation only when he
or she can see other aspects of life differently as a result of his or her changed perspectives. For that reason, Larry, Chuck and Scott showed that they might experience changes in their meaning schemes but evidence of changes in meaning perspectives were not clear. In other words, their changed perspectives did not affect other aspects of their life or ministry according to the data collected from the interview. The other eight participants indicated that their changed perspective resulted in changes in other areas of their life and ministry as well. The scope of influence is broader and deeper in their cases. For example, Paul reported his view on evangelism had changed which affected his life and how he established his ministry. In the case of Mary, she tried to divorce herself from established authority which used to determine how she viewed her world. The change she experienced was deeper which could affect everything else she tried to do from that time on.

Critical Reflection

This category has been presented in detail in question four. Two other aspects of critical reflection related to two categories-divine element and physical presence- will be discussed below.

Divine Element

In the context of theological education, divine element exists and plays an important role in these participants’ learning experiences. While processing her thought, Lindsey posted this comment in one of her online classes, “In all honesty, I feel like I am more like clay right now than stone. I am molded and shaped by all these new ideas. I am trying to seek the Lord's guidance in understanding His word more.”
Fred credited God as the major factor of change in his life:

He (God) has allowed me to come to a place of desperation so that I could be ready to receive His grace in Christ and understand that all my hope is in Jesus Christ alone and I think that He just allowed that to happen over a period of many years.

Having said that, Fred emphasized he was a reflective person who incorporated his reflection with prayer:

I'm a reflective person, I think a lot about what I believe and why I believe it...I think about it a lot. Anything that I do, I weigh and I pray "God, is it right, is it your heart?"

Thomas recalled one of his first classes at seminary where the professor helped him see the important role of God in all his study:

...Before we get in the technical stuff, let's get our hearts correct and let's connect ourselves with God and I think for me, that's been probably the best because it's really easy for me to sit down and all of a sudden go 'okay, i'm just gonna read for the stuff that I need to get out of it and not have my heart in tune with what God is trying to say through the scripture.

For Thomas, "...the understanding comes from Him (God) not from school."

Caleb in his Biblical Hermeneutics class acknowledged he had biases and presuppositions coming from his background which can limit his understanding of the Bible. However, he also trusted that whatever he needed to understand, God and His Spirit will help him despite his social or cultural limitations:

I am very aware that I have bias's that are hard for me to break. Furthermore when I approach a passage (especially this passage), I come from a culture of both backgrounds ironically. This makes interpretation for me very difficult. I have to remember that ultimately I need God and his Spirit to help me interpret. Even though there are skills that I can bring, what is most important is trusting God to reveal what He would desire, thus bring him the Glory.

Sandy had the same thought. She acknowledged her knowledge was finite and the divine help was needed:
Where would we be without the Spirit's guidance in helping us understand God's Word? (trapped in our finite musings!) I also keep running across a quote I wrote down from Goldsworthy - "Interpreting reality correctly is a by-product of salvation." I'm soooo very glad that me being face-to-face with my Savior one day is NOT dependent on me interpreting all scripture accurately!

Program Setup

Program setup is a category indicating what this online program tried to implement to achieve the goal of transformation stated in the school catalog. More specifically, the director of this online program viewed transformation this way:

In older models of education we had the notion that if the professor said something the students would learn it and they would demonstrate that they learned it by answering questions on a task ...they had it on their short-term memory, and I would suggest as adult learners who care about transformation, that a faculty member can say something and the students can read something and the students will interact with each other and then somehow the material actually needs to go through all of them as a person, so that they can consider what the implications are for how they live, for how they live out their relationships with God, and how they think. It needs to transform the whole person and if they engage at all those levels then I think we've got the real possibility for transformation, so nothing actually pleases me more or there's nothing that I find more moving than when I hear a student at the end of their journey in seminary saying at some level they love God more.

The program setup has two aspects: strategies that are employed to reach the goal and the embedded condition of the program itself, meaning the In-Ministry program. It is called In-Ministry program because it requires the students to be in some type of ministry while enrolling in the program. In other words, integrative learning strategy is the strategy employed to facilitate transformation while in-ministry is the intervening condition embedded in the nature and structure of the program itself. These two categories are discussed below.
The category “In-ministry” specifies the fact that students need to be in ministry while attending seminary. This requirement or this program setup itself creates other contingent factors. As an intervening condition to the phenomenon “transformation” or in Strauss and Corbin’s words, "the broader structural context pertaining to the phenomenon" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 1-3) the In-ministry category naturally leads to the fact that students (1) live in different geographical locations (thus bringing in multiple perspectives), (2) are currently in ministry (thus, integrating what he learns into his own ministry context), and (3) are trained to be a minister (thus, being expected to be changed first by the Bible). For that reason, the category "In-ministry" consists of three subcategories including multiple perspectives, integration, and intrinsic expectation. Being in ministry naturally forces a person to constantly integrate what he or she learns. Furthermore, being exposed to many different perspectives challenges his or her previous long-held assumptions about certain beliefs or values. They also expect change through their constant contact with the Bible which is believed to be able to change lives. Therefore, “multiple perspectives,” “integration focus,” and “intrinsic expectations” are three conditions that can lead to critical reflection and thus may lead to change or transformation. These three subcategories are presented below.

Multiple perspectives. Jesse loved the fact that he was around people that were on the same journey as he was but came from different backgrounds:

I've loved the experience of having people from other backgrounds and denominations. It's been a cool thing to see how churches like that work, the things they stress on, the way they do things...that's been really an encouraging thing for me, to see people that are on similar road and journey that I'm on but they come from such different places.
David talks about how a class has a powerful impact on him, especially because of the exposure to multiple perspectives in his class:

[the teacher is] really presenting [a topic] in a way that is challenging and then being able to conduct a productive conversation, you know, allowing the students to not just hear the information and be forced to believed it but to wrestle with it and to talk out loud with it and to hear the teacher's perspectives and then to hear students who come from different backgrounds to see how they wrestle with it.

Jeff began to think more critically about his own belief after being exposed to other perspectives:

I think our conversations after hearing some of the Muslim speakers really helps us start to recognize like how we kind of syncretized American culture with what we understood about following Jesus.

In the survey, when asked what did your being in school have to do with the experience of change, one respondent said: “[It is] significant because school exposed me to different perspectives and thoughts that I continued to pursue outside of the course work.”

Multiple perspectives also came from a good mix of faculty in the program. Mary pointed out:

it's very obvious that some professors are very conservative, very traditional, and at the same time there are other professors who are completely opposite of that, and they are very inclusive.

Thomas reported that even though the faculty came from different backgrounds, they didn’t force their views on the students:

The professors generally withhold their own personal viewpoints, so if they're presenting an issue, sometimes they'll say, 'well, this is how I would interpret the passage, but they don't always lead off with that and they don't always force their view on, you know obviously the question of the deity of Christ, yeah, there is some answer there, but on non-fundamental issues they oftentimes provide ambiguities about their own views, so they're not coming from the position, saying 'here is the answer.'
Attending a school that promotes multiple perspectives, Mary said she was accused of being pluralistic. She defended herself saying, “I think a lot of people think I'm pluralistic. I don't think I'm pluralistic, but what I've learned from [the school] is to look at the much wider picture.”


*Integration focus.* This category shows the natural mix of learning and application. Since the students are in ministry, they naturally think of how they can apply what they learn to their own contexts. Integration became a habit or a tendency in which students try to think back or reflect on what they have learned and connect or integrate them into real life situation, either their own life or the lives of the people they minister to. Students consider this process critical reflection process. At the same time, it is the school’s emphasis that the students constantly evaluate what they learn compared to their own experience.

Jeff put it very clearly, "I think online education forces me to always ask the application question, the pragmatic question, and figure out how to integrate it"

Thomas agreed the delivery system helped integration. In particular, he thought this was the advantage of this program over a traditional seminary:

I think that's what [the school] is trying to do the whole entire time. They've always been about integration. You know, a lot of our papers are integrated papers, how does this affect your ministry right now. And I don't think that traditional seminary can do that because most kids aren't in a ministry setting and so when they are talking about how does media affect culture, they might be able to see it on a macro level but on a micro level. I don't think they're able to grasp it.

Ray thought doing ministry and studying at the same time would improve what he was doing:

[The program] allows you to stay in the real world...that helps keep you grounded and always keeps an eyes into how do we use this to impact how we minister to others as
opposed to say, "all right, I have to leave ministry, going to a traditional program for 3 years, 4 years where I think there may be an opportunity to focus on the theoretical and philosophical ideas as opposed to having it set up where you are in the midst of doing it, and it allows for real life experiences to shape your ministry.

Paul said by focusing on the practical side, the program was less likely to become “ivory towered intellectual” which may eventually lose touch of the real world:

the format of courses allows us to stay in the ministry context, also forces us to be continually evaluating the things that we're learning not only on the academic level but on the practical level and I think that's helpful...I don't think it compromises the academic rigor of the program but I think it keeps the program from being too kind of ivory towered intellectual where it is just academic for the sake of academic. It keeps us focus on academics for the sake of ministry.

Ray also pointed out that the fact that the students were in ministry energized the professors since they constantly brought in real-life situations to ponder and deal with. As a result, the faculty was more likely to consider the students as their colleagues rather than just students who were fresh out of college.

On a learning side, Fred confirmed that being in ministry helps learning stick better:

I think that being in a local context and walking through things brings a level of maturity and a level of more issues to deal with and apply all of our learning with as we go. If you come to a seminary for a few years, you'll get all these stuff, but you don't really apply it, and so it just makes the learning deeper and I think it sticks better.

_Intrinsic expectation._ This category describes another aspect of the condition leading to transformation. Students who come to the program are expected to be changed to become better leaders in their community. Also, they are reminded and expected to change because of their frequent exposure to the Bible. These two elements-leaders (as a goal) and Bible (as the source) are intrinsic in the training of theological students for ministry. In other words, coming to seminary, a person is intrinsically expected to become a transformed and transforming leader.
Also, since he or she uses the Bible as their primary source of learning, they expect the transforming power of the Bible would be at work on them as well.

Jeff explained that this expectation came from one of his foundational classes in seminary:

In our first quarter, we had a great hermeneutics class that was clearly built to help us not just learn academically but have scriptures transform us and our professor continually reminded us of that purpose...Each week we got an email from the professor just kind of reminded us that certainly academic is important because it informs our faith. We want to be intellectually informed...we'll get the depth out of the Word of God and then he just continually reminds us, I think his phrase is: Be committed to the Word of God and let it change us, so that we would have that expectation that God's word will be at work in us as we're doing his assignments.

Jeff confirmed that this expectation was conveyed by most of the professors in this program:

I appreciate most about being here is that they seem to be very committed to, kind of their motto phrase is equipping whole and holy ministers for the gospel, and the fact that pretty much every professor I've had has made their class kind of has made a point to at least express it in some way that they really hope that this class helps us grow in our faith and not just grow our knowledge and so that's huge for me.

**Integrative Learning Strategy**

The other aspect of the program setup is integrative strategy. This strategy includes the integration of reading materials, discourse and community. Although each subcategory plays an important role in leading to change, it is the combination of all three elements that makes change possible.

Paul reported his change came from the combination of class activities, reading assignments and interaction with his classmates:

I think a class I took last year called Personal and Spiritual Formation. One of the things we looked at a lot was our family of origin. You know, going back to my grandparents and we had to put together a geneaogram, outlined the details of myself, my siblings and
parents, and their siblings and their parents, so going back to my aunts, uncles, and I think that just makes me to reflect more on, that assignment, but also the course as a whole, and the readings and discussions made me reflect more on role that my family has had in shaping who I am and it made me remember make it think the first time perhaps that I'm not just a self made person but I'm a product of where I come from. It makes me think more deeply about some other things and implications.

When asked “how did you come to that change?”, Scott replied:

I came through that through a couple of different means. One thing about this program, can't speak for traditional or other programs, they use a lot of vehicles to get us there: we do readings, we interact with articles, we interact with each other and then lecturing, I think it's a little bit of everything, going through and being forced to read different perspectives on the subject, so you know...having to read different theologians and authors talking about that and then send down to a group and kind of bouncing it off each other, then be able to interact with the professor who is extremely knowledgeable on it, and bounce between all three of them as you're talking about it. You know, I think that's huge because it helps solidify in your head.

Reading assignment. This category indicates reading materials the students were required or recommended to read during their study. When asked what was the source for his change, Paul said, “a big thing for that is one of the class reading.” In the survey, when asked which class assignment influenced the change, the students responded assigned readings as the highest percentage that contributed to that change (86.4%). One respondent in this survey said the school gave her “permission and opportunity to read from the assigned texts which came from many voices.”

Discourse. This category describes the interaction among students with one another and with their professors in an online setting or in a face-to-face setting.

Paul preferred interaction in an online setting:

In some ways I think the discussion board provides more opportunity for interaction than in a classroom setting because in a classroom setting often times, 20 to 30% of the class
is dominating conversations, but on the discussion board posting everybody is expected to participate, and it's a lot harder to go off on something. If you type it out, at least for me, it makes me stop and think what I'm saying...so I think it increases the quality of the discussion.

Fred also liked the online interaction though he admitted it was challenging:

I like the online interaction, reading materials and then having good questions posted by the instructor that I interact with, and interact with other students with those same questions. I like that aspect, I mean, it's challenging. It makes you think, it makes you have to articulate what you believe and why you believe and evaluate, 'oh, maybe I didn't have that right and, so I just find that very helpful.

David, on the other hand, appreciated the face-to-face interaction during his intensive weeks:

It makes it a little bit easier in a class setting with your peers because you've heard the same concept but they might wrestle with it differently than you would but you can see...so the hard part is when you're reading a book or just do online class, you get the concept but no one else around you at the time has been really challenged with the same concept and so sometimes it's hard to see that in people around you so I think the beauty of the face-to-face time is that you have the teacher who teaches the concept, but then you also have your peers around you who hear it but we all hear it a little bit differently in our own contexts and then seeing how that has been applied. I think it's important in my learning process.

Community. Among these three categories, community plays an important role in affecting the quality of discourse, thus influencing the overall integrative learning strategy. This community was expressed in a cohort assigned to the students when they came to the program.

David described the cohort and how it helped him in his learning:

The thing they do here I think also helps with that is we start with a cohort, a group of the same people. And so we move our five years together. In our classes there are other people outside of our cohort who were just meeting for the first time, but at the same time there are people who I've been spending the last three years with, and so that relationship is even deeper, and so I think there is a deeper learning curve with those people than the others.
When asked if he had any life-changing learning experience while studying this program, Ray responded:

The life-changing learning experiences? One of the biggest ones I would say has been the community that we go through it with. Our cohort has been transformational in the fact that the relationships aren't just when we are here on campus but they continue even when we are separated and even though we are scattered around the country.

For Ray, the community went beyond classroom assignment. It was not just a classroom community where people had to gather together to finish an assigned task. Ray pointed out that this was a genuine community where people really took care of one another beyond the classmate relationship level. He retold a story in which his friend kept checking on him over a long period of time since he heard about Ray’s sister’s death.

This community was also shown in the relationships between the professors and their students. Ray said every time his cohort came to the campus they went to one of the professors’ house and shared a meal. He enthusiastically shared during the interview:

Yesterday we had a picnic with him and his family for lunch and he and his wife are planning our graduation party for us and our families next year when we come up here for graduation, and he even emailed our cohort to pray for their family.

Scott said his cohort helped him in his learning because he felt safe talking to them. He felt they understood what he shared; they sympathized with what he shared even though they came from different walks of life:

The cohort has really been kind of nice because we're from all different walks, from all different areas, we all do different types of ministries, but when we come together we all talk about the same thing, and it's cool to see how everything kind of goes across that board. we all come to school and we all talk with the same concern...We've been together for three years now, when we get together, we talk about serious stuff actually, it's not stuff that we talk in our ministry staff at church you know because there is pressure where I work with the elder board and they kind of control how our ministries go and so if I disagree with what they feel I'll be in trouble. I don't have that here, I can just throw out an idea and kind of catch whether or not in general it's a good idea or a bad idea, like, 'oh, no, we've tried that, don't do that,' so that environment has really been a good thing.
The community was enriched and affected by multiple perspectives held by people in that community. These two categories were influenced by physical presence. In fact, it is this physical presence that triggered a change in the students. Ray reported that he became more humble because of the community he was in. Talking about his cohort experience, he said:

I think it really helps create a humbleness in ministry. To recognize that it doesn't just become a 'they'-we believe this and they believe that-it becomes you put faces to things, it becomes personal and you recognize the fact that there are people who have wrestled just as long and just as hard and believe they have had just as much biblical proof for their stance on something that you have for yours. And so I think that the whole system creates a humbleness to say "yes, this is what I believe… I hold them a lot looser than I did before, say that there are people out there who I love that view it differently than I do and that's okay, and that also I think just magnify the broadness and the spectrum of God and so I think it creates more an awe as to who He is.

Physical Presence

The last category indicates a face-to-face meeting or in person contact. These meetings or contacts can be (1) classroom physical presence where students meet professors and one another in person; or (2) local physical presence which usually describes face-to-face contact with people in their local ministries.

Larry said the online program allowed him more time to establish relationships with local people which had more potential to change him:

If I would have been in a more traditional setting I would never had had opportunity to invest that much time in meeting with someone. I've talked to friends of mine going to a different seminary in a different denomination and everything and they spent like one day, one and a half hours, something like that, going to a Buddhist temple or something, and that's their intercultural experience, but the depth that I was able to have with one person I think really changed me and I don't know if I would've gotten that kind of change in a traditional class.
David explained why it would affect him more if it was in a face-to-face setting, saying "but when you see that people are passionate about what they are saying, that challenges you to think more about it than it's just something on paper."

For David, interacting with his peers in a face-to-face setting was important in his learning:

It makes it a little bit easier in a class setting with your peers because you've heard the same concept but they might wrestle with it differently than you would but you can see...so the hard part is when you're reading a book or just do online class, you get the concept but no one else around you at the time has been really challenged with the same concept and so sometimes it's hard to see that in people around you so I think the beauty of the face-to-face time is that you have the teacher who teaches the concept, but then you also have your peers around you who hear it but we all hear it a little bit differently in our own contexts and then seeing how that has been applied. I think it's important in my learning process.

Physical presence was expressed most clearly in the intensive weeks. When asked “if they took away the intensives from the program, what would you think?” Ray said:

If every one of my classes would have been fully distance, I'd never met any of my professors face to face, I'd never met any of my cohort face to face, I would have felt isolated that I were doing tasks...and it wouldn't have been about enjoying the journey or allowing the journey to shape me…If it is just fully distance, I think I would look at it as a task and get it done.

Jesse had a similar thought:

I would like the program much less if they take out the intensive. I wouldn't say that I would not do the program unless I knew another place that had a similar setup with the intensive maybe I would find, I would go there.

David and others seemed to express an idea that there is something special about seeing and interacting with people in person that can affect them at a deeper level. David gave a further explanation:

It's easy to talk about rules and any concept but when you see the impact whatever it has on people then it becomes more real... it makes it something you have to truly wrestle with when you see people, their faces and how they have to deal with that concept.
Even though they only met for a short time at the main campus during their intensive weeks, the students treasured this time and acknowledged that it is the intensives that really made a difference in their study. Paul stated it succinctly:

I look forward to being able to interact with my classmates again in a new class setting, I look forward to being able to see them all during intensives, so I really look forward to that which makes it much easier to continue the program.

Overall, these findings indicate that the program setup consisting of the category “In-ministry” and “Integrative Learning Strategy” can foster the outcomes characteristic of Mezirow’s definition of transformative learning experience. In particular the presence of “Multiple Perspectives,” the emphasis on “Integration” and the “Intrinsic Expectations” built in the nature of this theological school are three subcategories contributing to the category “In-ministry” in this study. Also, the integration of “Reading Assignment,” “Discourse,” and “Community” in the category “Integrative Learning Strategy” was seen as an effective strategy facilitating transformative learning experiences among these theological students. Last but not least, the two major factors influencing the program setup were “Physical Presence” and “Divine Element”. These factors functioned as glue that bonded all other categories together and as a fire in a car ignition system that could transform fuel into force.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Summary of the Findings

This study explored conditions conducive to transformative learning experiences among theological students in an online program. Using Merizow’s transformative learning theory as a framework, this qualitative study collected data from three primary sources including an online survey, content analysis of online transcripts and semi-structured interviews. Results from the online survey guided the researcher in choosing two online courses for analysis. Then these two collection methods in turn aided the researcher in preparing his interviews with the students. Data collected from all these sources were analyzed to reflect many aspects of the students’ learning experiences and complement each method’s strengths and weaknesses.

A transformative learning condition model emerged from the data shed light on what an online theological program looks like in order for it to expect transformation from its students. In particular, the sample representing the In-Ministry program at Bethel Seminary would be a white male in his thirties who has just finished his first year in his M.Div. degree program. About four fifths of this sample (80%) reported having had a perspective transformation during their study. A perspective transformation according to Mezirow is a transformation in a person’s habits of mind or frames of reference which make a person view his life and relationships from new lenses. An obvious evidence of this change was usually a more open and accepting attitude toward other perspectives. For these theological students, it often started with a changing view of God which led to other changes in their lives.

For these participants, the factor that influenced them the most in the change was class assignment (66.7%). The second highest factor influencing the change was a person (60.6%) and
only 21.2% reported a significant change in their lives influenced their changes. In class assignment the participants indicated that assigned readings contributed the most in their change (86.4%) while “verbally discussing your concerns” and “personal reflection” came second (72.7%)

The content analysis of two online courses showed the online interaction aspect of the students’ learning experience. Category “affective” had the highest percentage (61.4%) and “interactive” had the lowest (15.1%) in the course Self in Community, while in the course Biblical Hermeneutics, the order was reverse in which the category “interactive” was highest (41.9%) and “affective” lowest (24.4%). The overall social presence density indexes of these two courses were different with 12.9 and 21.2 for Self in Community and Biblical Hermeneutics respectively.

Cognitive presence was also different in these two courses. In Biblical Hermeneutics, the category “exploration” was highest (36.3%) while “integration” came second (28.0%). In Self in Community course, “integration” was highest (45.5%) and “resolution” came second (21.1%) compared to only 0.6% in Biblical Hermeneutics.

Teaching presence consists of three categories including Instructional Design, Facilitating Discourse, and Direct Instruction. In Biblical Hermeneutics, “facilitating discourse” was highest (47%) followed by “direct instruction” with 41.0%. In Self in Community, “direct instruction” was highest (57.9%) which is 10% higher than that in Biblical Hermeneutics course.

Since these two online courses were identified by the participants as having had meaningful impacts on their study, the content analysis of these courses shed light on the online interaction revealed through these three presences that could bring changes to theological students in the online setting.
Semi-structured interviews with eleven participants exposed more detail as to how the factors mentioned above and other factors which might be missed through online survey and content analysis contributed to the transformative learning experience of the participants. Data analyzed from these interviews confirmed that critical reflection had an important role in transformation. It also showed that divine element or the involvement of God for these students also had a positive impact on their critical reflection process. Three other major conditions were identified as catalysts to the change through these interviews. The first two conditions- In-ministry and Integrative Learning Strategy- belong to a category called “Program Setup.” The last but not least condition was Physical Presence. This category emerged as a pleasantly surprising finding in this study since the researcher did not expect to find this element in an online program. In fact, “physical presence” affected other conditions and proved to be an indispensable element in creating change.

Discussions and Implications

Question 1: To What Extent have Online Theological Students from an Online Graduate Program at a Seminary Experienced Transformation according to Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory?

With about 80% of the sample having perspective transformation, this online program has produced a relatively high percentage of students indicating they had experienced perspective transformation during their study, compared to 37.3% in King’s dissertation conducted among undergraduate students at four private colleges in Philadelphia (1997). King (2000, 2004) also did several studies after that with different populations. In 2000, she conducted her survey among ESL learners from three colleges’ ESL programs in New York and found
66.8% had experienced perspective transformation. King (2004) did another study in a graduate program at a research university and reported 62% had experienced perspective transformation in their program (King, 2004). Most of the participants in King’s 2004 study already had a master’s degree (62%) and 8% had a doctorate. It is assumed that these participants might have a higher level of cognitive development compared to that of undergraduate students in King’s 1997 study. For that reason, it might explain why participants in King’s 2004 study were more likely to experience perspective transformation than those in King’s 1997 study. In fact, Merriam (2004) argued that “mature cognitive development is foundational to engaging in critical reflection and rational discourse necessary for transformational learning” (p. 65). Although the participants in King’s 2000 study did not have a higher level of cognitive development (61.5% had some elementary school), they had more transformation instances because of their unique situation—immigrants coming from other countries. That experience itself was big enough to be listed as a “disorienting dilemma” in Mezirow’s theory. According to this theory, a disorienting dilemma is the first condition or catalyst that may lead to transformation (Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 1998).

The relatively high percentage of transformation instances among theological students in this study might be the result of a combination of both cognitive development and disorienting dilemma for this sample. All of the participants were pursuing their masters’ degrees and active in ministry. Also they were attending an online program which is different from their traditional face-to-face undergraduate education. In addition to these two potential factors, other conditions found in this study including “being in ministry,” “integrative learning strategy,” “community,” and “physical presence” might be taken into account as well. These factors or conditions will be discussed below to give a more adequate explanation of why this online program had such a high percentage of transformation instances. Therefore, the implication is institutions that create these
conditions, found and listed in this study, might prepare to get the same result if that is one of their goals.

**Question 2: What Learning Activities Contributed to Transformation as Indicated by These Students?**

The online survey revealed that class assignment had the most impact on the students’ transformative learning experience. More specifically, they reported “assigned readings,” “verbally discussing your concerns,” and “personal reflection” as the top three activities that contributed to the change. Data collected from the interview shed more light on what the participants meant by “assigned readings.” Data showed that the students described the readings as challenging, novel or diverse in perspectives. This confirmed Bailey’s study when she found that “perspective building was another factor in the conceptual change process” (Bailey, 1996, p. 146).

In King’s 1997 study, “assigned readings” ranked fourth after “personal reflection,” “teacher challenge,” and “class discussion.” Yet it is still in the top four important contributors to transformative learning experience. King’s 2004 study also listed “readings” in the fourth place after “discussion,” “journal,” and “reflection.” Thus, the common list drawn from these three studies is “readings,” “discussion,” and “reflection.” This reflects the integrative learning strategy found in this study. In other words, the learning process can be summed up as follows: reading triggers the thinking process while discussion sharpens the thinking process and reflection individualizes this thinking process. As noted by the director of this online program, a student needs to go through all these three modes of learning in order for him or her to experience a significant impact which may lead to transformation. Therefore, it is easy to
understand why the participants in this study did not cite assigned readings as the only factor leading to change. They often mentioned readings with lectures, discussions and other learning activities. For them, reading materials laid a foundation or triggered their thinking process which was then tested, challenged and reinforced through discussions either online or face-to-face. The reason why “assigned reading” got the highest frequency might be because it was the first thing they experienced in this learning process.

“Verbally discussing your concerns” is another word for discussion. Although discussion can be conducted online or in a face-to-face setting, the participants in this study particularly focused on the face-to-face discussion while they were on campus. In fact, David, Chuck, Paul, and others noted in their interview that the interactions among professors and classmates in the face-to-face setting had a more powerful impact on their learning since they could see each other. By “seeing,” they meant they could see how passionate their professors are about certain topics, how genuine their classmates were when they were sharing their real struggles and concerns. These factors touched the inner side of their lives because they could tell it was real and personal. This relates to the category “physical presence” found in this study which will be discussed in questions four and five.

“Personal reflection” can be done in a traditional class setting and can also be taken advantage even more in an online classroom. Paul said the beauty of the online program is that he could read a question posted online, spend time reflecting on it, and come back to it as many time as he wanted during a week before he replied back to the professor or his classmates. Time and individualization are two important factors for a quality “personal reflection” which are conveniently provided by this online program.
These three learning activities depend largely on an instructor. Choosing a right reading material, according to the findings of this research, is tantamount to moving a step closer to transformation for the students. However, this activity has to incorporate with good discussion. This can be done online or in person. Finally, knowing when and how to give students time to reflect on certain issues also helps facilitate the transformation process.

**Question 3: Based on a Content Analysis of Online Transcripts,**

*How are the Elements of Cognitive Presence, Social Presence and Teaching Presence Revealed in the Courses Taken by These Students?*

Data from two online courses were coded for three presences. These two courses, Biblical Hermeneutics and Self in Community, were identified as having had an impact on student’s learning experiences. Biblical Hermeneutics was one of the first courses in seminary that provides guidance for students to interpret the Bible. Self in Community, a required course in the M.Div. degree program, is designed to help students learn to identify “their conscious and subconscious views about God, self, and others and to understand the connection between their human relationships and their relationship to God” (Self in Community syllabus, summer 2010). Each presence will be discussed separately followed by an observation of these three presences all together.

Social presence consists of three categories including “affective,” “interactive,” and “cohesive.” Category “affective” includes expression of emotions, use of humor and self-disclosure (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999). “Interactive” was coded when someone continued a thread, quoted from others’ messages, referred explicitly to others’ messages, asked questions, complimented, expressed appreciation or expressed agreement.
“Cohesive” was identified by the use of vocatives, addresses to the group using inclusive pronouns, or phatics, salutations (Rourke et al., 1999). In the course Self in Community, “affective” was highest (61.4%) while “interactive” the lowest (15.1). The order was reverse in Biblical Hermeneutics course where “interactive” was highest (41.9%) and “affective” was lowest (24.4%).

The finding drawn from Biblical Hermeneutics course data was consistent with Akyol and Garrison’s study (2008) in which they analyzed transcripts of a graduate course with 16 students at the University of Calgary. Akyol and Garrison’s research showed that “interactive” was maintained at 43% during the last 6 weeks of the course, “affective” was second (25%) and “cohesive” was third (20%). While the order was different, the percentage for “affective” was relatively the same.

Data from Self in Community did not match with that from Akyol and Garrison’s study because of the nature of these discussion posts. In this course, students were required to post ten journals to the discussion board and were encouraged but not required to comment others’ posts. The highest percentage of “affective” accurately reflected the nature of writing journal in which one reveals their thoughts and personal opinions. Also, since it was not required, the interaction was low.

Although “social presence density” was counted in both courses, there was no previous literature to compare except Rourke and his colleagues’ article produced in 1999. In this article, Rourke and his colleagues analyzed selected transcripts from two graduate courses. Postings from the fifth week of the first course and that from the sixth week of the second course were analyzed using their suggested coding template. The social presence density for the first course and second course was 22.83 and 33.54 respectively. Compared to the findings in this research,
Rourke and his colleagues’ study supported Biblical Hermeneutics’ social presence density (21.2). Social presence density in Self in Community (12.9) was low. Again, the reason might be because the postings in this course were all journal entries and commenting others’ posts was not required.

Cognitive presence includes “triggering events,” “exploration,” “integration,” and “resolution.” In Biblical Hermeneutics courses, “exploration” ranked highest (36.3%) and “integration” second (28.05). Compared to data drawn from the 3 mid weeks in Akyol and Garrison’s research, the order was reverse. In Akyol and Garrison’s (2008), “exploration” came second (30%) and “integration” came first (45%). It remained in the first place throughout the course (47% in the first 3 weeks and 52% in the last 3 weeks). Akyol and Garrison also did another study in 2010 where they compared cognitive presence in online and blended courses. Their data showed that in the blended course “integration” was still in the first place (43%) and “exploration” the second place (16%) during the three mid-weeks of the course. An explanation for a discrepancy in result findings between this research and Akyol and Garrison’s is twofold. First of all, the “exploration” characteristic seemed to reflect the overall atmosphere of the Biblical Hermeneutics course being the first and foundational course for students attending seminary. Also, the “integration” percentage might be higher toward the last weeks of the course where the students were asked to apply new principles and concepts they had learned from the beginning weeks. Transcript analysis from the last 3 weeks might show the increase of percentage in “integration.”

In Self in Community course, “integration” was highest in both Week 3 (45.5%) and Week 9 (62.5%). In particular, “resolution” was unusually high (21.1%) in both weeks. These numbers can be explained through the content of these postings which were journal in nature.
Controversial, intimate and practical themes were shared in these journal entries including one’s view of shame, the image of God, sex, culture, intimacy. This course was more integrative in its nature. Following are some excerpts taken from these journal entries:

**Bob:** A sense of shame and rejection has certainly been something I have experienced in life. I think a fear of rejection started in my life because of my relationship with my dad. I often felt rejected because no matter how well I did at something it was never enough to gain his approval and acceptance. If I pitched a no hitter in baseball and went 4 for 5 hitting, the one thing that would be talked about was the one at bat that I didn’t get a hit. In sports, I was performing at a very high level of excellence and yet I felt a total failure. In the process, I felt as though I had been rejected by my earthly father. Having not receive the blessing of my dad, I realize that much of my life has been spent trying to earn that blessing from others, not by being myself, but by trying to do something good enough that I would hear the words "good job." Interestingly, I did hear those words from others but somehow it never quite filled the hole inside of me. I think the reason for this is that what I really needed was to hear someone say they love me simply for who I was, that I was lovable and likeable because of my "being" not my "doing." If someone couldn't love me at my best, how would they ever love me at my worst. And I knew I had a "worst." As a result, this is why coming to know God completely transformed and is transforming my life. It's because for the first time, I experienced a God that loved "me," regardless of what I was doing. Interestingly, not only did that fill me up, it gave me a good motivation for the doing. It's now, more than before, a doing that is motivated because of God's love rather than in an effort to earn it. Also, when I am better able to continue to do what is right in life now even when others may not approve. That's because my greatest need for love is being met.

**Randy:** I grew up in a middle-class culture. I wasn’t aware that I was “middle-class.” In fact, I was actually brought up to think of myself in a “wealthy-class” mindset. We had opportunities to travel abroad, speak other languages, and enjoy fine dining…Being a Christian went hand in hand with going to church and doing other “christian” things. We went to Christian concerts, bought christian CDs and books, and hung out with other Christian kids. Even though I had experienced other parts of the world, I had never synthesized what being a Christian had to do with the culture I was in. It wasn’t until college that I met Christians from other parts of the world that acted different than me. In 1995, I had a chance to go to Romania and meet Christians there. I was surprised by some of their beliefs and behavior because it contrasted with mine. I was still under the assumption that the way I experience Christ and what I believe about him was the “right” way – a very ethnocentric view that was slowly being challenged. When I minister to a people in a poverty-class culture/mindset from a place of comfort in my middle-class/wealthy culture, it affects my image of God. I am tempted to think that I have the corner market on God, coming from a place of privilege. I have also conformed my evangelism efforts to the way I think and the terms that I respond to. For example, the
middle-class culture I was brought up in values literate ways of experiencing God (i.e. reading the Bible, Bible study materials and workbooks). The poverty-class culture I minister to values oral communication methods over written. That distinction has forced me to consider how my culture has shaped my image of God. God is not a commodity of culture but above and beyond all cultures. He is not owned or patented by any one group. No one has a copyright on God. Yet I have evangelized in a way that tends to act like that. The ABCs of evangelism have been so ingrained in me that I have had a hard time separating them from my image of God. Culture is all around me and I am more aware of its influence than ever before.

Teaching presence consists of “instructional design,” “facilitating discourse,” and “direct instruction.” In Biblical Hermeneutics course, “facilitating discourse” and “direct instruction’ were highest with 47% and 41.0% respectively. In Self in Community course, “direct instruction” was highest (57.9%) and “facilitating discourse” was second (36.8%). The findings from these two courses support Akyol and Garrison’s study (2008) in that the two categories ranked highest in teaching presence. It is noted that the higher percentage of “direct instruction” did not mean the professor controlled or led the class in an authoritative way. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001) listed seven indicators of the category “direct instruction” including (1) present content/questions; (2) focus the discussion on specific issues; (3) summarize the discussion; (4) confirm understanding through assessment and explanatory feedback; (5) diagnose misconceptions; (6) inject knowledge from diverse sources; and (7) respond to technical concerns. These authors also pointed out they used the term “teaching presence” instead of “teacher presence” to note that individuals other than a teacher can also carry out this role (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). The higher percentage of “direct instruction” instead showed that structure and facilitation are two important factors that can have a significant influence on the quality of online discussion (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

“Instructional design” was 7.2% in Biblical Hermeneutics and 0% in Self in Community. These data were also consistent with Akyol and Garrison’s (2008) where “instructional design”
was 1% and 0% during the 3 mid-weeks and 3 last weeks. The category “instructional design” was higher in Biblical Hermeneutics because it was the first class in seminary and the data was drawn from the 2 mid-weeks of the course. The low percentage of “instructional design” in most research does not convey the idea that instructional design is not necessary. On the contrary, it showed that instructors have already done “their homework” before their classes begin (Anderson et al., 2001), thus they do not need to post too many “instructional design” comments in discussion boards.

Taking into account all three presences, the overall picture of the online environment in this two impactful courses showed that the majority of the findings was consistent with previous research except for some discrepancies coming from either the content (journal entries versus regular discussion) exchanged in the discussion boards or the weeks (mid-weeks versus last weeks) where the data were analyzed. For Biblical Hermeneutics, the social presence was high compared to that in Self in Community; cognitive presence in Biblical Hermeneutics was relatively low compared to that in Self in Community course and teaching presence in both courses was relatively similar. Interview data showed this picture was accurate in that the students reported having been satisfied with the community and relationships established in this program. They were particularly attached to their cohort, sharing lives and taking care of one another beyond assigned class time. Therefore, the lower percentage of social presence in Self in Community did not mean the students did not have good social relationships among one another. This only showed one of the weaknesses of content analysis of online transcripts in describing an entire learning experience of the students in the program.
**Question 4: To What Extent does Critical Reflection Contribute to the Transformative Experiences of Theological Students in Their Online Program?**

Critical reflection is critical in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990, 1991). This study views critical reflection through two lenses including (1) boundaries of critical reflection and (2) means that promote critical reflection in the online setting. Participants in this study put boundaries around critical reflection and used critical reflection as their filter at the same time. Boundaries of critical reflection were shown in a commitment to not cross certain foundational truths or issues during their thinking process. Paul said there are things that will not be changed but only deepened. Scott noted there are some non-negotiable issues that he didn’t want to discuss further because he believed they will not change his mind as a result of such discussion. The foundational issues, according to these theological students, are the Bible, Jesus as the way, the life, and the truth, the doctrine of Trinity, to name just a few. They, however, acknowledge the blurring line of these boundaries. They admitted there had to be a boundary but many times they didn’t know exactly what it was. Some of them believed a personal relationship with God would help them discern that boundary. Mezirow (2003), however, did not believe critical reflection had boundaries, asserting that, “all conclusions remain open to the possibility of a future assessment by a larger, more diverse group” (p. 61).

Previous literature on transformative learning theory and theological education also addressed this conflict (Bayles, 2000; Wollert, 2003; Hwang, 2004). It seems critical reflection and theological education have reached an agreement that there needs to be a boundary for critical reflection in the context of theological education. Addressing this issue from an angle of academic freedom, Peterson (2001) noted:
Academic freedom promotes honesty and integrity in the search after truth, not neutrality. It makes little sense to foster total neutrality as an ideal, since all genuine searching for truth begins with some basic precommitments. At the very least, there is a prior commitment to the laws of logic so that our thoughts about truth may be consistent, coherent, and systematic. There may be other prior commitments to ethical and theological principles—such as the ethics of honest inquiry or even the sense of divine calling in the search after truth. Any individual or group that claims to be searching for truth but to have no assumptions is simply naïve. However, the fact that we bring our prior assumptions to our search does not destroy its objectivity. It simply tempts our understanding of the kind of objectivity we can have. We can strive for proper objectivity by being honest and open, by trying to be aware of the initial assumptions we bring to our tasks, and by being willing to evaluate and change those assumptions when there is sufficient reason to do so. This sort of modest objectivity retains belief in a stable, intellectually accessible reality to which the mind has access. (Peterson, 2001, p. 166)

According to Peterson, there has to be some basic or foundational grounding to enter a journey searching for truth. For those who claim to be Christians, they acknowledge the existence of a being called God and the reality of a knowable world. In other words, they believe there has to be a starting point and a foundation to begin within any inquiry. Peterson added even with that acknowledgement, their search for truth is still open because humans are fallible and limited:

A sound version of Christian theism endorses the venerated ideal of academic freedom. It acknowledges the dignity of the mind in the image of God and the reality of a knowable world. However, since we are fallible and limited, we understand that no scholar or teacher or student can have infallible knowledge or a perfect grasp of truth. That is why legitimate forms of free inquiry must be honored and attempts to compel conformity of belief must be denounced. Belief, intellectual assent, is like worship and faith: it cannot be coerced but must be freely given. (Peterson, 2001, p. 167)

While acknowledging the basic foundation for truth, Peterson also encouraged “open-ended exploration”:

If all truth is God's, and if the human mind is a precious gift from God, then Christians have nothing to fear from rigorous and thorough intellectual investigation. We must abandon easy answers that do not address the tough problems and must confidently launch open-ended exploration; we must also be willing to tolerate some ambiguity as we search for deeper insight…If we hide intellectually, we do not do justice to God's creation
whose truths exist for us to discover, and we fail to use our minds for his glory." (Peterson, 2001, p. 198)

His ideas reflected the same tension these theological students had in their study. On the one hand, they established some parameters in their critical reflection. On the other hand, they welcomed critical reflection in their educational journey. One of the participants observed that the school is conservative and diverse at the same time. They believed critical reflection was foundational in their transformational experiences. They also believed the program encouraged critical reflection through their welcome of multiple perspectives and emphasis on integration. Previous literature acknowledged the role of critical reflection but also tried to move critical reflection out of the central focus of transformation by showing evidence of how transformation was experienced through a more holistic approach including the role of feelings, intuition, and relationships (Baumgartner, 2001; Taylor, 2007; Taylor, 2008). However, this study confirmed the role of critical reflection in transformation since nine participants out of eleven acknowledged they had been through a process of critical reflection before their perspectives were transformed. One person emphasized the role of community or relationships in his change and the other gave credit to a friend who set an example which eventually initiated a change in him. Thus, in light of these findings, a more logical question should be “what influences, affects or fosters critical reflection?” According to the data drawn from this research, two factors fostered critical reflection and two factors affected critical reflection. These factors were discussed in previous sections and will be discussed further in question five of this chapter.

The second lens of critical reflection in this study is the means that promoted critical reflection in the online setting. Two major means that fostered critical reflection were discussion boards and integration. Three factors that fostered critical reflection through the online
discussion board were intentionality, time, and multiple perspectives. Larry said “talking” to one another in an online setting were more structured and intentional than in a traditional setting. Thus it made the students put more efforts into communicating their ideas, which in turn led to a better quality in discussing any idea or concept in an online classroom. David and others also mentioned time as an important factor in their critical thinking process, even though they believed reading online posts was a time-consuming task. This confirmed a similar experience described by one of the theological educators at a seminary:

Let us say someone queried a remark I posted. Instead of replying immediately, as I might in person, I could pack my computer, leave the office, and ponder the question during my drive home. Then I could unpack my computer, bat out my response before bedtime…and awake to find a reply to my response waiting at the breakfast table. Clearly the twenty-four-hour classroom might have some addictive properties, but deeper discussions were possible too. Discussion takes time, and writing takes time; I could tell early on that time-management would be an issue for both my students and me. But time invested is time spent thinking, and one of my main goals was to encourage students to think. (Haitch, 2007, p. 73)

The existence of multiple perspectives also encouraged critical reflection. Fred pointed out that there are more chances for him to interact with people who may or may not agree with how he saw things in online discussion boards. This supported Daloz’s concept of “the presence of the other” as one of four conditions under which transformation might occur (Daloz, 2000). She argued that the encounter with the other will cross some previously established boundary resulting in a different voice that will challenge a person’s earlier assumptions about life.

Integration is another factor that fostered critical reflection in this study. Since the students were required to be in ministry while attending seminary, integration became a natural habits of mind for these students. They also acknowledged that the program always asked them the integrative question, “what does it mean for your ministry.” The concept of integration is closely related to the concept of experience in Mezirow’s vocabulary. Taylor (1998) pointed out
the three major themes in Mezirow’s transformative learning theory are critical reflection, rational discourse and experience. He explained further, “Experience is seen as socially constructed, so that it can be deconstructed and acted upon. It is experience that provides the grist for critical reflection” (p. 8). Meyers (2008) suggested posing real-world problems that address societal inequalities for faculty members who teach online courses using transformative pedagogy. For these theological students, “real-world problems” were not far from them and their professors do not need to pose these problems in a theoretical manner since they themselves had a chance to encounter real-life problems in their work every day. This is the advantage of the online program. It allowed the students to be immersed in the real-world and to bring these real situations to school to wrestle with and reflect upon.

Critical reflection continues to be a delicate issue in theological education. Based on data drawn from this study and previous research, the majority still believe there are non-negotiable issues or beliefs that are not open to critical reflection, thus leading to a belief that there is a boundary in critical reflection. The responsibility of drawing that line belongs to an institution, an individual, or both still remains a question. That seemingly self-contradicting idea thus characterizes the view of critical reflection in many theological seminaries. Holding that view, theological seminaries still believe they are encouraging critical reflection in their programs. Particularly as suggested by this study, critical reflection can be fostered through discussion board and integration. If being in ministry is required for every student attending a seminary, the possibility for integration is even higher. Also, utilizing discussion board as suggested in this study will foster critical reflection among online learners.
**Question 5: What Conditions are Conducive to Transformation for Theological Students in an Online Setting?**

To answer the question “what conditions conducive to transformative learning experience among theological students in an online program,” the data in this study showed that there were two major conditions - In-ministry and Integrative learning strategy - conducive to transformation. These two conditions in turn were influenced by two other factors including Divine element and Physical presence. Each condition will be presented along with two impacting factors below.

**In-Ministry**

In-ministry and Integrative learning strategy were two expressions of the category “Program setup.” For the category “In-ministry,” being in ministry in fact created a win-win situation for both the students and the program or the goal the program tried to achieve. The students were able to pursue their education because this online program allowed them to stay where they were, thus giving them an opportunity to work full-time in some type of ministry. The program in turn was more likely to achieve their goal of integration and eventually transformation due to the fact that their students were already in ministry which would help them naturally integrate real-life situations into their learning and vice versa. Brookfield advocated the valuable asset of life experience in adult learning:

> We cannot critically scrutinize the validity of our unquestioned assumptions about interpersonal relationships, work and politics until we have lived through the building and decay of several intimate relationships, until we have felt the conflicts and pressures of workplaces, and until we have acted politically and lived the consequences of our political actions. How can we assess the truth of rules we learned in childhood regarding relationships, work and politics, until we have experienced directly these complex, contradictory and ambiguous realities? (Merriam, 2004, p. 65, cited in Brookfield, 2000, p. 95)
Attending this online program while being in ministry created other contingent factors including multiple perspectives, integration focus and intrinsic expectations. In other words, since it was an M.Div. online program the students were more likely to (1) live in different geographical locations (thus offering more diverse perspectives); (2) be currently in ministry (thus integrating what they learned into their ministry contexts was natural); and (3) be trained to be a minister (thus they were expected to be changed through the Bible).

Multiple perspectives were seen not only through the students who came to a class but also from the professors and the materials they introduced. In a study conducted by Foster, Dahill, Golemon and Tolentino (2006), the authors identified pedagogy of contextual transformation as one of the signature pedagogical frameworks applied in educating clergy in the U.S. In this pedagogy, the professors deliberately introduced to the students reading materials from the standpoint of the marginalized. Multiple perspectives in this sense are perspectives that are hidden or suppressed. Larry, one of the participants in the study noted how he was changed by his encounter with a Muslim. Other participants also said how they were changed by reading a book that offered perspectives that were different from their tradition.

Integration is another factor leading to transformation. The program emphasized integration in every course by asking the students this question, “what does it mean for you and your ministry.” In a traditional seminary, to many students it would be a theoretical or hypothetical question. However, in this online program, the question is real and personal since each student is doing ministry and thus can answer it with their current experience. Larry and others in this study liked the advantage of being in ministry because they could reflect on their practice and have a chance to test their theory in real life to see “if it holds water,” as Larry put it.
Bailey’s study (1996) mentioned “working while studying” and Weinski’s study (2006) noted “planned ministry experiences” as some factors contributing to the overall experience of transformation. Their findings did not, however, give these factors an important place in transformation. The reason might be since their samples were from traditional seminaries, students working or involved in full-time ministry did not constitute a significant number.

Intrinsic expectations come from being in a seminary. Different from other institutions, seminaries are more specific in their goals as to what they want their students to become as a result of their theological training. Transformation in seminaries has more concrete direction compared to other higher education institutions who might struggle to direct students to a specific goal of transformation. On the contrary, seminaries have an advantage of shaping their students into a certain direction without being concerned about ethical issues. For students in this program, they could recite an easy-to-remember phrase that the school wanted them to be, that is “whole and holy persons for ministry.” This phrase was repeated and conveyed in many different ways during their study including the director’s pastoral exhortation in chapel when the students came to the campus, and through professors’ emails, lectures, and conversations with the students.

Another expectation came from the students’ constant contact with the Bible. They were reminded by their professors that knowledge was necessary, but it was the Bible that could change their life. For that reason, their minds and their lives had been prepared for a possible change. The finding supported Kroth and Boverie’s study (2000). In a study about life mission and adult learning, Kroth and Boverie (2000) found that a process of asking and finding answers to the “Why am I?” question “should be explicitly included in the transformation theory process.”
They suggested “educators can improve the learning process for adults by providing the means for them to understand how their life mission relates to the learning topic” (p. 146).

In-ministry revealed through multiple perspectives, integration focus and intrinsic expectations is a condition conducive to transformative learning for theological students. Daloz’s work (2000) confirmed this finding when she listed four conditions under which transformation might occur: the presence of the other (or the use of multiple perspectives), reflective discourse, a mentoring community; and opportunities for committed action (or the idea of integration in this study).

Ricciuti (2003) in his article raised a concern that the population of theological students is becoming older, second-career and non-traditional where theological study and actual practice of ministry are simultaneous. The challenges Ricciuti (2003) raised in his article now become good opportunities for theological education according to the findings in this study. Being in ministry along with the experience of multiple perspectives, integration and intrinsic expectation actually serves as one of the best conducive conditions leading to transformation for theological students. Thus, an implication for theological education is that being in ministry should be a requirement for online theological students. Along with that, theological educators should pay attention to different or repressed perspectives and introduce these perspectives to the students in a way suggested in the pedagogy of contextual transformation (Foster et al., 2006). Integration also should be the focus of theological teaching in which students learn to establish a habit of constantly evaluating what they do and what they learn. Last but not least, theological educators should address the “why” question and relate this to the students’ current courses or activities. Making explicit the expectation and the goal of learning creates awareness and a readiness to encounter change.
Integrative Learning Strategy

This strategy aimed at giving the students an opportunity to experience the materials at all levels as whole persons through reading, discourse, and community. It is the goal of the director of this online program that the whole person of the students would be affected by this strategy resulting in transformation. Responding to the question “what led to this change?” the student often mentioned all three factors—reading, discourse and community—without singling out any one of them individually. Usually it was the reading that began to trigger their thinking process, and then came the discourse that sharpened and challenged their assumptions and the whole process of exchanging ideas, thinking and reflecting was done in a community that cared and supported one another. This finding was consistent with Bailey’s in her research on transformation and theological education where she identified a learning community that fostered transformation. She described some prominent characteristics of this learning community including collegiality and dialog; multiple perspectives, a culture of inquiry, and a safe climate for exploration (Bailey, 1996). Ten years later in 2006 Weinski did a similar study and found some similar factors contributing to transformation including dialogue and discussion among students, with instructors, with family and friends and a supportive social context (Weinski, 2006).

Although Bailey (1996) and Weinski (2006) highlighted important elements that were conducive to transformation, they did not indicate the relationships among these elements. Furthermore, they did not present these elements from the standpoint of adult learning theories. Reading, discourse and community are not just three separate, random factors that emerged coincidentally from the data. They, in fact, revealed and confirmed the holistic approach for learning. They advocated a complex process of learning that can occur inside the mind as well as outside the body. Jarvis (2006) noted that “the person is both body and mind, not just
personality in the psychological sense.” From this standpoint, he argued that a great deal of learning occurs unrecognized. For that reason, each component—reading, discourse, community—does not stand separated but together and thus complements one another, creating more opportunity for transformative learning to occur in the whole person of a student.

Divine Element

For these theological students in this seminary, divine element was part of their learning process. They acknowledged the role of God in their understanding and decision-making. Also, they reported their change occurred as a result of their new understanding about God. This confirmed Weinski’s study in which she noted the role of spirituality as central in all phases of transformative learning (Weinski, 2006). In Fewell’s study of women seminarians pursuing ordination, she maintained that “the spiritual is an aspect of adult life that should be included in any attempt to understand the complete development of an adult” (Fewell, 2001, p. 162). This is an extra-rational aspect that had been ignored by Mezirow (1991) and advocated by Dirks (Dirks & Mezirow, 2006). If becoming transformative means being more open and inclusive, this very issue called spirituality should also be acknowledged and given an appropriate place in Mezirow’s theory. Based on Mezirow’s theory, ignoring spirituality issue might be a result of following the mainstream in public education where spirituality has been known as a private matter. If that is the case, Mezirow proved that he is also the product of his society in which his perceptions were limited or constructed by his society. This also showed that Mezirow’s concept of rational consensus in a discourse has a dangerous potential (Hwang, 2004). While acknowledging the great value of a democratic society, I resist the idea of consensus because the ideal situation proposed by Mezirow and Habermas, from whom Mezirow drew his ideas, still
remains ideal in this world (Mezirow, 1994). Put it differently, these conditions are unrealistic in this world because humans are finite and their understanding of the world is limited by their finite nature. Spirituality is tantamount to a statement saying “here where I stand in this ever-changing world.” In fact, understanding the role of spirituality in a person helps explain that individual as a whole person. Chickering, Dalton and Stamm (2005) borrowed Teasdale’s definition of spirituality to highlight the importance of studying this issue in higher education:

Being religious connotes belonging to and practicing a religious tradition. Being spiritual suggests a personal commitment to a process of inner development that engages us in our totality. Religion, of course, is one way many people are spiritual. Often, when authentic faith embodies an individual’s spirituality the religious and the spiritual will coincide. Still, not every religious person is spiritual (although they ought to be) and not every spiritual person is religious. Spirituality is a way of life that affects and includes every moment of existence. It is at once a contemplative attitude, a disposition to a life of depth, and the search for ultimate meaning, direction, and belonging. The spiritual person is committed to growth as an essential ongoing life goal. To be spiritual requires us to stand on our own two feet while being nurtured and supported by our tradition, if we are fortunate enough to have one. (p. 7)

A growing body of literature (Vogel, 2000; Tisdell and Tolliver, 2003; Shahjahan, 2004; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005) devoted to spirituality in teaching and learning showed an increasing interest in the area of spirituality among researchers and practitioners.

Physical Presence

This category describes in person contacts or face-to-face meetings. It is, in fact, a pleasant surprise I found in this study. While hoping to find some sophisticated tools armed with highly advanced technology which may help facilitate learning in an online environment, I found a simple, foundational and basic concept that powerfully impacted the students’ transformative learning experience in this program. This physical presence can be face-to-face meetings among
professors and students inside or outside their classroom during intensive weeks or in person contacts with people in the students’ local ministry contexts.

This study found physical presence influenced the whole program and played an important role in triggering transformation in the students’ experiences. Wildflower (2010) noted many academic and training institutions have a growing interest in the blended models where they use face-to-face or conference call in their online instruction, explaining “often, face-to-face or conference call instruction is used at the beginning of the program to orient the students and to build community” (p. 399). In theological education context, hybrid or blended programs have been considered and implemented recently (Delamarter & Brunner, 2005; Anderson, 2007; MacLeod, 2008). Drawing their conclusions from literature conducted at higher education institutions other than seminaries, Delamarter and Brunner (2005) proposed a hybrid model for theological education. They stated that hybrid courses produce an overall improvement in student learning. The finding from this study now provides them with concrete data to say that in fact hybrid courses in theological seminaries created conditions conducive to transformation. Drawing their conclusions from a study conducted by other researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), Delamarter and Brunner noted two important factors that could produce a success in a blended program including: (1) online and face-to-face components must be intentionally integrated and (2) socialization must be prioritized. Findings from this study confirmed this observation. In this program, the online and face-to-face components were not two separate elements. They did not function independently from one another. In fact, each year, the students came to the main campus twice to finish their coursework. In a 10-week course, the first four weeks were conducted online, sandwiched by the two intensive weeks on campus and finished with the last 4 weeks online. It was integrated in a sense that each component had a
specific role in contributing to the overall learning experience of a student. The first four weeks prepared the students for interaction within their two-week intensives. The last four weeks forced them to integrate what they learned in a more individualized and practical setting when they returned to their local ministry and had some time to reflect on their own.

The participants in this study reported their transformative learning experiences were triggered by coming in contact with real people, either their professors, classmates, or people in their ministry context. Thus, it is a very important factor that should not be ignored in theological education. Furthermore, physical presence would be impossible if being in ministry were not required for theological students. Therefore, the online program in this case did not diminish physical presence but in fact increased physical presence. Delamarter and Brunner explained this beautiful observation, saying:

Proponents of these [hybrid] programs claim that they are able to give greater attention than traditional programs to integrating the education of the student into the life context of the student, precisely because the delivery system leaves the life context undisrupted and at the center. By this we mean that these programs can encourage students to view the situation as a theological education being brought into their lives as opposed to putting their lives on hold while they do a theological education. Where the program is peopled with a higher percentage of this kind of student, it can change the nature of the interactions that characterize the learning environment: from theoretical discussions about possible future scenarios in ministry, to the enrichment of ministry already in progress. (p. 154)

Findings in this study suggested conditions conducive to transformation for theological students in an online program were not virtual or technological issues. It was in fact a physical issue. It is physical presence. However, physical presence should not be understood in a traditional way, meaning students come to a traditional seminary and study for three or four years before doing ministry. Physical presence in this study is a by-product of the online program. It is the online program that allowed students to stay in their own ministry context, thus
giving them more opportunities to be in contact in person with people in their ministry. Also, the intensive weeks become a focused time to build relationships. Face-to-face meetings in these intensives were not taken for granted. It was a focused and intentional endeavor. Thus, quality time spent in these intensives led to quality relationships which strengthened community. For that reason, Kelsey (2002) did not need to have a concern that students might become spiritual machines in an online program. He posed a question for those advocating online theological education, “the question I am posing is whether the anthropological assumptions that help keep theological education theological see students as spiritual machines or as personal bodies” (p. 8). The findings in this study in fact affirmed students as personal bodies and not spiritual machine even though they were attending an online program, or more accurately a blended program. It supported the incarnational model of theology in which ““church” or “seminary” is not just a building or set of buildings where people gather but is also the people dispersed in the world” (Shaw, 2004, p. 93). Perhaps Kelsey and those still opposed online theological education were stuck in a mindset that community is an institution. Le Cornu (2003) strongly stated that “to remove the notion of community from the institution and to place it on people not only is theologically sound, it coheres with a learner-centered model” (p. 22-23).

The findings from this study support a hybrid model that allows students to stay in ministry while studying. It also encourages short, intense, and regular face-to-face meeting that integrates into the overall learning experience of the students. This in turn creates a community that supports one another and adds meaning to their learning. Being in ministry is required for those attending seminary because of many benefits it can bring. First of all, it establishes an environment in which multiple perspectives are heard and appreciated. Secondly, it forces the students to constantly integrate what they learn in their own context. Thirdly, it makes learning
more practical and meaningful, avoiding the pitfalls of being too intellectual or academic and losing touch of the reality. Integrative learning strategy should be utilized in such an environment including reading materials presented from different perspectives, intentional interaction and discussion, and allowing time and space for relationships to be formed and strengthened in cohorts. Last but not least, the divine element and expectations should be addressed and encouraged so the students can see the reason as well as the hope behind their rewarding yet challenging journey.

Limitations

A small and homogenous sample is the biggest limitation in this study. Only eleven interviews were conducted in which only one person was female. All interview participants reported having a transformative learning experience. Exploring negative cases might shed more light on the topic under study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As a research instrument, the researcher being a human might introduce some mistakes or errors into the data which in turn might influence the results of the finding.

Further Discussions and Recommendations

The integration of survey method, content analysis and interview proved to make a stronger case in this study since each method could complement one another through triangulation by data source (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Survey method guided the decision to choose online transcripts. Then online transcripts and survey data helped the researcher prepare questions for interview.
The findings in this study were based on only one case study of an institution in the United States conducted by one researcher. Its validity will be enhanced if it is “confirmed by more than one “instrument” measuring the same thing” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 273).

Although In-ministry is the major theme found in this study, it can also pose a problem if being in ministry is required for all students. Future research can focus on the role of traditional seminaries and the requirement of being in ministry, as well as the situation in which the students happen to live in the area where a seminary is located.

Critical reflection had been explored in this study yet there are still many unanswered questions including “Does drawing the boundary for critical reflection belong to an institution or an individual or both?” Or “how can a seminary set a boundary and yet encourage critical reflection?”

The role of critical reflection in Mezirow’s theory remains important but there is also a need to explore the role of spirituality in transformation and how it affects critical reflection in theological education.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study was conducted using survey method, content analysis and interview to investigate conditions conducive to transformative learning experience for theological students in an online program. Through the online survey, eighty percent of the participants reported having perspective transformation. Emerging from the data, conditions conducive to their transformation consists of two major components- In-ministry and integrative learning strategy- which were influenced by two other elements including physical presence and divine element. Thus, the study suggests gatekeepers of theological education should consider
the blended model for theological seminaries. In doing that, they do not need to fear theological
students might become spiritual machines. At the same time, they will be able to place
community on people instead of institution. According to Le Cornu (2003), it is both
theologically sound and pedagogically appropriate.
Appendix A

LEARNING ACTIVITIES SURVEY
Appendix A

LEARNING ACTIVITIES SURVEY

This survey helps us learn about the experiences of adult learners. We believe that important things happen when adults learn new things. Only with your help can we learn more about this. The survey only takes a short time to complete, and your responses will be anonymous and confidential. Thank you for being part of this project; your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

1. Thinking about your educational experiences at this institution, check off any statements that may apply.

☐ a. I had an experience that caused me to question the way I normally act.

☐ b. I had an experience that caused me to question my ideas about social roles. (Examples of social roles include what a mother or father should do or how an adult child should act.)

☐ c. As I questioned my ideas, I realized I no longer agreed with my previous beliefs or role expectations.

☐ d. Or instead, as I questioned my ideas, I realized I still agreed with my beliefs or role expectations.

☐ e. I realized that other people also questioned their beliefs.

☐ f. I thought about acting in a different way from my usual beliefs and roles.

☐ g. I felt uncomfortable with traditional social expectations.

☐ h. I tried out new roles so that I would become more comfortable or confident in them.

☐ i. I tried to figure out a way to adopt these new ways of acting.
☐ j. I gathered the information I needed to adopt these new ways of acting.

☐ k. I began to think about the reactions and feedback from my new behavior.

☐ l. I took action and adopted these new ways of acting.

☐ m. I do not identify with any of the statements above.

2. Since you have been taking courses at this institution, do you believe you have experienced a time when you realized that your values, beliefs, opinions or expectations had changed?

Yes___ If "Yes," please go to question #3 and continue the survey.

No ___ If "No," please go to question #6 to continue the survey.


4. Which of the following influenced this change? (Check all that apply)

Was it a person who influenced the change? Yes _____ No _____

If "Yes," was it... (check all that apply)

☐ Another student's support ☐ A challenge from your teacher

☐ Your classmates' support ☐ Your teacher's support

☐ Your advisor's support ☐ Other: _____________

Was it part of a class assignment that influenced the change? Yes _____ No _____

If "Yes," what was it? (check all that apply)

☐ Class/group projects ☐ Verbally discussing your concerns
Was it a significant change in your life that influenced the change? Yes _____ No _____
If "Yes," what was it? (check all that apply)

- Marriage
- Birth/adoption of a child
- Moving Divorce/separation
- Death of a loved one
- Change of job
- Loss of job
- Retirement
- Other: _____________

5. Thinking back to when you first realized that your views or perspective had changed, what did your being in school have to do with the experience of change?

6. Would you characterize yourself as one who usually thinks back over previous decisions or past behavior? Yes ___ No ___

Would you say that you frequently reflect upon the meaning of your studies for yourself, personally? Yes ___ No ___
7. Which of the following have been part of your experience at this institution?

(Please check all that apply.)

- Another student's support
- Your classmates' support
- Your advisor's support
- Class/group projects
- Writing about your concerns
- Personal journal
- Nontraditional structure of a course
- Internship or co-op
- Deep, concentrated thought
- Personal learning assessment (PLA)
- Other: _____________

- A challenge from your teacher
- Your teacher's support
- Verbally discussing your concerns
- Term papers/essays
- Self-evaluation in a course
- Class activity/exercise
- Lab experiences
- Personal reflection
- Assigned readings
- Other: _____________

Which of the following occurred while you have been taking courses at this institution?

- Marriage
- Birth/adoption of a child
- Moving Divorce/separation
- Death of a loved one
- Change of job
- Loss of job
- Retirement
- Other: _____________

List one or two online courses, if any, that have had the most impact on your life and/or your ministry during this program:______________________________.
8. Sex:  □ Male  □ Female

9. Marital Status:  □ Single  □ Married  □ Divorced/separated  □ Widowed

10. Race:  □ White, non-Hispanic  □ Black, non-Hispanic  □ Other: _________
     □ Hispanic  □ Asian or Pacific Islander

11. Current geographical location:
     Country__________

12. Current church/ministry position: _______________

13. Denomination: __________________________

14. How many semesters have you been enrolled at this institution? ____________

     □ 40-49  □ 50-59  □ 60-69  □ Over 70

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!
Hi,

My name is Nghi Tran, and I am a doctoral student at the University of North Texas. Being in a rare Vietnamese family of three-generations of pastors and a pastor myself, I am passionate about equipping and training Christian ministers. While doing my doctoral work, I was asked to teach some online courses for a Bible college in California. This rewarding experience has opened my eyes and excited my curiosity about this promising tool in training church leaders in the future. This research project is the result of my long-time passion for ministry combined with a curiosity about online learning and a serious study about online theological education.

This survey seeks to describe significant learning experiences and learning activities associated with these experiences that M.Div. students in your online program have had. To help me understand more about your learning experience, you are invited to participate in this survey. You are asked to complete a survey that will take about 25 minutes. Although this study is not expected to be of any direct benefit to you, I hope to learn more about online theological education in order to make decisions about possible improvement of online programs aimed at training church leaders in theological seminaries. Answering the questions in the survey involves no foreseeable risks. Participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time without penalty.

By completing the survey you are giving consent to participate and confirming that you are at least 18 years old. Your answers will remain confidential and will not be linked to any personally identifiable data. Results from this survey will be combined with other research methods including online transcript analysis and semi-structured interviews to explore learning among theological students in an online course. The results of this study will be used in my dissertation, and in possible academic papers and conference presentations relative to online learning and instruction in seminaries. All results are confidential and reported as aggregate data.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me at 0123 or nghitrang@my.unt.edu. You can also contact my advisor, Dr. Ron Newsom, UNT Higher education Program at (940) 565-2722 or Ron.Newsom@unt.edu. This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects. You may print this email for your records.
Below is a link to the web-based survey.
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/las0410

This link is uniquely tied to this survey and your email address. Please do not forward this message. I really appreciate your participation! Thank you.

Sincerely,

Nghi Tran
APPENDIX C

PERSONAL NOTES
APPENDIX C
PERSONAL NOTES

7/22/2010, 10:40 AM

Just got an interview with "Ray." He mentioned about community and professors who had made a big impact on his study. Throughout the interview, I sensed that he didn't differentiate or separate the online element from the whole program. He saw it as a whole program and very much liked to embrace the intensive week. I wondered if there is something that may skew the result, given that the students are here on campus, meeting face to face with others. I will try to do 'online' interview later to see if the result is the same.

Overall, I see that I have to change my questions a lot and let the students speak. I should let them speak and ask for clarification or dig deeper. I let them lead the way in a sense that even though I have an overall goal: transformative learning experience, critical reflection and conditions that are conducive to transformation. I really want to interview some female students as well since all of my interview participants are male.

The Process
Usually I have a room assigned for me to do interview. I put chair opposite to one another. I then asked them some random question about what class they are attending. I give them a small gift, a cross, from Japan. Then I go over the procedure, explaining important items in the consent form, have them sign the third page which includes information such as their contact information, email, gender, age. After that, I ask them to create an alias if they want to. I then push the button to record the conversation.

July 23, 2010 11:00AM

Very encouraged by the staff and the students. One of the students learned that I need more female participants, he tried to talk to his classmates to 'recruit' more participants for me. Also, the staff is available to help me whatever I need. They even gave me a meal pass during a one-week stay at Bethel Seminary campus.

I realized I need to keep revising my questions, asking broader questions and then I will ask more specific questions according to the direction the conversation is leading. Having said that, I also have some goals I want to achieve out of a conversation. The goals are:
I try to see if they have experienced any changes.
What kind of change have they experienced?
What is their process of change?
What triggered/influenced this change?
What did they do with this change?
How has this changed affected them/their ministry/their life?
What is the role of online instruction/the whole program in this change?
How does critical reflection play a role in this change?
How does the program foster/hinder critical reflection?

The ideas of integration and/or applicability came up very often when they talked about critical reflection, esp. in the interview with "Thomas."

About the revision:
I changed the questions, adapting Weinski's in my interview. The first question I ask is "What has changed since you came to Bethel?"
The last question I asked Thomas was "How does InMinistry program foster or hinder critical reflection?" I changed it from "online instruction" to "InMinistry program" because I want to refer to the whole experience. Even though this program, a distance learning program, consists of the majority of online component, it is still unique to refer to it as InMinistry program, not just online program, because I am convinced that the students don't see this program as an online program. I try to see it from their perspective and ask from their perspective. They will indicate or point out some online activities if they happen to appear in their answers. I don't want to separate the online element from the whole program.

I also try to refocus myself by reading and rereading the purpose of the study and the research questions before I interview. I think the interview experience was good overall because I can identify with them in their learning experience and life experience. I've been through seminary before. I'm also in ministry. Their views about the Bible, God, the role of a minister, the character of a minister…are somewhat similar to mine.
APPENDIX D
SAMPLE CODES

Code: Applicable {10-0}

P 6: DavidJuly21 1230.WMA - 6:12 [DavidJuly21 1230.WMA] ( 0:11:07.83 [0:01:25.72] )
(Super)
Codes: [Applicable] [From concept to real life applications] [Seeing a concept lived out]

P 6: DavidJuly21 1230.WMA - 6:14 [DavidJuly21 1230.WMA] ( 0:13:51.61 [0:00:49.63] )
(Super)
Codes: [Applicable] [Face to face impact] [FacetoFace-Peer discussion]

(Super)
Codes: [Applicable] [From concept to real life applications] [Ministry affecting learning]

P 8: RayJuly22 930.WMA - 8:14 [RayJuly22 930.WMA] ( 0:16:48.19 [0:01:15.95] ) (Super)
Codes: [Active in ministry] [Applicable] [From concept to real life applications] [Ministry affecting learning] [Online program allows more real-life contact w/real people]

P10: JeffJuly22 445pm.WMA - 10:17 [JeffJuly22 445pm.WMA] ( 0:20:56.78 [0:01:03.43] )
(Super)
Codes: [Applicable] [CR as integration with one's own ministry] [From concept to real life applications]
P10: JeffJuly22 445pm.WMA - 10:18 [JeffJuly22 445pm.WMA]  (0:22:14.31 [0:02:07.41])
(Super)
Codes: [Applicable]

P10: JeffJuly22 445pm.WMA - 10:19 [JeffJuly22 445pm.WMA]  (0:23:53.84 [0:00:07.60])
(Super)
Codes: [Applicable]

P11: ThomasJuly23 930.WMA - 11:9 [ThomasJuly23 930.WMA]  (0:17:10.55 [0:03:49.08])
(Super)
Codes: [Applicable] [Online program advocates integration]

P12: FredJuly23 1230.WMA - 12:11 [FredJuly23 1230.WMA]  (0:20:48.30 [0:00:33.58])
(Super)
Codes: [Applicable] [Real life triggers learning]

P14: PaulJuly26 1237.WMA - 14:14 [PaulJuly26 1237.WMA]  (0:30:38.55 [0:01:21.39])
(Super)
Code Families

Code Family: Change Content
Created: 10/11/10 07:42:06 PM (Super)
Codes (41): [Basic truths don’t want to change but to deepen] [Becoming more accepting] [Challenge us to be different] [Change-views becoming sharper and clearer] [Change-affirmed as woman pastor] [Change-broadening my view of God] [Change-broadening ourselves] [Change-feel so free] [Change-no longer agree with previous beliefs] [Change-self realization] [Change-views on prayer] [Change in content through teacher’s knowledge] [Change looking at the Bible more critically] [Change view on sanctification process] [Change: less committed to one viewpoint] [Community resulting in humility] [Content not changed but broadened] [CR-asking what the church is doing] [CR baptism] [CR basic truths already solidified before seminary] [CR challenging longheld assumptions] [CR Denominational] [CR on evangelism] [CR on ministry] [CR on self] [CR there are some nonnegotiable issues] [Deb-life change] [Deb-Rediscovering Self] [God image- Changed through friends] [God image- Growing up] [God image- led to changed behaviors] [God image-changed through experience] [God image-Changed through spouse] [Mixing American culture with what it means to follow Jesus] [Perspective on one’s role changed] [Perspectives about Muslim changed] [Resolution phase starting a house church] [Self image-changed] [Self image-transformed] [Situations solidify what I’m learning] [View of God always changing]
Quotation(s): 75

Code Family: Change Means
Created: 10/11/10 07:42:21 PM (Super)
Codes (47): [Active in ministry complementing your study] [Allowing people into one’s life leads to change] [Change-by divine aid] [Change-challenged by authority and support group] [Change-from real contact w/people] [Change-influenced by local church] [Change-trying from own efforts to relying on God’s grace] [Change from books plus interaction w/professors] [Change from experts persuasion] [Change from reading] [Change in content through teacher’s knowledge] [Change potential: divine bringing to desperation] [Change through a course] [Change through books, students, professors] [Change through interaction w/ professors] [Change through interaction w/ students] [Community- transforming experience] [Course influence] [CR through books and lectures] [CR through discussion board] [Deb-Divine Help] [Deb-Help from Books] [Diversity argued for: a bigger picture] [Divine truth led to changed behavior] [Expecting the Bible to change people] [Face to face impact] [FacetoFace-Teacher real presence] [FacetoFace affects online teaching] [Fostering the change is support from a community] [Friend influence led to changed behavior] [Friend support-Correcting God image] [God image- Changed through friends] [God image- led to changed behaviors] [God image-changed through experience] [God image-Changed through spouse] [Hermeneutics class foundational turning point class] [Human real life contacts brings changes] [Intensives allow transformation through people relationships] [Most impactful factor: God working] [No human contact just a task no potential for change] [School as catalyst for change] [Seeing a concept lived out] [Seeing impacts on people- more real] [Self image-God part] [Situations solidify what I’m learning] [Studying the Bible and let the Bible change us] [The more we’re open to it, the more we understand it]
Quotation(s): 71

Code Family: Cognitive Presence
Created: 09/25/10 11:17:14 AM (Super)
Codes (5): [CP Exploration] [CP Integration] [CP Resolution] [CP Triggering] [None CP]
Quotation(s): 185

Code Family: Cohort
Created: 10/11/10 04:56:27 PM (Super)
Codes (14): [Change supported by others' inputs] [Change through books, students, professors] [Change through interaction w/ students] [Cohort- deeper learning] [Cohort- sharing life outside class] [Cohort- the best part] [Cohort-community focused] [Cohort-lifelong relationships] [Cohort-support illustrated] [Cohort-wonderful support] [Cohort interaction enjoy the most] [Cohort same goal same concern wonderful support] [Cohort success depending on teachers’ organization] [Cohort wonderful environment]
Quotation(s): 19

Code Family: Community
Created: 10/11/10 07:40:46 PM (Super)
Codes (31): [Change through books, students, professors] [Change through interaction w/ professors] [Change through interaction w/ students] [Cohort- deeper learning] [Cohort- sharing life outside class] [Cohort- the best part] [Cohort-community focused] [Cohort-lifelong relationships] [Cohort-support illustrated] [Cohort-wonderful support] [Cohort interaction enjoy the most] [Cohort same goal same concern wonderful support] [Cohort success depending on teachers’ organization] [Cohort wonderful environment] [Community- transforming experience] [Community-other responsibilities postponed] [Community in diversity creates genuine respect] [Community in diversity creating a broader sense of God] [Community resulting in humility] [Devotion time in Intensive-the best for me] [Dilemma Sympathy] [Don't feel supported by classmates] [Fostering the change is support from a community] [God image Changed through friends] [Human real life contacts brings changes] [Impacting life: local church] [Intensives allow transformation through people relationships] [Intensives look forward to seeing classmates] [Intensives make online classes easier] [Support from friends] [Teachers relationship as colleagues]
Quotation(s): 34

Code Family: CR Boundary
Created: 10/11/10 07:24:31 PM (Super)
Codes (17): [Basic truths don't want to change but to deepen] [CR-questioning what the church is doing] [CR allows everything into my boundaries] [CR and prayer: seeking God’s opinions] [CR as filter giving one confidence to know what he is thinking] [CR basic truths already solidified before seminary] [CR boundary? depend on a situation] [CR challenging longheld assumptions] [CR don't know where the boundary is] [CR helps see the boundary God put] [CR knowing internally where the boundary is] [CR spending time w/ God helps discern the boundary] [CR the text is a boundary] [CR there are some nonnegotiable issues] [CR wrestling with foundational issues] [Once you’re open to it, you’ll see it] [View of God always changing]
Quotation(s): 20

Code Family: CR Roles
Created: 10/11/10 07:38:25 PM (Super)
Codes (18): [CR allows everything into my boundaries] [CR and prayer: seeking God’s opinions] [CR as filter giving one confidence to know what he is thinking] [CR as integration with one’s own ministry] [CR brings change] [CR challenging longheld assumptions] [CR foundational in the change] [CR healthy tensions] [CR helps me know what is relevant in my context] [CR helps see the boundary God put] [CR helps sharing experience w/ people who don’t believe] [CR natural to some] [CR requires time] [CR through books and lectures] [CR through discussion board] [Once you’re open to it, you’ll see it] [Online program encourages independent thinking] [The more we’re open to it, the more we understand it]
Quotation(s): 21

Code Family: Discussion forums
Created: 10/11/10 07:45:48 PM (Super)
Codes (12): [Being online allows more contemplation] [Being online More focused] [Being online more individualized] [Being online self paced] [CR through discussion board] [Discussion board helps clearer thinking] [Discussion board higher quality in discussion] [Discussion board too much posts] [Interaction before intensives setting tone for success later] [Papers and discussion boards help process thought the most] [Personally knowing someone helps in online discussion board] [Real human contacts help fully online classes]
Quotation(s): 12

Code Family: Diversity
Created: 10/11/10 07:41:44 PM (Super)
Codes (18): [Becoming more accepting] [Change-broadening ourselves] [Change: less committed to one viewpoint] [Community in diversity creates genuine respect] [Community in diversity creating a broader sense of God] [Diversity-Confusion] [Diversity accused too pluralistic] [Diversity aids conversations] [Diversity argued for: a bigger picture] [Diversity Exposure] [Diversity forces self reflection] [Faculty interesting mix] [Online program diverse and conservative at the same time] [Online program encourages multiple perspectives] [Online program provides multiple views] [Recognizing cultural differences] [School changing perspectives] [Teachers withholding personal viewpoints]
Quotation(s): 51
REFERENCES


