

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF MEANINGFULNESS IN FIRST YEAR
EXPERIENCE COURSES: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Students' Perceptions of Meaningfulness in First Year Experience Courses: A Case Study

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This qualitative case study, framed by a constructivist perspective, addresses a deficit in the literature and the knowledge base of a first year experience (FYE) academic program at a large, urban university regarding freshmen perceptions of meaningfulness in their courses. Existing studies identify concepts related to meaningfulness, but do not shed light on attributes which may inhere in those. These studies are inadequate for FYE curriculum planning due to their discipline specific contexts, quantitative nature, or sole focus on motivation. Furthermore, existing conceptualizations present meaningfulness from the etic (faculty/researcher) perspective rather than the emic (student). This is especially problematic in a postmodern era in which some scholars propose that students experience the classroom differently than educators.

Purposeful sampling identified student participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and participants provided reflective journals throughout the data collection period. Interviews and journals were based on exploratory research questions related to the words participants use to convey meaningfulness, the experiences they find

meaningful, and “what about” experiences they find meaningful. Students shared insights regarding what problems prevent meaningfulness. Data collection and analysis occurred in conjunction with the transcription of interviews, note-taking about emerging themes, member checking of transcripts and ideas regarding coded themes, review of appropriate literature, and exploration of theories and existing ideas. Trustworthiness and credibility existed through measures of triangulation that promote accuracy of data and findings.

Analysis led to the creation of categories to answer the four guiding research questions. Integration of those categories with scholarship in curriculum studies and educational psychology provided insight and discussion regarding students’ perceptions of meaningfulness in first year experience courses. The idea of academic states (emotional transition, academic pragmatism, and survival) emerged from participants’ words describing their experiences. Interactive learning (lectures, group discussions, and practice) and opportunities where students were offered challenge/choice were practices associated with meaningfulness. Energy and comfort were the underlying aspects of experiences perceived as meaningful, and participants offered insights into what problems may exist that prevent students from perceiving their courses as being meaningful, or having meaningful aspects (once n’ done and checklist approaches). The study also prompted implications for future research.

DEDICATION

To my parents and grandmother

Bill and Rita Evans and Mimi

who provided a safe space for me to explore my dreams
and stood by me when I changed directions along the way

and

To

Matt and David

who have stood by me daily in the past year
with love and support

In memory of

Boppy, Margie, and Glenn

grandparents lost too soon

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This research study and dissertation would not have been completed without the help and cooperation of many, and I mean *many*, people. As I consider acknowledgements, it seems natural for me to start at the beginning of this advanced degree process. Dr. Sharon Paulson was one of my first professors at Ball State University when I began working on a teaching license and Master's degree in 1997. The *Adolescent Development* course sparked my interest in human development which eventually became my cognate in doctoral studies. Dr. Paulson also offered guidance along the way regarding Ph.D. programs to pursue as well as cognate areas of study offered in Educational Psychology. With her prompting and Dr. Holmes Finch's approach and effectiveness to teaching statistics, I pursued a human development cognate with the curriculum theory major in the Ph.D. in Educational Studies at Ball State University while taking all of Dr. Finch's advanced statistics classes offered because of my seriously strange fascination with statistics (perhaps related to a natural inclination to working with and remembering numbers and those things quantitative initiated by an interest in accounting culminating in a Bachelor's of Science in Accounting). As I bring up my undergraduate studies as part of this process, I should credit Butler University who conferred upon me an undergraduate degree and Miami University (Ohio) where I began my undergraduate studies with the patience required for waiting out the time for me to explore five different majors due to my vast interest in everything. Just kidding, mom and dad; I realize the actual recognition for the patience and ensuing financial and personal investment goes to you.

As I reflect again on my post-baccalaureate pursuits, Dr. Richard Brosio, retired professor from Ball State University, was a professor of social foundations when I was taking classes circa 1999 to obtain a K-12 teaching license in Business Education along with a Master's degree. The feedback he gave me on the final paper for the *Sociology of Education* course encouraged me to believe I had the capability to pursue a Ph.D. which at the time seemed ridiculously unfeasible. Then in 2002 I was teaching as adjunct faculty at the University for Jan Stevens, a former colleague and long-time friend who was also the predecessor of one of the FYE courses I now coordinate, when she advised that I should finish my Master's degree in Educational Studies. Without any questioning or discussion, I said "ok" and finished up the three remaining courses to complete the M.A. While completing my Master's degree, Dr. James Powell, a mentor while working on my teaching license and my professor in a *Research Methods* for the Master's degree, provided options in his class to do a research paper or other work. When I told him I was not going to do the research paper, he told me that was not an option for me. Apparently he thought I should write a paper. The paper I wrote in his research class led to two conference presentations and was the origin for my area of interest related to this dissertation.

While the seeds for this dissertation were planted ten years ago, I will fast forward to the past couple of years when planning for this research study began. In this more recent time period, my boyfriend, David, and son, Matthew, have been influential in my focus, fortitude, and determination to complete this work, and I would not have persevered without their support, love, and understanding. Many a time, one or the other has put their needs and wants on hold so that I could "write." I say "write" in quotes

because in the final months when they asked what I was doing or I informed my son that he needed to leave the room because I was writing, I know that “write” and “writing” conveyed the message to “leave me alone” and I absolutely did not really want them to leave me alone, but we all three knew that leaving me alone was what was needed. I am deeply appreciative for their patience, belief in me, and excitement they expressed as the completion date approached because their emotions kept me going like the Energizer bunny. There were times when I did not think I could finish, and at various times both reminded me that I could and would.

I would also like to acknowledge my mom, dad, grandma (Mimi), Cousin Cindy, Aunt Tony, and Bob and Brenda as being supportive in this process. At times Mom, Dad, and Mimi have cared for Matthew when I needed to go to class or be reclusive to write. My son spent an entire summer with Mimi as I pursued this path and she recently told me she misses the conversations I had with her on the phone telling her all my student tales while traveling to Muncie during that summer. The excitement they display for me to finish my degree along with the enthusiasm to share in the graduation ceremony that my cousin and aunt have shown are gentle reminders that this project is much bigger than me. Furthermore, my brother, Mark, and sister, Iva, are also a piece of this process because they are inherently a part of me as my conscious actions have always been intended to be a guiding light to them as the older sibling. Furthermore, my grandfather (Boppy) who passed away when I was twelve has always been my source of deep inspiration, and I imagine he is proud of me. All have contributed to this accomplishment and it is not just mine; I consider this a family accomplishment.

When I ponder the actual writing of the dissertation, I realize I would not be able to organize all my thoughts without the help of the Chair of my committee, Dr. Nancy Brooks. Dr. Brooks was my professor in my first curriculum theory class which was experimentation on my part to test the waters of pursuing a Ph.D. While I was quite sure I wanted to apply for the Ph.D. in Educational Studies (due to Dr. Powell's gentle push), I was not completely sure, so I took a course in curriculum theory from Dr. Brooks and I was hooked on that area of study. While in that class, I applied to the program with the help of Dr. Barbara Graham who was also a former professor of mine in my Master's program. Upon acceptance, I embraced the joining of curriculum theory and educational psychology in my degree which comes through in my dissertation. Combining the literature of curriculum studies and educational psychology has been a challenging task in my dissertation writing and in my moments of being stuck in writing, Dr. Brooks has been able to sense my struggles and help me through them. She has been my professor and mentor and I look forward to the near future when we work together also as colleagues and friends.

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Chapter One: Introduction

At a large, urban university, Redwood University, where I coordinate and teach three introductory courses (also called first year experience, or FYE, courses) I frequently encounter the concept of meaningfulness in literature and in conversations with colleagues. As a former life purpose and career coach whose work centered on helping people of all ages find meaningful activities to fulfill their life's purpose, it did not take me long to worry that the word *meaningful* was becoming trite, and void of meaning. I also realized the student voice is frequently left out of the conversation of course meaningfulness. Students' issues and needs are a priority of the FYE program, and if students are not heard, FYE faculty may not be addressing needs of success and retention as fully as they might by developing and implementing meaningful courses.

There is scant literature to be found that provides insight into students' perceptions of meaningfulness from their voice rather than through a quantitative measure, especially at the postsecondary level. This deficit seems especially problematic in a time in which some educational scholars are proposing that

students in postmodern¹ conditions may experience the classroom differently than the educators who plan and implement the curriculum (Doll, 1993; Gilbert, 2005, 2007; Marshall, Sears, Allen, Roberts, & Schubert, 2007; Slattery, 1995, 2006). The purpose of this qualitative study, therefore, was to address this deficit by gaining in-depth understanding about students' perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year experience courses.

Qualitative studies are situated and described by particularities of a context within which interactions take place (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Because this study was situated in the context of the FYE program, it is important to provide background about the FYE program, my position in it, and the connection to course meaningfulness in this context. Often, resources and information about events circulated among FYE coordinators contain the word *meaningful* in the title or body of the resource/event (CTL Happenings, 2011; Mezeske, 2010; Svinicki, 2004; Weimer, 2010). Occasionally, such literature makes suggestions for meaningful teaching and learning that require FYE faculty to teach beyond the content of the course. For example, having students help set course goals (Weimer, 2010) or helping "develop students' awareness of themselves as learners" (Weimer, 2012, para 6) are instances of teaching beyond the content. Other teaching beyond the content may involve teaching universal critical thinking skills, study skills, time management, or providing information about future coursework and careers. These

¹ Postmodern and postindustrial are distinct concepts. According to Lyotard (1984), postindustrial refers to societies and the economy, performativity, power, and the relationship of science and technology to industry and business. Postmodern typically refers to the arts and culture. Although Lyotard would present societal movement from the industrial age to a computerized society as postindustrial, scholars such as Gilbert (2007) sometimes use postmodern or postmodern world to describe both postindustrial and postmodern concerns and conditions. This study will use postmodern rather than making a distinction between postindustrial and postmodern.

“extras” are viewed as meaningful aspects of courses and critical to student success and retention, a purpose of the FYE program. Many FYE faculty members are committed to developing and re-designing courses to include such aspects in an effort to make the courses meaningful for students. However, FYE faculty do not have data regarding FYE students’ perceptions of course meaningfulness to enhance this process.

Problem to be Studied and Purpose of Study

My interest in studying meaningfulness in FYE courses emerged from my experience. I teach FYE courses and am exposed to literature regarding the “meaningfulness of a syllabus or a curriculum, of materials, media, or textbooks” and the effect on “what is learned and taught” (Hameyer, 2007, p. 411), and meetings with colleagues who talk about meaningful work for students. This concept of meaningfulness is never discussed, but it is assumed that all readers or participants in a meeting interpret meaningfulness similarly. There is not a concrete shared definition of meaningfulness, nor does there need to be, but the problem is that faculty use the word as if there is a concrete definition. Given the prevalence of the word’s use in literature and event invitations distributed amongst FYE faculty, I began questioning what was really meant by meaningfulness and how the FYE group could understand the term consistently and particularly for our student population.

Turning to the literature of the fields of curriculum and educational psychology, I found much scholarship that both explains the need for meaningfulness and theorizes about its nature. However, a search for current studies of meaningfulness yielded inadequate and problematic guidance for understanding meaningfulness for FYE courses. In general, current studies lacked in-depth student perspectives because they were crafted

from quantitative research designs. The problem with quantitative designs in relation to studying meaningfulness is that the focus was on measuring and defining, and the dimensions of understanding that can be added by accessing the students' own language was missing, so the data does not provide the necessary depth for holistic understanding of a phenomenon. Furthermore, the definitions that emerged were either in different contexts than the FYE program, too focused on one aspect of meaningfulness, or too poorly constructed.

For example, some researchers have studied meaningfulness quantitatively in specific environments such as elementary education (Earp, 1996; Harradine, 1999) and high school physical education (Chen, 1998) and offered contextual definitions or aspects of meaningfulness. Other studies have defined meaningfulness generally, but the definitions were incomplete because they focused on motivation only (Weber, Martin, & Cayanus, 2005) or the definitions used the term meaningfulness in the definition itself, which was problematic (see Gentry & Owen, 2004). These definitions provided understanding related to activities and experiences that were relevant, interesting, and important for students (Gentry & Owen, 2004), but the discussion around them failed to produce insight into what dimensions may underlie concepts of relevancy, interest, and importance to students. Questions still remained. What makes certain activities, events, or aspects of a course relevant, interesting, and important to students? What not readily visible attributes of meaningfulness might inhere in their conceptualization of "relevant," "interesting," and "important?" The purpose of this qualitative study, therefore, was to seek understanding of full time students' perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year experience FYE courses.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study was based on the assumption that when people ponder what is meaningful to them, they construct their own knowledge about meaning in their lives. This study required students to focus on an aspect of their lives—their courses. Their construction of their own knowledge about course meaningfulness was the focus of the research study. Their construction of knowledge may have occurred individually (i.e., cognitive or psychological constructivism) or through interaction with others (i.e., social constructivism) as they actively made sense of their courses. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state that qualitative research “consists of a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). Words and the meaning associated with words are important in understanding from a “constructivist worldview” in which participants’ understandings are “shaped by social interaction with others and from their own personal histories” (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 40). Because the focus of this study was on how students construct their own meaning of experiences in FYE courses, a constructivist worldview (or epistemology) informed the research questions, and qualitative research case study methodology and methods were used for data collection and analysis.

According to Crotty (1998), epistemology (objectivism, constructionism², and subjectivism) and theoretical perspective (such as positivism, interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism, or postmodernism) make up the theoretical framework that shapes the methodology and methods of a study (see Table 1). An epistemology is “a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know” (p. 3). Since the research interest of this study was focused on students’ perceptions, the study was designed to

² Referred to as constructivism in this research study.

Table 1

Four Elements of Research Process

Epistemology	Theoretical Perspective	Methodology	Methods
Objectivism	Positivism	Quantitative research	Quantitative
Constructionism (constructivism)	Post-positivism Interpretivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Experimental research ▪ Survey research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sampling ▪ Questionnaire
Subjectivism (and their variants)	Critical inquiry Feminism Postmodernism <i>etc.</i>	Qualitative research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ethnography ▪ Phenomenological research ▪ Case study ▪ Grounded theory ▪ Action research <i>etc.</i>	Instrument Statistical analysis Qualitative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Observation ▪ Interview ▪ Focus group Comparative analysis Document analysis Interpretive methods <i>etc.</i>

Note. Table from *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (p. 5), by M. Crotty, 1998, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Copyright 2012 by Sage Publications Inc Books. Reprinted with permission via Copyright Clearance Center.

allow them to explain what understandings they piece together based on their experiences. The theoretical perspective, how researchers look at and make sense of the world (Crotty, 1998, p. 8), was interpretive because as the interviewer, I was situated in a position to interpret what students conveyed in regard to meaningfulness. Where quantitative research often takes a positivist perspective because the results are reported objectively with a focus on measuring, assessing, determining, and defining (with an objectivist epistemology guiding the study), an interpretive perspective is more open (and

susceptible) to explanation and understanding. Tending to qualitative research characteristics in design mediates the susceptibility of interpretation.

The following depicts how constructivism and interpretivism guided the specifics of this study. Because this study was designed with a constructivist lens, the research questions were crafted to be answered by semi-structured interviews and reflective journals that allowed students to freely answer with their own words and direction to those words to convey their meaning. The focus of the research questions was on students' construction of words they used to describe their experiences and interactions in classes. Furthermore, the insight from their answers provided additional insight into what it was about their experiences that made something meaningful, and from that insight, problems that prevent meaningfulness could be explored. The case study methodology consisted of data collection of seven FYE students' oral and written words so that results were derived from FYE students and not faculty or the researcher as a participant-observer. While some construction of knowledge of meaningfulness in their courses occurred in individual reflection (cognitive constructivism), other aspects of the construction likely occurred through sharing of ideas with the interviewer (social constructivism). Without the interviewer asking questions about meaningfulness in their courses, students were not likely to think about or construct knowledge about what was meaningfulness in their courses at that point in time. Constructivism as an epistemology enabled me to interpret (analyze) the data because with constructivism "there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8).

Research Questions

Exploratory research questions are necessary for qualitative research in order to provide an “open and wide opportunity for final analysis of the data” (Janesick, 2011, p. 190). Since the purpose of the study was to gain insight about the students’ perceptions of meaningfulness of FYE courses based on their individual and social construction of meaning, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What words do students use to convey something is meaningful in a course?
2. What experiences do students perceive as meaningful in a course?
3. What is it about an experience that makes it meaningful in a course according to students? What about the answers to RQ2 make those things meaningful?
4. What do students perceive as problems that may prevent meaningfulness in a course?

Significance

First year experience programs, such as the one at Redwood University, rely on national reports such as the most recent Fall 2010 report based on a national survey, *Enhancing Student Success and Retention throughout Undergraduate Education* (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). This report, based on quantitative data collected in a survey administered to over 1,000 chief academic officers at four-year colleges and universities in the U.S., provides insight into what faculty may deem as meaningful experiences for students. Data indicates that these programs help improve student grades and overall retention in courses. The data serves as an important guidepost for program change; however, it does not provide information regarding what is occurring based on students’ construction of meaningfulness at the course level.

The FYE program at the Redwood University has received the Hesburgh award and other national recognition for its learning communities and success and retention related to lowering DFW rates (i.e., grades of Ds, Fs, and withdrawals), both of which are based on quantitative data results. Quantitative data guides decision making in first year experience programs and is also what makes institutions candidates for national recognition and rewards. However, despite national awards for lowering DFW rates overall in FYE courses, FYE faculty contemplate in coordinator meetings why some courses are not able to lower their DFW rates. The quantitative data does not explain why certain phenomena occur. National studies and reports indicate that early warning systems are a factor in success and retention, and FYE faculty use early warning systems diligently. However, that too is driven by quantitative data and provides a picture of “what” but not “why.”

Of the seven student success initiatives presented in the aforementioned national Fall 2010 report, Redwood University integrates all seven initiatives: summer bridge programs, pre-term orientation, academic/student success seminars, learning communities, early warning systems, service learning, and undergraduate research. Again, these initiatives are viewed as promoting success and retention based on quantitative data from an objectivist epistemology and positivist perspective where the focus is on measuring, assessing, determining, and defining, such as data collected through a national survey and reported in *Enhancing Student Success and Retention throughout Undergraduate Education* (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012) as well as work based on the *National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)* (Kuh, 2003). FYE faculty participate in these initiatives in their commitment to promote student success and

retention. Yet, it is evident from FYE coordinator meetings that there is general consensus among FYE faculty that something is missing in our understanding of what is going on in courses where success and retention based on DFW rates indicates lack of student success and retention. There is a tendency to focus on DFW rates, but the pressing question has to do with what is going on in the courses for the students in those courses. National data will not answer those questions. To answer those questions, FYE faculty must inquire of students. Understanding what students perceive as meaningful in their courses is a step in understanding DFW rates in certain courses because understanding what is meaningful to students in a course and shifting certain aspects of a course may promote student success and retention in those courses.

When the results of this study are shared with the FYE faculty, the qualitative data will contribute to the FYE program knowledge base by including the student voice in the conversation. The student voice provides an *emic* (insider) perspective, rather than the *etic* (outsider) perspective. The concept of emic and etic perspectives comes from anthropology work with cultures (Moran, 2001). Emic perspectives are the thoughts, feelings, and ideas explained by the members of the group (students). Etic perspectives come from outsiders (faculty) who use their own criteria to explain a culture. Currently, FYE faculty understanding of success and retention is predominantly explained from the etic perspective based on faculty criteria to determine what is best in terms of success and retention. The student voice is lacking as a source of information regarding what is going on in high DFW rate courses and in terms of what they think makes them successful in a course and stay in school as well as what they consider meaningful in a course. Therefore, the data from this study will add to the FYE knowledge base and provide

guidance for curriculum planning. In addition, it will fill a gap in curriculum and psychology literature on meaningfulness by providing the emic perspective.

Summary

Literature that is circulated among FYE faculty and ensuing conversations related to meaningfulness are typically presented from an objectivist worldview with a focus on measuring, determining, and assessing rather than a constructivist lens that allows for the student voice. Existing understandings of the concept as found in recent scholarship are found to be inappropriate for FYE curriculum planning due to lack of ability of quantitative data to answer bigger questions such as why some courses still have high DFW rates, or at least are not able to decrease the rates as well as shedding light on attributes of meaningfulness that may be inherent in concepts connected to meaningfulness such as “relevant,” “interesting,” and “important.” Furthermore, existing conceptualizations present meaningfulness from the etic (faculty or researcher) perspective rather than the emic (student) perspective, thereby creating a shortfall of data related to understanding students’ experiences of meaningfulness in their courses. This research was a qualitative case study conceived within a constructivist lens to address the deficit in understanding of freshmen perceptions of meaningfulness in the literature and in the FYE program.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to seek understanding of freshmen perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year experience courses because current literature lacks the student perspective and is inadequate for FYE course planning. Understanding meaningfulness from the student perspective is important for FYE faculty because it will not only provide a general and consistent basis of understanding from the student perspective but it will also serve as a guide for curriculum development. Meaningful activities, materials, assignments, and assessments can be a part of the curriculum, but there may be aspects beyond content and the aforementioned “extras”³ that students would consider meaningful.

While academic rigor in the form of the content is certainly needed, the student voice (emic perspective) can provide a balance between academic content and other experiences or aspects that contribute to meaningfulness in courses. Student insight can help instructors identify what dimensions of the course are perceived as meaningful—as well as those that are not—for planning purposes. However, studying meaningfulness is complicated because it is a “fuzzy concept” (Greene, 2008) without clear definition. This

³ The “extras” referenced in Chapter One include having students help set course goals (Weimer, 2010), developing “students’ awareness of themselves as learners” (Weimer, 2012, para. 6), integrating universal critical thinking skills, study skills, time management, information about future coursework and careers, and the seven initiatives promoted by national reports (summer bridge programs, pre-term orientation, academic/student success seminars, learning communities, early warning systems, service learning, and undergraduate research).

review of literature will explore its complexity by drawing upon insights from the fields of both curriculum studies and educational psychology. Although the goal of this study was not to define but to gain deeper understanding of meaningfulness, it may help to lay out the general contours of the concept as presented in both fields before delving into particular contributions of each to the knowledge base.

For people to find meaning in life the social scientist R. F. Baumeister (1991) presents four needs: “purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth” (p. 32). These four concepts provide a foundation for which meaning, purpose, and motivation can be studied. Within educational psychology meaning and “the meaningful life” are concepts with empirical connections to “happiness,” where happiness is jointly referred to as positive emotion (pleasure/enjoyment), engagement (engaging life), and meaning (meaningful life) (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005, p. 413). The empirical connection indicates that students may associate feelings of happiness with “things” they experience as meaningful. Reker and Wong (1988) define personal meaning in life “as the cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (p. 221). Meaningfulness in curriculum development is similar to meaning as defined in educational psychology yet is narrower in scope than meaning in life. Curriculum scholars see curriculum development in the current postmodern era as an effort to create a space within which students may encounter moments of personal meaning (Slattery, 1995, 2006). Steinberg and Kincheloe (1995) observe that in these kinds of experiences “Time, place, and meaning collide in an aesthetic harmony that provides the motivation to learn that educational scientists have futilely tried to contrive” (p. xii). Thus, meaning

is a broad concept tied to purpose, goals, and fulfillment that also may be perceived as enjoyment and engagement.

The above discussion is not enough to understand meaningfulness fully for this study because it provides only a general idea of what students may consider meaningful in their courses. The purpose of this review of literature is to help the reader understand the importance of studying meaningfulness by drawing upon a broad scope of research and theory. To do so, this review employs three main sections. The first examines the inadequacies of recent research studies and the current use of meaningfulness in professional literature. The second section provides a rationale for studying meaningfulness under postmodern conditions as indicated in scholarship of curriculum theory and positive psychology. The final section reviews scholarship related to constructivist learning theory because constructivism is a common thread throughout the literature in curriculum studies and educational psychology and the significance of this study – providing qualitative data from the student perspective to inform FYE curriculum planning – is based on how students construct their own understanding of meaningfulness in the context of courses and learning.

Recent Research Studies and Use of Meaningfulness

As stated in Chapter One of this study, there is a problem with relying on the current body of literature for guidance in FYE planning because the studies, in general, are designed with an objectivist lens. Furthermore, some studies were done in different educational contexts than FYE courses, some were focused solely on motivation, and some resulted in poorly constructed definitions. In this section, I elaborate on these

problematic studies. I also provide examples of how the word *meaningful* is used too superficially in the professional literature to provide direction for FYE faculty.

At the elementary school level Earp (1996) conducted a qualitative case study of meaningfulness focusing on a literacy program using interviews, field notes, journals, observations, site artifacts, and a teacher autobiography, the results of which suggested three aspects of meaningfulness in a third grade elementary school classroom. The aspects were: (1) a “family atmosphere” which I would say promoted a sense of belongingness and relationship, (2) “authentic activity,” and (3) use of “negotiation of time, space, curriculum, materials, and assessment” (Abstract) which is roughly analogous to the concept of choice. In a separate study Harradine (1999) postulated meaningfulness as relevance and personal significance prior to administering measures to analyze with exploratory factor analysis and structural equation modeling to investigate predictive relationships among self-efficacy, interest, challenge, and classroom climate to determine what is meaningful for elementary students in the school setting.

At the secondary level, Chen (1998) used a nine dimensional meaningfulness scale that was reduced to six dimensions after principal component analysis and further modification with confirmatory factor analysis in order to guide curriculum design for high school physical education. Chen defined meaningfulness as desire, striving, and inner harmony in the theoretical framework that distinguished meaning from meaningfulness. Desire indicates that the purpose of an activity or learning a concept has been internalized into a personal goal. The student has created a goal and has the desire to achieve the goal. Striving occurs in carrying out the goal. The effort in achieving the goal is more important than actually achieving the goal because there is importance attached

to the process of going after the goal and whether or not the goal is achieved, any effort expended is seen as useful and beneficial rather than “diffused or wasted”

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 217). However, mere engagement in an activity is not enough to qualify as striving because engagement can occur without there being meaning.

Engagement must be used to connect desire and striving, or goal and action. Inner harmony is a feeling of fulfillment that comes from engaging in the activity as a result of desire interacting with striving. Inner harmony suggests that there is willingness to pursue the goal because of the feeling derived from engagement and pursuit. While Earp (1996), Harradine (1999), and Chen (1998) report on investigations into meaningfulness, these three studies are not helpful for FYE courses because their focus is too specific to their particular educational contexts.

Three other projects that focus on quantitative measurement and motivation theory provide narrow and problematic guidelines for understanding meaningfulness. In a study on student interest of college students from a large mid-Atlantic university, Weber, Martin, and Cayanus (2005) administered an 18-item version of the Learner Empowerment Scale (LES), which consists of three subscales that measure students’ perceptions of meaningfulness, impact, and feelings of competence. While this study measures students’ perceptions, it is measuring them based on an existing measure, not by asking students about their experiences. In this study, meaningfulness is “defined” as relating to the expectancy-value theory of motivation (see Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), suggesting that the more a student values a task, the harder the student will work.

Thomas & Velthouse (1990) theorize meaningfulness as one of four “cognitive components of intrinsic motivation” (p. 671) in their “model of empowerment” (p. 666). Meaningfulness along with “impact,” competence,” and “choice” are “seen as having additive motivational effects” (p. 671). In this management model, meaningfulness is discussed in relation to motivation as “the value of a work goal or purpose judged in relation to the individual’s own ideals or standard” or “the individual’s intrinsic *caring* about a given task” (p. 672). This model suggests that experiencing meaningfulness should contribute to motivation, but meaningfulness studied solely in connection to motivation does not provide an in-depth consideration of how students understand meaningfulness. Students may perceive a course (or dimensions of it) to be meaningful, yet not feel motivated. This possibility suggests that there is more to perceptions of meaningfulness than motivation.

In the development of their *Student Perceptions of Classroom Quality* (SPOCQ) questionnaire for gifted and talented high school students Gentry and Owen (2004) define meaningfulness as a construct in the following way: ”When content and methods have relevance to students’ lives and are significant, important, connected, and worth caring about, then meaningfulness has been achieved” (p. 21). They also suggest that, “optimal learning takes place when topics are relevant, meaningful, interesting, and appeal to the imagination” and “when learners connect their prior experiences and knowledge to new information” (p. 21). Meaningfulness in curriculum is tied to content and methods that are relevant, significant, important, and connected to students (p. 21). However, this construct definition is problematic because it uses meaningful and meaningfulness in the definition. In addition, “content validity was examined through a review of the literature

and by using 22 content experts who rated items for each construct” (p. 22). Thus, the instrument was developed solely from the faculty perspective, not a student perspective. Furthermore, the focus related to meaningfulness is primarily – if not entirely – on meaningful learning, not meaningfulness in general, which may preclude perceptions of the importance of other aspects, such as relationships in the classroom, for example.

While the studies above provide insight into meaningfulness, they do not all use the term to mean the same thing. The same problem is manifested in the professional literature about meaningful curriculum, activities, learning, and assessments. Each author has his or her own construction of what is considered meaningful. Some authors associate “meaning” with content, while others focus more on personal relevancy. Stalheim-Smith (1998) consider meaningful learning from a teacher’s perspective as learning that “emphasizes relating new information to information already known by the learner” (p. 1). Meaningfulness in this context is about providing connections to content. Petrina (1992) uses meaning in the context of the student’s perspective, referring to personal relevancy of the curriculum. DiMartino and Clarke (2008) believe, “Personalized teaching is based on the idea that each student is unique” (p. 72) and is a concept related to personal relevancy. Engagement comes from tapping into each student’s unique gifts, talents, interests, desires, and needs. Connection is important because “if content does not connect to life, many students do not pay attention” (p. 71). Furthermore, a study by Daniels and Arapostathis (2005) indicated that students who are engaged in their school content learning discuss subjects with their friends, whereas disengaged students do not engage in out-of-classroom discussions. In this discussion of meaningfulness, engagement, connection, and relevancy seem to be important.

The word “meaningful” abounds in articles and books in curriculum and educational psychology about student engagement (Cashin, 2010), critical thinking, collaborative learning, active learning (Stalheim-Smith, 1998), and about deep, lasting learning (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Millis, 2010). Usually the word is used as an adjective to describe an activity or experience and it is not explicitly defined. Each reader is left with his or her own assumptions, however vague. Meaningfulness is frequently highlighted as being important in course planning, and there are resources to help design, develop, and implement “meaningful” courses with “meaningful” activities. Articles are published about design and development with tips such as structuring for active learning, sufficient time on task and enforcing deadlines, rewarding students, providing regular assessment of progress, accommodating diverse styles, and staying in touch with students (Thiel, Peterman, & Brown, 2008). These tips along with many other ideas, activities, and techniques purport to be excellent ways to help students learn and succeed in their classes. Likewise, best practice literature in curriculum revolves around the importance of concepts such as *meaning* and *meaningful* in the context of engaging, interesting, relevant, authentic, and challenging work (Tomlinson, 2005; Daniels, Bizar, & Zemelman, 2001; Joseph, Bravmann, Windschitl, Mikel, & Green, 2000). Furthermore, as Armstrong (2006) points out, the human development discourse “favors a curriculum that is flexible, that is individualized, and that gives students meaningful choices” (p. 41). These may all be meaningful activities promoting meaningful learning, but the question remains as to why they are meaningful. Very little of this predominantly “how-to” literature attempts to pin down what it means by “meaningful,” and there is no reference to students’ experiences as interpreted by students.

There are also books about curriculum, such as *Meaningful Course Revision: Enhancing Academic Engagement Using Student Learning Data* by Wehlburg (2006) that approach course design, revision and teaching and learning from a student-centered perspective and promote student learning. The difficulty with this type of book being the “answer” to providing “meaningfulness” is that meaningful is used a lot with statements, such as “this is a meaningful and significant use of assessment data” (Wehlburg, 2006, p. 151) or “in order to gather meaningful information about student satisfaction...(p. 19) or “rubrics can help faculty give better and more meaningful feedback to students about their work” (p. 66), but meaningful is used merely as an adjective that adds an emphasis suggesting that what follows is really *good* because it is meaningful.

Resources in the professional literatures such as Wehlberg’s book, are focused on helping students learn and may ultimately make things more meaningful for students, but the data base for many such resources is based largely on student perceptions measured quantitatively from surveys such as NSSE (see Kuh, 2003) that measure student engagement. The underlying assumption appears to be that “it” is meaningful because it leads to student engagement. Measures of student engagement may be helpful in addressing student concerns related to a number of students reporting being bored, angry and stressed in school, which can lead to lack of engagement in social activities and learning (Gilman, Huebner, Furlong, 2009). But does student engagement make something meaningful or do students engage because something is meaningful? Student engagement is very possibly the result and not the reason something is meaningful.

Meaningfulness in Curriculum Studies and Educational Psychology

While curriculum theory and educational psychology have distinctly different bodies of scholarship, both include literature related to the importance of meaningfulness and both have been consulted for this project. Relying upon Oliva's (2009) definitions, this study conceives of curriculum as a discipline, a field of study drawing from many other fields, including psychology⁴ (p. 13). Educational psychology informs the curriculum implementation phase, which includes instruction, and the relationship between curriculum and instruction is "cyclical" (p. 10) because both impact the other when curriculum planning is broken down into a circular model of design, development, implementation, and evaluation. Because of this cyclical relationship between curriculum and instruction, this section connects literature in both fields of study to meaningfulness because both fields help provide a complete picture of meaningfulness. The literature reviewed from curriculum studies indicates a need to understand what is meaningful to students as curriculum addresses issues related to the postmodern condition rooted in constructivism. Educational psychology provides insights into the study of meaningfulness through a response to postmodern conditions from the area of positive psychology that connects to motivational theory and constructivism as well.

Meaningfulness and Curriculum Studies in Postmodern Conditions

Curriculum scholarship of the last two decades has foregrounded the changing social context of education. The postmodern era presents major challenges for designing, developing, and implementing a meaningful curriculum. According to Slattery (2006),

⁴ Additional fields include systems theory, technology, evaluation, sociology, supervision, organizational theory, management, subject areas, philosophy, history, communication theory, and instruction (Oliva, 2009, p. 13)

the current era represents a “paradigm shift’ because humanity is moving to a new zone of cognition with an expanded concept of the self-in-relation” (p. 19). This concept refers to individuals recognizing not only their individual needs and desires but those needs and desires in relation to others on a global level, to the planet, and to positions of perceived power where “diverse cultures and many genres of expression” (p. 19) can come together quickly and efficiently in this “global information revolution” expedited by the use of social media. Not only are postmodern curriculum thinkers experiencing the shift, but students are dramatically involved in the shift because they were born in this transitional era that relies heavily on social media. Doll (1993) notes that from a postmodern vantage point curricular issues require pluralistic thinking, where issues are seen as connected and non-linear requiring input from students, not just authorities. Gilbert (2005) suggests new ways of teaching and learning will be necessary, based on changes in our understanding of what knowledge is and how learners acquire it. Some of the new ways of learning will involve the proliferating use of technology from “insiders” (Lankshear & Bigum, 1999) or “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001a) requiring the emic perspective.

Curriculum studies provides a rich literature on implications of our culture’s move from a modern to a postmodern era. A review of curricular issues in the postmodern provides a context for students’ learning, understanding, interpreting, and constructing meaning. Slattery (2006) urges that “postmodern schooling must attend to these important issues” (p. 87). Holistic learning (Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr, & Kates, 2005), the “self and spirit” orientation to curriculum (Joseph, Bravmann, Windschitl, Mikel, & Green, 2000), and “the shift in emphasis from knowledge to knowing” (Gilbert, 2005, p. 77) are all concepts that emphasize the centrality of the learner to curriculum

planning in the postmodern world. Curriculum studies addresses what is determined to be in a course and why by answering the epistemological questions of: (1) what knowledge is most worthwhile, (2) why, and (3) how is it acquired or created (Schubert, 1986, p. 1). Postmodern thought requires that the student perspective be considered.

Lyotard (1984) is a postmodern philosopher who is often drawn upon by curriculum theorists because of his scholarship on the nature and function of knowledge. He contends “that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial⁵ age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age” (Lyotard, 1984, p.3). Societal movement from the industrial age to a computerized society is one of grand transformation, and knowledge will also change in the transformation. According to Lyotard, knowledge will no longer be an end, but it will become a commodity to be bought and sold, and power will also be a part of the knowledge equation in the postmodern world. Gilbert (2007) describes Lyotard’s image of knowledge in the postmodern world as being important for its perceived value as a product in economic terms rather than as a means to “truth, reason, or certainty,” the latter view being regarded by Lyotard as “obsolete” (p. 119). Gilbert’s (2007) analysis of Lyotard’s view of knowledge continues along the lines of postmodern thought that recognizes “many reasons, many truths, and many knowledges,” emphasizing the fact that not only are these “many” possible but they are warranted (p. 119). As such, Gilbert’s (2007) view of Lyotard’s discourse predicts that “traditional methods of representing knowledge (books,

⁵ Postindustrial and postmodern are distinct. Postindustrial refers to societies and the economy, performativity, power, and the relationship of science and technology to industry and business. Postmodern typically refers to the arts and culture. For example, Lyotard presents societal movement from the industrial age to a computerized society which is postindustrial. Scholars sometimes use postmodern world to describe both postindustrial and postmodern concerns.

articles and so on) and ‘expert’ individuals” will no longer be the main distribution of learning but “the process of ‘innovation’” will prevail (p. 119).

It is possible that some courses may not be meaningful to students today because the courses are cast in a modern (rather than postmodern) representation of learning as lecture, note taking, and test taking. Students are ready, able, and willing to figure out what something means in relation to themselves, create, explore, and move forward in their learning in a different, perhaps digitally wise (Prensky, 2009), manner where regurgitation of facts is not viewed as learning by today’s students. Students would rather use resources to look up facts and information they need as they need it than memorize data and information. Based on “neurobiology, social psychology, and from studies done on children using games for learning,” Prensky (2001b, intro section, para.3) suggests that the brains of digital natives are different—they “*think differently*” (“Malleability” section, para. 2) than many of their instructors who are “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001a). They have grown up in a world where digital devices and technology are their learning culture and their way of learning is shaped by that digital technology culture. Speed, interactivity, random access, graphical awareness, parallel processing, and choosing what to pay attention to are skills that digital natives have acquired as a result of immersion in a digital society (Prensky, 2001b). In order for students to be engaged in their learning, these skills need to be tapped. Students are not likely to find learning meaningful, not see meaningfulness in a course, unless they get to use their way of learning. Addressing needs of digital natives is a postmodern issue to be considered.

Digital natives are criticized for their attention spans, but as Dr. Edward Westhead, retired professor of biochemistry at University of Massachusetts, states, “Sure

they have short attention spans—for the old ways of learning” (cited in Prensky, 2001, “What About Attention Spans section,” para. 2). In other words, they choose where to put their attention, and they will not put it on “things” that are not meaningful to them. Prensky (2001) believes reflection is an area of weakness with digital natives. This weakness may be a reflection of them not seeing the importance of pausing between activities because of their being used to instant interactivity. It may also be connected to reading. He suggests that reading is also a weakness of digital natives because reading in a linear fashion is a skill. Digital natives access information and data randomly (from where they need it and when they need it, rather than finding a good book and reading it front cover to back cover). Elder & Paul (2010) and Nosich (2012), scholars of psychology and philosophy, would likely place the lack of reflection and connection to reading as lack of critical thinking skills which can be taught and practiced. Personal experience from teaching over the past ten years (during the time of the emergence of the notion of digital natives) concurs with Prensky’s suggestion of a decline in students’ reading skills. Being resourceful (knowing where to find information and reading what is needed) appears to be more important to students than reading a book in this postmodern, digital, information world. Close reading (Paul & Elder, 2008) is a skill that students do not inherently bring with them to the classroom. Perhaps we need to consider how this new way of reading occurs to be different than the old way of reading, just as the old way of learning is different from the new way of learning.

E-textbooks address the new way of reading that will likely be attractive to digital natives who are now seeing Kindles, Nooks, iPads as the norm. Textbook publishers and higher educational institutions are promoting e-textbooks as a means of driving down

textbook cost (Rickman, Von Holzen, Klute, & Tobin 2009). An e-textbook fits the Web 2.0, collaborative world and makes a book an “-able.” The book is searchable, sharable, annotatable, and printable (if needed). It is also linkable, meaning it has hyperlinks to activities and websites to support student learning. The “-ables” are what Web 2.0 is about – using the web not only as a means to get to something to print and read, but to collaborate, share, and create. An e-textbook is about accessing (buying knowledge) as needed, non-linearly, but randomly.

However, simply incorporating the use of technology in the classroom may not be enough to create meaningful learning experiences. Shneiderman (2002) refers to the concept of “new computing” (p. 11) in the sense that it goes beyond “mastering technology” (p. 12) and needs to consider human relationships as a motivating factor for computer users. Shneiderman (2002) argues that users want “more information, better relationships, more chances to create, and better ways to send the world their message” (2002, p. 61). Shneiderman (2002) also envisions new computing technologies will “recognize collaborative experiences, entertainment, and aesthetics” (p. 11) as he suggests the need for new computing to take into account Maslow’s hierarchical human needs (Maslow, 1943) when examining motivation behind using technology. Not only are digital natives’ brains different which leads to new ways of learning, but technology can meet the human needs of affiliation with others, a sense of belonging, and self-esteem. “Relating, creating, and donating are where Shneiderman’s (2002) categories of human activity intersect with Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs” (Evans, Mulvihill, & Brooks, 2008). Shneiderman’s connections flow from Lyotard’s view of “performativity” and “producing innovative new products” (creating and donating according to Shneiderman).

Furthermore, Lyotard called for traditional methods of delivery (such as books) to dissolve and new ideas of learning to evolve as “experts” become less important. The e-textbook initiative fits nicely with digital natives’ needs and is an example of traditional methods of delivery dissolving. Another example of the dissolution of traditional methods of delivery is the potential classroom use of sites such as Course Networking (CN)⁶. CN is a postmodern response to students’ fondness of social media (such as Facebook) as well as to the technological inefficiency of traditional learning management systems. CN connects students to their course and similar courses worldwide so that discussions are not confined to the immediate classroom. Students can learn from others around the world instantaneously as they share thoughts about course content and sometimes share aspects of their personal life that they feel is appropriate to share with others connected to the course. An outcome of CN is that students share parts of themselves that may be personal and not course content related because in doing so they are forming bonds with other students. When using social media, students do not seem to be concerned with getting expert opinions, and I contend that digital natives’ do not value experts (i.e. professors’ lectures) as much as they value finding an answer on an “as-and-when needed basis,” which may be considered a new way of learning as students use the old knowledge, not to add to, but to apply it to new situations. Students do not find it to be important to have all the expert knowledge on a topic imparted into them as much as they find it useful to be able to be resourceful to access expert knowledge if needed. In some instances, they find non-expert knowledge to be more useful, such as “like” or “dislike” in social media or reviewers’ comments at Amazon.com, for example. Social

⁶ See <http://www.coursenetworking.com/pages/?p=about> for pedagogical background.

media where details of lives are shared to the extent students do not see separation from work/school/personal also fit into the Shneiderman/Maslow model where “relate” parallels “love, affection, and belongingness” (Evans, Mulvihill, & Brooks, 2008). The proliferation and ubiquity of social media in the current cultural climate indicates a need to consider the importance of relationships in curriculum.

Relationships and Meaningfulness in Curriculum Studies

A final area of consideration in the literature regarding meaningfulness and curriculum development focuses on relationships in the classroom. A review of the literature suggests meaningful assignments that provide choice and allow for connections to their personal and professional lives will lead students to be more engaged and interested. Classroom environment and relationships have also been presented as a means to engagement and interest. A supportive environment that nurtures relationships where both course content and students’ lives outside the classroom are honored by teachers is important. This idea is supported by Noddings’ (2007) ethic of care, which is an academic structure of relationships in the sense of there being one cared for and one doing the caring in relationships, even those in the classroom. Greater learning evolves from a sense of being cared for, and I would argue that learning can come from the person doing the caring as well.

A classroom environment that reflects “teaching with love” is advocated by Goldstein (1998). Some of the entries in Goldstein’s (1998) account refer to building community. However, this phenomenon is about classroom intimacy which “embodies trust, the sharing of meaningful experiences, a degree of mutuality and reciprocity among participants, a commitment to open communication, and a depth of feeling regardless of

the number of people participating in the relationship” (p. 19). The affective that Goldstein refers to is a part of teaching; it does not disappear because there is content to cover, and it can enhance the content and environment. Ignoring the affective—the heart and community environment—reduces students to objects and learning to a mechanical process. As cited in Goldstein (1998), Mem Fox stated that “the plain old fact of the matter is that teachers and children have hearts, and those hearts play an enormous part in the teaching/learning process” (p. 30). While much of the focus of “teaching with love” is centered on elementary age students, college age students have hearts as well. Teaching with love is related to personalized learning and teaching (DiMartino & Clarke, 2008), as well as Dewey’s (1990) vision of “the child in the curriculum” where the child’s “world is a world of persons with their personal interests, rather than a realm of facts and laws” and “affection and sympathy” are “its keynote” (p. 183). This world of affection and sympathy presents a classroom environment where students are met with appropriate affection and sympathy and feel safe to share problems. This environment also considers students’ experiences.

Often there is a gap between experiences and content that makes up courses. Dewey’s (1990) emphasis on experience, DiMartino and Clarke’s (2008) emphasis on personalized learning and teaching, and Goldstein’s (1998) emphasis on teaching with love all require that students’ interests, experiences, desires and needs be considered in curriculum. Observing a teacher, Goldstein (1998) noted that the teacher “respects their interests, desires, and choices” (p. 51). DiMartino and Clarke (2008) emphasize personalized learning plans. Dewey (1990) stresses that we strive not to “fractionize” (p. 184) a child’s world, but meet his or her “peculiarities, whims, and experiences” in the

curriculum (p. 186). Kessler (2000) writes about “the inner life” of students being “bound up in matters of meaning, purpose, and connection with creative expression and moments of joy and transcendence” and contends that classrooms that invite such experiences promote academic motivation and retention (p. xvii).

An integrating factor in Dewey’s, Goldstein’s, DiMartino and Clarke, and Kessler’s work is the notion of “striking while the iron is hot” (Dewey, 1990, p. 192). Dewey’s (1990) emphasis is quite strong in that there is a now or never. I interpret this responsibility on the teacher as an effort to show that teachers need to help students “discriminate” (p. 192), which takes awareness on students’ part as well as the teachers; so, there has to be a conscious getting to know each other of students and teachers. Dewey certainly indicates that if the time is right in recognition, it can be a “turning-point for good in the child’s whole career” and if “neglected, an opportunity goes, never to be recalled” (p. 192). To me, this means that teachers must take care and to take care, they must show care (or love). The other aforementioned scholars struck while the iron was hot in other ways beginning with learning what was hot with their students by honoring their interests, desires, gifts, and talents in connection with course content and experiences.

Furthermore, I interpret Dewey to say that traditional curriculum does not serve the student; rather it serves the teacher. Traditional curriculum is created from the teacher/adult/expert vantage point. Curriculum that serves students would be created with more consideration of their vantage points and experiences. Curriculum that serves the student is seated in a curricular orientation of “self and spirit” where again the importance of a “learning community” is stressed (Joseph, Bravmann, Windschitl, Mikel, & Green,

2000, p. 75). Mutual trust and respect are required in this culture where teachers act as “guides,” “facilitators,” “nurturers,” and “coaches” (p. 83). In this orientation, “everyone affected...is involved in curriculum making” (p. 87). Thus, the student has a voice and is heard by understanding their perceptions and integrating their voices into the curriculum ultimately serving the students, rather than the teacher.

Meaningfulness Studied in Educational Psychology

Lyotard (1984), Shneiderman (2002), and Prensky (2001a, 2001b, 2009), make a case that students’ brains and ways of relating and learning are different in this postmodern world. In order to serve students and society, curriculum must adjust. There have been some adjustments, such as addressing multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and differentiating instruction (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Furthermore, educational psychologist’s work with *purpose* in positive youth development (Bronk, 2008; Bronk & Finch, 2010; Bronk, Finch, & Talib, 2010; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Damon, 2004; Damon, 2008a; Damon, 2008b) in the area of positive psychology represents another means of addressing postmodern issues in teaching and learning in the classroom. Positive psychology related to motivation theory and a review of literature related to purpose can provide insight into meaningfulness.

Positive psychology is concerned with psychological health and well-being. As stated by Pajares (2001), “positive psychology has been described as the study of human strengths and optimal functioning, and one of its key aims is to foster research on the positive personal traits and dispositions that are thought to contribute to subjective well-being and psychological health” (p. 27). Because a major goal of positive psychology is that “its methodology should be grounded firmly in systematic and scientific inquiry”

(Myers, 2001), Pajares (2001) studied traditional motivation constructs integrated with positive psychology constructs and found that positive psychology constructs “can yield valuable insights” into motivation theory (p. 33). An interesting result from Pajares’ (2001) study related to meaningfulness and potential for curriculum development is that “students whose academic efforts are grounded in love of the work and who prefer tasks from which they can learn, even if they make mistakes along the way, do not require that others validate their academic efforts and do not fear self-censure or the censure of others when errors are made” (p. 33).

While Pajares connects this finding to optimism, I suggest it connects to meaningfulness. Those students connected to something meaningful and were motivated intrinsically toward self-actualization. At the level of assignments and instruction, the goal would be to help students become comfortable with making mistakes in their journey and help them find ways to find aspects in their academic work that they can connect to in order to give students an individually meaningful experience with assignments and activities. While helping students find meaning and purpose in their lives in and out of school is not a new idea, the call for it in educational psychology directly addresses postmodern issues presented by curriculum theorists.

Finally, Damon’s (2009) emphasis on addressing purpose in the classroom seems related to meaningfulness in courses. Damon (2009) states that, “Schools must address the ‘why’ question with students about all that they do” (para. 5). “Why” is the most essential question to answer because it not only “helps students better understand the purpose of schooling but also exposes them to a respected adult’s own quest for purpose” (para. 5). Thus, educators can provide a model for students’ own search for meaning and

purpose. In thinking about their search for meaning, students, if asked, can convey what is meaningful to them in curriculum, thereby helping faculty improve design and delivery. Because many faculty members are not digital natives, it is entirely possible that their ideas of what provides purpose and meaning in a course are quite different from their students' ideas.

Additional Motivational Theory Related to Meaningful Curriculum

Expectancy-value theory can be used to shed light on a possible connection between motivation and perceptions of meaningfulness in a course. The student's thoughts and feelings about meaningfulness in a course may exist because the tasks in the class align with the students' goals and/or the student has an expectation that he or she can do well because of past experience. The perceived expectancy-value combination makes the student feel motivated or unmotivated to do the work. While this example is a simple interpretation of Atkinson's (1954) expectancy-value theory presented by Eccles (1983), it indicates that students' interpretation and construction of meaningfulness may be connected to motivation because they see a value in the course.

Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) is a motivational theory that may provide a more complete perspective of what is going on with motivation in regard to experiences of meaningfulness. It is simple to understand because one can imagine a moment where one has felt in the flow from an instance of immediate experience. The experience can occur as a participant in an athletic event, while working on a project in the woodshop, or while gardening, to name a few instances. Recall of Petrina's definition of spirituality, "any aspect of humanity's connection to something other than itself" (cited in Williams, 2007, p. 6), seems to capture the essence of flow theory where time passes in a surreal

manner and one feels connected with the activity. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) present flow theory as an intrinsic motivation theory because “when individuals are intrinsically motivated, they engage in an activity because they are interested in and enjoy the activity” (p. 112). Flow occurs when challenge and skill level are relatively high (Massimini & Carli, 1988) and an emotional state of feeling immersed in an activity occurs (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Flow leads to further motivation because individuals seek to increase their competency (Csikszentmihalyi & Massimini, 1985) because of the need for high challenge and skill. The internal reward, the feeling of flow, drives motivation for improvement and higher achievement. Meaningful curriculum in which students have a high interest might create a space for students to experience flow whereby they feel excitement, pleasure, and joy. Students who experience flow find a connection to a topic or activity because they find a way to relate it to not only their interests, but also their strengths.

Bassi and Delle Fave (2004) and Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Shernoff (2003) have indicated that enjoyment, motivation, and opportunities for involvement in the learning process are lacking in schools. Damon (2008) indicated that “schools fall short” (xiii) in providing meaningful and rewarding direction for students. Activities and assignments that allow a student to explore content through their strengths would be enjoyable and lead to “flow.” For example, after reading a piece of literature where the hero performs an act of bravery, students could explore the reading through an involved discussion with “high involvement” (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) from the teacher and classmates about an experience where not only is bravery considered, but virtues such as integrity, curiosity, forgiveness, and appreciation are honored in the

assignment. These virtues are character strengths and virtues out of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and apply to curriculum development of assignments and instruction that addresses individual differences and provides students with an individually meaningful experience. While the connection to motivation is important to make, I contend that there is more to meaningfulness than motivation, as suggested by the definition provided in Chapter 1: “When content and methods have relevance to students’ lives and are significant, important, connected, and worth caring about, then meaningfulness has been achieved” (Gentry & Owen, 2004, p. 21).

Constructivism

The following is an overview of constructivism based on the work of leading theorists and scholars in curriculum studies and psychology. This overview is meant to provide an historical perspective and background of constructivism as a learning theory to enrich understanding of the theoretical framework of this study’s methodology as well as complement the foreshadowing of constructivism from the above mentioned postmodern curriculum theorists. Piaget and Vygotsky are considered fathers of cognitive constructivism and social constructivism, respectively. The two were contemporaries who corresponded, and according to Sjøberg (2007), Piaget was “acknowledged to have been inspired by Vygotsky’s ideas” (p. 8). Piaget’s work presents four stages of child development with a focus on the individual and it provides the groundwork for social constructivism, developed by Vygotsky and other scholars such as Bakhtin, Dewey, and Bruner. Piaget’s work stemmed from his study of cognitive development of children and adolescents in which he viewed human cognition as the work of an “active organism

constantly striving to make sense of experience” (Berk, 1997, p. 212). Experience, active participation, and creating one’s own meaning were tenets of Piaget’s work.

Vygotsky’s work provides a social context, a sociocultural theory for a “view of the relation between learning and development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 84) with a central tenet being his theory of the zone of proximal development. The zone is defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level...and the level of potential development” which is guided by an adult or occurs through collaboration with more “capable” peers (p. 86). As for the relationship between learning and development, “learning is not development” but learning results in development and moves the developmental process forward and that would not occur without learning. Learning is necessary for development and it occurs by being around others with more skill, capability, or knowledge. For example, a child does not speak in a vacuum. The child is around adults who speak (the zone is the level of the child not speaking and the level of adults speaking). The child is learning prior to speaking and then in speaking progresses in development. The zone provides an environment of challenge, collaboration, cooperation, and support in a social context. This scenario translates to the first year experience as well as the social context of interviewer and interviewee in shaping the students’ knowledge (meaning) of course meaningfulness. Vygotsky’s child developmental theory is a foundation for the current social constructivist learning theory of “how people learn” where learning is social, occurs in context, is active, and is reflective (Driscoll, 2002).

While Vygotsky had a large impact on educational psychology, another contemporary, Bakhtin, who was a literary scholar, is important to mention because of

contribution to curriculum studies by recognizing that “voices cannot exist in isolation, rather our utterances represent some aspect of our interactions and experiences within society throughout the duration of our lives” (Gilbert & Broadway, 2010, p. 67). Bakhtin advocated that the words we speak are not only our words but the words of others we have heard (Wertsch, 1991). The implication of Bakhtin and Vygotsky’s theoretical work in relation to this study is that much of how students make meaning (and define what is meaningful to themselves) is related to sociocultural aspects of life. Both conceived of learning and what was presented by a student or learner as one’s own as a “culturally embedded and socially mediated process in which discourse plays a primary role in the creation and acquisition of shared meaning making” (Murphy, Wilkinson, & Soter, 2011, p. 391).

Dewey, sometimes thought of as a psychological constructivist (Seifert, 2009), was also conducting his work during the time period of the aforementioned scholars. One aspect of Dewey’s work involved the importance of classroom discussion which is more of a social constructivist than psychological constructivist viewpoint. Discussion amongst students and teachers provides an environment where participants can give and take in conversation, probe, explore, encourage one another, collaborate, consider multiple viewpoints, and ultimately construct knowledge with the emergence of new understanding. This type of understanding is a meaning making experience in which a student internalizes the discussions and learning and “becomes a miniature social assemblage” (Dewey, 1916, p. 195). Dewey’s viewpoint on the “social assemblage” mirrors Vygotsky and Bakhtin’s views of social construction of learning through

internalizing others' ideas and being in the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978).

Bruner's connection to social constructivism is visible through the concept of "assisted performance" (Seifert, 2009, p. 35). According to Seifert, Bruner's concept of "instructional scaffolding" (p. 35) mirrored Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development where Bruner's scaffolding was guidance from an adult (teacher) and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development required accompaniment by an "expert" (p. 36). Furthermore, in *Acts of Meaning*, Bruner (1990) writes about a child's "entry into meaning" (p. 67) that clearly can be seen as not being possible without human interaction. Children learn to narrate and construct meaning of situations by interacting with others, initially by being part of the social group called the family. In the context of a FYE course at Redwood University, the family could be considered the instructor and other students in a particular course.

Bruner's sense of a child's "entry into meaning" is also similar to the zone of proximal development where the child would put the child at the lowest level and the other family members in the zone (perhaps older siblings with more experience, skill, and knowledge) with the highest capable people (perhaps parents/adults) being at the highest level of the zone. The child would be challenged by and supported by all members in the zone with the achievement goal in this sense learning to speak or walk or something fairly basic. All family members at various levels of expertise work with the child to talk and walk and provide support and encouragement of such milestones (considered development and/or learning). Within a classroom there will be members of the class at

various levels in the zone, so this child and the family environment can translate to a classroom environment as well.

Constructivism evolved from Piaget's psychological or cognitive way of constructing knowledge to a social way of understanding the world. Constructivism was the theoretical framework for this study based on the assumption that, when interviewed, students would construct their own understanding of meaningfulness both psychologically in student journal reflections as well as socially in interviews. The overview of constructivism also illustrates how students would construct meaning of content in their courses.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to seek understanding of Redwood University freshmen perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year experience courses as an aid to FYE curriculum planning. This review of literature employed three sections that drew upon a broad scope of research and theory to emphasize the need for this study. The first section examined the inadequacies of recent research studies and the current use of meaningfulness in the type of professional literature that FYE faculty consult. The second section provided a rationale for studying meaningfulness under our current postmodern conditions, as educators in both curriculum studies and positive psychology work to reconcile the tensions between a modern representation of learning and a new way of learning for digital natives. The final section reviewed scholarship related to constructivist learning theory because constructivism's focus on meaningfulness is a common thread throughout the literature in the separate fields of both curriculum studies and educational psychology. The scholarship of philosophers, learning theorists, and

curriculum planners highlights the importance of investigating student perceptions of meaningful coursework.

Chapter Three: Methodology and Methods

Case Study Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to seek understanding of college freshmen perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year experience courses to gain insight into the following research questions:

1. What words do students use to convey something is meaningful in a course?
2. What experiences do students perceive as meaningful in a course?
3. What is it about an experience that makes it meaningful in a course according to students? What about the answers to RQ2 make those things meaningful?
4. What do students perceive as problems that may prevent meaningfulness in a course?

Constructivism informed the research design of this case study methodology and methods, and constructivism was also a common thread of the literature related to meaningfulness in curriculum theory and educational psychology. A review of the literature illustrated that both curriculum studies and educational psychology provide insights into exploring meaningfulness from the student perspective under postmodern conditions, and case study was deemed an appropriate methodology in which to explore the literature as it related to participants' construction of meaningfulness in their courses.

The rationale for case study was based on Yin's (2009) analysis of "relevant situations for different research methods" (p. 8) that conveys case studies are preferred over other social science research such as histories, experiments, or surveys when (1) the main research questions posed are of "how" or "why" in nature, (2) the study is in a real-life situation of a contemporary phenomenon, and (3) the investigator has little control over events affecting the study. In this case study, student interview questions focused on "how" those individuals perceived meaningfulness and "why" they thought of meaningfulness in the way they did. The purpose was "explanatory" (Yin, 2009, p. 9) where I sought to explain what students thought and felt so that there is a better understanding of students' perceptions. Qualitative results provided understanding of meaningfulness in the real-life situation of meaningfulness of FYE courses, which is a contemporary phenomenon, and it is not a concept that has a historical basis or has previously been studied from the student perspective. Since the preliminary basis of this study was based on participants' thoughts about meaningfulness requiring in-depth exploration to gain understanding, neither a control group nor a survey would philosophically inform such a study. In addition to the rationale for the methodology of the study, the general characteristics of qualitative research were considered in the research design of this study. While characteristics of qualitative research have been studied by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), Creswell (2009), and Yin (2009), Patton's (2002) twelve characteristics capture many of the aforementioned authors' perspectives and were used to guide the design, data collection, and analysis strategies of this case study presented in the following sections of this chapter.

Methods

Design Strategies

Setting. Design issues related to qualitative research involve *naturalistic inquiry* and *emergent design flexibility*. Designing this study as a case study of a real-world phenomenon in a natural setting was discussed in the rationale for using case study based on Yin's criteria. This study took place during the Fall 2011-Spring 2012 academic year on the campus of a large, urban university herein referred to as Redwood University. Students participated in their natural setting as students rather than the study being conducted in a laboratory or off campus. Interviews were conducted in my office which was deemed a natural setting for students in the student role. The interviews were casual and informal and conversational, as if they were meeting with a professor during office hours.

Also related to this characteristic is the idea of allowing experiences within the study to "unfold naturally" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). In a few instances, students needed to reschedule the interviews due to forgetting or other conflicts occurring. Two participants were typically late to interviews. These occurrences were a part of the natural setting of student life. Furthermore, it was important to be open "to whatever emerges" (Patton, 2002, p. 40) so that I maintained a neutral approach to interviewing rather than operating within "predetermined constraints on findings" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). This concept is related to *emergent design flexibility* and the use of a semi-structured interview rather than having a firmly set interview protocol. The semi-structured approach provided flexibility in asking questions that flowed from the conversational style with participants and allowed the students' responses to dictate the direction of interview questions and

pursue “new paths of discovery as they emerge” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Allowing the conversation to flow naturally kept the focus on interviewing rather than on what students were saying that might have fit any potential findings that were emerging in analysis. Thus, the interviews were not controlled based on any predeterminations.

Sampling method. *Purposeful sampling* is a characteristic to consider in the design phase of qualitative research. Purposeful sampling is viewed as a weakness in quantitative studies, but in qualitative studies, the sampling technique is a strength because it allows an in depth look into the case (Patton, 2002). There are a variety of purposeful sampling techniques; I used *typical case sampling* in this study because it was considered the means to “select information-rich cases strategically” (Patton, 2002, p. 243). FYE students were the direct path to “best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2009, p. 178). According to Patton (2002), typical cases can be selected from demographic analysis and provide a profile of one or more typical cases “to describe and illustrate what is typical to those unfamiliar with the setting” (p. 236). In describing the typical cases, which in this study are the typical FYE students, demographic data provided typical case profiles useful to participant selection.

Nomination criteria. The demographic breakdown from Fall 2010 (most recent data available at time of study design) for the first-time full-time students in FYE courses indicated that of 2,395 students, fifty-nine percent were female, forty percent were first generation college students where parents did not attend a four year college or earn a degree beyond high school, seventy-four percent were White/Caucasian, and twenty-six percent were Black/African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Other, or International students. The initial goal was to recruit eight first-time full-time students taking at least

one FYE course that represented the Fall 2010 FYE cohort breakdown based on male/female, first generation, non-White, as follows:

- 5 female, 2 first generation, 1 non-White
- 3 male, 1 first generation, 1 non-White.

Student recruitment process. I presented research study information to eleven FYE faculty teaching multiple sections of computer technology information, chemistry, learning communities, English, psychology, and speech. These six courses are high student capacity courses that meet requirements for general course selections for many majors. FYE faculty then provided me with a class roster of students from sections that they were teaching. From the class roster, I identified eligible students – those who were first time full time. I sent out a recruitment email to eligible students in mid-November. Four students replied with interest in participating in the study at that time. I sent out reminder emails at the beginning of December with no responses likely due to the end of the Fall semester approaching. At the beginning of the Spring 2012 semester, I sent out reminder emails again and received Spring class rosters from the eleven FYE faculty and sent out emails to newly eligible students. I received email replies from three students interested in participating in the study. At that point, I had already begun interviews with the four initial participants, so I considered the recruitment phase to be closed.

Participants. While eight students had been determined to be a reasonable number of students to work with over a two month period of time, I was only able to recruit **seven** students for participation in the study. There were unanticipated complications with the Internal Review Board (IRB) review process and approval was not received until mid-November 2011 which put student recruitment in a bind. I

received interest from seven students. These seven students met the most important criteria of first-time full-time students enrolled in at least one FYE course. This sample was close to the desired sample breakdown for typical case sampling, but due to student recruitment issues discussed in the Limitations section of this chapter, the sampling technique did not meet the demographic breakdown designed for a typical case sample. The following attributes describe the participants in relation to the demographic breakdown:

- 3 female, 2 first generation, 2 non-White
- 4 male, 2 first generation, 1 non-White

Role of researcher. While I serve as FYE coordinator for two computer information technology courses, students in the course sections that I teach were not considered to participate in the study. However, I supervise six adjunct FYE faculty who were included in the presentation of the study information and who provided class rosters. As with all FYE faculty asked to provide class rosters, doing so was voluntary and there was no expectation that the faculty that I supervise would provide names as part of their regular duties and responsibilities. Furthermore, my role was not one of participant-observer, but was strictly as the interviewer and data analyst.

Data Collection Strategies

A true case study requires multiple types of data collection (Yin, 2009). While the sources of evidence that Yin (2009) discusses may not be an exhaustive list of types of data that can be collected, Yin provides six types of data that are “most commonly used in doing case studies:” documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts (p. 101). A study may use only one of the

existing types of data collection, but using just one source of data is “not recommended for conducting case studies” (Yin, 2009, p. 114). First of all, a strength of case study research is the use of multiple, different sources (Yin, 2009). Further, recall that case studies look at contemporary phenomena, and contemporary phenomena as opposed to histories for example, provide opportunities for more than one way of viewing the phenomenon. Because there is more than one way of viewing the phenomenon, more than one way should be used to gain the deepest understanding which is the goal of a case study. Since case studies rely heavily on more than one method of data collection, I used four types of data collection: individual interviews, student journals, note-taking during interviews, and member checking.

Individual interviews and interviewer’s notes. Data collection strategies in qualitative research involve the use of *qualitative data* with “thick description” from interviews that reveal participants’ perceptions and experience (Patton, 2002, p. 40). In this study, each participant was scheduled for three individual semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for semi-structured interview questions) from mid-November 2011 through February 2012. Each interview took from thirty to sixty minutes. As the interviewer, *empathic neutrality and mindfulness* is necessary, so I was careful to not pass judgment, but remained open, sensitive, respectful, aware, responsive, and “fully present” (Patton, 2002, p. 40) during the interviews. In addition to recording the interviews for transcription, I also took notes during the interview session. Due to illnesses in February, not all participants were able to meet for all three interviews. Two students were interviewed three times. Four students were interviewed two times, and one student was interviewed one time.

It is important to note that in qualitative research, data collection positions the researcher's *personal experience and engagement* as part of the inquiry (interviewing) and understanding. The researcher's insights are "an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). For this study, the process of collecting data, transcribing the data, and taking notes during the second and third interviews and transcription were the points in time where evolving themes emerged and where collection and analysis coincided becoming parallel processes.

Students' journals. "Careful document review" (Patton, 2002, p. 40) is another source of data and means to gather *qualitative data*. Students were asked to keep a reflective journal in which they were to record weekly thoughts regarding experiences that they found to be meaningful in their FYE course that week (see Appendix B for student journal prompts). Students emailed their journals to me periodically throughout the data collection period. The journals were combined with transcripts to use in data analysis.

Member checking. Interviews were transcribed shortly after they were recorded so that the transcripts could be used to guide interview questions for each subsequent interview for member checking (Patton, 2002). I also often revisited previous interview topics to explore if students initial perceptions of meaningfulness were holding steady or possibly changing. The possibility of change addresses another characteristic of qualitative inquiry that Patton (2002) emphasizes in data collection—*dynamic systems* (p. 40). The student in the system was likely to change throughout a twelve week period in the transition from first semester to second semester freshmen students. As the researcher, I was aware of the importance of understanding "system and situation

dynamics” (Patton, 2002, p. 40), and the fact that change is ongoing. This concept of change and system dynamics is one reason that member checking was so important. From November interviews to January interviews, students’ perceptions mostly held steady; however, I noted a few inconsistencies in what they stated in a second interview and asked for clarification as part of the member checking process.

Data Analysis and Interpretation Strategies

Data in this case study was comprised of fifteen transcripts from the individual interviews and electronic reflective journals that were added to the end of the transcripts. In qualitative research, data collection and data analysis are frequently concurrent research activities. Data analysis began during the first round of interviewing because commonalities emerged in what the students were saying. As these commonalities or early themes appeared, I placed notes in transcript margins and added to my interview notes. This early analysis was the beginning of code creation of categories and themes used in the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) purported by Merriam (2009, p. 175). While constant comparison is typically used in grounded theory, this study is an exploratory case study and not designed to generate theory. However, according to Merriam (2009), “the constant comparative method of data analysis is inductive and comparative and so has been widely used throughout qualitative research without building grounded theory” (p. 175).

Inductive analysis and creative synthesis (Patton, 2002, p. 40), one of the characteristics of qualitative research to consider in design, began as discovery as one transcript was reviewed and themes (codes) were noted in the margins. While marking codes in the margin of each transcript, a *unique case orientation* (Patton, 2002, p. 40) was

assumed. *Unique case orientation* was most evident in analysis surrounding RQ1 because the details described by each student led me to descriptions for each student in regard to three categories of academic states that emerged from the words students used to convey that something was meaningful. While being “true to, respecting, and capturing the details of the individual cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 40), analysis also considered the larger picture where “well-constructed case studies are *holistic* and *context sensitive*” (Patton, 2002, p. 447).

Holistic and context sensitive characteristics cannot be separated from inductive analysis and creative synthesis but is embedded in the inductive process. After one transcript was analyzed, the next transcript was reviewed and the same process of coding in the margins was employed. Coding at this stage was not merely descriptive coding from one transcript to the next, but it was “analytical coding” (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). As I moved from transcript to transcript, I kept in mind the codes that had emerged from the transcripts before to check and see if codes from the prior sets were also in the most recent transcript. This inductive process of constantly comparing data resulted in initial categories which were “conceptual elements that ...span many individual examples” (Merriam, 2009, p. 181). This process of coding the individual transcripts, checking codes from one to another, and refining the emerging categories ensures that the phenomenon is studied holistically “as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). As more interviews took place and I continued to analyze transcripts, I edited and added categories as I considered the FYE context.

Analysis became more deductive than inductive when I reached a point of saturation in the second and third interviews with students. At that point I used member

checking to confirm categories and test the themes. Student repetition or restatements from earlier interviews indicated they had nothing new to say about course meaningfulness and I was able to finalize naming of the categories to be “congruent with the orientation of the study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 184). For final categories (see Table 2 for early themes, midway themes, late themes, and final categories), I had many pieces of data from several participants that helped answer the research questions. Finally, *voice, perspective, and reflexivity* (Patton, 2002, p. 41) were part of data analysis as I reflected upon the data in the FYE context, my own position in the FYE program, and my own perspective by connecting to theory where appropriate in writing the findings to gain credibility and trustworthiness.

Table 2

Coding Used in Data Analysis

Early Themes	
Related to RQ1	Enjoy, like, understand, help, nice, good
Related to RQ2	Bond, shared experience, relationship, talk to others, freedom to create, open, no rules, build on ideas
Related to RQ3	Challenge, problem solving, understanding, learning environment
Related to RQ4	Lack of motivation
Midway Themes	
Related to RQ1	<i>same</i>
Related to RQ2	Lecture, hands on/visual, discussion, learning environment
Related to RQ3	Challenge, problem solving, open, freedom to create, show me/make me do/reflect (to learn something don't understand)
Related to RQ4	<i>same</i>
Late Themes	
Related to RQ1	Engaged, interested
Related to RQ2	Interactivity, bonding, comfortable, practice, choice, challenge
Related to RQ3	Balance, environment, bond, relationships
Related to RQ4	<i>same</i>
Final Categories	
Related to RQ1	Emotional Transition, Academic Pragmatism, Survival
Related to RQ2	Challenge/choice, Interactive learning
Related to RQ3	Energy, Comfort
Related to RQ4	Checklist approach, Once n' done approach

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness was established by conducting a systematic research approach and quality analysis (Patton, 2002). Triangulating data sources by using multiple sources of data (interviews, journals, and member checking) added to the trustworthiness of the approach and credibility of the study because then convergence of data was possible (Yin, 2009). Also, triangulation of data and using member checking in analysis increases accuracy of findings which adds to credibility (Patton, 2002). Saturation of data contributed to trustworthiness and credibility because no new data was coming in to affect thematic categories that helped answer the research questions.

Limitations

A natural limitation of qualitative research is the resource of time. Because this study was bound in time from mid-November of Fall 2011 semester through the end of February 2012, collection of students' perceptions was limited to twelve weeks. I conducted one interview per month for the two participants who both were able to meet for three interviews. A month of time in between interviews was considered enough of a time lapse to gain new insight at each interview. However, for some participants who joined the study in mid-January, there was not enough time to conduct three interviews with enough time in between for new insight. Furthermore, twelve weeks proved to be a short period of time to plan for rescheduling due to illnesses. Time bounds did not prevent themes from emerging. Saturation was reached typically in the second interviews, but not having the third interview for some participants reduced the amount of member checking that was conducted. Member checking was one type of data collection and a form of triangulation which ensures trustworthiness and credibility of data. Part of

the intention in the third interviews was to review with students the portions of the first and second interview transcripts that were emerging as thematic in analysis. Without the third interview, I was not able to do that final check with two of the participants as fully as I did with the two participants who interviewed three times. However, with three of the participants, those who joined in mid-January, I was able to integrate that step into the second interview because analysis that was going on during collection provided emerging themes and areas for me to member check with those two participants.

Not only was length of data collection a limitation, but time was an issue for the recruitment process as well. Recruitment was significantly hampered due to IRB review issues at Redwood University. The Redwood IRB was backlogged approximately eight weeks, so it took an unexpected amount of time to receive approval for the study. Thus the time allocated in the research plan for student recruitment was essentially eliminated. Student recruitment should have occurred during September and early October, but I was not able to recruit until mid-November, and at that point I was compelled to also begin data collection in order to complete collection by the end of February per IRB approval. Since recruitment and collection occurred simultaneously up until recruitment was considered closed in mid-January (which was a significant modification from the initial plan), the typical case sampling method did not meet the exact demographic breakdown. I anticipated having enough students interested in participating that I could choose the first eight that met the nomination criteria. However, in order to conduct the study in the approved time frame, I had to choose the first and only students that showed interest in participating. With more time for recruitment, I would have informed more FYE faculty which would have increased the pool of possible participants which would have increased

the chance to get a typical case sample and the planned total number of participants of eight, rather than seven students.

Summary

In order to seek understanding of college freshmen perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year experience courses, a qualitative case study was conducted. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain the best possible instances in the case to study the phenomenon of meaningfulness in FYE courses. Data collection, description of the data, and analysis continually occurred side-by-side by transcribing interviews, taking notes about emerging themes, member checking of transcripts and ideas regarding coded themes, reviewing appropriate literature, and exploring theories and existing ideas. Trustworthiness and credibility existed through measures of triangulation that promote accuracy of data and findings. The study which was bound in time by mid-November 2011 through the end of February 2012 for data collection and March 2012 for data analysis was limited in what the study can reveal because there was not an extensive period of time for students' to exhibit growth of understanding which may be necessary to understanding meaningfulness. Furthermore student recruitment was significantly limited due to IRB issues at Redwood University.

Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to seek understanding of college freshmen perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year experience courses using an interpretive analysis approach. Both curriculum studies and educational psychology provide insights into exploring meaningfulness from the student perspective under postmodern conditions and analyzing the data brought those insights to the surface as categories emerged in analysis. Constructivism was a common thread of the literature related to meaningfulness in curriculum theory and educational psychology and it is also the lens through which this research study was designed. Constructivism was a guidepost for data analysis because not only were students constructing their own meaning of meaningfulness in their courses by sharing how they construct meaning of course content, but as the researcher I was interpreting (constructing) “what it meant to the people involved” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 278).

This chapter provides answers to the research questions presented in Chapter One by presenting the analysis of data comprised of interviews and reflective journals of seven student participants (see Table 3). Each interview and journal was transcribed and coded to construct categories or themes that emerge from the data using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) purported by Merriam (2009). In order to organize the data, all transcripts were combined in one paginated file. Line numbering

was used on each page, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Examples will be provided that help to answer each research question. References to the transcripts will be noted as: Participant Name: page number of transcript, line numbers (e.g., Devin: p. 14, 23-25). I will begin with participant biographies (see Table 4 after biographies for summary information of participants) to aid in understanding the following results.

Table 3

Research Questions and Categories

Research Questions	Categories
RQ1: What words do students use to convey something is meaningful in a course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Transition, words such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Like/love ▪ Good/nice/works ▪ Engaged/interested • Academic Pragmatism, words such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Helpful/useful/valuable • Survival, words such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Help/hard
RQ2: What experiences do students perceive as meaningful in a course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge/choice • Interactive learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lecture ▪ Group discussion ▪ Practice
RQ3: What is it about an experience that makes it meaningful in a course? What about the answers to RQ2 make those things meaningful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy • Comfort
RQ4: What do students perceive as problems that may prevent meaningfulness in a course?	See Chapter 5: Discussion

Participant Biographies

Carly

Carly is a first-time, full-time 19 year old white female student. She was in honors chemistry and honors chemistry lab and a first year seminar (FYS)⁷, also referred to as a learning community associated with the School of Science, in the Fall 2011 semester which were her FYE courses. She tested into calculus which is one level above the math FYE courses, and she is above the FYE course levels in her other classes, so she is not currently taking any FYE courses in the Spring 2012 semester. Over the course of the Fall and Spring semesters she has also taken or is taking 200 and 300 level courses (Spanish which she tested into). She went to a township school in Redwoodville and lives on the south side of Redwoodville where she commutes to Redwood University. In her free time she likes reading and watching Burn Notice and working in her father's veterinarian clinic part time. She likes people interaction while managing the front desk and also serves as a vet assistant helping with x-rays and medicine dosages. Her major is chemistry and she plans on attending veterinarian school. Her first interview for this study was late in the Fall semester, November 2011. Her other interviews were in January and February of Spring 2012 semester.

James

James is a first-time, full-time 20 year old white male student. He had two FYE courses in the Fall 2011 semester—English and a learning community. In the Fall

⁷ A first year seminar (FYS) is a one or two credit hour course that all freshmen are required to take. FYSs are intended to orient students to college life, campus services, resources, etc. FYSs during the summer (Bridge program) have a group of student mentors working with incoming students and the sole focus is orientation. FYSs during the Fall semester are an isolated class. FYSs are also referred to as learning communities.

semester he was in a Japanese course but withdrew because it was a five credit hour course and more than he expected. This Spring 2012, he is also taking two FYE courses—psychology and speech. He attended a high school near Redwood University in the Redwoodville Public School system and he currently lives seven miles east of Redwoodville. In his free time he enjoys video games and anime. His major is biomedical engineering technology (BMET). Interviews spanned the Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 semesters with one in November and another in January. He did not appear for his third interview.

Isabel

Isabel is a first-time, full-time black female student who celebrated her 19th birthday in January of this Spring semester. She had four FYE courses in the Fall 2011 semester—two introductory computer information technology courses, math, and a learning community. This Spring 2012, she is taking two FYE courses—English and geology. She attended a high school near Gary and she currently lives on campus. She visited Redwood University ten years ago when her sister attended and loved the city and campus and always wanted to go to Redwood University. In her free time she surfs the Internet searching for music and information to questions she has; she also plays video games. She also likes hanging out with friends and helping out with the dance club she is involved with on campus. She volunteers by mentoring with middle school adolescents and she is thinking about applying for the OTEAM⁸. She is interested in figuring out how a computer works and is majoring in computer information technology where she is

⁸ The OTEAM is the team of student mentors that makes Bridge successful.

considering a concentration in database management. Our first interview in Fall 2011 was in December and we met in January and February of the Spring 2012 semester.

Gary

Gary is a first-time, full-time 20 year old black male student. He had four FYE courses in the Fall 2011 semester—English, computer information technology, math, and exploratory Bridge⁹ as his learning community. Exploratory Bridge means that he had not declared a major; however, by the time I first met with him in December 2011, he had decided on organizational leadership and supervision, but still had to meet with his advisor to declare it as a major. This Spring 2012, he is taking four FYE courses—English, computer information technology (repeat), math, and speech. He attended a township high school near Redwood University off campus, but close to campus. In his free time he likes to play basketball, listen to and write music, and make time for his toddler son. He is involved in several organizations where he serves as a youth mentor to young black men and he is coaching basketball at the high school level. He also works at Taco Bell where he was promoted to Shift Lead Manager in January 2012. We met a second time in January and due to illnesses we were unable to meet a third time in February.

Colin

Colin is a first-time, full-time 23 year old white male student who went to high school in a rural part of the state northeast of Redwoodville and served in the military after high school. He was living twenty-five miles north of campus when we first met in

⁹ Bridge is two weeks of the summer before classes start where students are in a learning community together to orient to school and then continue with each other in a FYS class throughout the first semester.

early February 2012 but was looking to find a place closer to campus that was affordable. I met a second time with him late in February. Due to his recruitment not occurring until January, we only had time for two interviews because there needed to be some time, ideally a month, in between interviews. In his free time he likes hanging out with friends and playing video games like Guitar Hero. In the Fall 2011 he took three FYE courses – speech, introduction to criminal justice, and a learning community through summer Bridge. This Spring 2012 semester he is taking two FYE courses – English and psychology. He plans on studying criminal justice as a major and psychology as a minor.

Devin

Devin is a second-time, full-time 19 year old white male student who went to high school in the northern part of the state who expressed that he likes the city. Note that he is not a first year student. In the nomination process for recruitment, he slipped by the nominator as a first year student likely because it was early in the semester and there was an assumption made on the professor's end that he was first year because he was in a FYE course that students typically take in their first year. He was a late recruit due to issues with the Redwood University internal review process, so despite finding out he was a second year student late in our first interview, I decided he would provide insight because he has taken FYE courses in his first year in addition to the one he is currently in, I needed another participant, he related very well to the first year experience in his reflective answers to my interview questions, and he has experience with upper level (200 and 300 level) courses that he can connect his 100 level courses too and provide a more complete picture of what a meaningful first year experience course would provide.

In his freshmen year, he took three FYE courses—biology, chemistry, and a learning community. In the Fall 2011, he did not have any FYE courses but was taking some 200 and 300 level courses. In the Spring 2012, he was taking a FYE English course. In his free time, he reads novels, walks around downtown (which is close to his campus apartment) to relieve stress, hangs out with friends working on assignments, and he works on personal computer projects. His interest in working with computers is not a surprise because he is an informatics major specializing in biology. The biology specialty is related to his studies from his freshmen year when he was a biology/genetics major. He changed majors because he felt that this path gives him “all sorts of ways that I can study biology without getting into a monotonous career” (6: p. 68, 22). Our first interview in early February Spring 2012 and our second one was in late February. We did not have time for a third interview.

Serena

Serena is a first-time, full-time 21 year old black female international student from Uganda. Her first time in the United States was in July 2011 when she came to Redwood University to study biology. She lives about five miles from campus because the International House on campus is too expensive. She took two FYE courses in the Fall 2011—chemistry and biology and in Spring 2012 she is also taking two FYE courses—English and a chemistry lab. She chose biology as a major because she is interested in people’s health and taking care of people. She lives with her nephew and also has a niece in Redwoodville, but she has not made any close friends. She has a scholarship which pays for tuition but she has to pay living expenses and is having difficulties finding a job. I interviewed her only one time, in early February. She was a

also a late recruit, and due to illnesses we were not able to find a time to meet before data collection officially had to be completed on February 29 based on the IRB protocol.

Table 4

Summary Information of Participant Biographies

Name	Age	M/F	First year full time	First Gen	White/ Non-white	FYE courses	Interview Dates
Carly	19	F	Yes	No	White	chemistry, chemistry lab, learning community	11/22/11 1/18/12 2/15/12
James	20	M	Yes	Yes	White	English, learning community, psychology, speech	11/21/11 1/18/12
Isabel	19	F	Yes	Yes	Non-white	Computer information technology (x2), learning community, math, English, geology	12/7/11 1/25/12 2/20/12
Gary	20	M	Yes	No	Non-white	English, math, Bridge learning community, computer information technology, speech	12/9/11 2/10/12
Colin	23	M	Yes	No	White	speech, Bridge learning community, criminal justice, English, psychology	2/9/12 2/20/12
Devin	19	M	No	Yes	White	biology, chemistry, learning community, English	2/1/12 2/28/12
Serena	21	F	Yes	Yes	Non-white	chemistry, chemistry lab, biology, English	2/1/12

RQ1: Students' Words that Convey Meaningfulness

The first research question was one of curiosity to explore the words students use to convey that they find something meaningful. Faculty use words such as relevant, connected, important, significant, and motivated (Haymeyer, 2007; Gentry & Owen, 2004), but faculty use different words than students use. In order to understand students' perspectives, I sought to discover what words they use. Below I provide examples from every participant because each student conveys meaningfulness with his or her own language. The main words they used were: like, interested, engaged, good, nice, works, helpful, and useful. Note that those are quite different words from what faculty use. While the goal of this question was to find out what words students use to convey meaningfulness, I was not expecting the data to tell me anything more than the words. However, patterns emerged that point to data results much deeper than intended. Three academic states emerged: emotional transition, academic pragmatism, and survival. Some participants' descriptions tended toward the emotional side where they discussed their feelings of like/love, things being good/nice/works, or feeling engaged/interested. However, some participants expressed practical aspect of classwork being helpful, useful, or valuable. Finally, some participants conveyed that they were attempting to survive their first year of college.

Emotional Transition

Participants in this study were in their first year of college (with the exception of Devin who was a second year student). Interviews began in their first semester which was a time of transition from high school for Carly, Isabel, and James. Gary and Colin were transitioning from post-secondary experiences (the military and work world,

respectively), and Serena was in transition from leaving her home in Africa and high school (which was six rather than four years). Although Devin was a second year student, he was able to reflect on the first year as a transition from high school to the university environment. The transition to Redwood University was not the same for all the participants, but all were in a time of transition of some nature. While all students were in transition, the words students used to answer questions about course meaningfulness revealed differences in their academic states, and some responses were filled more with emotional responses than with practical responses.

As stated in Chapter Two, students may associate feelings of happiness with “things” they experience as meaningful. Because of this connection between things people find meaningful and feelings of happiness associated with things they like, some questions that I asked students were framed with the word “enjoy,” and students identified with that word. In describing things they like, they talk about being engaged and things being good. For example, when describing an in class group activity, Isabel stated:

We did a BINGO extra credit in class in 112 the other day and I like stuff like that. Keep me engaged...different ways of teaching. In 106 we do stuff like that too” (Isabel: p. 27, 15-17).

She uses the word “like” and “engaged” and she hints that different “stuff” in class is “good” because she is not one to want to “just sit there and listen to the professor talk” because she is “one that would doze off” (Isabel: p. 27, 20-21). She also discusses how she can stay interested for roughly fifteen to twenty minutes of the professor talking.

Colin uses the word “nice” rather than “good” to describe experiences that he has liked about his FYE courses:

There are some that, well they, I don't want to say, baby you but they take that extra step, time to show they do care. That's really nice to see. When you see that you know you have someone special and that's a big one and I kind of like it (Colin: p. 52, 29-31).

Carly goes beyond what she likes and states that “I really love Chem lab” (Carly: p., 1, 29). Gary uses the words engagement or engaged repeatedly as he described the courses that worked for him being the ones with group activities:

English, Morgan, she was great. She did everything in the book to get class engagement but there was me and another girl and we were the only ones who talked. Others had connections with others but they weren't engaged and open (Gary: p. 43, 28-30).

Furthermore, in describing what makes a first year seminar work during the summer Bridge program but not during the Fall semester, Gary stated:

It's the OTEAM? We go outside and play with others and we are fairly close and we form relationships. That OTEAM with the faculty and engagement made the relationships for students. That warm fuzzy feeling came from OTEAM faculty engagement (Gary: p., 44, 2-4).

Words associated with the more emotional side were aspects of class or a program that they enjoyed because they felt good or were fun; they may or may not have added to learning content, but they added to the experience of the class or program. Thus, meaningfulness seems to be viewed as providing an experience that is viewed as positive

and memorable while possibly helping students learn what they do not understand or are not accustomed too (through orientation or taking the extra step to help with transition). The transition to Redwood University is on their mind, and the college experience is broader than academics in their interview conversations. Isabel describes her emotional attachment to Redwood University:

I always wanted to go here. My sister went here 10 years ago and when I came up with her to move her in I loved the campus. I was only 8 then but I loved it. I still feel that way (Isabel: p. 26, 2-3).

She is involved in extracurricular activities such as the dance club which helps her transition by bonding with friends with similar interests. She also discusses that the adjustment to college is enough challenge indicating an emotional transition state:

For me it was like not being babied so much like in high school how they remind you about everything. It's a totally different atmosphere even though it might not feel like it at first. It's like whoa this is so not like high school. It's just getting adjusted to having to be independent and remind yourself on your own and reminding yourself to get your work done (Isabel: p. 37, 25-28). I didn't take it [challenge of the transition] serious at first but now I'm like ok (Isabel: p. 37, 30). It [realization] kicked in this semester [Spring, after taking the first semester to realize this is how it's going to be] (Isabel: p. 37, 32). It was kind of that because I got good grades but I was like I felt like I could have did better so I'm going to work harder next time and then I got to second semester and I'm like crap this is really hard. So I'm gonna have to work hard (Isabel: p. 37, 36-38).

Gary describes his transition and source of motivation:

The transition was...I thought I was prepared with Bridge and Summer success academy but they kind of just showed me resources and avenues which I was still not used to like in h.s. where it's all in front of you. Here in college if you want to find something you have to go find it. And setting up classes and having classes that don't meet all the time. What keeps me motivated is the campus stuff I'm involved in (Gary: p. 41, 8-12).

The connection to his outside interests motivates him to do his school work. Colin is in transition from the military and older than the other participants, and his transition is non-traditional. He felt awkward going through Bridge with predominantly traditional age first-year students, yet the experience was so positive that he wants to be part of the OTEAM which is the team of student mentors that makes Bridge successful. He describes his experience below:

Seems like everyone involved in the FYE program are nice people. I took Bridge in the summer too. I'm a 21st century scholar so they enforce that we take that. It was nice to see the professors come out and take time out of their summer and tell you what it's all about (Colin: p. 53, 1-4). I made good friends, it's only 2 weeks, but it's at least someone you can talk to. I remember going in there and the first half the week and I was like uh, I'm too old for this. This is high school kids, but after a while when I got past that foolishness then you realize it's really doing good (Colin: p. 53, 6-9). I applied for OTEAM for this coming summer and Fall. I'm excited for that (Colin: p. 53, 11).

The students in the emotional transition state display their richest descriptions on what is positive and memorable rather than what helps them learn, which is where students in the academic pragmatism state concentrate their richest descriptions.

Academic Pragmatism

Isabel, Gary, and Colin tended to describe their experiences on the emotional side, whereas Carly, Devin, and Serena provided descriptions from a more academically practical viewpoint portraying that they approach academics with devotion and diligence and a pragmatic attitude that they will get something out of the class if they focus on opportunities for learning and success. Their emphasis in answers tends to be on academic utility – how something in their classes helps them learn or succeed, and they use words such as helpful, valuable, and useful. Colin also displayed academic pragmatism although his responses were more emotional transition. However, he had clear direction academically and approached academics with the academic maturity required of academic pragmatism.

For example, Carly stated that she “really loves Chem lab” which is certainly and emotional expression, but her explanation of why she loves it shows her utilitarian approach to considering meaningfulness in her courses because she states that there is “more of an intellectual involvement in that [chemistry lab]” which is her “main favorite thing” (Carly: p.1, 30) with the main favorite thing being the intellectual involvement. Throughout her interviews she continually discusses things as being helpful/useful or not helpful/useful to her. Furthermore, Carly knows that she wants to be a veterinarian and has chosen the academic path to meet that goal. She is also very passionate about knowing why she is in college which is displayed as she describes that she does not think

professors should tell students how the content is relevant and the frustration she has with fellow students who do not approach classes with the same intensity and integrity as she does:

And I feel like that's something you should make for yourself. You should...if you really want to learn algebra then you should make algebra relevant to yourself (Carly: p. 10, 24-25). I guess hmmm maybe this is my view on humanity and people who have no motivation to take charge of their education. But if you have to have a professor tell you why it's relevant to you then why are you in that class. You should be doing something you feel is relevant to you, you shouldn't just be taking algebra because it tells you to take algebra on your career plan. You should realize that algebra is going to be important to your life every day. I use algebra to calculate how much my car bill is going to be when my radiator blew or calculating drug dosages for the dog in front of me who's going to die. That's important and it's important in every section of my life so why should that professor have to tell someone that. Why couldn't they figure it out for themselves especially if they are in a college environment (Carly: p. 10, 37-40, p. 11, 1-5).

Devin is actually a second year student (sophomore) who has taken FYE courses in the past and is currently taking a FYE (100 level) English course. He is an Informatics major specialization in biology after changing from biology/genetics after his first year. He exhibits a clear direction in his career path that began in high school:

Initially I was interested in genetics and biology and I got offered to go to a genetics conference here...but anyway I got invited to go to Molecular Medicine

in Action and I stayed in University Hotel and I saw the resources available to the things interesting to me. That's what got me interested so I did more research on it, eventually applied, and now I'm here. Granted I'm not studying biology directly but I think I've made the right choice (Devin: p. 68, 15-20).

Because he has a lot more course experience than the other participants and has taken 200 and 300 level courses already, I was able to ask him more involved questions that I would not ask the first year students. When I asked him if it would be helpful if students in 100 level courses had some interaction with higher level courses, he replied:

Yes! Actually I think that very much. I've noticed that some students really tend to be short sighted with their courses. They think ok I've got this material now why exactly is this important. If they were to see something that they would have to think about in these higher level courses they could be like no maybe this is important because of this or maybe this can be applied here. Uh, being able to see these connections I think would help students immensely (Devin: p. 68, 31-35).

When you compartmentalize it that much it makes the students really incapable of seeing how this material is going to be important beyond the scope of this course. They can't really see that it'll be important in the long term and that kind of gets students disinterested in it. And that's one big problem and when they become disinterested they don't learn nearly as well. They don't really walk away with anything either. Granted they do have the general information but it's not quite as useful to them as the fuller understanding they get when they actually value it (Devin: p. 69, 4-10).

Serena also displays clear academic direction, devotion, and diligence which are part of academic pragmatism:

I like biology because it has a connection with health issues and my passion... what I want to do in the future is people's health and I want to take biology because I know it is where it will lead me to where I'm supposed to be (Serena: p. 79, 10-12). If you study you will do well. I studied, went to class, did the homework. I think that's what a typical student should do. (Serena: p. 80, 28-29).

When asked if professors could do more individually to help international students, she replied that all her professors are nice and:

Not for classes. There's some classes where there's different accents so sometimes you can't understand clearly so you have to sit up front and look at the person from head to toe. Last semester I had very nice professors. I would go to office hours and she would talk to me and understood I was an international student. I had no issues with my classes. It's up to the student to talk to the professor and explain (Serena: p. 80, 35-39).

Students with academic pragmatism have a clear sense of their responsibility as a student to do their own learning and show frustration and dismay with their fellow students who do not have the same academic commitment. Carly describes a situation in which she has experienced students asking her to do their work:

I've only had one recitation so far but it was very infuriating in some ways because these people are paying all this money for education and they're not

going out and doing this for themselves [in reference to students cheating] (Carly: p. 11, 8-11).

Devin has also been asked to do the work for others; he describes his feeling about responsibility and learning in regard to the situation:

I'll be honest I have had students ask me to do an assignment for them. I didn't do that actually. I have one that asked me to just a few days ago and I just never got back to him on it. It's kind of ridiculous. The way I see it is if you don't do the assignment yourself you don't learn the material very effectively and really it's just more of a detriment to yourself (Devin: p. 72, 34-38).

Finally, Colin is frustrated by group work where he is the only one who has done the preparatory work for an in class activity which shows his dedication and sense of responsibility:

Group things which eh, with the group you're with other people who didn't read they did the work but didn't read just skimmed through it and you're like uh, bluh, anyway. Seems like I'm always the one who reads (Colin: p. 59, 23-25).

Survival

I got the sense from a couple participants that they were in an academic state of survival because of the context in which they talk about "help" and things being "hard." Their experiences are quite different. One is thriving academically with a disclosed 4.0 grade point average. The other student did not disclose his first semester grades, but I got the impression he did not do well in his classes and that at the point in November when we had our first interview, he seemed to think he was "doing ok," but conveyed to me a feeling that he was surviving. In January he had learned some things about himself that

were making academic life difficult. While the student with a 4.0 grade point average is thriving academically, her survival is based on a need for connection to others which if not met could be a threat to her academic success thus far. Accordingly, she too exhibits traits of the survival academic state.

James is a student who recently has been diagnosed with ADHD and I sense is struggling in his classes because he dropped one in the Fall semester and when I met with him in the Spring semester (January) he was late to the interview because he was receiving help from his uncle with time management. He is an engineering major who answers directly but not deeply, but his answers convey that he may be overwhelmed with classes and is trying to figure out how to manage them. For example, he responded to my prompt that asked him if interacting with others in his classes was important to learning with, “yeah, it helps you with writing” (James: p. 17, 37). Serena is an international student who is doing well in her classes and exhibits academic pragmatism as stated above, but she is struggling to find friends and indicates that coming to Redwood University from Africa is not what she hoped for as she answers a question about support for international students:

We have the international student club. You try to share things. We have the international office and you can go ask for help. That’s after you have been here and gotten used to things, but when you are new you don’t even know about that. My first day of school. I did not like it. I did not like it. I wished I had not come (Serena: p. 80, 11-14).

She indicates “It’s improving but it’s hard. Everything is hard.” (Serena: p. 80, 16).

Everything “is hard” from finding a place to live to paying for a place to live to finding a job to pay for a place to live to finding someone to talk to in or outside of class:

I’ve tried but it’s hard. People are so busy and everyone minds their own business. Sometimes you sit and class and they do not have time for you. They want to do their own stuff. My own country, you know the neighbors and their kids. You are friends and you talk to one another. Here I don’t even know my neighbor. I have friends but I don’t consider them close friends. Someone to be with. I don’t have any. I tried to make some but it’s hard (Serena: p. 79, 34-38). Because like my first time to go to class I met someone and I tried to talk to her and make friends with her but I realized this person was not really interested you know. I tried that like three times and I was like I don’t think I can be a friend of this person. So I decided to change a seat (Serena: p. 80, 3-6).

The interviews did not go into depth about meaningfulness in her courses, but focused more on her experience outside of classes and the things that she thinks would be helpful for international students and acclimation. Her repeated use of the phrase “it’s hard” indicates she is struggling to survive emotionally in this academic setting.

RQ2: Experiences that Contribute to Students Perceptions of Meaningfulness

The first research question was intended to reveal the words students use to convey meaningfulness so that I could interpret and place meaning on their answers in order to understand what experiences they find meaningful. From their descriptions and explanations of activities in their classes, two main categories of meaningful experiences emerged from the data: challenge/choice and interaction.

Challenge/Choice

Gary discusses challenge in general:

You know that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger so I believe challenge is a good thing because it makes you stronger the more you can do. I like challenge. Too easy is the same pace and you're not going to...(Gary: p. 33, 16-19) [learn]. I read a quote recently that said if there's no struggle there's no progress. That makes a lot of sense. If you don't struggle you won't learn anything. If everything's so easy (Gary: p. 37, 22-23).

This approach to challenge is admirable but probably too general for FYE students to grasp and understand in terms of their academics. First of all, some are finding that the transition is challenging. They are accustomed to high school as their most recent learning environment where they are comfortable because their teachers knew them and they had friends or "were at least acquaintances with people and here, you get here and you don't know anyone" (Colin: p. 52, 26-27). They also are told what they have to know to succeed in high school. Assignments are laid out step by step and they are told what exactly what to do. There is little room for choice or challenge.

The challenge of the transition makes learning the content in the courses challenging enough and they do not necessarily need deeply challenging content/assignments, and if given a choice to do something they see as challenging, they may shy away from it. Devin, who is a second year student reflecting back on his first year experience, discusses how first year students may perceive an experience where they are given a choice to create their own assignment if the given one seems too easy:

I imagine some students may be intimidated by the concept of being able to make their own assignments. I personally would be (Devin: p. 72, 12-13).

This example is one where they have a choice to create their own challenge and they likely will not choose the challenge because students admittedly will take the easy path toward their grade. They have demands on their time and have to prioritize when it comes doing homework, projects, studying for tests, etc. If they are looking at a long list of tasks and they have a choice to do A which is easy and B which is difficult and they both are the same amount of points, they will choose the easy one. When Carly was asked if she would do a more challenging assignment rather than an easy one because the challenging one would likely lead to further learning for her since she already knew the easy stuff, she responded, “the easy thing. I’m guilty of that myself” (Carly: p. 13, 5). Devin also states when discussing doing something easy versus taking a challenge that, “I imagine I can see if they are exceptionally busy but if not then go for the challenge” (Devin: p. 72, 25-26).

Students like the freedom to create and choose, and find that challenging and meaningful, but they are not likely to choose a challenge when given the choice. Challenge is meaningful and they like being challenged through activities and assignments that are prone to open and free thinking, but they will not choose a challenge over an easy choice. The key then for faculty is to provide challenge but not the choice of challenge or easy. This dichotomy seems to be related to life experience and wisdom as described by Colin and Devin. Note that it is not necessarily age related because Colin is 23 (so perhaps has more life experience from being in the military and being older) but Devin is 19 (but a second year student, not first year so he has a little more experience

academically than the others). Colin describes his thoughts about choosing something for convenience or ease:

There's I don't know I was thinking about this the other day. There's a time in your life when I hated doing things, again I was in the service and bluh you just did not want to do something. You knew that it was more work, I don't want to do it, I could easily take the easy way out. But you lose, if you do just the easy way out because it's more convenient for me or blah blah blah you lose I don't know if you do it the hard way it may be hard but it's going to be more beneficial to me in the long run (Colin: p. 60, 20-25).

Because the typical approach of the participants is to choose easy over challenge, yet they like choice which they find challenging, these results provide insight into the category of challenge/choice. Choice is the challenge and students like choice that is open-ended and/or they can relate it to their personal life. First year students find that choice and open-endedness in assignments is challenging and at first they do not like it. Not liking it has to do with comfort (which will be discussed later) because they are uncomfortable with choice at first. During the first few weeks they acclimate somewhat to their classes which stretch their comfort zones and they begin to feel they are in a safe environment. After a few weeks, they begin to appreciate the choice and find it challenging. Because they perceive choice as challenging, this category is framed as one item rather than what could reasonably be two separate categories. Thus choice (open ended and free thinking) and challenge go hand in hand. For example, Colin describes his English class after being in it for a few weeks at the start of the Spring semester where:

After taking it and being in the class a little while now her teaching method really works for writing. I think that's what that class is structured on and what they're emphasizing. She leaves it so open I mean the only thing as far as actual papers is the format of it and anything else she'll give you here's the assignment here's what I'm going to look for and she leaves it wide open. As far as writing goes it really helps. If you tell people this is what I want you to write about and go into detail then you basically tell them what to write. There's no free thinking there but when you leave it completely open it opens a lot of doors and you're surprised at what you can actually write. You go wow, I didn't realize, it's very free flowing and you never realized that I could conjure up. It's very interesting and I like it a lot how it's open and everything is just so open. Here's, for example, she handed out some pictures and said just write about it (Colin: p. 54, 27-37).

His description indicates that telling students what to write is not meaningful but challenging them to "conjure up" (Colin: p. 54, 35) something on their own is a meaningful experience.

Carly states that "the freedom we are given to create our own labs" (Carly: p. 1, 29) is what she loves about chemistry lab. This "freedom to create" is challenge and choice. She is in an honors lab so they are not given step by step lab manuals like the regular lab classes. Instead, they are told "this is what you need to do and figure out a way to do it" (Carly: p. 10-11). The lab problem is open-ended because there is no step by step manual so they have choice in how they solve the problem. She also states in a weekly journal reflection that she finds "meaning in things that challenge my reasoning and logic capabilities rather than the 'knowledge' that we were supposed to learn in

whatever class” (Carly: p. 77, 47; p. 78, 1-2). She is in the academic pragmatism state, so knowledge is a goal but she finds it more meaningful when she is challenged with open-ended work.

During the interviews I typically asked students what they thought about topics in their courses being relevant to their “self” (Joseph, Bravmann, Windschitl, Mikel, & Green, 2000), personally relevant. One student stated that he did not know what I meant when I said “relevancy” until I explained it further. And while I think many did know what it meant in general, it required explanation on my part for them to respond. They certainly had to think about the question for a moment. It is not a word they use. Although relevancy is not a word they use, they discuss it in three ways – one being through choice/challenge, another through interactive lectures, and the other through interactive practice (interactive lecture and practice to be discussed later in the section on interactive learning).

First of all, they do not like work, practice, or assignments that force them to think unnaturally or if they are asked to make a connection to their own lives – a choice as to what is personal relevant – about a concept they are learning in class, then they better not be “graded” on their connection! Making the choice, finding a connection is challenging and it is their own thought that they feel no one else can judge. For example, Carly discussed that in the lab reports for chemistry students are supposed to connect the lab to their own life:

We have a section like that in our lab reports and I flounder because I don’t know what they want me to put down there. Something that’s relevant to me isn’t necessarily relevant to the person who is grading my paper. I guess I like to have

very set standards and when they say relevant to you (Carly: p. 10, 5-8). I don't know. It was a TA grading it so it was very subjective but yeah. A relevant related topic something you think is related to this topic. I may think Cheetos is related to this topic but you may not think Cheetos is not relevant to the topic. (Carly: p. 10, 12-14) and if your explanation stands up to the scrutiny of the TA then you know the molecular structure of Cheetos compared to the structure of the ETDA or whatever you worked on in the lab. I didn't actually use Cheetos but I know someone that did. And they had to defend their explanation to the TA which is why I'm not sure I like the whole relevant to you thing (Carly: p. 10, 16-19).

Carly has had a bad experience with choice/challenge related to personal relevancy that was not what she would describe as meaningful to her. She struggles with it and is guessing as to what they want her to say is personally relevant. This example is provided because it is atypical of the choice/challenge experiences that others describe.

Other experiences are depicted with excitement as Isabel describes:

I turned a paper in today and it was about dancing and it was easy. I threw 4 pages together and was like cool. [Isabel is a dancer] (Isabel: p. 38, 12-14). My hand was just going. Yeah I think that helps a lot. Any assignment that you do that turns into your personal life turns out great (Isabel: p. 38, 16-17).

Gary conveys he is learning more about the Microsoft Office Access database program because he is making the connection to his personal life. He initially thought it was going to be difficult and challenging but by choosing to work on it with personally relevant material he was able to make more sense of things and doing so was proving to be meaningful to him:

The most thing I was impressed with was the Access database. I pursued it myself because of my interest in how I can use it for my organizations (Gary: p. 43, 5-6).

I'll love to dig deeper in Access (Gary: p. 43, 11-12).

Colin describes a writing assignment where he was amazed at his ability to be creative and think freely:

Uh it was a piece of something that you consider yourself an expert on. She still left it open. I ended up writing about myself it was a multi-genre piece. Even if you want to write something else, you just ask her. I ended up doing an excerpt from an autobiography and a letter to myself the topic I considered myself an expert on was me so I did the autobiography and letter to myself and obituary which was kind of weird but I used those kind of like the excerpt was just a little story to myself. The purpose of the writing which she wanted us to state was, no restrictions on the purpose, was to get people to know me. So the autobiography was a little story about me and the letter to me was maybe some regrets or things I would change throughout my life and the obituary was not a conceited view but goals of what I hope to achieve and the fact that I was able to conjure that up was amazing to me. I mean I never considered myself very creative person so that was interesting (Colin: p. 55, 6-16).

Note that he refers to the assignment as being open with no restrictions. He was able to choose what to write and think freely as he further discusses the experience:

It's like I don't know what to write about because it's so open but then it just comes to you and it's fun that's what I like about it. There's no rules. You're so used to all through writing class in high school that's another thing it was always

here's what you're going to write about and you just plug it in and this is just all up to you (Colin: p. 55, 19-22).

Not knowing what to write about is challenging and it is the choice that presents the challenge. I commented that a lot of times freshmen don't like when assignments are open. They are resistant to vague instructions and often ask "what do you want us to do?" because vagueness can make it seem difficult or challenging to them. Colin commented that "even like the first couple weeks it was like man" (Colin: p. 55, 27) but that it is a good thing:

As long as students really don't have to worry about the grade. As long as they know that if this is really what I want to do but what if that's not what she wants. They're so hung up on what if I get deducted for it and you're trying to stay part of the herd you know what I'm saying. I don't want to do free thinking because I may lose points. She does a good job at if you do the work and turn it in then you're writing which is what we're wanting so it's safe and effective. I love the class (Colin: p. 55, 29-34).

Colin's experience is similar in regard to choice and personal connection as Carly's but the "grading" is a difference. Colin's work is still graded but it is not graded for the personal thought, which is what Carly found disdainful. The difference is in the encouragement to think freely such as where Colin states that one of his professors "encourages you" (Colin: p. 55, 37). If students' thoughts are encouraged by not grading the thought, then they find the experience meaningful. If their thoughts are graded, meaning they have to worry about what they write or say, then the choice experience is not meaningful challenge, but dreaded challenge.

Interactive Learning

“I guess the more interactive stuff I like, now that I think about it” (Carly: p. 1, 34), states Carly after talking about why she loves chemistry lab and going to an event where the students listened to Spanish writers talk about their books instead of going to class. Many of the students discussed group activities and hands-on work in labs or in application of concepts to real life scenarios as the types of things they like to do in classes. Therefore, interactive means doing something with the content besides listening to it or reading it – it means practicing with the content, applying the content, talking about the content.

Lecture. Three of the students repeatedly stated that they liked lectures.

Traditional lecture is one hour and fifteen minutes (or at least 50 minutes) of straight talk from the professor where only the professor talks and students are expected to take notes and absorb information. After hearing students talk about their classes in subsequent interviews with them, I realized that their definition of lecture was likely not the traditional lecture. This set of students’ view of lecture was what I call an *interactive lecture* where students ask questions during the “lecture” and sometimes are asked questions by the professor. For example, Colin describes that he likes sitting in class for lectures because he can ask questions over the details and “the real world questions” (Colin: p. 54, 3) and applications that are weaved into the lectures:

It gives the, well, the professor is explaining the topic or the chapter. He’ll be going over it and if you happen to have a question or are reminded of a question when you were reading, it’s right there. You can ask it. They’re talking about the subject. You’re actively involved in what they are saying. You’re listening so it’s

a great time to ask questions. To me it is very nice. Where if you are doing online work, you're doing it and you have a question, there's nobody to ask. I like having somebody there to not only answer my questions but to better explain what it is I read (Colin: p. 59, 6-11).

For Colin, the lectures are interactive because he can ask for clarification during the lecture and for Devin, lectures are interactive because the professor asks students questions during the lecture:

Particularly with my K101 course, the professor was very interactive and would go and directly ask the students questions to answer and I think that direction interaction, granted it would be very difficult to get every student in a K101 class to answer a question but the fact that she is asking directly will help. She also had uh other professors or other masters students come in and discuss what they were studying and that helps the students figure out how the stuff they are learning can apply to things that come later on (Devin: p. 70, 24-29).

Isabel made it clear that she can only stand about fifteen to twenty minutes of straight talk from a professor before falling asleep, yet she states she likes lectures. Here is my interpretation of her experience of liking interactive lecture:

She likes there to be some structure to the material to give her the background to then explore and question on her own. Her web design class is an example of how she made the connection that she likes lecture and needs background information before feeling comfortable with attempting assignments. She is accustomed to professors using PowerPoints for lecture or doing problems on the board like in math class. Those activities give her some background and a starting point. In

web design, he just handed them materials and did not lecture at all – provided no background. She felt lost and intimidated because there was no structure, framework, foundation, or scaffold for her to build on. She was unsure of if she could ask him questions. She wanted there to be a lecture.

The following is how I determined that she does not like the traditional lecture, but likes the interactive lecture:

I don't think anyone can sit through an hour and fifteen minutes of pure lecture. Especially if you're tired or it's Monday or it's a late class. But if the students can say something, ask a question or respond or do something say something I think it would be helpful (Isabel: p. 36, 8-11).

In response to my stating that a traditional lecture is one where you just sit and take notes for the entire class session, she said, “no that's pretty bad” (Isabel: p. 36, 22) and she indicated that you “need some type of change” (Isabel: p. 36, 16) during a class session. They like the professor to talk because it guides them as to what the professor thinks is important for them to know or learn (Taylor, 2011). They like the structure and forum it provides to get their questions answered and framework it provides for knowing what to do next that is related to an upcoming assignment or exam.

Group discussion. Although students sometimes voice a dislike for group work (Taylor, 2011), students in this study indicate they like to know what other students are thinking about their own thoughts or a topic, so this subcategory is group discussion, distinct from group work on projects outside of class. Also note that while interactive lectures provide some idea of what others are thinking because they have to do with questions/answers, group discussion (whether small or whole class/large) is different

from interactive lecture because group discussion, in the sense the students portray, is about ideas, thoughts, and their own opinions, not questions/answers about content of the discipline. For example, Carly finds interaction with classmates helpful when she's thinking one way but someone else is thinking another way because

It helps me step outside my box a little bit. It doesn't chain me to my way of thinking as much. We all get chained to our own way of thinking (Carly: p. 2, 23-24).

She also finds it helpful to "bounce ideas off of other people especially if they are ideas that can be elaborated on" (Carly: p. 2, 10-11). Isabel shares a similar abstract view as she states, "discussions are very good" (Isabel: p. 39, 13) and they help "because you get to see what other people are thinking and um understand like why your opinion well nobody's really right or wrong but others are out there. It opens you up" (Isabel: p. 39, 15-16). Devin mentions it is good "to exchange ideas back and forth" (Devin: p. 82, 2).

James is a quiet young man who does not use many words in his interview answers but conveys that interaction with classmates in discussions and straying from the initial discussion topic "builds ideas outside of the content which is cool" (James: p. 18, 9) and helps with his writing as he excitedly describes his English class in which "We have class discussions and sometimes they don't even relate to the topic but it makes you think about ideas that you can write about" (James: p. 16, 30-31). James's viewpoint about the usefulness of discussions is an elaboration or example of Carly's abstract statement.

Isabel points out that "getting in groups help bounce ideas off each other" and that "two heads are better than one" (Isabel: p. 27, 20). Gary talks about how he "might know

one thing and another something else” and that “picking each other’s brains” is helpful (Gary: p. 42, 36-37). Devin also indicates that he values the importance of interactive group discussion by describing how he spends some of his free time:

I have a group of friends that I like to work on assignments with and get their input even if they’re not in my courses. I remember yesterday I was working on my database homework and I had one of my friends who is not very computer literate, I had her look at the output I was getting to see if it kind of matched the criteria that the book was saying because it looked like it could work but I just kind of needed a second opinion (Devin: p. 67, 8-13). And at the same time I might help them with their psychology homework even though I’m not taking a psychology course I can offer my perspective (Devin: p. 67, 15-16).

Devin also offers insight as he reflects upon collaborative activities in his classes and how they help him learn by taking on a “teaching” role and by figuring out questions that he has which he may not have discovered without the group interaction:

The recitation part of that course as well students had to perform collaborative activities that forced the students to discuss the concepts amongst each other. And I think that in itself helps promote learning in itself for example a better way to put it. One thing that I’ve learned trying to help others out with assignments is that I tend to learn the concepts just as much as they do when I’m trying to teach them, or not teach them but assist them (Devin: p. 70, 31-35). At the same time it helps me to come up with questions myself that I don’t know and it helps me better to learn. So the discussion portion is also very effective at helping one learn the material (Devin: p. 70, 38-39).

Practice. Practice involves labs and application of concepts. Practice requires the students to do something with the content after or beyond reading and listening. It can involve hands-on work, writing, or talking about it with other students in a group. Group discussion in the practice realm is different from group discussions previously discussed which involved sharing of own ideas, thoughts, opinions. Practice in this context involving talking about content in a group has more specific outcomes for students to produce rather than just sharing of ideas that may stray from the topic. Students shared a common theme of needing more than one way of learning concepts such as “write it, say it, and hear it” (Carly: p. 3, 28). Show me or tell me is not enough; there has to be a make me do it part. For Colin, the “do” part is application of a concept to a real life scenario in psychology where students think of a stressful time in their life and bring that to class with them. In class, they apply psychology concepts by analyzing a real life situation.

I like those real world kind of examples or applications. I know a lot of students would see them as uh it’s a lot of work and I read the chapter and I did the assignment and uh now I have to actually think about what it means or how it applies to certain situations and how can I relate this to something I know (Colin: p. 63, 12-15).

Colin’s description indicates that practice is “a lot of work” but worth it to find individual meaning, personal relevancy.

For Carly, the “do” part includes writing up a lab report because “the lab part, doesn’t...I know how to do that part...it’s the writing about it that helps me” (Carly: p. 3, 32). Although Carly looks at the lab and writing the report as separate activities/assignments, writing the lab report could be considered part of doing the lab.

Writing is another way of processing the information which is the key aspect of this practice category. Processing the information in more than one way is important and Gary also describes such processing in his computer applications course where the instructor provides demonstration files for students to practice and “tells you how these Office fundamentals are going to be useful” (Gary: p. 51, 1-2). She also encourages students to apply what they learned to something personal to themselves as depicted by Gary:

I took what she said in class and applied it to a spreadsheet I’m doing in my life with the kids [at an organization where he is a volunteer] and the points they get toward things to go on a trip (Gary: p. 51, 2-4). Our [final class] project is a trip and I’m planning a trip so the same thing I’m doing with her is what I can do for me. I like it” (Gary: p. 51, 4-5).

And, Isabel describes application to current real world web pages in her web design class:

The web pages we do, our final project we have to redo a whole page and it’ll be a current page so we have to get there permission which is pretty cool and current so...(Isabel: p. 38, 40; p. 39, 1-2).

Devin describes the importance or value of hands-on experience in his learning of concepts:

I know personally coming from a lot of science courses the hands on experience that you find in a lot of lab courses tends to provide just as much of a learning experience as ... it allows students to become interested in it because they are actually working with the concepts hands on. For example, in the start of the C106 class at the same time I was taking C126 which is the lab portion, uh, at the

very beginning we were discussing crystal I don't remember the full term. I remember the concept but it discussed how chemicals atoms and them crystalized into form shapes. At first I struggled with it because one I just didn't care. Seemed like a silly concept to learn and ... (Devin: p. 69, 14-21) yes, it was very abstract. But then we got into the lab later that week and we were given a bunch of cut up Styrofoam balls and little box like things and we were told to take these Styrofoam things and make them into the form of a cube, like the general form of a cube. So they had little spaces between them but we made them into a cube and it represented the crystalline structure of these atoms and that helped me to understand the concept so much better and to see actually how it applies to real things. For example, a diamond is crystallized carbon and when you think about it you can imagine the carbon being a grid almost and that's how the diamond is made. So it helps you to apply it to real life scenarios as well (Devin: p. 69, 23-30).

Devin also describes the value of pretend scenarios that help students apply concepts they are learning if there is not a real life or personally relevant application:

Uh, and thinking on this I'm thinking there are all sorts of ways you could have the students apply the concepts to real life types of things. For example, with economics or something like that there's hardly any way you are going to apply the concept of economics to that student's life but you can have them run an imaginary country for a project. It forces them how the different marketing systems work, taxes work (Devin: p. 70, 8-12). Even if it's a fictitious scenario application of the concepts is just as important as reciting the concepts or just

hearing them. Application to the real world is really what collegiate courses are really about if I'm thinking correctly. Because it's not so much the material you are getting from it but uh extracurricular concepts—the things between the lines—and when you are able to apply these concepts to the real world or a fictitious world the student seems to learn the concept so much better. This seems to affect this by this. Making these connections makes the student better grasp what they are supposed to do with these concepts. (Devin: p. 70, 14-20).

Isabel discusses hands-on learning related to a topic outside of school but one in which she is passionate about – a conversation about her religion in which she was finding out “information” that was new to her and she was questioning things. Her practice, or hands-on learning, was largely going to be to “read the Bible” but her description was more depictive of practice where she would be reading and struggling with ideas and application of concepts like others discussed in this section:

I was having a religious conversation with someone and they were telling me stuff about my own uh religion and it was stuff I didn't know because I had just recently got into it and I was like I don't know I want to do my own research and have my own thoughts about it instead of listening to the next person. I kind of want my own research my own background so I can have an argument or if something doesn't sound right I can back my stuff up (Isabel: p. 34, 14-19).

Through her learning experience she was going to do research and interact with the material beyond just reading and listening to others.

RQ3: What is it about an experience that makes it meaningful in a course?

When students are asked to think about meaningful experiences, with enough time to think (reflective journals) they tend to think more deeply and consider what about something makes it meaningful. My experience as a life purpose coach provides insight into the “what about” experiences (RQ3) that provides meaning, purpose, joy, dislike, etc. The three research questions operate on different levels of thought/feeling/depth of meaning. The first level is the words we use to describe things—in this study, meaningful things about courses. The second level is the types of activities—challenging activities, activities that give choice, activities where students interact with content or people. The third level is the “what is it about those things?” It is not that the activities are challenging that underlies why someone likes it. It is that challenge is energizing—it is motivating. Consider the following as a possible student viewpoint (a composite that I created based on interviews with students) regarding challenge, choice, energy, and comfort:

I don't like academic challenge because it's a challenge, but I like it because it energizes me. It isn't that choice is why I like it, it's that choice/freedom is energizing and comforting! It isn't that I like interactive lectures, but it's that they are more energizing than traditional lectures. There is also some comfort in hearing what my fellow students say rather than only hearing from the teacher. It provides a baseline for which to judge myself against and that provides some comfort because I know where I stand.

Energy

When attempting to depict meaning from students' responses, the excitement in their voice portrays a different level of feeling about the experience. When I sense excitement and enthusiasm in their answer, I tend to think it is more meaningful than other things they talked about. Their energy level rises when they talk about something they really, really, like. They are excited because they feel energized by the experience and when describing it, that energy is also unveiled. It is not surprising then that energy would be an underlying attribute of what makes activities of challenge, choice, and interaction meaningful.

My first exposure to students' connection to the importance of energy in the classroom came from Isabel's description of her math class:

With my math class I have Harvey and he is amazing. He has so much energy and he's all around the room and he takes time and explains it all but he's high energy and I like that (Isabel: p. 27, 26-28).

From this description, I did not have a complete picture of what Harvey's energy was like or what it was that he did. And, I admit that I had difficulty figuring out a way to inquire further into what was going on with math and Harvey, but this was not the only time she mentioned Harvey's energy. She compared his energy to her second semester math class, and while her second semester math class was good, it was not the same energy.

While Isabel's description of Harvey's energy was a glimpse into energy, it was not until after many interviews with students that energy began to emerge as a common theme.

Gary describes some of his classes and professors in a way that depicts high energy through the use of the word exciting:

That guy was exciting, interesting, knew what he was talking about and made it clear for us to understand (Gary: p. 47, 26-27).

The other words he uses are “interesting” and “knew what he was talking about.” Both of those characteristics brought energy to the classroom, and are also important as depicted in Colin’s reflective journal:

I would not say that I found this class extremely interesting but the enthusiasm in which it was taught was contagious. It consisted of four professors talking about different aspects of national security. Each professor spoke about what they specifically had knowledge over. This ensured the subject matter was “spot on” while at the same time bred a sort of personal enthusiasm when teaching the subject. This is one reason I believe the learning and enthusiasm were contagious.

Let me try to better explain myself. If you love knitting and have done it your whole life when you have to opportunity to teach someone else how to knit (at least give them general knowledge in that subject then let them learn to grow into it and make it their own hobby) you will be knowledgeable and WANT-actually enjoy teaching someone else. This was the feeling I got from these professors.

They were confident in what they taught, knowledgeable in the subject, were able to break it down where anyone could grasp what was being taught, but most importantly they were genuinely interested in the subject (Colin: p. 74, 8-19).

The most important part of this class, what this student called “meaningful education” (Colin: p. 74, 1, 3) was that the professors were “genuinely interested in the subject” (Colin: p. 74, 19). It was the feeling the student got from the professors that conveyed

energy; the student felt the professors' energy. Carly describes energy through a dynamic classroom experience:

It is helpful so a professor doesn't just stand at the board and write with chalk. Dr. Weng is a prime example of that you show people how to do it, make people do it, a very dynamic class (Carly: p. 4, 5-6).

Finally, students discuss energy as if it leads into comfort. There is genuine excitement for the subject matter which interests the students and they become engaged and more at ease. They sense that the instructor cares about the students learning which is comforting.

Gary discusses energy and it leading to comfort:

You have mentors in the LC? They have to be energetic. Mentors are important because we relate to them, created that fuzzy feeling and having instructors like David. He was cool and he knows how to get what he wants out of you by questioning and conversation. I can't think of any strategic way, it's just that relationship built and put some fun with the content (Gary: p. 44, 7-11).

However, there is more to comfort than just energy which is why comfort is a separate category, but as the above example depicts, an energetic environment fosters a nurturing learning environment.

Comfort

When initially analyzing the data, "relationships," "bonding," and "learning environment" were emerging as themes. These are important aspects of the category of comfort, but when it came down to really naming what was in common for all the students in regard to this aspect of meaningfulness, it is comfort. Not all students discussed bonding or the importance of friendship and relationships in the classroom, but

all of them in some form or fashion expressed that comfort is important. The two students who discussed bonding and relationships were male students who had been in the Bridge program which is a program intended to form relationships and bonding experience.

The first year, first time FYE students are just that—it is their first year and their first time in college. On Day 1, it really is their first time in a college classroom! They are nervous, excited, unsure, wondering if they belong, and wondering why they are there. They feel alone and by themselves. They are uncomfortable. Where do we want them to be – nervous (maybe), excited (for sure), unsure (not really), knowing they belong, and knowing why they are here. We want them to feel like they are part of something, form a “bond” and “be” in the class “together” (Colin: p. 55, 38-40). We want them to feel comfortable so that they share and participate willingly, not because they have to for participation points. The bonding, relationships, instructor traits, teaching style, class structure (online/hybrid versus traditional face to face), time of day, and classroom management issues all relate to comfort.

First of all, the classroom environment cannot be so comfortable that students fall asleep in class. Not only can too much instructor talking or “monotone” (Carly: p. 5, 30; James: p. 20, 32; Gary: p. 56, 24) talking “be a drag” (Isabel: p. 31, 29) or lull students to sleep, but time of day is an issue. Two of the six participants mentioned that late afternoon or evening classes were a problem for them. For one of these two students, having a big break in between classes was also part of the problem because she would go back to the dorm and get tired and not be fully revived when she went to the late afternoon class:

It's not really so much about the class...class is so late in the day. I have two classes and they last until 11:45 and then I'm free until 4:30 and so I go back to the dorm and I'm relaxing and I get tired and uh it's so late to go to that class (Isabel: p. 25, 25-29).

Most students did not have trouble staying awake in class but recall that none of these students are in a traditional lecture type class with fifty, one hour and fifteen minutes, or more of straight talk.

The learning environment also needs to be well-managed by the instructor so that "people should feel free to ask questions but not chatter all the way through class because that's annoying for everyone" (Carly: p. 14, 4-5). Carly continues discussing classroom management:

If the teacher doesn't do anything when the people are talking in the back row and impeding your learning environment then I feel that's something that needs to be dealt with and they're not doing their job, both the student and the teacher (Carly: p. 14, 7-9).

Students are busy and do not like to feel like their time is wasted by non-sensible or non-relevant activities by either the students or the instructor "like in a Spanish class where you make lots of food, yes we did that last semester. It's great it's fun but is that like a relevant in class activity" (Carly: p. 9, 26-27). Carly continues to speak of relevancy in the following statement:

If there's some connection to the subject you're studying then I think it's relevant.

If it ties ideas together but if it's off the wall like go listen to music because we

feel like it then it's not relevant and it's not worth spending my time and money and you know to be in this class doing this (Carly: p. 9, 32-25).

Students responses convey that the goal of class time is to get knowledge, to learn, and to focus or stay on task. Students rely on class time for structured learning and they get more out of face to face than online classes.

When it comes to content and teaching style, first year students lose interest or get lost when a lecture or discussion is "theoretical and above my head" (Carly: p. 2, 2) or there is a lengthy explanation with a lot of words in a row. Students handle "big" words that sound like a foreign language, like in Isabel's geology class, as long as they can ask the instructor to clarify what he or she means if they are confused. Asking for clarification and asking for help are where the comfort level primarily comes into play.

Structure, consistency, and well-organized classes can aid in fostering a safe learning environment and also provide comfort to the students because they know what is expected. Knowing what is expected can help them figure out what questions to ask. It would be good to avoid situations where students do "not know how to check the Oncourse Gradebook until half way through the first semester" (Devin: p. 82, 32) so they do not know how they are doing in the class until it is too late. They also need to have consistent teaching methods described by Colin as follows:

If you go in from class to class and it varies. I ran into that last semester. It was her first time teaching and there was a lot of hit and miss type things. She was trying to find her stride and that's a little um (Colin: p. 57, 10-12). You want them to be clear on how they are teaching (Colin: p. 57, 17).

Furthermore, they are not far removed from high schools students who are accustomed to standards as explained by Carly:

It's good to have rigid standards (Carly: p.8, 12-13). Then you know exactly what you need to do to meet the standards. Now if they're so high that you can't meet the standards then that would be a time where students and the teacher should come together and find new standards (Carly: p. 8, 15-17).

Carly indicates that students and the instructor might need to adjust the standards and to do so the instructor would need to be approachable. Approachability of the professor is a component of feeling there is a safe space to bring up a concern as well as ask a question. According to Carly, it takes two to three class sessions for her to gauge approachability in a professor. This two to three day timeframe was confirmed by Isabel who described being lost in a class at the beginning of the semester where she describes, "at first I thought he was just being a jerk but I went up and asked and he was like, ok, so it turned out ok" (Isabel: 29, 20-21). The professor "being a jerk" is something that many professors do not want to convey, and may be a teaching style, or the type of class where, in this case, the student explains that he is "more of a one on one, so instead of lecturing you have to go up and ask him" (Isabel: 29, 8-9). This "being a jerk" sounds like Carly's description of an arrogant professor and that the best thing for a professor to convey is:

I'm not a person with an attitude, of I'm not so much bigger and better than you but someone who can come down to your level and talk to you like you're a person and not a speck on your shoe. I don't know how to better express that (Carly: 9, 4-6).

Another way to get a sense of approachability is by things such as “a willingness to admit a mistake” (Carly: 8, 38) when grading, for example, or by showing availability and flexibility as described by Isabel:

College is way more flexible. In high school any class work was due at the end of the period but in college it's due at the end of the day. Also, it's easier to access the professors anytime you need help. Some are like add me on Facebook or find my twitter, email, call me, text me. They make themselves available which is pretty cool. So anytime I have a question I can get an answer pretty easy (Isabel: 24, 14-17).

Students appreciate flexibility, but with flexibility there is also freedom that is a new experience. Isabel describes the “freedom” she feels in her online class:

It's different because a lot depends on me. There are no constant reminders, basically no babying. I have to keep my planner open constantly and make sure I'm not missing anything and it's a step up as far as responsibility goes and that's different (Isabel: 29, 24-26).

Colin discusses that comfort helps balance the freedom in college with the responsibility that comes with that freedom – freedom and importance of instructor role in helping with the transition from high school to college:

There's a lot of freedom and do what you will. You don't get the feeling that some well not all, it's your life man if you don't want then they aren't going to hold your hand. There are some that well they I don't want to say baby you but they take that extra step, time to show they do care (Colin: 52, 27-30).

Not only does showing that they care help students, but a “friendly” (Colin: p. 58, 6) atmosphere is necessary in the classroom. “Friendly” does not mean social or everyone is friends, but the atmosphere is “open” (Colin: p. 58, 6) and inviting of questioning and learning and it being acceptable to not know things. Being available, flexible, on their level, and approachable provide an atmosphere that allows students to feel safe to ask questions in class.

Recall that students learn from each other by getting an idea of what others think so for them to ask questions in class is important to their learning. It is better for questions to occur in class for all students to interact with than for questions and answers to occur in isolation like it does in the online or hybrid class setting. The online or hybrid classes are not as comfortable, not as safe because they are in isolation (meaning they do not go to a classroom at a set time). Colin describes his lack of comfort with the online/hybrid setting:

To be honest I don't like any online. I hate it. Spanish they incorporate this online and psychology is mostly online because it's hybrid and they're really pushing for that and I don't like that. A lot of times I'll be reading the book and there's a test and they slightly deviated from the reading and if I have questions about it I really don't have anyone to ask.

I asked him if he could email the instructor questions and he replied:

Well email but now I've got to wait for your email and if something gets lost in translation or takes time or I forget then I'm usually doing the work now and I have a question about it.

Isabel discusses her online class experience where comfort is also an issue not because she is afraid to ask questions but she cannot even figure out what questions to ask:

My online class is so horrible for me. (Isabel: p. 35, 13). The material is just not that interesting to me and on top of that to not have a lecture I am like oh my goodness what am I going to do. (Isabel: p. 35, 17-18). The instructor is really cool about us asking her questions but I don't even know where to start (Isabel: p. 35, 22). We have quizzes every week over the reading where we have a short essay response. It's horrible. The people in the class have been talking about having study groups so I'm going to see if I can go to those. My head is all over the place, I don't know (Isabel: p. 35, 25-27).

Isabel has some comfort with asking the instructor questions, but she is still isolated and does not know what to ask because she is missing the group interaction with her instructor and other students that is necessary to figure out what to ask, described by Devin.

Things like that make one find out just what they don't know because that is equally important to figuring out what you know. Because once you're distinguished what you don't know you can address it. It's like finding out you have a problem of any sort, once you address you have a problem you can fix it (Devin: p. 71, 12-15). The best way to figure out what you need to learn is to figure out what you don't know (Devin: p. 71, 29-30).

Isabel is lost in geology because she does not know what she does not know; she does not know what her problem is to ask about. She is uncomfortable with the online environment for some of the reasons described by Devin, and Colin solidifies the need to

be able to ask questions and the difficulty of doing it in the online portion which is lack of comfort with the online class structure:

If you are doing online work, you're doing it and you have a question, there's nobody to ask. I like having somebody there to not only answer my questions but to better explain what it is I read (Colin: p. 59, 9-11).

Four of the students have online classes or hybrid classes where a portion of work/learning is online rather than in the classroom. Although we are in the digital age, in general, these students do not like the online class components. Carly "can guarantee I shouldn't be taking an online class because I need someone there in my face telling me what's due in two weeks" (Carly: p. 12, 25-26). Isabel mentions that the online setting for many classes would not be good because "it's so confusing you need someone there to help (Isabel: p. 36, 26). Colin describes the need to have a set time for working on classes:

The more time you can spend in a class setting it just so much more that can happen with the class. People feel that that time is designated for sitting in class and learning the subject. But if you're online you're at home on your own and can do whatever you want and that time if you had designated time you'd be there – your time designated time to spend learning the subject. But once you have the online it's a little more difficult. You lose something with online. There's something that's lost with it. I don't like it.

Finally, Gary describes his experience in a hybrid class that met one day a week and relied heavily on email for communication and interaction:

I don't like emails too much, like in the [computer] class, too many students sent random messages and I quit looking at my email which hindered me because then I was missing emails from the instructor (Gary: p. 42, 37-39).

He felt like he was advised poorly because he did not even realize that he had registered for a hybrid course. If he had known the difference he would have chosen a fully face to face class because it is better for him in staying on track with assignments. The hybrid setting "did not work for me. I didn't have anyone who I felt comfortable asking for help" (Gary: p. 43, 17). He reiterates what others conveyed about the online/hybrid space not being a safe space to ask questions, and the need for that safe space is meaningful to students.

Another issue with the online/hybrid setting related to isolation is lack of connection. They are not forming relationships or building camaraderie which is important as described by Gary:

[Computer class] was a very difficult course to have that. We only meet on a Monday for a short period of time. Instructor comes in and teaches what she needs and there's not enough time to build that camaraderie in that class (Gary: p. 42, 32-24).

Forming relationships has to do with connecting with professors even on the small scale of the professor knowing students by name and showing care described by Gary

I've yet to see the stereotypes where they don't know your name. If I'm missing he'll ask my friends where is Gary. They care. I like that at Redwood University that they care and after class, they say come talk to me (Gary: p. 44, 17-19).

Furthermore, he discusses his relationship with one of his instructors:

I've fallen behind a couple times but she's been helping me out staying on task.

It's been very helpful to have a teacher like her who personally knows me. And is trying best to help me out (Gary: p. 45, 15-17).

This description is typical of all participants – they all expressed that their teachers are helpful, know them, and “just really wants to help you out and improve; get you better” (Gary: p. 45, 23-24).

Only two students discussed bonding and forming relationships on a deeper level and they were both in what is called the Bridge program. Bridge is two weeks of the summer before classes start where students are in a learning community together to orient to school and then continue with each other in a class throughout the first semester.

Bonding and forming relationships is a goal of the program. One of the students who was in the Bridge program stated:

So you make a couple study buddies you know we're able to help one another out there. Whenever you have that bond there and you spend that much time together it helps. I was able to help mentor a couple kids before the finals and then me, and then there's classes like psychology and Spanish where it's a very tight, stiff atmosphere and she says get with partners and you turn and oh you just grudgingly do it. It's like with any social thing the more you know somebody the more comfortable you are (Colin: p. 56, 2-7).

The above response is interesting because it shows two different class dynamics going on. One is where relationships were formed more deeply due to Bridge, so getting into groups for class work was *more* comfortable because they knew each other longer. In psychology and Spanish at the time of this interview, class had only been in session for a

couple weeks, so not much time had passed to get beyond that “stiff atmosphere.” The class may never get to a bonding stage, but it can still feel like a safe space to ask questions, which is the minimum they need for comfort. The difference is that the class associated with Bridge had “bonding” activities built into the program and regular classes do not have “bonding” activities built in necessarily. Non-Bridge classes may be at a bonding disadvantage, but it is clear that students do not have to have a deep bond to feel comfortable asking questions and asking questions is what they deem to be the most important piece of class time.

Some students expressed that bonding with classmates was important, but Devin mentioned that social activities in the classroom would have been stressful to him. He described himself as anti-social, so those first day of class activities where students stand up and introduce themselves are not comfortable for someone like him. However, Devin is a student who gets a lot out of interacting with his classmates by asking them questions and finding out what they are thinking when solving a problem. He wants to interact with others, but being on the “spot” for what might be perceived as more “social” value than academic value is not something he likes because it is uncomfortable. While he describes his experience differently from those who like social activities and talk about forming relationships and bonding, the similarity is that it takes some time to get to know people, to feel comfortable, and creating activities that are perceived as more social than academic is not helpful. For Devin if he has to get with a group of students to discuss a problem, he is fine, he is bonding, and he is forming relationships while getting to know others. The key is not to force bonding or relationships but create a comfortable atmosphere and in time students will naturally form some bond in the classroom, but it

does not have to be as deep as the Bridge students experience for students to have meaningful experiences in the course.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to explore students' perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year courses. On the simplest level, the findings indicate that if FYE students learn something about the content of the course that is new to them or that they do not understand, then that learning experience is meaningful. Students indicate challenge/choice and interaction as keys to promoting learning, so meaningful learning can come from interactive learning or activities and assignments that promote free thinking and creativity. Faculty may be delighted to focus on meaningful learning activities and assignments, but the data from this study indicates that FYE students place a great value on energy and comfort in the classroom. Energy and comfort are the sources of meaningful experiences in the classroom. Energy is a word that students use, and it is not necessarily related to what students perceive as learning, yet it energy from the classroom environment or feeling energized working on an assignment is meaningful to students. Without comfort and energy, students may not perceive a course to be meaningful. They may have learned something, but they expect to learn something. When they write about "meaningful education (Colin: p. 74, 1; 3) or experiences they "find meaning in" (Carly: p. 77, 47), they speak of energizing experiences. And as far as interactive learning and challenge/choice to be effective, it has to be safe to ask questions which comes from comfort.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to seek understanding of college freshmen perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year experience courses. Literature from both curriculum studies and educational psychology provided insights into exploring meaningfulness from the student perspective under postmodern conditions, and data from this case study illuminated those insights as categories emerged in analysis. See Table 5 for a review of the research questions and resulting categories from analysis.

Table 5

Review of Research Questions and Categories (including RQ4)

Research Questions	Categories
RQ1: What words do students use to convey something is meaningful in a course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emotional Transition, words such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Like/love ▪ Good/nice/works ▪ Engaged/interested ● Academic Pragmatism, words such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Helpful/useful/valuable ● Survival, words such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Help/hard
RQ2: What experiences do students perceive as meaningful in a course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Challenge/choice ● Interactive learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lecture ▪ Group discussion ▪ Practice
RQ3: What is it about an experience that makes it meaningful in a course? What about the answers to RQ2 make those things meaningful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Energy ● Comfort
RQ4: What do students perceive as problems that may prevent meaningfulness in a course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Checklist approach ● Once n' done approach

The semi-structured interview questions resulted in participant answers that directly addressed the first three research questions. However, the last research question was not one that was directly addressed in the semi-structured interviews. For example, I asked students what they enjoy in their classes because meaning is connected to feelings of happiness or enjoyment (see Chapter 2). I did not ask students what problems they perceive that may prevent meaningfulness. However, some participants discussed their fellow students based on their own perceptions of disappointment and frustration with other students' apathy toward school. In the moments where students discuss their perceptions of others, insight is gleaned regarding problems that would prevent meaningfulness – insight to help answer the fourth research question. A general discussion of the first three questions will be provided in this chapter, followed by a separate discussion of the fourth question, ending with implications for future research.

Discussion of First Three Research Questions

Academic States

Typically, when FYE faculty discuss students in regard to teaching and learning, they present them at three different levels of success based on how they are doing in a course. There are those students who are doing quite well, those who are not doing very well, and the vast majority are somewhere in between. Or, there are discussions of skill or knowledge level at the 100 level courses. Students are either at a high level of knowledge (relative to the course level), are true beginners, or are somewhere in between which could mean they know a lot about some topics and not much about other topics in the course. One of the goals of FYE faculty is to meet the needs of these different levels.

However, there are not discussions about students' academic states, such as the states revealed from RQ1 of emotional transition, academic pragmatism, and survival.

In the first year, this idea of an academic state is significant and it takes into consideration Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological framework of child development in which multiple layers (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems) of the student's environment are considered to have impact on behavior, thoughts, feelings, motivation, and academic success or performance. Their emotional state and academic approach is affected not only by the immediate microsystem of immediate family, instructors, courses, peers, technology, living spaces, but the relationship and interactions between those aspects of their life which is the mesosystem. The exosystem is also a factor which includes their extended family, neighbors, mass media, and parents' life influences. The macrosystem encompasses laws, culture, economics, history, and social conditions. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model emphasizes the significance of systems impacting their lives. Their transition from high school to college (or post high school activity to college which may account for the older first-time full-time students) is another aspect in the ecological model which impacts the specific systems of each level. From an ecological developmental vantage point, first time full time FYE students' lives may be in disarray. Since they are all in transition, even one who describes courses with academic pragmatism could be in a survival mode (as with Serena) or mostly emotional transition (as Colin). Even the truest academic pragmatism interviewee indicated social awkwardness and shyness which would be part of emotional transition.

The answer to RQ1 is much more than just about the words they use. The words they used to answer interview questions indicate an approach to being a student, an

approach to thinking about course meaningfulness at different levels. Recognizing these states is important particularly in the first semester when students are transitioning from high school (or post high school) to the university and when they do not know anyone in their classes. True recognition means more than awareness by faculty. It requires conveying these states to the students so that students are aware of the system changes and different academic states and so that students are aware that faculty are aware. This recognition requires talking about it. All incoming freshmen take a learning community (FYS) whether it is in Bridge or during the Fall semester and this study suggests it might be appropriate for the faculty team (which includes an advisor and mentor) to share that the team recognizes that each of them may be in one of these academic states, or more than one, or something different but similar to these states. Recognition may put them at ease which would increase comfort – one of the themes that arose from students' perceptions of meaningfulness.

Oftentimes when faculty concentrate on the different success levels or skill levels there may be a tendency to focus on achievement motivation, such as expectancy value theory (see Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) and miss other factors that may be affecting performance in the course. Learning communities (FYSs) present student support services and opportunities for campus involvement. Discussion of these academic states, the real academic states the students are experiencing whether the ones presented in this study's results or others would normalize the academic states for the students and present a segue into support services and campus opportunities for student involvement. In some learning communities there have been textbooks, such as *Success in Technology* (Pearson, 2011), with case studies of students in academic states

similar to emotional transition, academic pragmatism, and survival. The intention of reading the case studies is to put students at ease and normalize states of emotional transition and survival. Students “get” that is the purpose of the cases, but they are likely disconnected from the “lesson” from a textbook. They would not be disconnected from the authenticity of the issue in their own lives.

One reason to move away from textbook cases that describe the academic states where homesickness, for example, is depicted is because it does not fit the experience of challenge/choice. Recall that FYE students in this study indicated that experiences with challenge/choice are meaningful. Providing students the choice to connect to their personal lives is more meaningful than using a textbook example only. There may be a need for both in classes, but when creating experiences for the students, faculty may need to let the students “create” by choosing which state they see themselves relating to. Choice in the form of ambiguity or open-ended answering was considered challenging for FYE students in this study. Allowing them to choose how to do something rather than prescribing how they do something meets the desire to create and is challenging. That “choice” could be dealing with the three academic states in a learning community where they choose how to portray their perceived state. Instead of telling them to write about their academic state using the three choices of emotional transition, academic pragmatism, or survival, learning community faculty could allow them to use one of those or choose their own descriptor and instead of writing, they could choose their own way of presenting which may be an artistic, creative expression.

Interactive Learning

In Chapter 2, curriculum scholars of the postmodern era (Gilbert, 2005, 2007; Lyotard, 1984; Prensky, 2001a, 2001b, 2009; & Slattery, 1995, 2006) suggest that digital natives have a different way of learning than the modern representation of learning that they bring from K-12 into the university. Speed, interactivity, random access, graphical awareness, parallel processing, and attention deployment (2001b) have been suggested as skills that digital natives have acquired as a result of immersion in a digital society. This is apparent from students' definition of lectures. They define lecture differently from the traditional lecture. Their concept of lecture is one of interaction which includes PowerPoint presentations and/or some other visual representation. They also do not maintain attention for longer than approximately twenty minutes in a lecture and frequently do not read through things carefully but rely more on a random access approach to reading as they are accustomed to reading online. Nielsen (2006) presents data based on eye tracking web reading and has found that web reading results in an F-zone pattern of reading (F stands for *fast*). Words in the F zone are the focus, but not every word is read which differs from the traditional pattern of book reading. F pattern reading may be a natural way of reading for digital natives which may adversely affect attention to detail of the written word, but has become a natural skill.

These are natural skills that they use in their everyday life, but maximizing the strengths associated with those skills needs to be balanced with their transition and need for structure. Students' desire for structure (Taylor, 2011) where they can find out what the professor thinks is important for them to know or learn is part of the transition from K-12 where they are used to studying what the teacher tells them is important based on

state standards where tests “direct the curriculum as they ‘operationalized’ performance objectives and learning outcomes” (Taubman, 2009, p. 17). FYE faculty encourage students to think on their own rather than focus only on what they have to know for a test, so there must be a balance between what they are used to and where we want them to end up. In the first year the interactive learning experiences of lecture, group discussion, and practice can provide some structure for them while balancing that with choice as they tap into their digital native natural way of learning and connecting. It should be noted that the participants’ digital native-ness does not mean that they want to use a lot of technology in classes; no one mentioned technology in the classroom as meaningful other than one student mentioning he likes the iPad app for the etext in one of his courses (Gary: p. 51, 10). He also mentions that collaboration and networking websites such as Diigo and LinkedIn are good for some courses when making connections to career and collaborative work, but that Facebook and Twitter should not be used in classes. He thinks that using the Internet for course work is fine if it makes sense for the context of the course, but that it should not be forced and that “Facebook and Twitter are more distractions and students are easily distracted” (Gary: p. 51, 20). Further research may find that their digital native-ness leans toward creating digital representations rather than having to use technology for all aspects of learning.

Upper level classes may be designed more in sync with Gilbert’s analysis of Lyotard’s “new ways of learning” where “many reasons, many truths, and many knowledges” (Gilbert, 2007) are recognized and where students want “more information, better relationships, more chances to create, and better ways to send the world their message” (Shneiderman, 2002, p. 61), where “collaborative experiences, entertainment,

and aesthetics” (p. 11) are recognized through use of technologies, such as social media. However, it is possible that FYE courses should provide a balance between structure and expectations and choice/challenge and openness where students begin to practice with new ways of learning. While they may be equipped with new ways of learning, they are not used to new ways of learning in their first semester/first year. Some scholars (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b, 2009; Shneiderman, 2002) suggest that one of the natural ways of learning for digital natives is connecting. They are digitally and socially connected so connection is natural, but they have not practiced it academically. Academic connection requires reflection. Reflection can and should occur in every subject so that they can make connections within the class to what they have already learned that is related to what they are now learning and to other classes either in their career path (major) or among seemingly unrelated courses. More often than not, if students rely on structure and the instructor telling them exactly what to do or what to know, then students will compartmentalize what they are learning which prevents them from making connections. Activities that require reflection and connection require them to tap into their natural way of learning and being. The first year is that transition and practice ground for them to gain confidence in that skill academically. This study reveals that students like the group discussion and hands on learning activities and experiences. It is their natural way of learning where they express their ideas with others and connect their ideas to what others are saying and then connect to actual doing. They cannot learn as naturally from lecture (even structured lecture that they are used to that is interactive).

Furthermore, by making connections and interacting through lecture, discussion, and practice they discover what they do not know. Duckworth (2006) suggests that K-12

classrooms have held “knowing the right answer” in high regard, as a virtue related to intellectual functioning (p. 63). However, she also states that “the virtues involved in not knowing are the ones that really count in the long run” because “what you do about what you don’t know is, in the final analysis, what determines what you *will* know” (p. 67). Through interactive learning, FYE students discover what they do not know. In not knowing, students learn by using their imagination, creating, and figuring things out as students experiment to learn something they do not know and reveal “surprise, puzzlement, struggle, excitement, anticipation, and dawning certainty” (p. 66). While Duckworth’s example is of a 10 year old student, these states of emotions are similar to what I experienced in the interviews in this study with some descriptions of experiences by the eighteen to twenty-three year olds. Duckworth contends that surprise, puzzlement, struggle, excitement, anticipation, and dawning certainty “are the matter of intelligent thought” and that “as virtues, they stand by themselves—even if they do not, on some specific occasion lead to the right answer” because “in the long run, they are what count” (p. 66). Therefore, in not knowing, students can discover and learn and experiences that result in the aforementioned emotions can lead to Lyotard’s vision of “many reasons, many truths, and many knowledges,” wherein the “process of ‘innovation’” will be warranted and prevail (Gilbert, 2007, p. 119).

Challenge/choice

The FYE students who were interviewed in this study indicated that when they created something on their own or solved a problem without step-by-step guidance, they were creating something meaningful. Innovating, or creating and donating as Shneiderman (2007) terms it, is what is important to the interviewed FYE students. They

want to do well on exams that require them to memorize information, but they are energized and motivated when they get to work on something that they create. It seems that excitement comes from creating, no matter what one's age or stage in life. When students are provided an opportunity to create something on their own, they work with purpose (Damon, 2009) and address for themselves why they are doing what they are doing to meet an assignment's goals because they chose what to create. Helping students with the "why" they choose to create what they do is helping them understand the bigger question of their "own quest for purpose" (Damon, 2009, p. 5) in life, confirming the constructivist principle that students construct their own learning based on their experiences in a social world. Their quest begins with each and every task and activity they do in school as they connect the purpose of it to their world. When they get to create, they create with purpose and the experience is meaningful.

Underlying Components of Meaningfulness

As presented in Chapter 2, most studies about meaningfulness occur in a specific disciplinary context (Earp, 1996; Harradine, 1999; Chen, 1998), are tied to motivation (Weber, Martin, & Cayanus, 2005; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), or are related only to meaningful learning (Gentry & Owen, 2004) and not to other meaningful experiences such as those that provide energy or comfort. In this study, participants described experiences that were meaningful such as those that were challenging through choice or provided interaction. However, there is something underlying those experiences, some one or more dimensions of those experiences that led to students perceiving them as meaningful. Energy and comfort are the "what about" those experiences – the underlying components that make something meaningful. Students perceive meaningfulness not only

through learning something, but by feeling energized and by feeling safe in the classroom.

When faculty focus on students skill levels and grades as success in the classroom, if a connection is made to motivation, the tendency might be one where a motivation theory such as expectancy value theory would be applied. Expectancy value theory of motivation (see Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) suggests that the more a student values a task, the harder the student will work. A one sided glance at motivation from this theory suggests that some students will value doing homework and some will not or some will value studying for a test and others will not. Some faculty may consider intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors when designing their course as well. Providing points for attendance is an extrinsic motivation which gets students to come to class, for example. Applying expectancy value theory to this situation does not necessarily mean that a student attends because he values class so he works hard to get to class (intrinsic). It may, but it may also mean that the student values the points rewarded for attending, not the task of attendance and attends for the extrinsic reward of the points. The task is attending, but students' value on attending may be different but result in attending without faculty knowing or maybe without the student knowing the real reason for attending.

The point of the above example is to show that where the value comes from can be difficult to discern. Understanding others and even one's own motivation can sometimes be an elusive task. However, in the case of students describing the importance of energy in the classroom, they seem to be experiencing the phenomenon of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Flow theory can explain why a student places a value on a task

in some situations but not in other. From Chapter Two, I mentioned that flow occurs when challenge and skill level are relatively high (Massimini & Carli, 1988) and an emotional state of feeling immersed in an activity occurs (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Flow leads to further motivation because individuals seek to increase their competency (Csikszentmihalyi & Massimini, 1985) because of the need for high challenge and skill. There are two aspects to consider: flow for the student and flow for the professor. In the cases in this study, it is the professors who are in the flow and in situations where students feel “flow” from others they use the word “energy” to describe the feeling.

While initially writing about flow theory in Chapter 2, I considered the students being in the flow. I was thinking that students would be motivated if they felt in the flow, and if they felt that flow energy, then they would consider that experience meaningful. Only one student described a course experience where I would interpret she was in the flow. She stated that as she was writing, “my hand was just going” (Isabel: p. 38, 12-14). She was energized and in the flow. She was also motivated to write the paper and liked it! The surprise to me was that students described their professors’ flow as energy and that was meaningful to them – so meaningful that one student reflected in a journal writing on his experience with high energy as “meaningful education” (Colin: p. 74, 1).

At some point in their academic career, I imagine all students will find themselves in the flow on their own. For introductory, FYE, first time students, however, flow from the professor is motivating. It occurs in context of new and/or difficult content to the student (high challenge) where the skill level of the professor is high which encourages or motivates the students to learn more or increase their skill/knowledge level of the given topic. Note that for the professor in presenting and facilitating delivery of content that

being in the flow does not mean the content is difficult, but that effective delivery is a skill that is aided by conveying information/skill to others about something that is loved by the professor. The professor enjoys the content and being immersed in it in a teaching mode.

Comfort

Just as a professor can bring energy to the classroom setting, he or she can also create a safe, comfortable space where relationships in the classroom are valued. Two of the male participants in the study stressed bonding in a way in which it was apparent that bonding was important. Now whether bonding is important to those two male students inherently or whether the bonds that were formed were something they deemed significant was not explicitly explored. However, based on the fact that bonding did not occur in every class they were in, it seems the significance was in the fact that it occurred in the specific classes they mentioned. It is unusual for that level of bonding they felt to occur in classes but the fact that it did was meaningful to them. In these “bonding” situations, the ethic of care (Noddings, 2007) and the level of “teaching with love” (Goldstein, 1998) was greater than in the average classroom where it is safe and comfortable to ask questions. Students need the comfort level of “safe to ask questions,” but if the level of bonding is reached, the experience is more meaningful. The difference in safe space for questioning versus bonding seems to be the level at which the heart is involved. Involving the heart where students form and feel a bond will ease the difficulty or challenge the FYE students feel with choice and it may open them up to deeper sharing, reciprocity, commitment, and collaboration. If personal interests and connections are explored and honored then students may naturally begin to make connections to their

real lives and help each other understand their experiences and learn from connecting the academic to experiences.

Striking While the Iron is Hot

Dewey's emphasis on experience and the interaction through interactive lecture, group discussion, and practice that these students describe as critical to meaningful learning fit the theoretical framework based on constructivism, particularly social constructivism. Students are constructing their learning in a social setting using each other and the professors to bounce ideas, share, and figure out what they do not know so that they know where to focus their next steps in learning. A classroom is not necessarily comfortable on Day 1. It is not necessarily uncomfortable either, but it takes a few times together, sometimes even half a semester for students, particularly shy and introverted students to warm up to interaction. Time must be spent easing into interactive activities, so Dewey's concept of "striking while the iron is hot" (1990, p. 192) has implications for a FYE course. Each course is different so instructor awareness is important to the dynamics of the group, which requires discrimination on the instructor end in order to begin to help the students to discriminate. There are two examples from FYE courses that provide an example of the time it takes to establish a comfort level for "striking while the iron is hot." One is related to content for an entire class and the other is on a personal rather than content level for a student.

In an existing computer technology course, there are approximately ten hot topics—these are topics/questions/concepts that the professor would like the students to be able to answer/discuss when at the end of the semester. They are usually things that typical computer users have problems with and the students' goal is to be able to explain

what is going on so an average, common user can understand. The answers have to show technical understanding but be conveyed in lay terms. The ultimate goal is to be able to explain to their mother or grandmother, for example, what is going on with the computer when the power button is pushed on to the time the operating system loads and the computer is ready to use. These topics are important enough to introduce on Day 1 or at least in the first couple weeks. The problem with introducing things that early is the iron is not hot – they have not had enough time to read, explore, do labs, have discussions, ask questions, or work with the concepts to be that interested in the end goal. At that early point in a semester they see it merely as an assignment, and not a meaningful assignment, just something they are told they will have to do. They do not absorb that there can be exciting stuff to learn but they ignore the possibility of excitement, like they ignore or skim over the objectives or course goals on the syllabus (Carly: p. 6, 8-24).

However, if these hot topics are introduced gradually in labs, discussions, quizzes, etc. students can begin to see where they have weaknesses, gaps in their understanding, and interests too. About mid-way through the semester, they have had enough technical content to make some sense of the hot topics, so at the mid-point of the semester, they can be given the hot topics with associated questions. They are interested and they are beginning to know how to strategize a plan to figure out the questions related to the topics. Also, they are comfortable enough with the structure of the course to ask questions and feel safe that they will have an opportunity to continue to practice with the material so that they can reach the goal. If they are given all of those topics on Day 1 or even Week 2, they do not care about it yet, and that lack of care sets the tone for how they approach learning the material. In this example, “striking while the iron is hot”

requires time to establish some comfort level and relationships within the classroom and comfort level with the content.

The other “striking while the iron is hot” example is on a personal level that emerged because of comments a student was submitting in her lab work in a technology class. She would complete a lab assignment and state in the reflection portion of the assignment that she thought she did everything she was supposed to do but she did not feel like she understood the concepts fully. In general, that feeling is typical and appropriate early on in the class, but students may think they are the only one feeling lost. These comments continued on almost every weekly lab and the instructor thought the student was getting a bad impression of the subject area. The student was a non-major but interested in a minor, and the instructor remembered that from the first day of class. The student was also the only female in the class. Being the only female in the class did not seem to bother the student, however it was difficult to discern if some of her comments were due to discomfort in the classroom or just lack of perceived understanding on the student’s part. The instructor felt some negativity with the comments and always responded to the student positively, meaning that the instructor acknowledged the students’ comment, fear, or problem that was stated and attempted to ease the stress of the situation by providing an answer, if possible, or reassurance that in time with more practice the concepts would begin to make more sense. The problem is that making more sense does not always happen in that introductory course. It sometimes takes another course with more in-depth work with the topic for concepts to make sense. On one of the projects the comment from the student indicated a deeper interest in that particular area than in the previous ones, so the professor struck while the iron was hot. The professor’s

gradebook comments stated that he remembered that the student was interested in pursuing a minor in the area or possibly a smaller number of credit hours with a certificate. There are several concentrations/paths for a certificate so the professor mentioned that he would be able to talk to the student about further interest in an advising role. The next class day after class, the student approached the professor and asked about the certificates and minors. Enough comfort and relationship building had occurred between the two and the professor waited for the right time to approach the student and turn what initially appeared might be a bad experience for the student into a career path that complements the student's chosen major. Too early in the semester and the student would not have had interested yet. Too late without a direct appeal to help and the student may have left the course still feeling a little lost and lacking confidence to continue in the minor.

Both of these situations – the one with content and the one with advising – occur because the instructors value the students as people, not just as bodies taking notes. They want to get to know the students and help the students. They care about the students and the students sense that and feel comfortable. The comfort level in these situations goes beyond asking questions, which is the bare minimum that participants indicated they need. In the content case, the comfort level led to the right timing for delivering the hot topics and in the personal case, the comfort level enabled a student to express discontent with the course and how things were going which then turned around into a positive experience related to choosing her minor and further exploring content that was uncomfortable.

Concluding Remarks RQ1 - RQ3

As students pondered aspects of their classes that they considered meaningful, it became apparent that many had not considered meaningfulness in their courses. They had never been asked to do so, and it was not natural for them to think of their courses in that regard. In conveying their answers of what they considered meaningful, they constructed their own meaning of what meaningfulness in their courses meant to them based on interaction with me as the interviewer. When they answered the interview questions, their desire and need for learning to occur within a social context became apparent. The social context was not one where they felt “social” like at a party, so classes were not what they would consider social activities, but learning was occurring because they were interacting with others. They were learning from others and they were figuring out what they did not know by listening to others.

Students’ words guided by the research questions provided deep insight by revealing their thoughts of meaningfulness in FYE courses. Student construction of meaningfulness indicates that we need to be aware of how they perceive their transition in college and help them be aware of how they perceive their transition. We also need to be attuned to their reliance on each other and active interaction in classes by feeling safe to ask questions to construct meaning (knowledge) in the disciplines. Finally, energy and comfort underlie their perceptions of interaction and safety they feel in the learning environment.

The results from data related to the first three research questions provide a general and consistent understanding of meaningfulness in FYE courses for faculty to use as a starting point for discussions and future studies and serve as a reminder of appropriate

expectations of first year students. Sometimes FYE faculty lose sight of what is realistic to expect of first year full time students. Discussions regarding first time full time FYE students need to take the students' perspective into consideration. Results of this study indicated that they focus on practical aspects of classes rather than deeply transformative events.

RQ4: Checklist and Once n' Done Approaches

One way to answer, "What do students perceive as problems that may prevent meaningfulness in a course?" would be to reverse the findings regarding what students perceive as meaningful activities. The opposite of meaningful experiences or the absence of those experiences could be what prevents meaningfulness. Initially, this question was intended to provide more insight into what students perceive as meaningful, but in the interview conversations when I asked students what they thought about fellow students, they often discussed frustration and disappointment in their fellow students related to the lack of effort on other students' end. The study participants seemed to think that many students were not finding their FYE classes meaningful because they were not putting effort into their own work in the class.

Carly exhibited mild anger when she began talking about what she sees from other students and frustration with students "who have no motivation to take charge of their own education" (Carly: p. 10, 37-38). In the Fall semester, she was in an Honors section of chemistry, but for the Spring 2012 semester she is not in the Honors section and she describes her experience:

But now that I'm out of the honors recitation I'm really seeing it. I've only had one recitation so far but it was very infuriating in some ways because these people

are paying all this money for education and they're not going out and doing this for themselves. They're saying oh you look like you know what you're doing so tell me how to do it now and I'll just copy off your paper. Recitations aren't graded so it's not like you're cheating or anything but it's not helping you. Why are you even here even though it's a required portion of your course (Carly: p. 11, 7-13).

Carly states that in this situation "it's not like you're cheating" (Carly, p. 11, 12) if they copy your work because the work is not graded. Whether it is cheating or not is not the issue. She does not view their approach as cheating off of her, but as cheating themselves. Devin has experienced a similar situation where another student has asked him to work for him:

I'll be honest I have had students ask me to do an assignment for them. I didn't do that actually. I have one that asked me to just a few days ago and I just never got back to him on it. It's kind of ridiculous. The way I see it is if you don't do the assignment yourself you don't learn the material very effectively and really it's just more of a detriment to yourself (Devin: p. 72, 34-38).

Devin shrugged off the experience where Carly displayed frustration by their "lack of motivation" (Carly, p. 12, 15) and their approach to being in college and learning. She cannot believe they pay for college but do not want to do the work. She sees the work in her classes as an opportunity and it makes her mad that others do not see the opportunity, but approach the classes only with the attitude of what do I have to do to get an A:

What do I have to do to get an A really, really bothers me because what if you're not understanding it. You shouldn't get an A in the course just because you did all the crap. You didn't do it to a standard that is an A standard (Carly: p. 11, 20-22).

Doing only what one has to do to get an A (or a B or any desired threshold) is a *checklist approach* to taking classes. Students seem to look at the syllabus on Day 1 to find out what they have to do to get their desired outcome. And in some cases, like with Carly and Devin's experience, students know they just have to show something whether it is their own work or not. As long as they show something, they have checked off that item on their checklist.

This *checklist approach* may be related to Colin's viewpoint where students worry about the grade and take classes just "to get through" (Colin: p. 60, 28). In Chapter 4's section on Challenge and Choice, Colin discussed challenge and choice to think freely as being good as long as the students did not have to worry about the grade. This concept of worry about the grade is connected to the *checklist approach*. They approach the work as a checklist to reach their desired goal with the focus on the grade they want so they are worried about the grade and it is difficult to think freely and openly and be creative if students are striving to do what the instructor wants them to do so that they get the grade they want. They cannot think "outside of the box" when they are concerned that they have to do the work "within the box" to satisfy the instructor's requirements. The problem is that when they do strictly what the instructor wants, they are going through the motions to get the work done but they are not doing anything that they necessarily connect to, are excited about, want to explore, or in other words find meaningful.

The other problem that Colin presented is that some classes are approached that the class is just something you have to get through to get to the good stuff. He has heard professors say that about classes to students and feels that if a professor does so, then they do not approach the course in a meaningful way. Rather they approach the course with the *checklist approach* in a way in which it would be difficult to find the experiences in the class meaningful. The following is the conversation between Colin and me:

Colin: Like [the attitude/thought] this class is just made for to get through, to pass. All you need to do is pass it. I've heard that [from professors!]. This class is just designed to get through to pass.

Me: OK

Colin: If you do that and you let students know this is just a "passing" course and not designed to... it's just an intro course to get you through to what you really want to focus on. But what are they learning?

Me: Are they basically saying if you do the work you'll pass?

C: Yeah, just do what I have to take the test boom and there's no retention there

N: Right, just a checklist

Colin: Exactly do it and done. That's exactly what I'm saying. Like an online class is like that. If you set up a class, structure a class where you apply, because I don't care what it is every subject is building blocks for something. An intro course is building blocks basics of something. If you want to build off of one of those areas you have to know the fundamentals, the basics. Make it known that these are the fundamentals and if you have a solid base rather than "if I just pass this" then you can move on to something more important that you want to do.

[That attitude/thought from professors is] not helpful, not cultivating. The people I talk to they say “uh, this class is so boring” yeah, introductory course and I like this part of the book but the rest of it is just so boring. But if they find one part of it interesting and a lot of it is boring and they don’t care because they think once they get past this then they go onto one of their cool classes they want to take then it’s all going to be dandy and then they’ll start to learn and start to pay attention but it makes no sense. This is stuff that I’ve heard. People actually think that it’s just an introductory course and when I get through this I can go on to do the real stuff. But without a solid foundation, the basics of what it is uh I don’t know. See what I’m saying, I don’t know. It’s all very. You just have to you know suck it up do the hard stuff and even though right now you don’t like it it’s going to be it’s going to pay off in the end.

Me: Sounds like the attitude where they think there’s a lot of busy work tied to the intro level. Busy work, why should I do it, but if they do it, they learn something.

Colin: Exactly, yeah you retain it

N: And it connects to something else

Colin: Especially with those intro courses it will connect I don’t know, it’s all just the basics. I don’t understand how people just don’t do it. They get lazy and try to take the easy way out.

Me: Are you seeing that a lot?

Colin: I see it here. Just people not being focused. I don’t know what it is. Maybe I’m just...

In this conversation, Colin presents a situation in which the *checklist approach* may come from the professor's attitude about the course. He also discusses that students may be lazy and unfocused, but it is certainly not helpful in his mind if professors convey the message to students that a course is just something they have to do to get on to "real work" or "bigger and better," more interesting material. If a course is set up as a checklist of assignments where the goal is to do them to get the grade, then students will find it difficult to be motivated to do anything other than getting the items on the checklist checked off. This structure breeds a *once n' done approach* as well, where once the item is done, the student does not think he or she will need to return to it. The *once n' done* and *checklist approaches* are part of what Devin mentioned regarding compartmentalizing in the section about Academic Pragmatism in Chapter Four. He thinks it is important that students see connections to other courses, to "real work" being done by other students (like graduate students) and other faculty. Once n' done checklists facilitate compartmentalization. Even in a course in which it may be difficult to connect to higher level courses or other "real work" whether at the university with research or in the work world with guest speakers, for example, connections to other aspects of the course itself can be made so that students can see the purpose in what they are doing now related to what they will be doing in a few weeks. Topics within a course connect to one another and faculty may naturally see those connections, but students do not naturally see the flow unless they are aided.

One way to guide students is to tell them the purpose of assignments, or the purpose of a particular section or topic. For example, Isabel discussed that in her Quantitative Analysis class there was a chapter related to finite math and logic that

seemed to just be thrown into the middle of the course. She did the work but stated that “Venn diagrams were tough” (Isabel: p. 28, 3). She did not understand why that chapter was there, but said that if the purpose of that chapter was explained it would be helpful. We also discussed that it would be helpful if that chapter was integrated throughout the course instead of coming as one big chunk. Integrating the logic portion of the course throughout would help connect it to the other work she was doing. When asked if she had an idea of why she was doing what she was doing in other courses, she referenced one of her courses and said, “Oh yeah...the myitlab videos show an example of where it might be used” (Isabel: p. 28, 14). In discussion about the purpose of the software being used in a course, Gary commended his instructor because she “tells you how these Office fundamentals are going to be useful” (Gary, p. 51, 1-2). If students do not know what the purpose of something is, they may do the work, but it will not be very meaningful to them because they do not know why they are doing it. Knowing “why” in courses seems to be important just as “why” in life is important (Damon, 2009, para. 5). If there is no purpose, falling into a *checklist approach* and *once n’ done approach* is a comfort zone for students.

Some participating students suggested that the problem of *checklist and once n’ done approaches*, lack of effort or motivation, and propensity to cheat is out of the hands of the professors. They placed blame for these problems on the students who lack intrinsic motivation, focus, direction, purpose, and who just want a grade or merely get through the course. Their insight is helpful, but it is also clear that problems that prevent meaningfulness do not completely lie within students because professors can mitigate some of those issues by helping students see the purpose of the work. While there will

still be that checklist of assignments on the syllabus, the course can be presented with energy related to flow theory to facilitate excitement for the course content.

For the most part, the students who shared insight into this problem are students who take their school work seriously, who state that it is their responsibility to do the work and learn in their courses, and they might be considered high-achievers, but their insight is valuable for understanding and eventually helping all students. These students were able to make the distinction between what was their responsibility and what was the instructor's responsibility. They did not suggest that it was the instructor's responsibility to make sure students learn or find things meaningful in their classes. They stated that it is clearly their responsibility to do so, and they think that FYE faculty are great, but when faculty consider that these students for the most part are outliers,¹⁰ then faculty need to address the fact that not all students can make the connections, find the relevancy, see the purpose, get naturally energized and in the flow, but that they need some help in doing so.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this study provide useful insight for the FYE program, and also provide opportunities for future research. In regard to expanding the scope of this qualitative case study, further qualitative research could be done to increase the number of participants and provide a larger set of data to work with. Interested FYE faculty could explore their own courses in a manner similar to this study and all could compile results to analyze course specific results as well as gaining more general insight that could be

¹⁰ I consider five of seven of these students as outliers, meaning academically they are performing at high levels in their classes and approach their work with academic seriousness that I have not seen from typical FYE students.

used as part of a mixed methods study. Also, qualitative case studies could be conducted in FYE courses to explore students' perceptions of what they think about courses with high DFW rates in regard to how to be successful as a student in those courses. Both students who have been successful and those who have not been successful in those high DFW rate courses offer a unique emic perspective.

Part of the expansion of research could also explore certain aspects of data points from this study more pointedly. For example, Devin stated, "Critical thinking learning that is in an intro course will help in the long run because you can apply these skills to your higher level courses and by that point you are a little more adept at them" (Devin, p. 73, 16-17). He was the only participant in this study to share insight about critical thinking, so it was not a significant result of this study. However, it could be the impetus for future exploration. Exploring students' perceptions of the meaningfulness of assessments (i.e., tests, quizzes) would also be a way to broaden the scope of this study particularly in regard to how they view formative and summative assessments.

Expanding the scope of this study to other courses and other aspects of courses is one way to conduct future research, but another way is to use this qualitative case study as the starting point for a larger mixed methods study where the results of this study are used to inform the creation of an instrument to administer to students in all FYE courses. Scale development would be an intermediate phase and the scale would need to be tested for validity and reliability. With a valid and reliable instrument, data could be gathered from a large number of students and exploratory factor analysis could be used to help in construct definition of meaningfulness. Construct definition would add to the literature surrounding meaningfulness in both curriculum studies and educational psychology, and

FYE faculty would have a concrete way to discuss the concept related to FYE courses. An instrument of this nature has been on the agenda for the FYE program, and this qualitative case study offers data to move that project along.

The discussion related to RQ4 pointed out two approaches to school work that participants indicated to be problematic. The *checklist* and *once n' done approaches* seemingly prevent students from perceiving meaningfulness in their courses. There may be a connection with students' approaching coursework this way in FYE courses with a high DFW rate. Future research in the FYE program could explore this possible connection. This research study would not necessarily be an expansion of scope of this qualitative study, but could be designed as a separate qualitative study to explore the connections.

Finally, the most interesting results of this study was the students' disdain for online courses. This declaration from these participants was surprising considering literature regarding the use of technology in the classroom with digital natives. A qualitative study would be useful to gain deeper insight into this phenomenon. For example, the digital natives in this study want to bond and relate so exploring their use of technology for bonding/relating through the use of Course Networking could provide more insight into their views of technology in their classes. It might be possible to combine that study with an Redwood University quantitative study that is now in the planning stages for the purpose of investigating the use of Course Networking in two online FYE courses. If those studies cannot be combined, they certainly can stand alone and both would provide insight into this digital native aversion to online courses and perceptions on technology use in general.

Summary

Analysis of the qualitative data led to the creation of categories that helped answer the four guiding research questions of the study, but it is the integration of those resulting categories with the literature in curriculum studies and educational psychology that provides deep insight into students' perceptions of meaningfulness in their first year experience courses. First of all, the academic states of students can be integrated into class discussion, activities, or graded work as a means of helping students make sense of their transition. Interaction is another way for students to construct knowledge socially, but it is interesting to note that the participants' digital native-ness does not mean that they want to interact with a lot of technology in classes. Interaction helps them figure out what they do not know and they do not feel like they get much interaction in online courses. Interaction is also connected to the comfort level they feel.

Furthermore, students like to create something that they are interested in or have existing knowledge about. They are energized when they share something they create on their own rather than regurgitate facts that anyone can find out. Interaction and sharing seem to be meaningful aspects of courses for the participants. Experiences where students feel energized seem related to flow theory of motivation, and "striking while the iron is hot" (Dewey, 1990, p. 192) is an important notion to consider in FYE courses. This concept relates to flow, energy, comfort, and interaction, all of which are categories that emerged from data analysis and all of which connect to the literature reviewed.

Participants' insights into problems that prevent courses from being perceived as meaningful indicate that if students approach coursework with a *checklist approach*, they end up with a *once n' done checklist mentality* that results in compartmentalization and

ultimately limits a comprehensive understanding of what they are learning. Finally, reviewing the results in a discussion format connecting to the literature review shows how this qualitative case study opens up possibilities for future research in the FYE program as an expansion of the scope of this study as well as new studies, both qualitative and quantitative.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Typical first interview questions:

1. What you most enjoy doing in your free time?
2. What FYE courses are you taking?
3. How is (was) this course similar to courses you took in high school?
4. Think about a FYE course you are currently in (took) that you consider(ed) enjoyable. What about it is (was) enjoyable?
5. Is there anything not enjoyable about the FYE course? Why?
6. What would you like to experience in your courses that you currently are not?
7. Is interaction with classmates important to learning? Why or why not?
8. What do you expect to learn in a course besides the content, if anything? And why?
9. What are the most important parts of a course that have not already been discussed?
10. How do you study and learn?
11. If you could develop a FYE course after hearing about the purpose of FYE courses, what would you tell your instructor to make it the best course ever?

Typical second interview questions were based on questions related to the ideal versus typical professor (Weimer, 2012b). Typical third/fourth interview questions were tailored to each participant and included member checking questions.

Appendix B

Student Journal Prompts

In the first interview, I will discuss the purpose of the study and ask them to write weekly reflections regarding their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and experiences that they consider meaningful. I will provide prompts for them as follows:

1. One thing that was particularly meaningful in my course this week was...
2. The best thing we did in class this week was...and here's why...