

**Communities of Student-Led Dialogue: Promoting Empowerment and  
Advancing Changemaking Engagement through Reflective Educational  
Practices**

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## **Abstract**

In response to the growing emphasis on civic engagement and social responsibility within Canada's post-secondary education landscape, this qualitative study explores the transformative potential of student-led dialogue in fostering leadership and sustained social action. Traditional pedagogy has primarily focused on educator-led models to promote student engagement. However, there has been less research on the effectiveness of student leadership roles in driving peer-to-peer social action, motivation and learning. This research investigates the role and experiences of thirteen student facilitators in a Compelling Conversation (CC) workshop at a Canadian Changemaker College. Through semi-structured interviews, analyzed thematically from a contextualist perspective, the study examines how leadership, empowerment, and critical reflection emerge within peer-led environments. Findings reveal that student facilitators, when supported through inclusive and dialogic spaces, successfully cultivate reflective peer engagement, build confidence, and develop leadership skills. Key conditions, such as openness, connectivity, and perspective sharing, were found to be instrumental in students expressing motivation to extend their social justice efforts beyond the workshop setting. The discussion situates these outcomes within broader discourses on participatory leadership and student subjectification, arguing for the integration of student-led pedagogical models that promote critical hope and inclusive social innovation. Ultimately, the study concludes indicating the empowerment of students as autonomous agents of change enhances their capacity to navigate complex societal challenges with agency, confidence, and sustained commitment to social justice.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### **Introduction**

Higher education has long been regarded as holding a crucial role in educating students for personal and social responsibility (Reason et al., 2013). Over the years, growing societal challenges have heightened higher education's societal contract, creating the need to enhance how students understand systems from different perspectives and for them to become catalysts for positive social change. Rapid societal change has unearthed system vulnerabilities often fueled by circumstances such as climate change and political polarization. To effectively address such intricate social issues, it is essential to examine the increasingly interconnected and complex systemic perspectives from which they originate at a deeper level (Fenech et al., 2023).

As students navigate a progressively uncertain world, characterized by regular exposure to systemic challenges and often lacking actionable pathways, support, and critical hope, disenfranchisement, disconnection, and growing concerns about their future may result (Freire, 2008; Schwittay, 2023; Howell, 2024; Gore & Limthongviratn, 2017). These circumstances impact students' self-identity, socialization, perception of reality, and their interaction with it (Barnett, 2012). Consequently, there is an increasing demand for critical pedagogy, offering new skills and mindsets to help students adapt and contribute positively to both local and interconnected global communities.

In response to evolving circumstances, students often seek greater opportunities for voice and direct participation in shaping their current and future lives. Education thus presents an avenue to foster student empowerment within learning environments, facilitating student

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engagement in constructive social activities. For instance, rather than promoting transactional forms of "banking education" (Freire, 1970), it is essential to encourage students to engage in transformative learning and critical thinking, allowing them to explore themselves and their surroundings, thereby enabling them to make informed decisions and significant contributions. Freire's works emphasize how education should foster this development through, "the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire, 2000, p. 34, as cited by Schwittay, 2023). Biesta (2020) agrees, indicating that the construction of freedom in subjectification is not simply to do what one wants but to instead "act in and with the world in a "grown-up" way. (p. 89). This type of freedom is integrally connected to one's own existence as a subject, both with and for themselves, while also always in existence with the world around them. Concerns have been raised regarding the efficacy of traditional educational frameworks and methodologies in addressing the novel and unfamiliar challenges faced by society (Floridi, 2015).

Given the complexity and interdependence of social, economic, and environmental challenges worldwide, a new framework for analysis and action is required (Ashoka, 2019). It has been argued that transformative educational commitment and vision can facilitate social change by equipping students with critical knowledge regarding social issues, thereby promoting broader democratic processes within society (Prilleltensky, 2001; Rhoads, 2009). Ultimately, critical pedagogy has the potential to advance social justice through "a commitment to social transformation and a break from the comforting illusions regarding the current organization of our societies and their educational systems" (Apple et al., 2009, p. 3).

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Key literature findings suggest that further exploration of nontraditional educational dialogic methods may enhance student engagement through critical social interactions. Educational praxis can challenge students' preexisting assumptions and prejudices, helping to dismantle dominant knowledge systems and decentralize their perceived expertise (Kapoor, 2004, cited by Schwittay, 2023). Moreover, critical dialogue aims to transcend oppressive limitations by identifying and eliminating constructs that obscure oppression (Rosenberger & O'Grady, 2000). This study contributes to the body of student changemaking literature by exploring a student-led peer-to-peer dialogue approach that broadens the scope of student social initiatives.

### **Context**

Canada's education sector aligns with national and global priorities emphasizing social innovation, inclusion, and sustainability (Universities Canada, 2020). Consequently, most educational institutions incorporate strategies that support initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, demonstrating a commitment to embedding social innovation throughout post-secondary education (Stein, 2023). Higher Education Institutions play a significant role in the reorientation of teaching and the creation of research to enhance understanding of sustainability and sustainable development (Kohl et al., 2022). Higher education institutions further enhance social innovation by generating and disseminating knowledge, as well as serving as central institutions within their communities (Haddow & Brodie, 2023), as they are committed to advancing innovation and facilitating social transformation (Bui et al., 2024.)

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Many Canadian post-secondary institutions actively participate in initiatives such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's Community and the College Social Innovation Fund, which acknowledges the vital role of education in comprehending the social dynamics influencing sustainable development. This fund encourages these institutions to provide critical inquiries, data, and insights into significant aspects of society that impact both local and global contexts (Government of Canada, 2024). Additionally, the federal government offers targeted support for social innovation to Canadian colleges by fostering collaborative links among researchers, students, and community partners to address challenges across the social sciences, humanities, sciences, and engineering fields (Government of Canada, 2025).

Established in 2002, Ashoka Canada aligns with broader national educational objectives as a social-profit organization committed to recognizing, supporting, and connecting leading changemakers. Its aim is to enhance solutions and integrate empathy and changemaking within society (Fenech et al., 2023). Arising from the desire to undertake actions that foster essential social change within communities and societies, changemaking is defined as “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions, and for which the value created primarily benefits society as a whole rather than private individuals” (Phillis et al., 2008).

Changemakers have been described in a number of ways including those “who takes action to address a problem, activates others, and works towards solutions for the good of all (Fenech et al., 2023, p. 9) or those “who can see the patterns around them, identify the problems in any situation, figure out ways to solve the problem, organize fluid teams, lead collective action, and then continually adapt as situations change” (Brooks, 2018, p. A27). In today's

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volatile environment, there is a growing acknowledgment of the need for qualities that challenge established norms to promote constructive social outcomes (O'Brien et al., 2018, cited in Kirby & Webb, 2021; Cederquist & Golüke, 2016).

The concept of changemaking has evolved from its initial focus on social entrepreneurship to encompass significant developments within the field of education. Presently, a global network of 42 designated Changemaker Campuses fosters the enhancement of student changemaking capabilities. These campuses are committed to promoting social innovation within their communities by supporting educational initiatives that develop changemaking attributes and skills. Educational institutions may apply for international recognition and designation as a Changemaking Campus by meeting specific criteria and demonstrating campus-wide excellence in social innovation and changemaking. Additionally, they must commit to collaborating with other changemaking institutions to advance social innovation and changemaking across higher education (Ashoka U, n.d.; Mitchell et al., 2024).

With a strong foundation in social innovation, Maple College (hereafter referred to as MC) promotes collaboration among faculty, students, and community organizations across its campus communities to tackle complex issues and pursue positive social change. Since being designated a Changemaker Campus, MC has strategically focused on implementing changemaking practices across its multi campus locations. The institution is actively engaged in collaboratively addressing complex, relevant community challenges and has introduced a series of projects and programs aimed at enhancing students' changemaking abilities, empowering them to make valuable contributions to society.

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The MC Changemaking Compelling Conversations Workshops (hereafter referred to as CC) is a changemaking initiative aiming to involve MC's current student body in some of the most pressing social issues. The workshops commenced with action research cycles, which provided direct feedback from student participants to enhance the workshop experience. The participants expressed a preference for student leaders to facilitate the workshops themselves, to increase their comfort while discussing social issues. Consequently, this led to significant process modifications and as a result, my research focus expanded beyond the CC student changemaking workshops to examine the notable roles of social action leadership that emerged.

The World Café was selected as the facilitation dialogic method for the CC workshop due to its structured yet accessible framework and its capacity to foster inclusive participatory engagement. It effectively engages students in various contexts for multiple purposes, including organizational change, citizen participation, and community development processes. This method is valuable in exploring and extrapolating themes with potential benefits for participants, such as mutual reflective learning and ideation aimed at facilitating change. Additionally, it can accommodate large groups through its semi-structured questions and process (Löhr et al., 2020).

The World Café method is known to elicit the creation of comfortable and safe space to engage in dialogue and requires a timeframe of approximately three hours. Conversations are guided by a facilitator at each table who use selected compelling questions as the framework for an open discussion. Participants rotate tables to discuss a new question with a different facilitator and group. This movement and environment work to “foster collaborative dialogue, active engagement, and constructive possibilities for action” from diverse perspectives (The World Café Community Foundation, 2015, p. 3). During each round of the World Café, participant

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tables systematically record essential insights, questions, and considerations. This structured documentation enables facilitators to collect comprehensive data at the conclusion of each round. The subsequent analysis of these data sets is collaboratively undertaken to identify recurring patterns and actionable insights that may inform future initiatives or interventions (The World Café Community Foundation, 2015).

The generation of compelling conversation topics and as well as specific questions to frame the workshop discussion are created in pre-workshop planning sessions. The structured dialogic design (SDD) method is employed to support this workshop preparation and form a consensus among workshop student facilitators. Once the World Café workshop concludes and all participant information is shared and collected, student facilitators come together around a workshop debrief session where an SDD session is used once more to analyze the data and generate a tool or other form of outcome(s) formulating conditions for future changemaking action. This process was developed by a leading member of the MC Changemaking Team and is designated as the Compelling Conversation Workshop Framework. The term CC was used throughout this research, as student facilitators were involved in all three steps. See Appendix A for an infographic depicting this nuanced process.

The concept of student engagement in changemaking and social action has become increasingly significant in contemporary research, driving my interest in this area of study. My objective was to collaborate with the MC Changemaking Team and involve students in conducting rigorous and meaningful research in this field. Given that changemaking is led by individuals who actively seek to create change through questioning, disrupting, and engaging with others, my intention was to analyze the unique role of student leadership in this formed

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process and examine the factors that motivate students to become engaged leaders in future changemaking initiatives. Furthermore, I aimed to understand the overall student perception of the CC workshop experience and investigate what participating student leaders believed they gained from a unique facilitation leadership role.

### **Significance**

Educational organizations regularly explore diverse strategies to enhance student interest and participation in social justice initiatives aiming to engage students in support of greater impact. Examining the role of student leadership in changemaking, both as leaders and mentors to their peers, could prove be beneficial as higher education efforts aim to increase and sustain student involvement in social action initiatives. To date, students are regularly seen as critical participants to influence positive change action (Dougherty & Clark, 2023, Flores & Fierle-Hedrick, 2021) with peer-to-peer engagement often being highlighted (Oddone-Paolucci et al., 2021; Nowell, 2022; Griffiths et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2021). My research takes this further and investigates the possibilities of students leading peer-to-peer changemaking initiatives and strives to uncover the results of these leadership roles and any impact on future student social action engagement.

Providing student leaders with empowering roles can aid them to recognize the value of shared perspectives and deep reflection in addressing social justice issues both now and in the future. It also presents an opportunity to inspire young people to further engage both themselves and their fellow student peers in meaningful changemaking. Using dialogical tools can additionally illuminate student civic engagement strategies (Schwittay, 2023; Van Balen et al.,

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2022; Owen, 2016). While dialogue and student involvement are important for sustainable social action, combining them into a reflective process to guide peers in becoming architects of their own realities is a technique that offers interesting potential consideration. This thesis attempts to shed light on these gaps in the literature and to illuminate the need for education to offer impactful training to student leaders, allowing them autonomy and authority to actively propagate sustainable student leadership in changemaking for their communities and beyond. The current study also contributes to emerging literature by exploring ways in which dialogical reflection practices can serve as a critical pedagogy tool for enhancing student motivation and engagement in changemaking initiatives.

### **Reflection**

My professional journey in education has been characterized by a commitment to equity, cross-cultural understanding, and the transformative potential of global learning and citizenship. Over the past three decades, I have occupied a wide variety of roles in postsecondary education across several countries, ultimately culminating in my current position as Dean of International Education and Development at a publicly funded Canadian college. In this capacity, I spearhead strategic global initiatives to engage the MC community in a variety of global projects and endeavors, while supporting the academic and social integration of international students.

My interest in international education was sparked by an early fascination with human geography. During my formative years, I pursued pen pals, hosted exchange students, and later assumed a wide range of roles in overseas educational institutions and projects, ranging from teaching to program development, strategic planning and administration. These experiences

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provided me with firsthand insight into the structural challenges impacting access to education globally. Such encounters deepened my interest in global citizenship and paved the way for my transition into leadership positions focused on global engagement programs, projects, and initiatives. As a Dean, I endeavor to align and balance internationalization strategies with institutional commitments of diversity, equity, and inclusion. I have also strived to reconcile economic and ethical imperatives to ensure all students experience a genuine sense of belonging and opportunity. These challenges have driven my doctoral inquiry into the intersection of global education and social justice.

My research is both professionally and personally motivated: I aim to generate knowledge that can inform more equitable and inclusive international education strategies at institutional and policy levels, serving the needs of current and future students. This scholarly endeavor is not a departure from my professional work but rather an extension of it—rooted in a desire to lead with integrity, contribute to decolonial and anti-oppressive frameworks in higher education, and reimagine global education through a justice-oriented lens.

Conducting interviews with students and analyzing the related data has enabled me to expand my understanding of the experiences and perspectives of post-secondary student leaders in changemaking initiatives. The reflections shared during the workshop facilitation were particularly relevant and noteworthy. Although my recent work environment involves observing student leaders on international initiatives, being actively engaged in witnessing a broader peer-to-peer leadership experience has allowed me to gain insight into unique cross-institutional opportunities for student changemaking leadership. I have valued observing the significant

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impact of the CC workshops on student development and recognize that the process of data collection and analysis has contributed to my own personal and professional growth.

Throughout my academic career, I have consistently and increasingly valued the perspectives of students, and I am dedicated to integrating their input and recommendations into my professional practices. Nevertheless, identifying student leadership as a pivotal factor for substantive change has been motivating, compelling me to share these insights and pursue further research in this area. Subsequently, the research process highlighted the advantage beyond my established preference to champion student contributions and insight towards enhancing support for student empowerment, to ensure the depth of student contributions and influence can be realized.

My research findings have influenced my professional practice by enabling me to incorporate strategies that support students as critical leaders in broader changemaking initiatives through a more structured approach. I am confident in discussing the potential impacts student leaders can have on their peers through student-led changemaking leadership roles and I am prepared to share new perspectives in this regard. I have felt motivated to persevere through the rigorous process of documenting my PhD findings to distribute their reflective stories and to honor student voices.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study aims to provide comprehensive insights into the benefits student leadership roles offer in enhancing overall student engagement in changemaking initiatives. The thesis is

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systematically structured into six chapters, commencing with the introductory chapter that delineates the purpose and contextual background of the research. Chapter Two contains an extensive review of literature pertinent to student engagement in social action, with a particular focus on educational changemaking initiatives. Chapter Three elaborates on the methodology employed in conducting the study, including the rationale behind participant selection, data collection, and analysis processes. This chapter also explains the qualitative methodology used to afford student leaders the opportunity to convey their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study through the analysis and synthesis of interview data. Chapter Five discusses the outcomes of the analysis in relation to relevant literature and outlines the results specific to student engagement through meaningful reflection and sense of purpose towards effective change agency. The final chapter addresses the contributions of the study, proposes areas for future research, and considers implications for practice across various levels of the system, along with concluding remarks.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the literature review on student roles in changemaking and related social action educational initiatives. It begins by outlining key terms aligned to changemaking concepts and moves into relevant literature as it relates to student involvement in this space. Next, topics around the advantages of students in social action and who students are in today's civic educational sphere will be explored. Lastly, the chapter will move to uncover literature related to new and developing types of student leadership and the evolving role of students in the changemaking leadership space.

In support of this literature review I searched through a wide variety of data sources to identify articles and books published regarding student social action in education and more specifically, student civic or changemaking education initiatives. A broad spectrum of literature surrounding the topic of student roles in changemaking was studied, including literature on critical pedagogy, transformative learning, student empowerment, leadership, critical hope, subjectification, co-construction of curriculum, social innovation, civic education as well literature identifying students as agents of change in areas such as community-based and service-based learning.

The current literature related to changemaking, along with other social action student movements, tends to focus on what educational leaders can do to support success in these endeavors and less so on the role of students themselves. Therefore, in this chapter I aim to

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explore how literature characterizes the various roles of students across changemaking and other educational social action initiatives, while offering a sense of tension towards an evolving lens of understanding and enhancing students' leadership roles within environments of social change action.

### **Terms and Definitions**

I have chosen to use the terms “student” and “educators throughout this study. Although much of the related literature identifies students as youth or young people, I have chosen to avoid these terms understanding that a portion of students today are often adults. This thesis will alternate between the terms ‘social change,’ social action’ and ‘changemaking’ will collectively refer to activities and strategies addressing social justice issues. According to Snyder and Omoto (2007), social action encompasses all activities conducted to benefit themselves and the greater community that someone is a member of. Similarly, changemaking action is known in literature as “the process of creating a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, and more just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society rather than to private individuals” (Wells & Schindler, 2022, p. 2). These terms are aligned in their approach within educational settings.

Moreover, it is important to note how closely tied the term ‘changemaking’ is to the term ‘social innovation’. As the two definitions overlap with one another, they are often used synonymously across literature. For example, Mayson (2021) describes changemakers as those who desire change in the world and find meaning in “using their agency (knowledge and resources) in tangible action towards intended transformative social innovation” (p. 23). Social

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'change leadership' as well as 'changemaking leadership' will also be used interchangeably in this thesis with both incorporating a mindset acknowledging the need to envision, enable, and ensure that every participant acts as an initiator and understands the broader context in a continuously changing world (Wells & Schindler, 2022, p. 2).

Finally, throughout this chapter, I use the terms 'social movements' and 'grassroots movements' interchangeably, as both represent powerful forms of collective action. While this paper acknowledges variations in their scale and origin, the primary focus remains on students' motivations and their potential future engagement.

### **Student Social Action Involvement**

There is growing interest regarding student agency, student civic participation, activism, and citizenship across a spectrum of sectors (Pickard, 2019; Harris et al., 2023; Wood, 2024). An intriguing body of literature more precisely considers the position for student social action and civic engagement within education (Richards-Schuster & Aldana, 2013). It is understood among social justice educators that supporting student involvement in social or civic engagement is critical to activate positive social change in a rapidly changing world (Grimm et al., 2024; Dassonneville et al., 2012) and to "build and advance a democratic culture" (Akin et al., 2017, p. 810). It is important to include students in policy making and in other realms of power of decision making, as these outcomes will affect their futures (Grimm et al., 2024). As it stands, higher education is challenged to "prepare citizens to work toward solutions of our current ecological and sustainability crises" (Bowling, 2011, p. 53) and supports an increased need to

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foster new ways of cooperation and power sharing in support of more equitable futures. Student experiences play a critical role in developing an informed citizenry for democratic participation (Dassonneville et al., 2012; Kisby & Sloam, 2014).

Educators and institutions recommend an array of potential approaches to activate students as changemakers including what Kim and Krampetz (2016) suggest as the use of “civic engagement, service-learning, social innovation, and philanthropy” (Nagda & Roper, 2019, p. 123). Student civic engagement involves skills, values, knowledge, and behaviors related to community and politics (Wray-Lake et al., 2017; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024). Literature specific to student civic engagement “identifies many ways that young people are civically engaged to improve communities and society” (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024, p. 3).

Education can influence students through various aspects such as values, goals, attitudes, moral and civic identity, political efficacy, moral and civic emotions, and civic or political skills. These factors serve as motivators for student moral and civic responsibility (Colby et al., 2003, as cited by Bowling, 2011, p. 57). Therefore, when education enables student democratic development, they are in fact aiding in preparing students for active participation in democratic life (Dassonneville et al., 2012; Kisby & Sloam, 2014). Literature such as Marzana, Marta, and Pozzi's 2012 article *Social Action in Young Adults* highlights the significant benefits of social engagement for both students and communities and refers to service-learning projects aiding students to develop problem-solving skills while promoting sustainable changemaking for their local and global communities.

Student-led social movements and grassroots leadership have historically been crucial for advocating for systemic and institutional change (Mars, 2009). Whether through environmental

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activism, labor rights advocacy, or multicultural initiatives, students have continuously challenged entrenched systems of power structures within their communities. Important for both changemaking and other social action initiatives, is that students in higher education, have been known to often push for more radical, systemic and political changes (Dougherty & Clarke, 2018; Ho et al., 2015). The enthusiasm of youth helps advance social change by challenging boundaries (Dougherty, 2004). The recognition that individuals learn societal values and form civic and social identities during their youth makes the study of social action during this period relevant and significant (Youniss & Yates, 1997).

### **Students' Roles in Changemaking**

Although the concept of changemaking and changemakers has been gaining popularity for the past few decades (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013), it remains a somewhat ambiguous term, making it relatively uncommon across academic literature (Mayson, 2021, p. 33). Aptly noted by Alexandrowicz (2021), there is a strong alignment between changemaking skills and twenty-first century skills. It is believed by the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning that education must enable learning beyond traditional forms of education in the forms of reading, writing and arithmetic, to also develop students' key abilities and competencies in areas of learning and innovation skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication); digital literacy skills (information, media and technology literacy); and life and career skills (flexibility, initiative, cultural competency, accountability, leadership) (Alexandrowicz, 2021).

Rivers, Armellini, and Nie (2015) articulated the changemaker attributes to include “self-confidence, perseverance, internal locus of control, self-awareness, action orientation, creativity, critical thinking, reflection, communication, emotional and social intelligence, problem solving,

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leadership, value driven, and empathy” (as cited in (Alexandrowicz, 2021, p. 108). According to Alexandrowicz (2021), the differentiation changemaking skills offers is the empowerment to take action to improve society by interacting with kindness and respect, to overcome challenges and lead initiatives, “Changemakers do something about what hurts their hearts, are aware of other people’s feelings, they notice others and are intentional about understanding others’ perspectives” (p. 109). Raza, Kahn and Jakel (2017) summarize the following related abilities:

(1) Initiative ; (2) Serve people from diverse backgrounds; (3) Imagine and bring future in their hands; (4) Choose between good and bad; (5) Innovate new ideas that can save time and resources; (6) Adapt to improve their lives; (7) Express ways to combat discrimination and injustice; (8) Inspire others with thoughts and actions; (9) Collaborate towards common goals through sharing responsibility, authority and accountability; (10) Genuinely help others and pay attention to their needs; (11) Appreciate others, strengthen relationships and improve teamwork; and, (12) Empathize.

The role of students within changemaking in education has been nuanced. Students are both the recipients of innovative and experimental educational paradigms with the goal to enhance changemaking attributes and opportunities, as well as the initiators of changemaking projects, dialogue, and relationships. Students are known to also play a role in driving changemaking and social action through their passion and persistence in fighting for change that is personal and applicable to their futures (Rivers et al., 2015). The themes of civic agency and civic engagement are closely connected (Nachtigal et al., 2024). Furthermore, Rivers, Armellini and Nie (2015) align changemaker principles with the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency's definition of sustainable development education, which consists of processes that equip students

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with the “knowledge and understanding, skills and attributes needed to work and live in a way that safeguards environmental, social and economic well-being, both in the present and for future generation” (Rivers et al., 2015, p. 3).

Both online and in-person, students offer a plethora of valued insights and fresh perspectives on societal issues (Cook-Sather, 2010; Khan et al., 2023). After all, analyzing social issues from the lens of students is a critical practice to do when it is their future at stake. Literature clearly indicates the vital importance of authentic student involvement within social education approaches such as changemaking (Astin & Astin, 2000). Ultimately, student input is known to be foundational when considering creative solutions for positive impact (Atkins et al., 2020; Benz et al., 2020; Bates et al., 2019; Fallender & Brooks, 2022; Ho et al., 2015; Nemoy et al., 2018; Hurley et al., 2022).

The literature notes several significant areas where students bring unique value to changemaking and social action initiatives. Peer influence is a key factor. For example, student participation influences and encourages others from within peer groups to become engaged and can then support the expansion of positive social momentum. Students are more likely to engage in community activities if they are participants in student groups, particularly when invited by friends, or other consequential people (Marta & Scabini, 2003 cited in Marzana et al., 2012).

Overall, students connect meaningfully with other students by being more relatable to each other, (Howland Cummings et al 2023) as their perspectives and mindsets are often better aligned due to generational similarities (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Dugan and Komives (2010) observed that group belonging significantly influences social change outcomes, such as collaboration and common purpose, as noted by Barnes (2014, p. 24). A study by Youniss,

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McLellan and Mazer (2001) identified that students in peer groups that prioritize school-endorsed activities are more likely to engage in civic participation than those in groups that emphasize non-school activities (Jahromi et al., 2012). Their development of civic agency equips students for active participation in democratic processes, ensuring that their impact reaches beyond academic institutions.

As new generations favor digital media technologies for social connectivity and networking, a technologically influenced approach towards student civic engagement is now essential (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). Researchers focusing on student citizenship have acknowledged alternative spaces for young people’s participation in society, such as online and digital environments where they can easily connect regarding social interests (Black et al., 2022; Vromen et al., 2014; Wood, 2024). Digital technologies are enabling information to spread at an unprecedented pace and reach, mingling cultural and political identities. Through the investigation of student citizenship practices within digital media, educators can gain insight into how they assert their roles as citizens in interconnected global spaces of responsibility and belonging. This understanding can help develop student-centered approaches to participatory and collective actions in support of democracy (Harris et al., 2022).

Social media has “emerged as a new type of civic space” and many social movements led by students involve the heavy utilization of social media platforms (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024, p. 2). Collaborative learning further reinforces this by encouraging peer engagement, self-assessment, and shared responsibility, aligning with student-centered learning models (Jacobs et al., 2022). Creative forms of online social action can easily expand the impact from the local to the global audiences (Wood & Kallio, 2020). Furthermore, digital social engagement supports

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students to function independently as content creators, developing autonomy, which is an essential trait of changemakers.

Student digital making integrates technology with subject matter knowledge, enabling students to share learning experiences through active problem-solving and co-creation (Whewell et al., 2023, p. 6701). Further to this, digital making cultivates cultural competence, digital literacy, and changemaker identity, fostering a culture of collaboration and communication. Others raise concerns regarding the use of technology as a student engagement catalyst in global development stating it “presents a dual edged narrative” (Grimm et al., 2024, p. 10). While technology can empower students through education, participation and activism, without inclusive and responsible policies, it can result in vulnerabilities in the areas of cybersecurity, unwarranted consumption and the digital divide (Grimm et al., 2024).

Media and communication for development and social change (hereafter referred to as MCDSC) is a growing field that promotes social capitalism through philanthropic entrepreneurs who contribute to “national building and social justice through their creativity and value generation” (Noske-Turner, 2023, p. 2946). An example of a movement mobilizing for a goal for 2.5 million student changemakers is ‘Restless Development’. This organization aims to use the engagement and mobilization of communities to center around student engagement and ties entrepreneurial influences with communication, local organizing and engagement processes (Noske-Turner, 2023). Social media and other user generated content media outlets allow media to be utilized to build communities of changemakers who can create inclusive ‘collectively owned’ spaces. Leadership within MCDSC, is identified by those who can mobilize and persuade or inspire others through their trust, connections, relationships and charisma” which

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highlights the importance of leadership skills encouraging engagement and motivation within changemaking (Noske-Turner, 2023, p. 2952).

### **Student Social Action Motivation and Critical Hope**

There is acknowledgement of the significance of building mutual trust and respectful relationships with students to enhance comfort, equity as well as heighten motivation for more effective social change (Cook-Sather, 2010; Gollifer, 2022; Iwasaki et al., 2014). Kelly's (2009) article explores the impact of trust in relation to student participation and its connection to social impact, indicating social trust promotes civic participation which reinforces social trust (Kwak et al., 2004).

The literature suggests educators in support of educational social action efforts should frequently revisit social justice goals while acknowledging and constructively embracing student perspectives, which can often differ from their own (Cook-Sather, 2010). "Without student perspectives, educators have only theories. By accessing their perspectives, educators afford themselves an opportunity to learn from and with students" (Cook-Sather, 2010, p. 43). Furthermore, by identifying variables such as confidence and competence, that influence student conceptualization and choice toward specific civic engagement actions, it is plausible to address these factors to promote and encourage sustained social action among young people (Sherrod, 2007).

Connecting student's bold ideas with decision-making power allows for unique and effective solutions to target complex social justice challenges (Ho et al., 2015). However,

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fostering student long-term commitment and engagement in social issues is where many organizations and student initiatives fall short (Dougherty, 2010). Burkhard (2007) explains how the current generation of students are often “disconnected from traditional political institutions where decision-making takes place” (Clarke & Dougherty, 2010, p. 8) which can lead to apathy and the need to find alternative student engagement strategies (Howell, 2024).

Citizenship education is multifaceted with various factors influencing student values, attitudes, and political behavior patterns. Considering these complexities and potential impacts, student political disengagement remains a concerning issue to address (Pontes et al., 2019). Several authors highlight the importance of “cultivating and sustaining critical hope as a key skill for leadership grounded in social change” (Bishundat et al., 2018, p. 96). After all, to learn to contend with ever prevalent global uncertainty, particularly with complex social justice issues, one must work “with the presumption of one’s equality to make meaning” and this offers “a conduit into possibilities of broader political subjectification” (Kirby & Well, 2021, p. 142). Marzana and colleagues note that “Self-determination also plays its role: having a well-structured self-concept suitably adapted to one’s life context facilitates involvement in voluntary and/or political activities” (2012, p. 499).

Although leadership education advocates for student involvement in social action, educational institutions have been known to resist and at times can go as far as silencing initiatives or using punishment as a response to student active participation (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Dugan & Humbles, 2018). The rhetoric of citizenship education endorses student participation, yet students continue to struggle to be recognized as having valued perspectives (Wood, 2024). Traditional student involvement opportunities can appear as a form of tokenism,

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or manipulation when the real decisions continue to be made by educators alone (Dougherty, 2004).

Efforts to include student voices can fail if students are not genuinely considered or involved in the change process. Careless or disorganized consultations can appear from an outside lens as though those asking the questions are listening. However, when input is ultimately ignored, or student perspectives are simply added onto adult views, student consultations may threaten to undermine social justice work (Cook-Sather, 2010). Grimm and colleagues (2024) agree with such concerns and believe despite the recent increasing enthusiasm among young activists for sustainability and climate change, student meaningful engagement is often impeded by several challenges, including insufficient preparation and training, sporadic involvement, fragmented platforms, tokenistic practices, exclusion of marginalized groups, and inadequate funding.

Students are cognizant of the gap between values of leadership education taught and the actual outcomes and roles (Dugan & Humbles, 2018), and observe when practices do not match the rhetoric, making it unsurprising when educators notice an increasingly disengaged student population. Howell (2024) reflects on Bandura's 1995 book *Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies*, noting that the feeling of "being unable to effect change in adverse circumstances has been shown to generate feelings of apprehension, apathy and despair" (p. 2) which are noted as enemies of student hope (Bishundat et al., 2018). Additionally, "Losing hope causes us to become stagnant, decreases our efficacy to engage in leadership, takes away our sense of agency to act as leaders, and widens the gap between espoused and actualized values" (Bishundat et al., 2018, p. 94).

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Schwittay (2023) indicates hope is intrinsic for critical-creative pedagogy and is required for students to address past injustices, engage with current challenges, and be future-oriented for transformative action. “Achieving this in today's classrooms is challenging, but we can tackle obstacles through pedagogical prefiguration” (p. 12). Overall, educators play a vital role in combating obstacles of critical hope by fostering connectivity and empowerment associated with social change leadership (Bishundat et al., 2018). It is therefore imperative for educational initiatives to cultivate optimum environments that actively foster critical hope, enabling students to envision alternative futures they can meaningfully contribute to (Schwittay, 2023). When students recognize their potential and connect their aspirations to ideal future scenarios, they are better positioned to maintain commitment in pursuit of their future goals (Snow, 2020).

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical pedagogy centers on analyzing the relationship between power and knowledge within educational contexts. Rather than viewing education as “banking education” (Freire, 1970), where information is deposited into students, this approach positions learning as a transformative tool capable of driving social change. It encourages both students and educators to critically examine established power structures and conventional curricula, cultivating educational environments that value diverse perspectives and experiences (McLaren, 2009). As such, it serves as an effective framework in support of positive student changemaking initiatives.

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A core principle of critical pedagogy is its adoption of problem-posing education, which allows students to recognize systemic and power imbalances (Freire, 1970). This method proves highly effective in advancing social action learning by encouraging the development of emancipatory knowledge that equips individuals to effect meaningful transformation and seek constructive solutions. As McLaren (2009) notes, emancipatory knowledge underpins social justice, equality, and empowerment (p. 78), as it exposes the influence of power and privilege on social relations and seeks to confront oppression through collective efforts.

Central to this process is the cultivation of critical consciousness, a concept first articulated by Paulo Freire. Critical consciousness involves developing an acute awareness of social, political, and economic contradictions, enabling learners to question and challenge oppressive structures (Schwittay, 2023). Through dialogue and reflection, critical pedagogy promotes deep examination, aiding students to not only understand inequity but also recognize their capacity to act against it. Facilitating student empowerment consequently means nurturing critical consciousness and supporting students as they move from passive recipients of knowledge to active agents of change (McLaren, 2009).

Critical consciousness occurrences in educational setting are pertinent in helping students deconstruct experience and reflect on this constructively to inform individual or collaborative future action. These instances foster cooperative peer learning grounded in open and frank discussions, where power is actively redistributed. By engaging in such experiences, learners not only examine their own involvements but also participate in collective reflection, which is essential for deep learning and transformative action (Deeley, 2022). This process aligns with the praxis of critical pedagogy, where critical thought and critical action come together to guide

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meaningful change. The values underpinning critical pedagogy, such as democracy, community, and experimentation rooted in real-world contexts, are inherently present within the practice of social action including changemaking, community and service-learning, further reinforcing the importance of experiential and collaborative approaches in education (Deeley, 2022).

Critical hope, alongside critical consciousness, underpins the transformative goals of critical pedagogy by motivating social action. Unlike mere optimism, critical hope involves a dedicated pursuit of justice and equity despite challenges (Bishundat et al., 2018). This perspective affirms that collaborative action can initiate meaningful change within educational settings. Educators can play an important role in fostering critical awareness and optimism to then empower students to confront injustice and maintain motivation toward positive transformation (Schwittay, 2023).

Building on these foundations, critical pedagogy advocates for an educational process that interrogates not only how knowledge is constructed but also how it relates to the lived realities of students. It encourages students to question portrayals that might marginalize, misrepresent or exclude their perspectives (McLaren, 2009). In this context, educators are responsible for fostering learning spaces where knowledge becomes a means for students to engage with issues directly impacting their lives. This approach moves beyond conventional notions of human capital, embracing a broader vision of emancipation and self-determination (McLaren, 2009) to action and thrive in democracy of choice (Biesta, 2020). When students are provided with opportunities to engage in addressing social challenges relevant to their lives, they can cultivate critical awareness and a sense of optimism. As a result, education plays a crucial

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role in helping students become active participants who can make valuable contributions to improving society.

Critical pedagogy empowers students as agents of change, linking personal growth to collective action. The research highlights how concepts like critical consciousness, hope, and the rejection of banking education shape both analysis and interpretation of student experiences.

By foregrounding these principles, the research demonstrates how critical pedagogy informs application within educational settings, shaping the ways students engage with and respond to social challenges. This orientation not only guides the interpretation of student narratives but also provides a coherent theory for examining transformative learning processes and changemaking initiatives. In doing so, the study underscores the dynamic interplay between critical reflection, empowered agency, and collective efforts, illustrating how educational spaces can nurture the development of skills and dispositions essential for participatory social action and meaningful societal impact.

### **Student Reflective Dialogue for Social Action**

Academic literature underscores the growing need for critical reflection in educational social initiatives (Heberle et al., 2020; Owen, 2016; Wilner et al., 2012). Studies advocate for students to engage in reflection through actively sharing their perspectives on social themed issues (Nagda & Roper, 2019; Schwittay, 2023) as well as for educational practices to support students' reflection on concepts of social justice while making these tangible within their own

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context (Henderson & Kline, 2014). Schön's (1983) theory of reflective practice is defined as "the ability to focus on beliefs and values that inform an individual's actions" (Henderson & Kline, 2014, p. 61). Within academic environments, a focus on moral reasoning through reflection practice and orientated through social justice, can offer students the opportunity to "inform further action" (Henderson & Kline, 2014, p. 61).

Students benefit from open dialogue practices that foster deep reflection to work through the complex realities of social concerns (Van der Zee, 2022; Van Balen et al., 2022; Schwittay, 2023). Dialogic practices where students connect through reflection, inquiry, and deep listening while suspending judgments, or identifying assumptions, can be considered an "exercise of self-leadership so as to heal and build resiliency for social change work" (Nagda & Roper, 2019, p. 127). When students are asked to address pressing social concerns, it is important they embrace the uncertainties to be able to discover new possibilities (Cederquist & Golüke, 2016). In using the design thinking model, it has been found that when students share their perspectives and consider multiple potential future outcomes, they are able to reflect on the importance of co-creation and co-learning (Whelwell et al., 2022).

Faculty can guide reflection on individual student learning by posing pertinent problems to solve (Whelwell et al., 2022). Problem solving methods also encourage the use of imagination, which helps to avoid ideological thinking where the student must match a predetermined solution to the posed question (Schwittay, 2023). Such reflective approaches are promoted by Freire (1970) as key elements to unearth and fight oppression, as praxis requires educators to interrogate students to reflect on their assumptions, power dynamics while considering alternative perspectives to change the world (Owen, 2016; Schwittay, 2023). When the mental

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constructs that keep the oppression hidden from the oppressed are broken, critical dialogue can work to recognize, de-construct and overcome oppressive limits (Rosenberger & O'Grady, 2000).

Transformative Learning Theory underscores the vital importance of reflective dialogue in education, not only for critically examining and revising expectations, but also for empowering students to engage in informed action. Reflection serves as a conduit between past experiences and present understanding, allowing individuals to examine how their frames of reference, shaped by community, family, and culture, influence their perceptions and decisions. By engaging deeply in reflective conversation, students are better equipped to consider diverse perspectives, assess their validity, and recognize opportunities for meaningful participation in changemaking. This process is pivotal for fostering critical awareness and agency, enabling students to move beyond passive acceptance and actively participate in shaping a more just and equitable society (Cranton, 2006). Mezirow (2003), describes Transformative Learning as:

“learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (p. 58-59)

Critical reflection within educational contexts focused on changemaking entails thoroughly evaluating established perspectives on an issue, with the goal of constructing alternative frameworks that enable more successful solutions. Authors such as Mezirow (1990) emphasize that both critical reflection and self-reflection are essential to transformative learning,

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particularly in fostering social action. Through a process of questioning the root causes of societal issues, students are encouraged to reevaluate their “habitual expectations, revise them, and act on the revised point of view “(Cranton, 2006, p. 15). By closely examining their beliefs and assumptions about themselves and the world, students not only reshape their personal perspectives but also become motivated to take collective action. This awareness helps them recognize the social influences on their experiences and understand the wider context where change is possible.

Transformation learning is increasingly understood as a holistic process involving both internal changes where individuals develop new perspectives and review external reflection on the social structures and contexts that influence lived experiences (Cranton, 2006). This comprehensive approach empowers learners to participate actively in initiatives that advance social justice and equity, emphasizing education’s essential role as a catalyst for meaningful societal change.

While Transformational Learning has occasionally been critiqued for insufficient emphasis on social change, its reliance on discourse and reflection provides a strong foundation for fostering critical, reflective student dialogue within the context of changemaking. It serves as a foundational lens for analyzing student narratives and experiences, not only through critical examinations but also through the dynamic process of social engagement and perspective sharing, linking it to the significance of analyzing collaborative peer changemaking within educational contexts. Furthermore, it permits an exploration of how reflective student-led peer conversations encourage empowerment and agency, underscoring the link between student leadership growth and collective social change.

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Changemaking literature shares the aim of critical pedagogies to guide students towards a more socially just world by using reflective discourse, alongside the values of, reason, freedom, and equality to transform realities within a democratic framework (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2010; Toivonen, 2013; Noske-Turner, 2023; Gollifer, 2022; Gardner & Crockwell, 2006; Brown, 2012). When students are asked to address pressing social concerns, it is important they embrace uncertainties, rethink their beliefs as well as the existing order of the situation to discover new possibilities. Moreover, when dialogue is used to support curriculum, students can learn with – rather than from – others which can result in the enablement of respect for unique ways of thinking and openness towards a variety of perspectives (Gollifer, 2022). According to Whewell and colleagues (2022), when taken a step further and allowing for reflective engagement of students’ own learning, as well as how others learn, this process has demonstrated to build empathy in the evaluation of others. If reflective educational initiatives are exposed to collaborative conditions, “changemaker attributes such as empathy and reflexivity could flourish” (Whewell et al., 2022, p. 6705). Conscious empathy is important to benefit the greater good; it allows one to recognize and understand their own, and other, perspectives and to identify patterns over time to make impactful and clear decisions (Wells & Schindler, 2022).

A recent Changemaking report by Dougherty and Clarke (2023) supports the need for trusting relationships in support of reflective dialogue that could involve discomfort and ambiguity, elements often required to discover innovative solutions. Owen (2016) concurs, suggesting the use of dialogue and critical reflective activities as a “springboard for action” (p. 45a) and corroborates the opportunity for student-driven innovative solutions by expanding perspectives beyond a student’s comfort zone; challenging ways of thinking and linking their experiences to new cognitive ways of knowing.

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Reflective thinking facilitated by student leaders has been shown to help develop innovative solutions with diverse student perspectives. It also highlights the complexity of current and future social realities by ensuring various student perspectives are shared openly. Research on changemaking emphasizes the need to rethink leadership through meaningful and reflective dialogue, as it plays a role in cultivating justice (Nagda & Roper, 2019).

### **From Faculty Led to Student Centered Opportunities**

A review of social engagement and changemaking literature demonstrates that adult-led student engagement and social justice organizing remains the prevailing method (Cook-Sather, 2010; Clarke & Dougherty, 2010). Existing studies predominantly portray structured faculty or adult facilitated peer mentorship programs, rather than those organically derived through the input of students. For example, reflective dialogical learning in contemporary education ultimately remains directed by educators (Schwittay, 2023) as does peer mentorship programs (Oddone-Paolucci et al., 2021; Nowell, 2022 Lorenzette et al., 2019; Lyon et al., 2022).

Rather than naturally derived by students, it is the educators who remain dedicated leaders in support of “developing the skills, mindsets, and dispositions to work on social justice related events and campaigns aimed at undoing oppressive systems that frame student’s social worlds” (Carey et al., 2021, p. 942). Following tradition, educational leaders create and lead the changemaking opportunities they perceive as best for students to engage in (Bordas, 2016; Nagda & Roper, 2019). Literature continues to encourage educators to be open to making positive changes first and then pass this shifting mindset onto their students (Van der Zee, 2022).

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For example, negotiating curriculum allows students to practice, experience, and develop the skills needed for democratic citizenship (Bron et al., 2016).

Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) assert that student engagement and faculty development began to overlap, both having been widely understood as critical on their own merit, researched the key components of belongingness by Hagerty et al (1992/1993) and Asher and Weeks (2014) and synthesized two factors. The primary consideration involves cultivating a sense of meaningful involvement, wherein individuals are recognized as integral members of the environment and their contributions are regarded as essential. Additionally, it is important to ensure that participants perceive a sense of belonging within the space, such as identifying shared characteristics or values with the broader community or system (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017).

A study by Heriot and colleagues (2008) showcases a particular course designed by teachers to develop students as agents of organizational change. Student projects were used as the basis for an active learning pedagogy for problem solving; however, the course was designed by educational leaders. Coleman (2018) and Rivers, Armellini, and Nie (2015) emphasize how faculty integrating social entrepreneurship into curricula assists students mobilize their skills and resources for societal betterment creating program aligning with the concept of transformational creativity, which prioritizes collective welfare, ethical values, and long-term impact (Desmet, 2024).

To ultimately equip students with skills, tools and confidence needed for changemaking, educators often deem their role to be one of a leader, mentor and or guidance provider while engaging students (Shakesprere et al., 2020; Brown, 2012). However, it is shared that trust

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should be built in dialogic processes while facilitating a safe space and offering clear guidelines and timeframes fostering growth as participants feel “freer and more confident to raise difficult questions, challenge each other” (Zúñiga et al., 2007, p. 14). Authors such as Blanchet-Cohen and Torres (2023) suggest student-centered methods to improve student engagement such as meeting them in their own spaces to be more inclusive and fostering self-expression, as well as or creating more welcoming environments through room setup, verbal and body language. Recognizing students for their expertise is also key to truly engaging them in decision making. Similar to other social action education efforts, changemaking flourishes in settings that empower through student voice, choice, and skills to enhance learning and human experience (Coleman, 2018).

Gert Biesta’s concept of subjectification not only emphasizes the freedom to act but also retrofits the student and teacher relationship through “relational approaches dependent on dialogic pedagogy” (Gollifer, 2022, p. 16). Such learning models are a priority as they consider students’ emotions and motivations and drive collaborative learning, while focusing on enhancing the ‘welfare of others’ (Jacobs et al., 2022, p. 114). Nachtigal, Zetlin, and Shen (2024) emphasize that embedding social-emotional learning (SEL) in civic education strengthens students' capacity to critically engage with political systems and develop a self-narrative as changemakers.

Over the years there has been heightened advocacy for the reduction of teacher involvement in favour of increased student engagement (Van Balen et al., 2022). Educational policies and practices, strategies to achieve social justice within the classroom continue to be

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“defined and pursued by adults. Education risks missing the perspectives of those most directly affected by what educators decide and do: students” (Cook-Sather, 2010, p. 43).

### **Students as Social Action Collaborators (External stakeholders)**

In Marine’s review of Alexandrowicz and Roger’s 2022 edited collection, *International Models of Changemaker Education: Programs, Methods, and Design*, Changemaking education is acknowledged for its vision to navigate rapid and volatile global and complex societal changes. Furthermore, it has been referred to as a “reality-based approach to learning, teaching and human development that positions changemakers to lead collaborative efforts to solve real-world problems” (Marine, 2022, p. 234). Research indicates that intergenerational collaboration supports and enhances social action (Albright et al., 2017; Howell, 2024). Although educators cannot coerce students to engage (Guillemin, 2024) in social action, the incorporation of suitable space and opportunities within educational initiatives can enable student subjectification, allowing students freedom to thrive in a democracy and provide them choice “to act or refrain from action” (Biesta, 2020, p. 92) towards changemaking. Collaborative decision-making and co-creative teaching approaches between students and teachers foster meaningful relationships and enhance student agency and engagement (Bovill, 2019). In pursuit of a more inclusive and ethical approach in higher education, educators can partner with students to support their growth as thoughtful citizens and skilled decision-makers (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017).

Student-adult partnerships are known as an enabling factor in changemaking education and ‘meaningful intergenerational dialogue’ between students and faculty. The equality

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established within student-adult partnerships counters societal perceptions that young people are "emergent becomings – always-unfinished subjects-in-the-making" (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 10). Community programs, for example, are places where students and local residents congregate to work on projects or goals through which they have the potential to form lasting and meaningful relationships centered on a “collective purpose” (Zeldin et al., 2005, p. 2). By involving students in the development of their own learning and changemaking initiatives, societal norms of inequitable power distribution between educators and students begin to be addressed (Howell, 2024).

The “student voice” includes expressing views, participation and influencing decision-making. Students should not only have a voice to be able to speak and express their thoughts and opinions, but they should be given a platform to speak and be listened to. This way they can make a change to their situation by having an active role in decision making and “practice democratic skills in working with others while feeling responsible for the needs and learning of others” (Bron et al., 2016, p. 4).

### **Community-based and Service-based Learning**

Critical pedagogy asserts that service-based and community-based learning initiatives can facilitate the decentralization of authority from faculty, empowering students to assume active roles in addressing community challenges. Through this lens, student agency is foregrounded as students move beyond traditional roles to become engaged as co-creators in their learning helping shape collaborative projects and civic initiatives. This redistribution of authority

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transforms the classroom and community into spaces where democratic participation and collective action are actively practiced.

As students gain experience in negotiating real-world problems and working alongside educators and community partners, they develop critical thinking, leadership, and an understanding of social justice that prepares them to enact meaningful change both inside and outside academic contexts. Such an approach ensures that learning is not merely an academic exercise, but a dynamic process of empowerment and transformation, sustaining a culture of participation, equity, and ongoing social progress.

It is essential to assess and broaden student opportunities to encompass practices of democracy and social justice within public education (Gardner & Crockwell, 2006). When students actively contribute to shaping their learning, they enact democratic principles by engaging as agents of change (Bron et al., 2016). Empowering students with voice and agency and recognizing them as knowledgeable contributors unlocks their potential to become actively engaged in changemaking. Rather than remaining passive recipients, students are inspired to collaborate, address inequities, and challenge dominant structures, positioning themselves as catalysts for meaningful social transformation. Their learning, in this context, becomes a form of social action as it interrogates and dismantles prevailing hegemonic knowledge, creating space for new, more equitable ways of knowing and doing (Gardner & Crockwell, 2006).

By incorporating critical pedagogy, faculty transition from authoritative figures to those who empower students to apply their learning for tangible social change beyond academic boundaries (Howard, 1998; Stokamer, 2011). This approach fosters a collaborative and democratic atmosphere, encouraging students to participate actively in addressing real-world

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challenges and promoting the cultivation of citizenship and leadership skills necessary for social transformation.

Lempert and Briggs (1996) further highlight that this reimagined dynamic between faculty and students is rooted in democratic principles and social action. Rather than relying on passive knowledge absorption, students focused on current social challenges and engage critically and actively in service and community initiatives, cultivating skills and agency essential for advancing social justice. As Stokamer (2011) notes, such experiential, hands-on involvement enables students to become informed, responsible citizens who are “equipped to question and reshape societal structures through collective action” (p. 100). Participation in collaborative tasks facilitates interdependence, cooperation, and effective conflict resolution, all of which support leadership development and democratic education. Moreover, when students are given substantive responsibility in the design and administration of community connected programs, they acquire valuable skills and gain a heightened awareness of political decision-making processes (Stokamer, 2011).

Service-learning distinguishes itself from other experiential learning methods by aiming to benefit both students and the community members they serve. Instead of focusing solely on charitable acts, service-learning cultivates critical awareness and promotes reciprocity by recognizing community partners as co-educators, thereby fostering a more equitable distribution of power (Deeley, 2015). Such partnership models democratize learning, encouraging inclusive participation, and fostering student ownership by supporting collaboration and peer development (Deeley, 2015). Deeley, (2022) suggests “Overall, the values underpinning critical pedagogy can be perceived to be naturally inherent within the practice of service-learning” (p.27) and that

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partnership models in this regard make learning more accessible, promote inclusion, and support collaboration and peer growth (Deeley, 2015).

Additional research also highlights the significance of partnerships between students and external stakeholders for social change overall (Iwasaki et al., 2014; Arminio et al., 2000; Bordas, 2016; Marshall et al., 2021). The incorporation of students into the planning and execution of projects promotes their development as socially responsible individuals. These experiences allow students to act, reflect on their learning, and build self-efficacy, motivating them toward future civic participation (Stokamer, 2011). Community-based approaches often apply knowledge to real-world sustainability issues to enhance social action and learning. At Portland State University, for example, a senior capstone project creates an opportunity for students to solve community problems with peers from different fields. Students develop critical life skills and connect with the local community to create positive changes (Bowling, 2011). “Service-Learning involves a combination of cognitive, affective and practical aspects which are connected and drawn together through critical reflection.” (Deeley, 2010 p. 51).

Critical pedagogy within community-based learning emphasizes service as a means for social change. The aim is to create a space for dialogue regarding privilege, difference, and recognize systems of oppression to empower students to challenge existing structures which cause or perpetuate systemic inequalities (Stokamer, 2011). Faculty can guide students on Freire’s (1970) concept of liberation through praxis of reflection and action to enact social change. The social change perspective in community-based learning ensures the connection between reflection leading to action through community service (Merrifield, 2001, as cited in Stokamer, 2011, p. 22).

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Similarly, within educational service-based learning, a collaborative approach nurtures students to develop political awareness, prompting them to question systemic causes of inequity rather than merely addressing its symptoms. According to Deeley (2015), the purpose of service-learning from a social justice perspective encompasses fostering a deeper understanding of the root causes of social issues. Through critical service-learning opportunities students are encouraged to reflect upon their own privilege and social position, which is essential for the development of critical consciousness and agency, qualities that are vital for transforming society and advancing social justice (Deeley, 2015).

Collier and Williams (2005) refer to Dewey as “one of the first educators to recognize the importance of reflection in the educational process” and that “it is through reflection that people come to understand their experiences”. (Bowling, 2011, p. 56). Viewed through the lens of social justice, students acquire the capacity to systematically analyze social structures and power dynamics, thereby cultivating a sustained commitment to advancing a more just and equitable society (Stokamer, 2011) while working towards positive changemaking.

Critical reflection serves as an essential link between educational theory and practice (Deeley, 2015). This process enables students to develop attributes such as empathy, collaborative leadership, and effective communication, while also encouraging them to critically examine their own biases and social values. In service-learning contexts, reflective practice is particularly significant, as it allows students to assess the influence of their personal backgrounds and societal structures on issues related to inequality (Deeley, 2010). This reflective practice enables learning to become a “transformative experience, challenging students’ preconceived

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notions and engaging them with social justice issues in a meaningful and impactful way.”

(Deeley, 2015, p. 72).

### **Peer-to-Peer Collaboration and Mentorship**

Student peer-to-peer collaboration is noted as beneficial for social action initiatives (Oddone-Paolucci et al., 2021; Nowell, 2022; Griffiths et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2021), as it generates collaborative solutions, and develops social relationships to maintain motivation in support of long-term continuity. Research advocates for increased student interaction (Van Balen et al., 2022) and mentions peer collaboration in both agency frameworks and leadership models (Komives, 2005; Komives et al., 2011).

Higher Education student peer mentorship programs have been applauded as beneficial, demonstrating positive outcomes for both the mentee and mentor roles (Nowell, 2022; Johnson, 2016; Komives et al., 2011; Marshall et al., 2021). Peer mentorship models support student growth and development across disciplines and stages in education (Nowel, 2022,) while enhancing critical skills such as collaboration and engagement (Sunderman et al 2022; Griffiths et al., 2018; Nowell, 2022; Hastings & Sunderman 2019; Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Marshall et al., 2021) as well critical thinking and self-regulation, for both mentees and mentors alike (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Stigmar, 2016). Furthermore, Howland Cummings and colleagues (2023) report that a layered approach to mentorship programs fostered self-efficacy and empowerment among students through their peer community.

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Although student mentors are less studied (Marshall et al., 2021) research specific in this regard indicates that within the role of mentor, students established an “increased development of leadership, communication, and social skills, as well as a sense of community, and in some cases, increased retention rates” (Howland Cummings et al., 2023, p. 3). Peer mentorship is said to act as a support in the development of “safe, inclusive, and respectful culture of growth and learning through self-exploration, reflection, curiosity, and identity formation (Lunsford & Baker, 2016 cited in Nowell, 2022, p. 1). In addition to improving personal well-being, life and work satisfaction (Hastings & Sunderman, 2019), studies suggest that mentoring peers fosters growth in leadership self-efficacy and identity, supporting socially responsible leadership (Sunderman, 2022; Hastings et al., 2015). Numerous authors believe mentoring is a strong predictor of increased social leadership responsibility (Astin, 1993; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Komives et al., 2005; Thompson, 2006).

Research indicates that peer-to-peer student mentorship improves social justice leadership skills such as collaboration, empathy (Marshall et al., 2021; Paolucci et al., 2021; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Barnes, 2014), as well as supporting generativity overall (Hastings, 2012; Hastings et al., 2015; Hastings and Sunderman, 2019). Barnes (2014) referenced findings from Hastings (2012) that note student mentors in college developed a concern for others or a “sense of generativity that is integrated into their personal identity as a result of their mentoring experience” (Barnes, 2014, p. 74). Mentoring relationships with faculty and student affairs professionals have been studied extensively and have additionally shown to yield significant collaboration and community participation outcomes, including developing capacity for socially responsible leadership for mentees (Campbell et al., 2012). Such generative behavior among

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college student mentors can result in the creation and application of programming that enhances social responsibility, and socially responsible leadership (Hastings & Sunderman, 2019; Rossi, 2001 in Sunderman and Hastings, 2023).

### **Student Voice, Choice, and Empowerment**

Ilkiw (2010) clarifies the difference between student organizing and student-led organizing, the earlier being a strategy to guide students for social justice purposes and led by educators, the latter being directed by students, usually through grassroots initiatives, leading to stronger empowerment, generating hope, passion, and motivation (Maconachie, 2014). Programs such as the Global Citizenship Ambassador Programme, offered across Australia from 2022 to 2024, demonstrate how educators, student co-design of social action initiatives between students and educators empowers both groups (Dowling, 2024).

Another powerful example of student empowerment is presented in recent literature by Schwittay (2023) where a program at the University of Sussex offers a unique student peer empowerment program. The program supports students to plan, create, plant and care for a campus garden, to then hand over the garden responsibilities to a new cohort of students at the end of the course. The program interweaves “social justice and climate change topics, to actively campaign for change and apply classroom topics to real life issues” (Schwittay, 2023, p. 16) allowing students to consider themselves in the systems they experience and look beyond mainstream solutions.

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Student voice and agency are key to changemaking, yet a significant discussion in the field of student citizenship centers on the extent to which young individuals can exercise their agency, as opposed to the degree to which they are constrained by social, political, and institutional factors (Wood, 2024). The educator's role is to make room for subjectification within the classroom (Van Balen et al., 2022), and to work with students in support of their views, participation and influence to be included in decision-making and allowing their voices to create "a meaningful and constructive change well beyond the initial interaction" (Cook-Sather, 2010, p. 45). According to Bron et al. (2016), students can influence their current and future situations by participating actively in decision-making processes. Cook-Sather (2006) has articulated this as students possessing 'sound, presence, and power', suggesting that students ought to be provided with a platform where they can articulate their thoughts and opinions, and be heard attentively.

When students are offered the opportunity to actively collaborate and are empowered to create their own changemaking influence, additional skills and motivation can result. Beyond technical knowledge, interpersonal and intercultural skills are needed to navigate and shape a "global" world. (Grimm et al., 2024, p. 1). Such involvement within higher education institutions nurtures leaders to develop key leadership attributes such as empathy, resilience, compassion, as well as cultivates perspective taking (Dowling, 2024), which supports resistance to oppression (Carey et al., 2021).

Marsh, Lammers, and Conroy (2021) propose the integration of a five-step advocacy research model into the curriculum that repositions students from passive recipients of knowledge to central agents of social change. This model requires that the student identify a

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local issue, formulate solutions and engage with the community to cultivate research-driven activism. After the project, several students felt compelled to ‘do something’ rather than simply talk about it, based on the realization that not only were their academic skills enhanced, but also the internalization of a changemaker identity and belief of their capacity to make positive social change (Marsh et al., 2021, p. 62).

### **Student Leadership in Changemaking**

To strive for a more inclusive and collaborative changemaking approach, there is a strong interest in expanding the range of leaders and changemakers throughout education. Leadership for social change requires individuals to collectively engage with one another in an ongoing struggle for justice and inequity (Brown-Henderson, 2017). Bordas (2016) explains how sharing power within leadership supports empowerment and capacity building for both groups and communities. Defined as the ability to guide, influence, and empower others toward shared goals in dynamic environments, leadership is considered a core competency of changemaking (Mankeekar, 2024). Within changemaking literature, leadership is recognized in a nontraditional sense that it emerges from communities. Educators engaged in this practice propose approaches such as service-learning, social innovation, civic engagement, some of which will be discussed in this literature review.

Furthermore, in the context of campus activities and initiatives, leadership roles lie within a space that provides challenge, hope, and creativity to foster communication, understanding, and

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collaboration across divides (Nagda & Roper, 2019). Findings demonstrate a higher engagement rate when students have a strong sense of belonging (Kelly, 2024; Taff & Clifton, 2022).

Therefore, educators and institutions should engage students in meaningful ways to enable changemaker skill and ability development and include a focus on “sharing experiences of belonging and being otherized in spaces where everyone’s story is heard and acknowledged” to build empathy and relational responsibilities needed for leadership (Nagda & Roper, 2019, pg. 117).

Changemaking practices are rarely limited to traditional leadership and often see positive results from other approaches such as community-based leadership initiatives (Arminio et al., 2000; Bordas, 2016) or inclusive leadership where power is distributed more equitably. Building upon Dugan and Komives (2010) findings, Barnes identified how a sense of belonging to a group had significantly influenced social change outcomes, such as collaboration and common purpose, as noted by (2014, p. 24). Leaders need to adapt strategies for collective action in uncertain environments (Mankeekar, 2024) and actively work against ‘belonging uncertainty’ that underrepresented identity groups may feel when they question environmental contexts (Taff & Clifton, 2022).

Peer-driven collaboration is observed within a variety of student leadership agency models (Dugan & Humbles, 2018; Haber, 2011) as it underscores the importance of relationships which enhance perspective sharing, responsibility, and interest. Building upon this, authors such as Barnes take this requirement further and note how group connection and belonging have “significant impacts on specific outcomes of the social change model, including collaboration and common purpose” (2014, p. 24) as creating a sense of belonging requires fostering growth

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and exploration through meaningful collaboration, with regular affirmation of all participants (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2019). Highlighting the importance of building a sense of belonging has become a key aspect in the development of student citizenship approaches (Harris et al., 2021) and more widely understood as critical for students learning and personal development (Taff & Clifton, 2022).

In an ever-evolving world, organization and leadership must be viewed differently, and critical to this is the inclusion of students. Leadership for changemaking and social change involves reimagining greater possibilities and recognizing diverse human potential, including student, to develop additional leaders and changemaker leaders through education (Nagda & Roper, 2019). Inclusive leadership plays a critical role in changemaking as effective leaders foster collaboration and empower others to reach their potential by being empathetic, embracing failure, driving action and guiding future leaders (Mitchell-Ashley et al., 2024). Furthermore, social capital is instrumental for effective social action leadership. Dugan and colleagues (2015) call for a reconstruction of leadership development to focus on learning how power systems operate in social and organizational contexts, which includes how “dominant understandings of social capital (i.e., connections within and between personal networks) as a form of individual power” (p. 10).

Pidgeon (2022) discusses Drayton’s ‘everyone a changemaker’ vision in *The CEO Magazine* and takes note of Drayton’s suggestion that today requires a culture of shared leadership where power dynamics and hierarchies become dismantled. If educational institutions can foster dialogic methods where dominance can become collaboration, they can break across borders and build skills in students that can utilize these within larger societal structures in their

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futures. A key goal of changemaking is to undo power and privilege dynamics that stain society, cultivate critical hope, and boost collective leadership (Nadga & Roper, 2019). According to the 2020 report *Supporting Systems of Changemakers*, changemaking leadership encourages others to step into their power and contribute to positive change. This form of leadership requires adaptability, however, requiring judgment and choice to determine the most suitable approach depending on the context of the scenario. “It means knowing when to lead and when to facilitate, when to speak and when to let others speak, when to drive change and when to co-lead with others” (Fenech et al., 2023, p. 57). Further to this, “Leaders of education, social change and changemaking have “the hopeful possibility to be the midwives to accompany birthing of newer ways of being with each other, newer ways of sharing power, and newer ways of building just and equitable futures” (Nagda & Roper, 2019, p. 134).

### **Activating Student Leadership in Changemaking**

An increase in genuine social action student engagement can support the development of warranted changemaking skills, along with the fulfillment of social action objectives. Students are encouraged to create a new understanding of their identity when participating in civic activities (Nachtigal et al., 2024) while fostering collaboration critical for social justice through peer-to-peer interaction (Haber, 2011). A variety of authors have turned to students’ leadership as a key attribute to spark innovative ideas required for global social transformations (Grande &

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Srinivas, 2001; Mars, 2009), while others describe students being motivated to take on leadership to work towards improving their communities as well as their lives (Nagda & Roper, 2019.)

Student leadership models have been supporting an increased level of student involvement over the years. For example, the Social Change Leadership Model (SCLM) applies a lens of leadership with greater weight attributed to group features such as collaboration, common purpose and citizenship (Dugan & Komives, 2010) and defines leadership as a “purposeful collaborative, values-based process that results in positive social change (Komives et al., 20119, p. xiii). Critical leadership development literature suggests a “radical shift in our educational paradigm” (Dugan & Humbles, 2018, p. 9) to empower students by activating their agency to understand and disrupt dynamics (Dugan & Humbles, 2018). Dunne and Zandstra's (2011) theoretical model for students as change agents outlines several empowering roles that students may assume, including that of co-creators, partners, experts, participants in decision-making processes and evaluators of their own educational experience.

Leadership is often seen as a skill for empowerment; however, perhaps leadership in social action can in fact ultimately function as empowerment for students in and of itself. Education and educational institutions are finding themselves at a critical point in leadership education with the question being if we “as a community of educators, have the foresight to pivot in the direction of progress” (Dugan & Humbles, 2018, p. 9).

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## **Conclusion**

Research over the years has indicated that students are increasingly valued as citizens capable of contributing to and engaging in societal issues (Wood, 2024). However, they often fail to be fully recognized for their full potential in this regard as “these young citizens still encounter many challenges and very uneven experiences of inclusion, participation, representation, rights and expression” (Wood, 2024, p. 10). By incorporating critical pedagogy and reflective educational practices within service-based learning, community-based learning, and peer-to-peer collaboration, educators can utilize effective strategies to foster student motivation and a sense of personal identity as changemakers. These approaches also support the development of skills and capacities necessary for positive social change. Furthermore, research demonstrates that student agency, engagement, and motivation are enhanced when learners are actively involved in educational decision-making processes (Bron et al., 2016).

Scholarly literature supports students’ roles in educational social change efforts as being critical but varied, identifying several key areas where student contribute distinct value across changemaking and social action initiatives. Although student roles may be adjusted depending on the social initiative, changemaking environments can be activators and a firm support of students’ meaningful and indispensable engagement.

My research aim was to investigate how students explore social action leadership through reflective opportunities and more specifically inquire if and how communities of student-led dialogue support social engagement, and action. Overall, literature firmly substantiates the role of critical pedagogy educational methods and approaches to engender student leadership abilities while increasing their awareness of power and privilege dynamics for advancing social justice

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action. Where more consideration could be offered is to further investigate key processes and student roles within social action educational undertakings which offer the potential to interrupt traditional approaches to empower students towards sustained motivation of social action engagement.

Although literature speaks of a substantial shift towards student-centered engagement in learning practices, there is not yet a clear indication of significant autonomous responsibility placed upon student leadership in social action, nor for a focus on student leaders to contribute to their own transformative social action learning, as well as that of their peers. For this reason, my study was guided by the following main and supplementary research questions:

**Main Question:** How do students at a Canadian Changemaker College explore social action leadership development through critical dialogue?

**Supplementary Question:** Does building communities of student led dialogue support social engagement, and action for students within Canadian applied learning post-secondary institutions?

To address these research questions, the upcoming chapter will detail the qualitative methodology used for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. As qualitative thematic analysis involves documenting various complexities (Roberts et al., 2019), as such, key aspects of the chapter will outline the steps, components, and strategies to enhance the validity and rigor of the study.

## Chapter Three: Research Methodology

### **Introduction**

*Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences [emphasis added]. (Merriam, 2009, p. 5).*

In this chapter I introduce my investigative methods and substantiate the suitability of my qualitative research design considering the desired data type. I also outline the instruments used in the study, the process of analysis, along with the context in which my data generation and research took place. I then outline the sampling procedure as well as discuss related limitations and ethical considerations of this methodological design.

The purpose of my research study was to investigate the impacts of student-led peer-to-peer compelling conversation (CC) workshops on attitudes of changemaking as well as social action engagement. The goal of this research was to listen and gather insight from student leader facilitators of the CC workshops felt from their experience. Given my research questions, my chosen study design aimed to ensure rigor to uncover the impacts to student changemaking leadership through critical dialogue. Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews, and the interview transcripts were thematically analyzed to interpret and identify themes. Qualitative methods partner well with social science topics as they align with the flexible nature involved with the interpretation of thematic analysis within research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This made the use of a qualitative method a logical choice for my research given

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changemaking and student leadership are social science topics as are “many evaluations of learning and teaching interventions and research projects” (Bree & Gallagher, 2016, p. 2812).

Merriam (2009) outlines four characteristics of qualitative research, each of which align with how my research study was conducted. The first is that the goal of the research is to understand the participants' experiences. The second is that the researcher acts as the primary data generation instrument. Thirdly, analysis of data generated via the selected instrument(s) is done against the research questions. Lastly, the theory is built “inductively from the data gathered and supported by authentic participant narratives” which led to a descriptive result (Davy, 2016, p. 43).

The inclusion of student voice was crucial to my research. A qualitative approach supported the facilitation of the identification of genuine narratives and experiences from participants (Stewart, 2009; Davy, 2016), which can guide the direction of descriptive findings. Furthermore, this study anticipated smaller sample sizes; employing qualitative methods allowed for the generation of a substantial amount of data (Bree & Gallagher, 2016) that could be thoroughly analyzed (Bran & Clarke, 2006).

### **Research Context**

Maple College (MC) is a multi-campus institution renowned for its commitment to community engagement, viewing social action and grassroots efforts as essential steps towards creating healthier and more inclusive communities. With a robust foundation in social

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innovation, MC encourages faculty, students, and community organizations to collaboratively address complex issues and strive for positive social change.

In support of MC's commitment to embed social innovation institution wide, a student-led co-curricular changemaking opportunity was created that offers a peer-supported community to explore and lead positive change initiatives. Several CC workshops are available throughout the academic year for students to participate in. Based upon the Structured Dialogic Design (SDD) framework, as well as the World Café dialogical method, CC focuses on conversations for collaborative decision-making, problem solving and reflective listening. It aims to assist students in examining and exploring social and systemic issues through an interdisciplinary lens and in a psychologically safe environment to develop students as key stakeholders in positive community changes.

### **My Perspective**

Ruslin and colleagues (2022) refer to the ontological and epistemological perspectives of the researcher as a reason why semi-structured interviews are selected. It has been suggested researchers who select semi-structured interviews to construct data hold the ontological position that, "knowledge, views, understandings, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of social reality in which their research questions are designed" (p. 24). This is certainly accurate in my case. Furthermore, this same article indicates a researcher's epistemological perspective allows for the data to be generated legitimately and meaningfully based on ontological

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properties, such as analysis of the interviewees “language and their construction of discourses” (p. 25).

The increased need to include diverse perspectives in solving societal challenges while building a robust foundation for student social engagement has become apparent within educational endeavors. Although identifying as a white middle-class woman, both my personal and professional experiences have highlighted the impacts of increased neoliberalism on Canada's most vulnerable populations in recent years. Hence my motivation lies in understanding privilege and exploring potential solutions to counter various forms of polarization that frequently affect students and the broader community. With nearly three decades of experience in global education, the opportunity to learn from others by understanding unique perspectives has always been of value to me. This research work aims to offer new or enhanced tools to support this objective.

As the Dean of the MC International Education and Development department, as well as an avid supporter of the MC Changemaking Team, I have witnessed MCs changemaking initiatives that contribute to student belonging, while expanding opportunities and success. I found the structure and initial impact of the CC workshops particularly persuasive, as they rapidly gained popularity among members of the social innovation co-curricular student group. Students reported the safe space provided by CC, facilitated an environment where they felt comfortable sharing their perspectives openly and where they were encouraged to acknowledge and accept diverse viewpoints. This capacity to understand, adopt, or consider different perspectives and global views is essential to social justice work (Waghid, 2023). My research aimed to explore how students can deepen their understanding and perspective-taking regarding

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both local and global community issues, and whether this could lead to empathetic social engagement motivating them to take personal action.

In qualitative research, it is essential to account for the researcher's unconscious preconceptions and subjective positionality, as these factors can impact the analysis and interpretation framework. Reflexivity involves examining personal biases and integrating them into the interpretation process to ensure that data co-created through qualitative approaches yield valid results (Cohen et al., 2011).

Given I hold an interest in student changemaking within educational settings, it was imperative to consider potential interviewer bias. It is noted the use of open-ended questions allows constructed data to transcend the researcher's preconceived notions, while closed questions typically elicit responses aligned with the researcher's agenda (Ruslin et al., 2022, paraphrasing from Arksey & Knight, 1999).

## **Research Methodology and Rationale**

### **Epistemological positioning**

My research embraces a contextualist approach, acknowledging the interview data as being co-constructed by participants. This epistemological stance is crucial due to the interpretive nature of thematic analysis, which relies on the researcher's judgement to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The contextualist approach to my research straddles the

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essentialism and constructionism perspectives and emphasizes both the individual meaning-making processes as well as the broader social contexts that shape those meanings. Grounded in theories such as critical realism, a contextualist approach is argued to acknowledge the material and contextual limits of reality while exploring the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Mjøset, Byrne & Ragin (2009) highlight that contextualist methodologies embrace diverse qualitative methods, such as interviews, that are designed to connect the research question with its broader context. This method recognizes that researchers actively or passively influence the research through their interactions with subjects and the surrounding context, shaped by both macro (e.g., cultural or institutional biases) and micro (e.g., personal) factors. It considers both the "context of justification" and the "context of discovery", which illustrate how external influences, such as funding structures or public discourse, impact the knowledge produced (Mjøset, Byrne & Ragin, 2009, p. 43).

Rather than prioritizing one method over another, a contextualist paradigm emphasizes the importance of allowing research questions and their contexts, to guide the choice of methods over rigidly selecting a method first, potentially limiting the scope of inquiry as well as the questions that might be explored (Johanek, 2000). Context, described as a "pivotal, fluid term" (Johanek, 2000, p. 1), is thus central to the construction of meaningful, problem-driven research that responds effectively to its environment. Constructivist epistemology relies on the participants' views to develop a theory throughout the research process (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). This aligns with my core value to respect people's differences and unique construction of

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reality, a value that likely stemmed from my experiences among a wide range of cultures, societal interpretations, and understandings.

Furthermore, I identify with an anti-foundationalist ontological perspective. Anti-foundationalism is the epistemological doctrine that “asserts that none of our knowledge is absolutely certain” (Bevir, 2009, p. 2), and “that concepts cannot directly represent objects in the world since our experiences of those objects must in part be ones that we construct using our prior theories” (Bevir, 2009, p. 3). I have intentionally sought out and been surrounded by a wide range of global viewpoints for most of my adult life, and value unique and fluid social perspectives and interactions.

## **Research Instruments**

### **Action Research**

This research began with a cycle of action research. The first CC workshop was organized and led by educators and therefore I anticipated my initial study aimed at gathering interview data from student volunteers about their participation experiences. However, after the initial workshop concluded, students were asked for feedback, and they shared a unique insight for improvement to the process. Although they valued opportunities for connection and collaboration, they preferred future sessions to be led by student leaders. Students explained that peer-led workshops would encourage more reflection and creativity, as they felt more at ease sharing ideas with those who had similar backgrounds.

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The changemaking leadership team acknowledged the need for comfort in fostering thoughtful discussion and authentic student contributions, so they opted to make changes that would inspire deeper and more innovative insights. Consequently, the CC process was revised to include training for student leader facilitators, so they could oversee planning, leadership, debriefing, and action planning. Therefore, my research shifted from focusing on data from student participants in CC to gathering insights from student leader facilitators about their CC leadership experiences.

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

Given my research focus on dialogue, semi-structured interviews were chosen for their characteristics of flexibility, depth, and ability to foster open dialogue. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews extends from the data generation phase into the data analysis process due to its suitability to categorize, map, and theorize data (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Unlike structured interviews that rely on rigid question frameworks, a semi-structured interview aligned with my approach to establish informal reflective conversations with students.

Semi-structured interviews' flexibility allows for greater adaptability, which enables each interview participant's responses to take their own direction. I aimed to establish a comfortable interview setting to facilitate psychological safety for the interviewees to delve deeper into their experiences if desired. This participant observation approach was well suited as it supports conversational and reflective interaction where participants share their insights and stories. I was permitted to guide the discussion towards the research goals using a pre-determined interview protocol that I could refer to and remain on track. With the purpose of semi-structured interviews being to "gather the experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs related to the topic of

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interest”, while being a useful tool to “delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues” (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019) it offered an exemplary research instrument.

As Kvale (1996) noted, I was able to act as a ‘traveler’ through dialogue to learn participants' stories and gain new perspectives. This constructivist approach is additionally known to emphasize the relational aspect of interviews where questions guide rather than dictate the conversation (Ruslin et al., 2022, p. 23). This method, effective in social sciences, allows for exploratory interviews that delve into complex student experiences and simultaneously establish a framework for discovery (Hyman et al., 1954; Magaldi & Berler, 2020).

The more informal nature of semi-structured interviews encouraged participants to share openly and capture “the nuances of their lived experiences” (Ruslin et al., 2022, p. 25) yet allowed me to remain aligned with my research goals. During the interviews I utilized generic probes such as “can you tell me more about that” to encourage participants to elaborate on their answer, clarify statements and reflect on their experiences more fully. I also employed suitable probes and follow up questions to maintain the flow of the conversation, uncover nuances, and to generate more detailed and contextual data. Furthermore, I repeated their responses verbally to demonstrate active listening skills and open space for additional reflection.

My research spanned over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the need for interviews to take place on the virtual meeting platform, Zoom, to comply with governmental mandates. I initially worried virtual interviews could risk the casual nature of a semi-structured format; however, the virtual environment suited the conversational and exploratory qualitative research approach. The virtual setting of the semi-structured interviews was effective due to its adaptability and adherence to safety during a unique time in modern history.

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The use of semi-structured interviews is known to generate qualitative data aligning with the selected thematic analysis, as both methods emphasize flexibility, depth, and contextual understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore participants' experiences through guided open-ended questions resulting in rich and detailed narratives, which thematic analysis is aptly suited (Davy, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The interview questions (see Appendix B) provided a baseline to structure the interview. I followed a script that provided space to allow the incorporation of prompts, permitting the order of questions and phrasing to adapt, based on the students' areas of interests as well as how the interview was proceeding. I based my approach on the idea of an informal conversation where participants could lead in the direction. This intentional format encouraged participants to share their perspectives and experiences through a mutually beneficial interaction, and “to assist each other in making the world a better place through creative conversation and reflection” (Earl, 2018, p. 48).

The conversational nature of these interviews allowed me to uncover nuanced perspectives and unexpected themes through the systemic identification, categorization and interpretation processes used within a thematic analysis process. Through this analysis process, I focused on patterns and meanings within the data, as thematic analysis enables researchers to map connections, explore relationships, and generate insights that reflect the complexity of participants' lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Jebreen, 2012). This methodological pairing was aptly suited to address my research questions given I was seeking to understand subjective experiences and social phenomena, as ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data while providing the flexibility to adapt to emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

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### **Data Generation**

My aim was to recruit thirteen to fifteen post-secondary student leaders willing to reflect on their experiences as facilitators of the student-led CC workshops. During the pre-workshop and post-workshop planning sessions, students were notified that if interested they could voluntarily participate in a research interview that would allow them to share their reflection on their facilitation experience. Interested students were directed to contact me, the researcher, via email for further communication. I distributed a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix C) to those who reached out with interest, detailing my study's aim, confidentiality measures, expectations, and the interview process. I addressed any questions and provided meeting options to suit their individual schedules. After participants confirmed their interest, I sent out a research consent form (see Appendix D) as well as a meeting request for dates and times most suitable. Interviews were conducted via Zoom within two weeks of their facilitation experience.

Due to COVID-19 safety protocols, organizing large student gatherings outside regular classes was initially challenging. However, the process of arranging CC workshops became more straightforward once these restrictions were lifted. Each CC workshop involved between three to six student facilitators. Although some facilitators either cancelled or were absent from interview sessions following the first two workshops, all student leaders who participated in the final CC workshop and volunteered for the research attended their respective interviews. Interview scheduling times as well as growing enthusiasm for the CC workshops could have been factors impacting attendance.

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### **Timeframe**

The interviews were conducted over an eleven-month period, from December 2022 to October 2023. The duration was influenced by the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to policy changes and safety measures that either reduced or eliminated students on campus at various times and regularly prohibited in-person gatherings. Following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, CC workshops were reinstated and promoted to new students, resulting in a gradual recovery of the CC momentum and allowing my research to continue.

The workshop schedules had significant intervals between sessions, which prolonged the period available for recruiting participants. To ensure adequate participation, three sessions were organized due to smaller group sizes. Moreover, although the use of online semi-structured interviews enhanced participant comfort, it may have contributed to absenteeism in two sessions. In total, thirteen student leaders participated voluntarily across three CC workshops.

### **Participant Selection**

Qualitative researchers are known to experience difficulty in determining a sufficient number of participants to generate insights from semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling, which strategically selects research participants that align with the research questions, provides freedom to the researcher to determine the quantity of interviewees to reach data saturation and no ‘universal rule’ has been established to date (Bekele & Ago, 2022). Estimate saturation level consideration factors include sample size, the researchers’ experience, expansiveness of the subject, the study design, comparable required, and quality of the resultant interview data (Bekele & Ago, 2022; Tight, 2023).

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Due to the depth of data generated from the interviews, I argue the sample size of thirteen students was adequate as using fewer participants allowed for more in-depth inquiry (Wattley, 2020). Given that all participants were required to be full-time students enrolled in a program at MC and have been facilitators in a CC workshop, the sample is considered homogenous (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Appendix E outlines the CC workshops participants were sampled from. Demographic data was not collected as these were not intended to be used for comparative thematic analysis.

Data saturation, noted by Guest et al (2006), as the point at which no new themes or insights emerge, can be reached with as few as six interviews, depending on the context and homogeneity of the sample. I feel the use of a consistent semi-structured interview protocol across all thirteen participants ensured the comparability necessary for identifying thematic saturation. As a novice researcher my intention was to generate as much data as possible. Nonetheless during the data analysis stage, I became confident I had comfortably met the data saturation point within the thirteen participants.

Additionally, a sample size of thirteen aligns with prior research in the field: Bursa and Ersoy (2016) interviewed ten teachers to explore the consistency of perceptions of social justice within their lived experiences and within their classrooms; Wattley (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with ten students to uncover their educational access and retention probability through sharing their experiences as lower income first generation college students; Francis and le Roux (2011) gathered rich insights from eight pre-service teachers on the emerging identity connected with social justice pedagogies; and Gandolfi and Mills (2023)

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conducted eight life history interviews with teachers committed to enhancing social justice within the education system.

Consistently, these studies demonstrate small, yet purposeful samples are common and can effectively lead to achieving data saturation in qualitative research. As Bernard (2012) emphasized, there is no absolute number that defines saturation, but through careful sampling and methodical interview design, this study reached a point where additional interviews appeared unlikely to yield new thematic insights. I felt the amount of data and depth gathered was suitable and felt ‘good enough’, a concept in line with Dey’s (1999) descriptive term for “theoretical sufficiency”, and what he felt was likely more appropriate terminology than “saturation” (as cited by Tight, 2023).

### **Participants**

Each participant in my study occupied a leadership role in extracurricular or co-curricular activities or was currently enrolled in a leadership program and class. Although attendance at the CC workshops was voluntary there was significant diversity among participants. The participation cohort encompassed a wide range of ages, genders, academic disciplines, and levels of leadership experience. Some participants were mature students returning to education after years in the workforce, while others had less professional and life experience.

The students' cultural and educational backgrounds were notably distinct. Several participants were international students from various countries and cultures, while others were local students who had grown up in the area. Among them were mothers, managers, those attending their first program at MC, and others in their second. The level of study dedication also varied significantly; some students concentrated solely on their academic pursuits due to

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limitations with their second language, while others managed multiple jobs outside of school.

Although some participants had attended CC workshops previously and were eager to deepen their engagement, others were student leaders from various campus associations and groups interested in exploring the facilitation of the CC process. Many students demonstrated considerable interest in related social issues, although they were initially drawn by the topic itself. While some

students prioritized community support in their commitments, others pursued leadership skills to improve their future employment opportunities.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Thematic Analysis**

I decided to conduct a thematic analysis for this research to identify key patterns of meaning relevant to my objectives. This method is versatile, as it works without pre-existing themes, and can generate unanticipated insights, yet provides detailed data analysis to interpret various aspects of the topics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is known to be “a comprehensive process” that allows researchers “to identify numerous cross-references between the data and the research’s evolving themes” (Alhojailan, 2012, p. 39). Additionally, thematic analysis is a common approach for diverse educational social science topics (Evans & Mathur, 2005; Adams & Cox, 2008), and suitable to be used as a researchers’ introductory analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

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A thematic analysis approach was advantageous for my study as it is not tied to a specific epistemological or theoretical perspective (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Instead, it allowed for a comprehensive understanding of participant perspectives by highlighting similarities and differences to contribute to an overall understanding of issues (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, it offered flexibility in the process while avoiding commitment to any pre-existing framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As Maguire and Delahunt (2017) explain when they refer to Braun and Clarke (2006), “There are no hard and fast rules about what makes a theme. A theme is characterized by its significance” (p. 3355) and allows for the identification of numerous cross references between data and an evolution of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Concurrently, the research can uncover "similarities and differences between the participants' perspectives to assist the readers to obtain a global view" (Alhojailan, 2012, p. 42-43).

Furthermore, as thematic analysis is identified as a useful method “for working within a participatory research paradigm” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 96), this appealed to my research objective to analyze student voices in depth. Also, the engagement of reflective dialogue within student interviewees aligned with the participatory nature of SDD and World Café dialogic designs (Löhr et al., 2020). Thematic analysis allowed me to examine students' concepts and perspectives to discover a comprehensive view of their opinions and actions (Joffe & Yardley 2004; Blacker, 2009) and provide the flexibility to encourage clarifications or additional reflections through probes.

A thematic analysis method is particularly relevant when data is obtained through interviews or focus groups, as the themes identified may differ significantly from the initial

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questions posed to participants. It allows for both social and psychological data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased approach to guide me through a rigorous and coherent interpretation of the data. The process began with familiarization, during which the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were read numerous times and in multiple ways to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. I wanted to ensure I was very well acquainted with the entire body of data to support a holistic understanding before the next phase was initiated.

A latent, inductive research approach was best suited for my investigation goals which were to encounter data patterns without pre-established categories and to allow me to sit with the data to examine and interpret underlying thoughts and ideas (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The fundamental relationships of the data were significant to me to honor the student's perspectives appropriately. Moving beyond data description, the latent approach allowed for the replicability of the research to create validity (Bree & Gallagher, 2016) and emphasized how the themes identified during analysis strongly linked to the data itself.

Braun and Clarke (2006) note that the process of identifying and examining the underlying assumptions and ideas contributes to the theoretical conceptualization that informs the data's semantic content. This process requires interpretation by the researcher, and "the analysis that is produced is not just description but is already theorized" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). The latent approach offered flexibility for the research questions to develop naturally through the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was particularly useful considering my objective was to delve into the student voices from a variety of angles. Furthermore, an inductive method supported data to be unbiased as inductive methods supported my research to be

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analyzed beyond semantic content and avoid preconceptions or existing codes allowing student leaders' stories to solely guide the findings.

### **Data Coding and Categorization**

My data coding was strongly informed by the thematic analysis process of Braun and Clarke's (2006) method. Although the ability to replicate research is not considered a requirement in qualitative thematic analysis methods, documenting the process provided me with a structure to follow as well as enhanced reliability of the framework. Such transparency can demonstrate how particular conclusions are drawn within the outcomes chapter (Roberts et al., 2019).

The first step for thematic coding and categorization is to transcribe the interview recordings. I performed this manually to ensure no errors as well as build an initial acquaintance with the responses outside of the interview itself. After the interviews were transcribed, I read the transcripts multiple times, beginning with chronological order, followed by randomized readings, and later a review of each participant's response in correlation to an interview question (i.e. all responses to question one, all responses to question two, and so on). This layered reading process allowed me to gain a deeper understanding and engagement with the content and helped initial patterns and meanings to organically surface (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For this research, I employed a manual analysis, as a hands-on approach aligned with my comfort level and professional strengths. Manual coding and theme development have the advantage for researchers to gain a close engagement with the data throughout the thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were generated with the interpretive analysis technique due to the literature's strong support of its ability to guide the generation of

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patterns and for meaningful data segments to naturally emerge (Lichtman, 2014; Morse, 1994; Tukkett, 2005), rather than imposed by a pre-existing deductive framework (Bree & Gallagher, 2016) or pre-engaging with the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The selection of methods and approaches that do not require a specific framework was a notable pattern throughout this methodology.

To actively maintain objectivity, I approached the data with an enhanced neutral lens by intentionally distancing myself from the interview experience during analysis (Mjøset, Byrne & Ragin, 2009). My goal was to uncover the underlying thoughts and ideas within the participants' responses yet to remain open to new patterns rather than confirmed preconceived potential patterns (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). I noted the frequency of themes mentioned, such as the fact that approximately eighty percent of participants referenced the theme of reflection.

The manual coding process began with formatting compelling quotes in bold, followed by color coding based on thematic similarities. The iterative process helped materialize high-level categories. As the data set was small an overlap resulted between code generation and preliminary theme identification, which Maguire and Delahunt (2017) note as a possibility. I highlighted and annotated the transcripts during each review to capture my initial impressions and ideas prior to further categorization. At this stage, I had begun to develop a broader understanding of the students' perspective on their leadership experience with a particular focus on changemaking.

To enable a better visualization of the patterns that were emerging at this phase, I transferred the highlighted data into an Excel table. Within Excel I was able to reorganize and form some structure of the high-level themes and overlaps to identify and build out subthemes.

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After the initial round of data review within Excel, I explored a tactile method that was inspired by a recommendation by Braun and Clarke (2006), where I wrote the colour-coded quotes from Excel onto color-coded sticky notes, which I then arranged on large poster sheets taped to the walls. This method allowed me to physically step back and reflect on the data visually over time, even passively, as it hung on the wall in my living room. Whenever I reviewed a quote on one of the sticky notes, I would use a marker that matched its corresponding sticky notes to identify indirect or direct thematic overlap. See Appendix F for photographs of the process.

The Excel chart facilitated the next phase of coding the data's initial categories and subcategories. From the sticky notes presented on the wall, I then created a new Excel sheet to determine the thematic overlaps and attempt to help refine the categories. Some codes had clear correlations with broader themes; however, some felt more obscure, which were consequently placed into a miscellaneous category for further consideration. My goal with that process was to revisit the miscellaneous quotes at the end of this phase to see if any subthemes 'arose' from the data (Bennett et al., 2019; Sousa, 2014). Interestingly, two themes did emerge around 'reasons for participation' and 'challenges', however these were later deemed unapplicable to the research question purpose, so were discarded. Throughout the process, I remained open to modifying and refining the codes and themes, understanding the importance of keeping an open mind and accepting alternative perspectives throughout the identification process and all phases of the data analysis (Bree & Gallagher, 2016).

The next step involved the creation of a matrix with interview participants as columns and refining thematic categories as rows. This allows examination of how each theme functioned both within individual interviews and across the entire data set. I alternated between a micro and

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macro lens where I highlighted the most important elements within a cell (micro level) and then entered my interpretation or connection to the research question in a row underneath to see the arc of the participant's broader narrative (macro level). This dual technique of sorting the codes into themes was done intentionally to challenge how I deciphered and interpreted the data, to expand my views, and absorb the data in various modalities. For example, the physical aspect of attaching sticky notes quotes to paper on the wall allowed me to glance over and rethink statements and their potential thematic placement over time, even while being involved in unrelated daily activities. The transfer from the sticky notes into an Excel table aided me in organizing the subcategories and sorting through the data with more ease. This process between digital and physical modalities, along with movement between the entire data set and coded extracts and analyzed results, allowed for a more comprehensive insight of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Themes were validated over several stages to ensure they accurately reflected the full scope of the data (Alhojailan, 2012). I reread transcripts multiple times, reassessing theme coherence, removing or merging overlapping categories, and I discarded those lacking sufficient support. The analysis first identified seven macro-level themes, which were later refined into eight preliminary themes through repeated review and reevaluation of the data. For example, the theme of "reflection" encompasses related ideas such as mindset, insight, growth, and identity. This phase involved constant comparison, reevaluation, and reorganization to ensure that themes were both distinct and representative of the data. This iterative process was both analytical and reflective, balancing the complexity of the findings with the responsibility to honor participant voices. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of "identifying the essence of what each theme is about" (p. 92), a goal I continually strived to achieve.

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Ultimately, eight overarching themes were identified: (1) Reflection, insight into self, and sense of identity; (2) Confidence and personal growth; (3) Perspective sharing and communication; (4) Safe space, trust, and belonging; (5) Connectivity, community, mentorship, and teamwork; (6) Motivation and engagement; (7) Struggles, challenges, and fears; and (8) Leadership. These themes were shaped by the data and reflected the diversity and depth of the student leaders' experiences participating in the CC workshops. The inductive nature of the process and multiple rounds, and methods applied to the theme validation and refinement generated a robust and rigorous analysis that was grounded in participant voices.

### **Figure x: Initial Coding Framework Developed While Reviewing Anonymized Interview**

<b>Red highlight or red writing</b>	– challenges, struggles, fears, covid related, pessimism
<b>Dark Blue highlight</b>	– reflection, mindset, insights, growth, sets of identity
<b>Dark Green highlight</b>	– development, growth, confidence,
<b>Dark Yellow highlight</b>	– perspective sharing, differences, communication
<b>Dark Cyan (dark turquoise)</b>	- safe space, belonging, welcoming, comforting, authenticity, trust
<b>Turquoise</b>	– new leadership, leadership (I learned I need to listen, to engage)
<b>Pink</b>	– connection, connectivity, community, mentorship, teamwork
<b>Purple</b>	– engaging, motivating

### **Responses**

After sitting with the original generated themes, I further analyzed the data by creating a diagram to visualize if and how the themes overlapped. This process allowed me to use a unique variety of lenses to adjust and narrow the themes and to select the most appropriate thematic titles. For example, the broad theme of challenges, struggles and fears was simply part of a student's reflection and development of their growth. Therefore, I decided to collapse this theme.

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Furthermore, the theme of dialogue surfaced as a theme on its own separate from perspective sharing, not sitting within the theme of communication or reflection.

Subsequently, I then conducted a sub-theme analysis. I analyzed how the themes interacted and if they were related to a larger overarching theme or to one another by charting the interview key quotes into sub themes organized by anonymized student leader participants. The aim was to separate the interview content from participants, in order to analyze if their insights into one theme (e.g. growth in leadership skills) correlated to another thematic area (e.g. increased motivation). Direct participant quotes were included in the thematic analysis to clarify and support emerging themes, offering genuine and contextual insights into the participants' views.

### **Thematic Mapping**

To better understand the codes and themes, I created a thematic map to summarize my sub-theme analysis and highlighted overlaps on micro and macro levels. It was here that I noticed a number of codes formed clear sub-themes, while others were discarded into the miscellaneous section. The themes were complex but clear, so I used a circular visual to show high-level overlapping macro themes with mixed-in micro subthemes. For example, when safe space and confidence overlapped with their subthemes, I recognized the key theme of confidence. Recognizing data sets are imperfect (Braun & Clark, 2006), my attempt was to visually reflect both patterns and contradictions while allowing for discovery of new themes as needed. The maps generated during this process can be found in Appendix G.

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### **Data Segmentation**

To facilitate data analysis and extract meaningful insights, the data was segmented by dividing thematic information into smaller, more manageable groups. Relevant criteria were identified to group data into distinct segments and focus on specific subsets for an in-depth analysis. After entering all the data, I summarized key concepts and quotes per participant and searched for correlations within and across participants. This allowed me to investigate how the themes worked together and reveal a more in-depth interpretive analysis of the data outcomes.

Lastly, I interpreted the data by examining its implications and connecting it to literature, as well as existing knowledge, as this supported the comprehension of the results in the context of my research objectives. Authors emphasize an interpretation focus, known to be particularly valuable in qualitative research (Jebreen, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bree & Gallagher, 2016) and for me this was significant as it aligned with my aim to understand the distinct meanings and experiences of each of the student participants.

The data analysis ended with the production of a detailed narrative that integrated the findings into a more coherent interpretation, as well as linking the data back to broader research objectives and literature. Once the themes are finalized and confidently renamed, the analysis was complete to “identify the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92) as well as identify any related subthemes of importance. My goal with this iterative process was to ensure that the analysis remained flexible yet data-driven while discovering rich, contextual insights into the participants’ experiences. Please see Appendix H for a more detailed chart of thematic analysis breakdown.

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## **Ethical Considerations & Limitations**

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research was approved by the Lancaster Research Ethics and Integrity Committee and Maple College Research Ethics Board. I was cognizant that enhancing critical consciousness on social topics can invoke discomfort and as a result I needed to recognize emotions that could ensue during my study. Research involves looking into others' lives which raises the question of whether this is 'ever ethical' (Warin, 2011). As the CC process intentionally facilitated differing points of view around social issues, I was committed to taking steps to carefully focus the interview questions on the facilitation experiences and not on the social topics themselves, hoping to guard from potential student discomfort.

Considering the potentially controversial workshop topics, I supported the participants' well-being by being attentive to any signs of discomfort and being ready to adjust the interview accordingly. Additionally, I recognized my self-interest as a researcher, and my perspective as a student in a PhD program. I aimed to acknowledge my power as a researcher, and resultant lens as a PhD student researching social justice in education (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). Therefore, throughout my analysis, I was careful to consider the data through a lens where I considered my assumptions as well as the extent of my skills and resources (Bryne, 2021).

According to (Schostak, 2013) an investigation is never set in motion without motive. As such, I committed to regularly check my own motives and actions throughout this study. Although I do not work within the Centre for Changemaking and Social Innovation department, my role as a Dean at MC could likely be seen as a position of power through the lens of students.

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Hence, I ensured to clearly and repeatedly state that there are no requirements to participate, and that withdrawal could occur at any time prior to data anonymization. My aim was to encourage sincere voluntary participation and attempt to level the power dynamic in the process and the approach.

Given the predominantly positive responses from the interviewed students, I consider it important to clarify my position as an internal researcher. Not only were the students affiliated with the institution, but they were also aware of my role within it, which may have influenced their responses and, consequently, the data obtained.

All downloaded interview recordings were saved on my password enabled and encrypted computer, not the cloud. I scheduled three weeks between the conclusion of an interview and when the data was transcribed and anonymized within Microsoft Office on my computer, allowing for a suitable timeframe for students to withdraw from the study. Prior to each interview's transcription, I coded each interview randomly once all interviews were completed and assigned a randomly generated number so that interviewees could not be associated with their responses. This also allowed for additional anonymity during the data analysis phase as it reduced prior interpretations applied to the participants that could have been gleaned during the interview.

### **Limitations**

By nature of semi-structured interviews —the data generation method employed in this paper included responses laden with context and social situations that could be “shaped by the spatial and temporal context in which the interview takes place” (Karatsareas, 2022). Semi-structured interviews are prone to responses being influenced by the power dynamics that may

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exist between the interviewer and interviewee (Karatsareas, 2022). Given my senior leadership role at the institution, there was a risk of social desirability bias, where the interviewees may have responded with what they believe the interviewer wants to hear (Karatsareas, 2022; Jones & Donmoyer, 2021). Furthermore, the participants in my study were both domestic and international students, which could have influenced the degree of comfort and familiarity experienced by the participants due to their varied cultural contexts and socio-economic backgrounds (Karatsareas, 2022; Jones & Donmoyer, 2021).

The duration of my study, which spanned a year, may have presented potential limitations. Participants might have encountered diverse circumstances due to varying local and global contexts over time. These varied realities could include the specific semester of the student, their progress in their studies, the proximity of the interview to holidays, or significant global political and climate events that might influence participants' thoughts based on cultural backgrounds (e.g., the wars, the COVID-19 pandemic, or other substantial economic, political, or natural disasters). Notably, COVID-19 had a considerable impact on students, making it challenging for them to reintegrate into social groups and engage in extracurricular activities.

While online interviews provided flexibility and comfort in the post-pandemic era, this mode may have hindered personal connectivity, potentially limiting the students' willingness to share their experiences. Although some students favored online interviews, the absence of an in-person option could be perceived as a drawback. Online interviews were conducted uniformly for all participants to ensure consistent interview protocols, thereby enhancing data reliability and comparability by maintaining a standardized interview environment (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

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Canada's public tertiary education sector encompasses both universities and colleges. Colleges provide an extensive array of programs, including applied degrees, diplomas, and postgraduate certificates. The entrance requirements for these programs vary; for example, postgraduate degrees typically necessitate significant work experience or an undergraduate degree, while diplomas usually require a high school credential. The college curriculum emphasizes applied learning and the development of career-ready skills, often incorporating integrated learning components such as co-op placements or internships (Fisher, 2009).

Such varied programming, flexibility, and individualized timeframes often appeal to a broader range of students than traditional university degrees, which are primarily pursued by individuals as their initial education following secondary school (Roberto, 2024). However, participating in shorter programs also limits the duration during which college institutions can engage students in initiatives such as changemaking experiences. This limitation is relevant to my study, as some student facilitators had more extensive MC changemaking experiences than others.

The flexibility of programs and modes of delivery tends to attract students who may already have families, hold full or part-time jobs, or live in various communities, resulting in minimal time spent on campus. Furthermore, most college programs require one or two co-op semesters, during which students are off campus. The Canadian college education sector widely acknowledges that these factors can negatively impact campus engagement levels. This same phenomenon could be seen as a limitation as it could have led to a less consistent pool of participants.

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## **Conclusion**

To effectively investigate the impacts of student peer-to-peer leadership in changemaking initiatives, I selected research methods appropriate for the data requirements. I employed a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews for data generation and thematic analysis for data interpretation. These methodologies were well-suited for examining topics related to social justice student leadership, providing the necessary flexibility and depth to yield meaningful insights on student leadership experiences in changemaking. The iterative nature of the latent, inductive thematic analysis was evident in the resultant overlap and fluidity of the findings, which will be detailed in the following chapter.

The semi-structured interview format and questions provided a methodical yet approachable means to generate genuine insights into peer-to-peer student facilitation experiences. I firmly believe that students possess valuable perspectives that are critical to addressing society's most pressing issues. This belief underpinned my objective for the student voice to be central to the success of my research. Thirteen student leaders offered significant data on the impact of their leadership in facilitating dialogue among peers. Organizing and coding their insights enabled me to gain a thorough understanding of their firsthand experiences. The results from the inductive thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data will be detailed in the following research outcomes chapter.

## Chapter Four: Research Outcomes

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will argue that the data results of my research demonstrate that communities of student-led, peer-to-peer, critical dialogue can activate agents of change, interrupting mindsets and inspiring changemaking leaders. Through intentionally designed compelling conversation (CC) workshops, students are energized by meaningful reflection and empowerment, which drove a sense of purpose, and catalyzed impactful self and social action.

Several significant themes emerged from the data collected. All of which impacted the CC workshop experience as these themes enabled a conducive ecosystem in support of an opportunity for profound reflection and empowerment. The CC workshop provided time, security, and comfort to initiate both personal and critical reflection. Although deep reflection can result in discomfort, the reflective process as well as the authority to drive the discussions fostered student empowerment. The combination of the two allowed students to examine their realities, allowing for their minds to shift, their hearts to be inspired, and their capacity realized, fostering motivation to plan for participating in future solutions.

During the data analysis, it was discovered that several elements enabled the creation of an environment that fostered several outcomes, which this paper will refer to as resulting factors. A previous lack of meaningful conversations and social interactions were forthrightly expressed as a common concern amongst student facilitator interviewees. The CC changemaking workshops helped to counterbalance these concerns, as they offered a unique social platform to converge and as well as created four central enabling elements.

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Students openly spoke about the critical role that connectivity between peers played in establishing a comfortable environment for the delicate topics discussed within the CC workshops. With connectivity and trust established in a safe space between fellow participants and facilitators, the typical sense of tension, fear and hesitancy of sharing opinions and personal stories was reduced. Obtaining a sense of security and belonging were described as essential elements to facilitate honest dialogue and welcomed new and varied ideas on social issues. The facilitators learned to practice active listening skills to further establish feelings of comfort and openness, and they often shared their own unique perspectives to demonstrate it was safe and acceptable to also do so.

These enabling elements resulted in a plethora of positive results which this study distilled into four resulting factors. The results were evident around personal and professional growth as student facilitator interviewees noted development resulting from their facilitator experience in the CC workshops. Additionally, interviewees shared they learned that fellow participants carried similar, yet varied views from their own, although all commonly shared a desire to combat social justice issues. This resulted in feelings of hope and heightened their motivation to make positive impacts on their communities.

While engaging in critical self-reflection can increase students' feelings of uncertainty, facilitators noted that despite unease or discomfort by learning new information and perspectives, they felt mostly intrigued and managed to organize their thoughts towards future changemaking. The study found that such transformative learning processes led to important outcomes, including deep reflection and personal empowerment, which prepared participants to take part more effectively in future social action.

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### **The relationships between the outcomes from varied sources of data**

With the data being collected in two distinct modes it was intriguing to note the resultant thematic alignment between the methods. First, action research occurred through informal debriefing sessions, conducted for the purpose of making improvements to future workshop coordination and implementation. The feedback immediately indicated a solid preference for the workshop setting to focus on connectivity as well as creating a relaxed environment to foster the form of respectful yet critical dialogue most students appeared to crave. Similarly, the semi structured interviews provided an abundance of responses containing clear statements around the need for both connectivity as well as safe space. These two themes quickly became the first of four enabling elements that arose from the data and significantly impacted the resulting factors, and the key outcomes of the research.

Data acquired from the semi structured interviewees quickly revealed the positive outcomes of connecting students in a safe space to generate a sense of belonging to nurture open perspective sharing. This combination set the stage for both personal and critical reflections that many students explained was not typical. Overall, students enjoyed the experience and discovered an increase in their confidence through what they learned and shared. Personal and critical considerations throughout their involvement nurtured an open or shifting mindset as well as growth. The student facilitators felt enabled and heard by institutional leaders and like-minded peers, instilling hope that their direct influence could impact their futures specifically on how situations may or may not become an improved reality. The newfound sensation students felt around vital social issues activated emotions that generated motivation and ownership, empowering student facilitators to plan related forms of action and enhance their changemaker

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attributes. These factors are interwoven and critical to enabling a resultant spark of agents for change.

### **Enabling Factors**

#### **Connectivity**

The significance of connectivity emerged as a prevailing theme throughout the data analysis. While the concept of connectivity is widely recognized across various disciplines, within the context of the CC workshops it specifically referred to the intentional linkage of student groups, fostering engagement around shared interests and concerns. Despite the inherent value of assembling students in educational settings, participants in the research consistently articulated a notable absence of opportunities for meaningful peer-to-peer interactions, particularly those focused on substantive discussions about personal, societal, and community matters.

Student leaders explicitly shared how the opportunity to connect with like-minded peers on topics of interest was valuable. They openly conveyed their enthusiasm and often described how they had shared their excitement of their recently discovered experience of connection with friends and family. Furthermore, participants tied the experience to other opportunities. For example, students expressed how an uncovered sense of unity regarding their concern for a social topic encouraged additional peer open conversation. Interviewee E reflected that, “Realizing others are on a similar page can encourage and facilitate more conversation,” and Interviewee D’s transcript described how this peer connection built inspiration, “Being now

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connected with other strong and passionate people can influence you and inspire and motivate you to give new windows of opportunity that maybe we didn't have previously".

Today's post-secondary student life is filled with daily competing priorities. It was observed in the interview data that the students' daily obligations and schedules rarely permitted time to be allocated to truly connect with other students outside their immediate circle. Students noted working more hours to support themselves and described how they often juggle complex family obligations alongside their academic commitments.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, students encountered significantly fewer opportunities for substantive connectivity. Interviewed participants observed that social distancing measures and the transition to remote learning contributed to pronounced feelings of isolation. This context elucidates why the CC in-person workshops, conducted within a year of the return to campus for many post-secondary institutions, were received with notable enthusiasm. Both the extended period of pandemic-induced isolation and the subsequent phase of adjustment led to diminished interactions among students who were largely unfamiliar with one another. Furthermore, it was noted that those who had participated in online learning during the pandemic continued to favor flexible virtual options to accommodate increasing work and family obligations.

Many interviewees expressed concern about the lack of communal spaces for meaningful conversation and social interaction. They noted few opportunities to connect with peers facing similar challenges regarding their futures and communities. A quote encapsulating this sentiment by Interviewee F, said that it was, "Hard to get people out of their shells and talk. Everyone has

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their own lives and are depressed about things, with more and more negativity with all the world events.” Interviewee H similarly indicated that, “We are a community, we need to connect more,” and C argued that we, “Need to discuss things as a team and eliminate the feelings of differentiation.” Overall, the data outlined a clear trend that students recognized the importance of connecting with others and valued the security to do so within a welcoming environment.

Feedback received from student participants regarding the enhancement of workshops indicates that, to cultivate a trusting and open environment, student leaders should facilitate discussions among their peers. Students asserted that establishing direct, peer-to-peer relationships founded on trust could heighten both their willingness and motivation to engage in dialogue on social topics. Consequently, this approach was implemented and correlated with a reported increase in comfort levels, as it served to minimize the power differential between faculty facilitators and student participants.

### **Safe Space**

Safe space typically refers to a situation or environment—whether physical or psychological—that fosters both emotional and physical comfort for individuals or groups. Within such a setting, uninhibited self-expression is actively encouraged and regarded as valuable, with an emphasis on minimizing concerns related to negative judgment, preconceived notions, or bias. The assurance of security in these contexts is fundamental to facilitating open, honest dialogue and welcoming diverse perspectives on social issues.

The CC interview data recounted the conditions of the workshop experiences as one of respect and curiosity, which provided a positive and comfortable position to share thoughts,

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feelings and often their own personal stories associated with the subject matter being discussed. Student facilitators interviewed noted, both directly and indirectly, that the CC workshop environment was refreshingly safer compared to their routine academic and social settings. The participants noted their relief at having the freedom to share personal and occasionally vulnerable perspectives without concern for being judged. Several students poignantly recounted episodes of discomfort in similar contexts circumstances and described a persistent fear of judgement in their personal and professional interactions. Such negative polarizing encounters had restrained their willingness to be open to deeper conversations. As said by Interviewee J, “I wasn't sure what my opinion would be to them and was scared someone wouldn't like it or that opinion was wrong. J said “You never know the tough circumstances someone’s facing.” and upon reflecting on how they felt after the event, they learned to truly hear others’ opinions and, “mix my thought process”, which “allowed me to come out of my shell...helped me gain knowledge about their circumstances.”

An examination of the interview responses revealed numerous participants positively mentioning the significance of a respectful environment as well as facilitation. These factors were noted as enabling and nourishing a sense of connectivity between fellow participants and facilitators working to eliminate fear and hesitancy of sharing opinions and personal stories. As students felt more secure, trust was established, and synergies surfaced. For example, Interviewee J described that through finding good connections, they were able to share their thoughts and feel appreciated by others by doing so. Another way this came up in the interviews was when it was explained, “If you give people a safe space, you can get their true insights on things” (Interviewee C).

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Recognizing that changemaking discussion and exploration of social issues necessitate an environment conducive to open exchange, it is unsurprising that the interview data highlighted the deliberate strategies essential for fostering safe spaces. Key among these enabling factors were the intentional use of inclusive language and purposeful actions designed to instill a genuine sense of belonging. In light of students' previous experiences with negative repercussions when expressing opinions openly, the establishment of environments defined by comfort and acceptance proved fundamental to encouraging meaningful and respectful dialogue.

An example of this sentiment from Interviewee B was that the "safe space impacted their experience and made people share a lot of feelings." Another identified that, "It was nice that everyone is important here; everyone's opinions matter" (Interviewee L). This notion is further encapsulated by Interviewee C as well, who said, "It eliminated that feeling of differentiating between us. We are all one and want to contribute to enhance the experience of good humans in this society."

As part of the CC student facilitator preparation, faculty provided targeted guidance on establishing a judgment-free environment. This training equipped student facilitators with effective strategies, including the use of key phrases for developing discussion questions and techniques for steering conversations in a manner that actively includes and welcomes all perspectives and personal experiences. Facilitation preparation tools did not include a requirement or recommendation to share their own narratives to achieve this. Rather, they were encouraged to use probes and inclusive language to help guide the conversation and could include personal perspectives, respectfully, where desired if they felt it would be beneficial and were comfortable to do so.

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Facilitators were additionally encouraged to offer and promote alternative methods for students to provide feedback. For instance, each table was covered with sheets of paper to allow students to write or sketch their ideas for later reference. Cue cards and sticky notes were also made available, enabling students to select their preferred mode of communication to encourage their participation in discussions. These materials could be referenced during discussions or presented independently, should participants wish. Several facilitators interviewed observed that positive feedback contributed to a noticeable increase in participants' confidence, as the sharing of personal narratives fostered greater engagement and the respectful expression of honest perspectives.

It was important to recognize the significant interplay between the concepts of safe space and connectivity as revealed in the data. These two interdependent elements were discernibly portrayed and frequently identified as fundamental prerequisites, each contributing to the success of the other. For example, Interviewee D shared this sentiment, indicating a safe environment provided "a sense of belonging, where we feel represented and connected...Integration without divide or hierarchy or chain of command".

### **Listening Skills**

A willingness to listen is an essential element to successful dialogue which was apparent in the data. A key reflection from Interviewee B was around the shift in their ability and readiness to listen; "At first, I would listen and form a response in my head, then start realizing the need to hear them out and make sure to understand what they're saying." The practice of listening fully and waiting to formulate the response is an example of employing active listening

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tools to build safe and authentic dialogue. This allows a group to “figure out a wonderful solution through digging into healthy conversations” (Interviewee C).

Through the practice and implementation of active listening skills within a safe and connected space, students realized an expression of more authentic dialogue was possible and enhanced their overall experience. Interviewee H articulated this as, “We are all part of society and the community, and I really want to know what they think and open conversations” (Interviewee H). Interviewees further connected the sense of security within the CC environment with generating a comfortable presence; as stated by Interviewee I, “The entire process itself is kind of a nurturing environment I can surround myself in.” This supporting environment in turn allowed them to embrace and to dig deeper into more ‘intimate’ conversations, thus being more impactful. Interviewee B articulated this in saying, “We should listen and share in a safe environment allowing people to be comfortable and give their perspective.”

Participation in the CC facilitation program resulted in notable advancement of leadership communication skills among several students. One interviewee explained that “A leader's thoughts can influence people, so to develop my leadership approach, I will try to always be aware of other's feelings” (Interviewee F). Another interviewee noted, “It has prepared me to be a leader in the future” (Interviewee J). Interviewees elaborated further on the essential role of effective communication in facilitating dialogue, emphasizing the importance of participants comprehending and engaging with one another’s viewpoints in a manner marked by respect and consideration. The utilization of non-partial communication was distinctly noted as important. As leaders their role was “to listen more to people so others feel heard and really share” (Interviewee B).

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Multiple student leaders spoke of the value of deep listening and how this was a vital attribute for successful facilitation of compelling conversations. Active listening and deep listening skills are needed and commonly addressed topics in education and the workplace as they decrease tendencies to make quick inferences and jump to conclusions. The research indicated the CC workshops provided suitable circumstances to practice and apply this knowledge, or previously honed skills, in a vulnerable and unique format, “I opened the conversation to help myself and others listen more, as I didn’t always have that in my mental model (Interviewee K). In several quotes, it became apparent that the action of listening in an attentive manner became attached to realization that such behavior invited others to feel more comfortable and confident in sharing their stories and ideas. As shared by Interviewee B, who indicated they were careful to “listen to what others say and let them speak.”

### **Perspective Sharing**

Half of the student leader facilitators interviewed described the value they derived from critical perspective sharing through the CC workshop process. These student facilitators made a clear connection around an enhanced ability to consider various perspectives and the overall benefit in sharing individual’s insights to connect and grow. As perspectives shifted, students understood the situation and themselves in the context of others. One student shared how the experience gave them, “A perspective I hadn’t noticed before while learning other perspectives about what other people thought (Interviewee K). Another indicated they were increasingly drawn to other perspectives when their own was considered. A different student expressed this when indicating that once they were able to “put my perspective in it made me want to offer true insights and feedback too” (Interviewee A). Such sentiments suggest that as participants started

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to engage more honestly with the CC workshop topics, their intrigue around delving deeper and learning others' perspectives grew. Another interviewee observed, "You can't assume you understand everything just because you know something" (Interviewee K) This underscores the recognition that exchanging dialogue and perspectives within a secure environment encourages individuals to question their own beliefs and assumptions and highlights the ongoing nature of personal growth and learning.

There was an explicit recognition that an open conversation in search of innovative solutions does not require agreement. Rather, having differences enables a broader understanding and awareness which hence aids in considering the best solutions overall. Although it is not explicitly stated within the research whether interviewees possessed this outlook prior to participating in the CC workshops, the data indicates that they subsequently developed distinctive approaches to thinking, which are regarded as essential for fostering effective dialogue and enabling innovative solutions to social challenges.

It was apparent from the transcripts that, upon reflecting on their roles as facilitators in the CC workshops, students recognized that attentive listening and engagement with diverse perspectives led to a more profound understanding of the workshop topics. This notion was expressed in the following quote; "People do not agree 100%... people have reasons to have opinions, and the right to open up to learn from them" (Interviewee H). Some interviewees also expressed the importance of not pushing their personal biases onto others, demonstrating their recognition of how such actions could force the conversation in a less productive and authentic direction.

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In addition to considering listening to engage others in the workshop, one interviewee spoke to their desire to be in tune with themselves as well. One interviewee reflected on the importance of being attuned to their own thoughts and feelings in addition to engaging others through active listening within the workshop setting. This observation highlights the importance of self-reflection and the careful evaluation of one's own communication. It underscores the necessity of considering whether personal statements are expressed with clarity and intention, as well as ensuring that they can be accurately interpreted by others. As Interviewee L noted, it is vital to "understand yourself and what you are trying to say." An inference may be drawn between the imperative of self-understanding and the identification of one's inherent biases as they manifest within communication. This concept further complements the notion that attentive listening serves as a conduit for enhanced reflection and deeper self-discovery.

### **Critical Reflection Tensions**

Multiple students who took part in interviews reported facing challenges, which they were supported in addressing over the course of their growth as workshop facilitators. For example, some described the value of facilitator opportunity to overcome personal limitations, such as low self - confidence, or alleviating feelings of isolation. However, the data also indicated that challenges and tensions occasionally persisted, particularly during the dialogical critical reflection process in which students were confronted with their beliefs and assumptions.

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As students engaged deeply with diverse perspectives, some reported experiencing awkwardness, unease, confusion, nervousness, and occasional feelings of being overwhelmed. Recognizing transformative learning involves the presence of discomfort or struggles due to the profound shift in core assumptions and beliefs (Mezirow, 2003), this was not surprising. Deeley (2015) refers to these conflicting emotions as "productive tensions" (p. 160), emphasizing that both challenges and benefits emerge through a critical reflection process, as to face uncertainty of new perspectives encourages students to reflect on their prejudices.

The CC workshops provided a supportive environment where students were encouraged to move beyond their comfort zones to engage in sometimes vulnerable self-reflection and critical analysis of real-life issues from their lives. While these students were likely familiar with the community issues discussed, this was perhaps their first opportunity to examine them from new and sometimes conflicting perspectives. Students described the courage it took to confront unique and challenging elements of the discussions, which included encountering opposing viewpoints and questioning personal opinions they had held throughout their lives.

Real-world environments create unpredictable challenges that require students to adapt beyond standard classroom experiences. Deeley (2015), notes that service-learning can expose cognitive dissonance when students' assumptions are challenged, and Deeley (2010) observes that many students develop critical reflection skills for the first time during such activities. However, it is this opportunity for deep reflection which serves as an essential component of the process, acting as the crucial link between knowledge and its practical application within service-learning settings. (Deeley, 2015).

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In this reflective changemaking study, numerous participants articulated the resolution necessary to challenge their pre-existing ideas. They recognized the uncertainty of how the systems in which they function, as well as their roles within these systems, may diverge considerably from prior assumptions. Navigating this ambiguity facilitated personal growth and enabled collaborative development of more appropriate changemaking strategies based on an enhanced understanding of relevant local issues.

This process of grappling with ambiguity and complexity may have resulted in moments of discomfort, yet it was precisely through these challenges that participants reported experiencing meaningful transformation. As they collectively navigated the uncertainties inherent in critically reflective dialogue, students developed not only a deeper appreciation for diverse viewpoints but also an increased willingness to confront and adapt to evolving social realities. This journey was marked by a gradual shift from individual introspection to collaborative action, with students leveraging their newfound insights to co-create and collaborative solutions tailored to their communities' specific needs. In doing so, they advanced from merely questioning established norms to actively contributing to ongoing cycles of social change, illustrating the integral role of critical reflection supported by peer engagement in shaping empowered, adaptive changemakers.

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### **Resulting Factors**

#### **Growth**

The principal resulting factor derived from the semi-structured interview thematic analysis was the growth in personal and professional confidence. The growth identified encompassed both specific competencies, such as public speaking, strategic planning, and presentation skills, as well as broader abilities, including enhanced communication skills and a greater capacity to articulate one's thoughts with precision (Interviewee M). Additionally, students reflected on their development as leaders, noting how they implemented the facilitation techniques and tools acquired to encourage respectful participation

Several students emphasized the importance of reducing judgments and biases, recognizing that this approach significantly enhanced their ability to facilitate open dialogue and foster leadership skills. By establishing an environment where there are no absolute or 'correct' answers, (Interviewee A) facilitators created a space conducive to authentic engagement and collaborative learning. As one interviewee described, "Sometimes you feel alone or doubt yourself...Scared to mention certain things in case wrong or hurt someone" (Interviewee H).

The data manifested various levels of student growth that occurred during the CC workshops and often went beyond what students were accustomed to experiencing. Student leaders explained that through their participation as a facilitator, they were able to expand past their comfort level and achieved noticeable growth opportunities in multiple areas. Interviewee D noted that "Before [the CC workshop] I had anxiety and didn't get out of comfort zone." An

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apt quote by Interviewee F showcased an acknowledgement of stretching one's boundaries as a condition of growth; "When you're uncomfortable, that's when you are growing and that's when you will help with change in the world and to see human rights and equity, the social justice part of it."

Several interviewees revealed how they felt motivated to share their own stories and perspectives as a method to guide the conversation and demonstrate acceptance for openly expressing oneself in the workshop through authentic dialogue. Leading by example resulted in not only making the environment more comfortable for the workshop participants, but also for themselves by modeling the desired behavior. Interviewee C explained this well, that by "Trying to listen to more people so others feel heard and share, I learned leaders need to help others speak up and boost their confidence."

The environment and protocols of the safe space were clearly outlined and reviewed from the start of the CC activity establishing trust and an opening suitable condition for sharing. Students divulged that they felt secure to share their perspectives on the CC workshop topics they had developed as part of the preparation, and they felt open to learning and accepting alternative views in a manner that broke down barriers of defensiveness or holding onto limited opinions. The data analysis additionally discovered the emergence of the student opportunity to learn a new outlook during the CC workshops, prompting personal growth in leadership as a facilitator as they carefully enacted techniques to create a judgement free zone.

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### **Motivation**

It was heartwarming to recognize how the data revealed that the CC workshops significantly enhanced participants' motivation. Numerous student facilitators expressed a strong commitment to collaboratively seeking innovative solutions to social justice challenges, with the intention of achieving meaningful and lasting improvements within their communities.

The thematic analysis yielded trends around honest dialogue occurring within a safe space, allowing various perspectives to surface around social justice topics comfortably shared and activating agency. Such discussion helped a number of interviewees realize their growth and this created a resulting factor in motivation. Students registered "I can consciously do good" (Interviewee J) and therefore encouraged to search for areas of improvement regarding social issues that can be actioned upon (Interviewee D).

In recounting their experiences, interviewees employed language that directly reflected their activation as agents of change. For instance, Interviewee O2333 remarked, "I now feel like I should be part of that [initiative], to achieve something together. Students further noted that the structure and environment of the process stimulated their interest in taking meaningful action. One student leader specifically described the new sense of determination as a 'trigger point' that made them "want to participate in the future to prove we can make the change" (Interviewee J). Several participants expressed a heightened sense of commitment to becoming more actively involved in efforts to create a better future.

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Upon realizing they were not alone in their concerns, nor in their desire for change, many of these student leaders seemed determined to move ahead and make relevant changes accordingly. This phenomenon was described in affective terms as a ‘contagious’ desire to continue building communities of dialogue (Interviewee D) and to “help with change in the world...the social justice part of it” (Interviewee F).

The data further revealed how the CC workshop experience stirred energy, and for some had blossomed into a sense of promise, as well as an overall boost in confidence and clarity for their potential role as a changemaker. The experience made changemaking tangible with students being able to see themselves in the process. These developments and realizations allowed students to explore unique and optimistic new identities tied to changemaking initiatives in anticipation of more positive social initiatives. Aptly articulated by Interviewee D, who declared “I saw a different side of changemaking so I saw a place I could potentially fit and identify myself as a changemaker. Before I didn't tie my identity to a changemaker, it was more of a concept of someone to me.” Another student facilitator explained that they felt the experience brought “something different out of a person” (Interviewee E), demonstrating they could see how each person, all who have different perspectives and backgrounds, will in turn gain different skills, motivations, and learnings for such impactful work. With students feeling energized regarding social topics of interest, it stirred and motivated them to explore solutions, and in doing so gave them a reason to take the time for their individual personal growth.

### **Hope**

Expressions of positive emotion, particularly hope, emerged as significant outcomes in the research data. A thorough review of the semi-structured interview transcripts along with an

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attentive thematic analysis revealed that numerous facilitators consistently observed that many students shared similar views on the social justice topics discussed. Through their newfound deep connection resulting from genuine dialogue and reflection, several interviewees noted they felt a newly acquired sense of confidence in their own perspectives and place in their communities. Interviewees realizing they were not alone in their concerns around social topics created a positive emotional response, which ignited feelings of hope and inspired a sincere interest to engage in social action and changemaking leadership.

One interviewee articulated this in saying, “The experience really touched me and made me hope in the future” (Interviewee J). Another verbalized, “Now that we are identifying with it, and it's not just a script...We are passionate, and this spreads” (Interviewee D). Another example came from Interviewee H when shared how they were eager about future community improvement exclaiming “politics or communities, these kinds of things, little things, can change the community when we start these conversations, I believe that things can change. It gave me hope.”

Upon careful review of the statements pertaining to student hope, it became evident that multiple participants identified connections with additional themes such as communication and leadership. The interrelationship among these themes highlights the manner in which they mutually reinforce one another; for example, engaging in constructive and respectful dialogue is a foundational aspect of effective leadership and the ability to inspire collective action. Interviewee H, denoted this by saying “I want to make this world more positive...I now see a possible way as I am filled with positive energy and tools, it helps me know I can communicate and lead others.”

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Further to this, there was also a description on how this invigoration aided students to visualize the options for a viable positive influence for a better future, “When we have these conversations, I believe that things can change. Now I can believe and see these opportunities we can create” (Interviewee H). One student facilitator made an additional indication that such positive sentiment extended onto others, creating a cycle of motivation that often continued long after the event itself. Interviewee D articulated, “Since the [CC Workshop], I have been energized and this has spread into other spaces of my life. Slowly it starts that cycle for others when they get involved and talking, and the cycle spreads out... it makes me want to push more questions and take time to engage in conversation.” Aligned with this sentiment, interviewee D described how they felt immersed in the workshop process and motivated to now make meaningful change and become more involved in Changemaking. Corresponding with these observations, Interviewee D further conveyed that their immersion in the workshop process fostered a heightened motivation to pursue meaningful change and to engage more actively in changemaking initiatives.

### **Key Outcomes**

#### **Self-Reflection**

A dominant and particularly salient aspect identified within the data was the essential role of self-reflection in enabling and strengthening students’ motivation to engage in purposeful action. The interview data clearly indicated reflection was a substantial facet to the CC workshop facilitation experience. A significant majority—85 percent—of the interviewed student leaders

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recognized and valued the conditions that enabled them to engage in personal reflection during their facilitation experience. Participants discussed a process of introspection, through which they gained deeper insight into themselves and a heightened awareness of their realities and roles within that context.

When formulating their answers to the study's interview questions, the participants were able to reflect on how their insights or points of view may or may not have developed from their own personal assumptions. The CC workshop facilitation allowed for the "opportunity to see a side that was different" (Interviewee D). Several explicitly shared how they started to evaluate their unconscious biases and explore the root of their individual frame of mind; that they should "personally think while being a facilitator what your mindset or thought process is regarding the questions" (Interviewee C).

The welcoming environment of the workshops nurtured a sense of security for students to accept vulnerability, delve into reflecting on their own distinctive thoughts on the topic and stretch the comprehension of themselves and others. Students claimed they were able to expand their cognizance by hearing various sides of the CC workshop topics which helped them "reconcile" (Interviewee A) the differences presented and broaden their views. One interview participant described their experience as being one which they felt "Allowed to come out of my small thoughts" (Interviewee J).

Data indicated that personal reflection supported self-discovery amongst the students, allowing for what Interviewee G described as, "intrinsic exploration to explore myself and in some cases I didn't know I felt the way I felt", where another stated that, "I sat with myself to figure out where I was going with this knowledge (Interviewee I). A number of participants

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disclosed new personal traits they unveiled about themselves, indicating in the process; “helped me learn a lot about myself, I am more empathetic than I think (Interviewee H). Another was able to distinctly recognize “The way I feel comfortable talking with people is through my presence of who I am” (Interviewee E).

### **Critical Reflection**

To be able to connect with those who share similar realities, yet offer unique perspectives, attributed and enhanced the student reflection process. This favorable setting provided a new perspective for consideration, enabling students to engage in deeper introspection regarding the origins of their views on social justice workshop topics. Participants moved beyond surface-level issues, examining the broader systemic contexts in which these challenges are embedded and how they have evolved over time.

Interviewees described the CC workshop as a place where everyday situations and issues, relatable to their own lives, were critically considered and where there was space held to explore potential innovative solutions. One participant stated, “We are trying to find solutions to problems that we are experiencing, and that aspect is very helpful to help participants to engage in critical thinking” (Interviewee M). Eight of the thirteen students shared what they had critically reflected during the CC workshop experience. They described the necessity of posing thoughtful questions to deepen their understanding of underlying causes, emphasizing how enhanced discernment can inform the development of innovative plans and solutions to benefit their communities.

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The data reflected how the students who facilitated CC were agreeable to viewing topics in different ways to learn and improve their realities and those of others. Students expressed their openness to consider their thoughts and preconceptions more distinctly than what they had previously while noting their value towards their own unique perspectives. One student leader shared how they discovered they should put themselves “out there and think from that different point of view, as there are many varied responses and ways to solve an issue” (Interviewee M). Others indicated how they began to “think about the angle or thought process behind the issue.” (Interviewee C) while another student spoke specifically regarding the need to learn “how systems work, which made me think about what my point of view should be” (Interviewee J). Yet another participant described this as looking at social challenges from a different lens and how they differed from our assumptions of what those challenges might have been (Interviewee D).

The ability to challenge one’s own assumptions is an important development towards innovative thinking and problem solving, as without the ability to reconsider how something is from a unique angle, intractable challenges cannot be addressed. Similarly, critical understanding of social topics and their own realities within these topics was also mentioned. Some participants recalled the moment when they saw the world and the state of their place in it differently.

Such realizations serve as potent catalysts for young individuals; once one attains clarity regarding their position in society and appreciates their capabilities in alignment with personal values and perspectives, new opportunities for growth and contribution emerge. Recognizing the capacity to choose whether to act, as well as discerning the appropriate manner and degree of

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action, enables a more nuanced understanding of social engagement. Consequently, the concept of social action becomes both more approachable and attainable.

Equipped with a recognition of their individual perspectives regarding pertinent social justice topics, students emerged with realizations that enabled them to proceed with greater confidence and clarity of purpose. For example, interviewee H indicated that the facilitation experience “helped me learn a lot, and I want to tell everyone it will change their mind because it really did for me.” One interview participant described the moment that interrupted their reality as something that “shook me up and offered me insights where I had to now sit with myself to figure out where I was going to go with this knowledge and how I was to use it to be an efficient leader” (Interviewee I). Overall, the sentiment was positive, as students felt it was refreshing to look more profoundly into issues allowing for a better understanding of their place and role within their experienced realities. One student specifically shared that, “meaningful dialogue was welcomed” (Interviewee M), as it had been lacking.

As part of the CC process student facilitators were further probed with reflection questions during the debriefing sessions; however, to critically make meaning of their experience, they would have had to be comfortable and motivated to allow reflection to occur. The secure space and the heightened emotions which surfaced, such as the feeling of hope, allowed students to affirm that their thoughts and outcomes could in fact result in positive consequences. They were open to thinking critically and differently, realizing they had freedom and autonomy on a path to solutions and understanding. They felt the significance of their influence on proposed approaches and could visualize the positive impacts. The connectivity to a

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variety of perspectives, because of the CC workshops, further supported critical reflection of the topic at hand.

### **Self and Critical Reflection**

Of particular note within the data was the pronounced effect observed when students engaged in both self-reflection and critical examination of others' perspectives. This combination appeared to yield the most significant impact on their development. Out of the participants, 46 percent experienced a combination of both personal and critical reflection. In general, these participants expressed greater overall learning from their engagement in the CC workshops, often challenging their individual biases to consider more innovative approaches. Moreover, the data noticeably identified the experience of both self-discovery and critical reflection going beyond being receptive to new ways of learning for personal growth to instill a greater motivation for future action planning regarding the social topics discussed. This was appropriately depicted by Interviewee F, who noted the CC workshops allowed for "self-learning...each scenario brings something more out of a person. It's all about what people will now take away from it."

Upon review of the strong quotations within the data related to social action, it was captivating to determine most of the statements pertaining to either direct or indirect social action were pulled from these unique students who discussed a combination of personal and critical reflection. Participants who both self and critically reflected used language distinctly more driven to action in their interview. For example, interviewee A shared their reflection to, "expand and change myself, it helped me reconcile with bias and weakness" while also made direct reference to looking forward to "make a change." Interviewee D claimed to better identify with themselves and others upon reflecting on their experience facilitating the CC sessions and used the

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terms “fueled and energized” to describe their feelings for motivational action as well as the terms “spread and flowing” to explain the expansion of the social change movement they felt were now occurring since the workshops. Interviewee I described how reflection allowed for the opportunity to, “sit with myself to figure out where I was going with this new knowledge.” This same student leader then expressed strong action-oriented verbiage, using the phrase, “There is no stopping, there is more for me to get into now.” Another way that an interviewee directly expressed their motivation for taking social action was their recognition that, “I can put my mark in a task to give back. We are here to make a difference, make a change in the community” (Interviewee L).

Five of these same six interviewees shared the most notable emotional language attached to their experience; ‘promise’, ‘hope’, ‘inspiration’ and ‘empowerment’, which could be valued as emotions propelling them towards future orientated social action planning and engagement. Interviewee L was the one student leader within this reflection combination group who did not explicitly mention or refer to motivational feelings. However, although they did not directly indicate being motivated to engage in social action plans, they did express their desire to be become involved in positive change overall; “let me be part of that...we are here to make a change in the community.”

### **Non-reflection Combination**

It was similarly intriguing to note the distinctions of students who either reflected personally but not critically or vice versa. The data showcased five participants who recounted experiencing self-discovery with no strong reference to critical reflection. These same student leaders interestingly did not indicate any change in their mental model or thought assumptions during the

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facilitation process. They spoke about obtaining shared information successfully and an increased overall comprehension of the workshop's social justice topics, however, they did not directly indicate deep learning altering their personal perspectives.

Some of the participants in this group, noting areas of self but not critical reflection, touched on upcoming plans albeit without any clear mention of specific action or action related language. Others spoke of action but not in the future tense. For example, one student reflected on how sometimes, "small things can make a lot of difference on people's journey," and therefore it is important to "learn from our insights and improve in the future" (Interviewee B). Another attested to their role in generically helping themselves and others with their identity and sense of community as a changemaker. Although despite their role in this identity and community building, there was no particular social cause in mind; "Now that I see what a changemaker can be and in what capacity, I can tie it to my identify and can help students with that sense of identity building" (Interviewee D). This participant noted a generic desire and sense of potential to make a positive change in saying, "Now I realize it's a community of people that want to innovate and improve, not just let things be how they are (Interviewee D).

Another interviewee (G) indicated how taking time to reflect resulted in an "intrinsic exploration of myself," implying that they had learned more about themselves and may not of realized they felt the way they did. This same individual then expressed a newfound sense of confidence in themselves and for their future, as they would "decide to keep going when frustrated." They did not, however, express any future social engagement action or desired contribution to the community.

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The implication behind these findings suggests self-reflection to be a critical aspect to social action, although without a critical lens it would not stimulate a strong desire for engaging in social action. Rather, self-discovery is one of the areas of reflection required to drive social action planning.

Similarly, participants who described reflecting critically throughout their facilitation experience, yet did not express any self-reflection or self-discovery, lacked many drivers to fulfill action-oriented planning. The research data indicated these students were deficient in emotional responses to enhanced motivation for action as well as any notable deeper personal learning to trigger increased desire for future planning. For example, Interviewee F stated, “Tiny things said can make a huge difference and influence, now I can do something like this” however they did not share emotional triggers or motivational intentions towards future social action.

Another such student leader referenced an existing involvement in aiding a social cause, but without an indication of future-oriented plans, “I always remind myself to give back. We are here to make a difference, make a change in the community” (Interviewee L). Yet another participant referenced the future in general without pending action, “If I am able to become a leader in the future, this knowledge of different insights will help” (Interviewee J).

Overall, the data collected strongly indicated that a combination of self-discovery and critical reflection is what yields greater learning regarding social issues. This learning leads the students to gain confidence and emotions to motivate them to plan their own contribution to creating the social change they want to see in the future.

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### **Empowerment**

The second key aspect that undeniably arose within the research data was the importance of student empowerment when engaging student in changemaking and social action initiatives. The element of empowerment was noted both directly and indirectly through the initial informal feedback gathered during the action research cycles as well as throughout the interviews data collection.

The enabling elements and resulting factors described in the data outcomes above set the stage in support of an organic development towards a powerful sense of empowerment. As students experienced an increase in confidence, they were consequently able to engage in deeper reflection and meaningful personal development, thereby strengthening their capacity to trust in their own abilities and assume additional responsibilities related to social action. One student noted the increase empowerment when saying, "you have blocks, but you do it again anyways as you now know you can" (Interviewee C). It was also shared that true reflection is distinctly when one can, "pursue our mindsets", so they can "prove to the leaders and government how we will make the change" (Interviewee J).

Students also felt, "fueled by seeing other examples of what meaningful connection can look like" and described this feeling as "contagious when with like-minded students" (Interviewee D). Interviewee J noted they discerned a connection where they aspired to be more regularly connected with their new "intellectual friends" in the future. A bond developed and appreciation was expressed toward these groups throughout and following the knowledge-sharing process.

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**Students Leading Students**

The data analyzed explicitly identified that ensuring the conversations were planned and led by students, for students, contributed to a greater sense of overall empowerment. Although faculty and administrative guidance and support were consistently offered and provided during the workshop planning, as well as throughout the workshops themselves, it was the students who became the voice of the CC experience. Students themselves asked for this role as part of the follow-up discussions and through the action research cycle. This request and the willingness to alter the experience for student peers to lead student peers through critical dialogue unmistakably drove the data to be collected in a more student-empowered voice.

Moreover, the CC debriefing sessions held after each CC workshop allowed for the continued opportunity to examine students' insights and needs as facilitators while looking for continuous improvement around the planning for future delivery of the workshop model. Although tools, resources and support were provided from behind the scenes, it was the students themselves who directly developed the questions, led the discussions, supported student engagement, and who reflected on the learnings to then report on and plan forward. The CC model stimulated empowerment not only by facilitating student-led peer-to-peer dialogue, but also by granting students agency over the ongoing refinement of the process itself.

By assuming responsibility for leading the initiative, students naturally cultivated an authentic sense of ownership over the event and its potential outcomes, contributing meaningfully to the solutions developed. Having experienced this authority first-hand student facilitators themselves were then adamant that motivation could be activated through genuine

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student participation and insisted on this as a group requirement stating, “to give them motivation is to engage by involving them” (Interviewee I).

The CC workshops offered a place to directly deconstruct social challenges. Students shared how they wanted to know their worth in contributing to a solution and felt more confident to do so with autonomy and a reduced sense of fear of judgement from educational leaders, aptly described by I when they said, “Talking directly to other students to learn about their realities is important... you can empathize a lot because we have so many things in common in our perspectives in life”. It was additionally identified that with the facilitators being students, the student-to-student influence narrowed the power gap and bolstered the opportunity for dialogue and co-creation of their imagined better futures.

Power dynamics are an important cultural and social concept to consider in all initiatives, especially where critical dialogue could create a sense of vulnerability. Many cultures and individuals, shaped by their upbringing, may not experience an equivalent sense of security or openness when interacting with those who hold positions of power. It is important to observe a variety of interaction levels that may take place among those who possess a sense of lower or higher power position or status. A different set of boundaries to show respect should be enacted to fulfill what is understood by that individual as a more open and beneficial way to conduct themselves to obtain a more open and trusting environment. Interviewee L identified that, “Everyone is carrying a goal on their back and when the community hears your ideas, they give advice and insights - you get to learn, it is important they won't judge you, people want to be part of something and be heard.”

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By substantially diminishing the disparity in power through student-led and student-mentored CC workshops, participants were afforded a distinctly more comfortable and conducive environment for interaction. In tandem with this, the analysis indicated that student facilitators experienced a measurable increase in confidence through their active participation in the CC workshop process. This engagement fostered clear indicators of empowerment and enhanced their capabilities, as they gained valuable insights about both themselves and their peers.

The data obtained early in the initial action research cycle corresponded closely with insights derived from the interview findings. Informal student feedback strongly emphasized the necessity for students to assume a more active role in the process, not only to nurture empowerment from the foundational level but also to ensure a sense of comfort and value within the CC process. Students explicitly articulated their preference for peer-led facilitation, asserting that entrusting these responsibilities to fellow students would enhance the overall effectiveness and relevance of the initiative. The implementation of this feedback was incorporated in the subsequent action research cycles ensuring their preference for critical dialogue facilitated for students by students remained central to the process.

### **Fluidity of the Topics**

What was consistently evident in the research was the fluidity and interdependence of the elements, factors as well as key aspects of the research. Within the entire CC the process,

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connectivity and safe space for example, had a direct impact on individual willingness to reflect and on the ability to welcome consideration of alternative perspectives. The trusting relationship established among participants enhanced self-authority to transform personal perspectives. The implication for this finding suggests that a safe space is most effective when paired with peer collaboration, allowing students to work together with those they can easily related to.

Moreover, these factors necessitate that students advance their experience by engaging in both personal reflection and critical analysis during dialogues pertaining to social justice issues. Collectively, these elements foster empowerment by cultivating a sense of belonging and facilitating the development of new skills, increased confidence, and a transformative introspective regarding individual agency and capacity to effect meaningful change.

One participant articulated the interrelated nature of these factors, emphasizing the significance of engaging in collaborative reflection. They noted that such processes possess the capacity to foster meaningful transformation, both individually and collectively. Moreover, what was also noteworthy was how one interviewee aptly described this as a continuous cycle, “engage as well as you can, give them motivation to engage by involving them. It’s a full circle. There is no stopping, there is more to get into now” (Interviewee I). Other students similarly indicated this fluidity when describing how the CC process, “changes you, when seeing the consequences of so many minds...it changed my views, made me think about what my point of view should be” (Interviewee J). Another described this overarching significance of these interconnected elements stating, “shedding light on my views as they changed...as problems that affect people that would affect me in the future as well”. Interestingly, another interviewee also used the phrase ‘shed a light’ in reference to this changemaking experience and how they

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could now think about their mindset and thought processes differently (Interviewee C). The terminology around ‘shedding light’ implies a revelation, an acknowledgement of uncovering new information and learning within the intermingling of several factors that resemble the fluidity of light itself.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the outcomes of the thematic analysis were explored to demonstrate that communities of student-led, peer-to-peer, critical dialogue can activate agents of change, interrupting mindsets and inspiring changemaking leaders. Data from the research supported the intentionally designed compelling conversation workshops, as a process to engage and empower students in meaningful reflection driving a sense of purpose as a catalyst to impactful social action.

The research revealed that the outcomes from intentionally safe-space design of the CC workshops resulted in a natural pause from their daily busy lives. The CC workshops were three consecutive hours in total, with the facilitator’s preparations and debriefing sessions adding another three hours to their experience. For a busy student, three hours of time set aside can be considered a substantial interruption from their daily life and a break from their conflicting priorities. Careful inclusive facilitation guidance gave a sense of security to participants and the

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student facilitators alike, who helped each other overcome their self-doubt, anxiety, and hesitancy to speak their minds and provide honest perspectives.

The collaborative and inclusive peer-led experience strengthened the connection of ideas and decision making between the students at a grassroots level. Students shared how a student-to-student lens also contributed to directly enhancing their sense of understanding as well as their freedom to make and control choices in the process which supported momentum towards future engagement and action.

A key contributor to an increased sense of student empowerment was that students were given the freedom and responsibility of dialogue facilitation. This included the autonomy to generate the questions that drove the facilitators' engagement and growth. By having students lead the CC workshop, it narrowed the power gap and contributed to the safe environment. The workshops offered a safe space where participants felt comfortable to honestly deconstruct social challenges together. Autonomy in planning for and facilitating the workshops empowered students and facilitated momentum towards future engagement and action in social justice issues.

Becoming the architects of their own realities through critical dialogue facilitation allowed students to shift and take on the roles of main actors, aiding in the search for collaborative and innovative solutions. The CC workshop experience provided a supportive educational encounter arousing an appetite and offering the freedom to identify what is really at stake from not just a community and institutional perspective but also from their individual and peer relevance on the social issue on hand. Once this was clear, students broadened the lens to include the larger picture. Consequently, many felt energized by exploring their voice on the

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issue as well as being provided the autonomy and authority to act in a way that may or may not be calling for them to intercede.

Enabling elements and resulting factors identified among the data enhanced a unique opportunity for both personal and critical reflection. Reflection and empowerment were directly correlated as substantial elements of the CC workshops towards activating changemaking mindsets and leadership. The data showed how critical and personal reflection yielded deeper learning around challenging biases. Such learning enhances the acknowledgement that diverse perspectives are required to enhance innovative approaches and contribute to growth in personal leadership and confidence. Reflection, growth and mutual respect gained from the safe environment of the workshop culminated in increased conceptualization of one's own capacity and motivation for future social action. Students openly shared their newfound feelings of hope as a source of inspiration to engage in social action causes in the future and were provided an opportunity to enhance their changemaking leadership skills.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

### **Introduction**

Students are often disenfranchised from political and decision-making systems that impact their own lives. My research has shown that to become agents of change, students require opportune circumstances to empower one another through meaningful critical dialogue, both to reflect personally as well as on the structures which influence their realities. Guided through a student-led process of subjectification, students can learn to expand their personal understanding while developing a powerful sense of autonomy to enhance their interest and agency regarding social action initiatives.

My research reveals that student participation in conversational workshops focusing on topics related to relevant social issues can empower them to become agents of change, challenge existing mindsets and inspire future leaders. This directly supports social innovation efforts that are needed to be developed within education today. Additionally, my research contributes to leadership discourse by demonstrating that peer-to-peer student leadership is an essential mechanism to foster social engagement, generate collective solutions, and ensure the long-term sustainability of changemaking efforts and motivation.

In offering students' leadership roles within a reflective contemplative process, the CC workshops stirred critical hope amongst peers and resulted in an increase of student motivation towards collaborative action to improving social justice issues. Research participants openly shared in their interviews how their experience as a CC facilitator stimulated both their growth and confidence in leadership skills as well as transformative and innovative solution ideation.

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My investigation shows that fostering student engagement and ownership in social action initiatives is crucial for preparing students to navigate uncertain future challenges. The findings from the semi-structured interviews with students highlight a growth in confidence and leadership skill development. Empowerment and reflection in this context play a key role in strengthening student commitment and involvement in social action. Supporting these two key elements, student-led peer-to-peer academic initiatives can enhance connectivity and collaboration within institutions and communities. This provides a valuable peer-led foundation to enhance student motivation and their sense of agency to engage in broader and more sustainable change efforts.

### **Thematic Findings**

#### **Empowerment**

Student leaders from my study were supported in their request to obtain more active and responsible roles within a series of changemaking dialogical sessions. These student participants, interviewed for the purposes of this study, clearly divulged a variety of favorable outcomes from their roles as CC workshop facilitators and conveyed a strong interest in continuing their changemaking leadership positions, having developed an enhanced passion and motivation to work collaboratively with their peers to achieve meaningful social change.

Given the current emphasis on fostering authentic student engagement through innovative social education approaches (Astin & Astin, 2000), as well as the importance of genuine student

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involvement to incorporate the critical input of students into changemaking solutions (Atkins et al., 2020; Benz et al., 2020; Bates et al., 2019; Fallender & Brooks, 2022; Ho et al., 2015; Nemoy et al., 2018; Hurley et al., 2022), it is timely that my investigative study highlights and enhances the significance of nontraditional social action engagement models of leadership, particularly when focusing on social communities (Arminio et al., 2000; Bordas, 2016). Moreover, my research presents a distinct and supportive student-empowering process that can be effectively applied in various educational settings and encourages student to lead positive change both today and in the future.

### **Peer-led Rather than Adult-led**

To inspire changemaking leaders and activate agents of change, students must be empowered directly within changemaking processes (Komives et al., 2005; Barnes, 2014). My research substantiates this claim by illustrating how empowered student leaders act as catalysts for mobilizing their peers. This peer-led activation is not merely an auxiliary component of leadership; it is a foundational prerequisite for sustained engagement and long-term collaboration with adult partners. My outcomes substantiate the call that there is a need to move beyond traditional leadership frameworks that individual skill development (Dugan & Humbles, 2018; Bordas, 2016; Day et al., 2014), and where peer leadership is often undervalued in favor of hierarchical adult centric approaches. It instead reveals the opportunity for scholarship to more broadly examine how leadership is cultivated within educational spaces and shifts the direction recognizing the leadership potential in all individuals rather than limiting it to predefined roles (Nagda & Roper, 2019).

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While previous literature speaks to peer-to-peer engagement (Oddone-Paolucci et al., 2021; Nowell, 2022; Griffiths et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2021), my research outcomes demonstrate the benefit of investing in leadership models that empower student-led initiatives from the start as well as place emphasis on peer driven collaboration seen in leadership student agency models frameworks (Dugan & Humbles, 2018; Haber, 2011). It challenges the paradigm where student engagement is predominately through adult-led endeavors, where student participate in decisions and social action but under traditional adult supervision, and it underscores the necessity of dismantling traditional power structures. Moreover, it also supports the notion of peer interaction to provide notable influence and motivation during leadership development (Komives, 2005; Komives et al., 2011).

The previous literature has additionally identified partnerships between student and external stakeholders as meaningful for social transformation (Iwasaki et al., 2014; Arminio et al., 2000; Bordas, 2016; Marshall et al., 2021). Citing leadership responsibility as “sharing power and benefiting others” to “build community capacity and group empowerment” (Bordas, 2016, p. 70). My research findings expand on this logic and indicate that community engagement and empowerment may not prove to be sustainable without initial investments in student-led peer networks to establish a foundation of peer driven momentum.

Participating CC student leaders held autonomy in planning for and facilitating the CC workshops which they stated built momentum towards future engagement and action towards the social issues presented. They trained as workshop leaders, organized logistics, outlined guiding questions, selected locations, and prepared necessary materials. Moreover, it was the student leaders who determined the necessary materials and methods for gathering and capturing

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significant information for future references. Although they received guidance on maintaining inclusive and respectful conversations during the planning meetings, they were ultimately responsible for choosing strategies during the event. Upon the completion of the workshops these same leaders reviewed, debriefed and tabulated all the student information gathered to then set action plans into motion. Providing student leaders with these responsibilities and allowing them to make critical decisions offered them a sense of purpose intensifying the meaning of the engagement and connecting it to a sense of self as well as potential positive impact for their communities (Dougherty, 2011).

### **Critical Hope**

Student facilitators in CC changemaking workshops viewed their leadership experience as both authentic and significant. They reported feeling energized when engaging with their peers to positively contribute to social change. The empowering roles of the student leaders offered both personal and professional growth. Each student interviewed shared how they gained confidence across a variety of areas, and many exclaimed they were able to use this confidence to more successfully and openly share and discuss critical social issues and “by doing so, they could cultivate a passion and their potentials” (Iwasaki et al., 2014, p. 327). These student leaders noted that the roles as facilitators in the CC workshops encouraged new perspectives on societal, economic, and environmental injustices. The findings of my research indicate the confidence, leadership, and listening skills gained were essential for overcoming barriers to participation in decision-making on these same changemaking topics.

Furthermore, my research demonstrated that leading peers through reflective discussions helps student leaders develop purpose and a sense of hope, as when they can more freely express

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themselves, they are more open to trying new and positive activities. Students were able to “step into leadership roles as a way of acting on their hopes for a better community and thus a better life” (Nagda & Roper, 2019, p. 123). The CC framework demonstrated educational changemaking initiatives can support student empowerment to achieve positive social impact and can also counteract student feelings of being hopeless and overwhelmed concerning current world issues (Schwittay, 2023).

The results of my investigation indicated that to give students genuine hope and have them aspire towards changemaking, it is best to consider a progressive student-led approach where, “instead of teachers and the curriculum, learners and their learning are at the center” (Biesta, 2020 p. 91). Providing students with a peer-to-peer reflective opportunity regarding pressing social issues offered a way to balance complex realities while feeling a sense of solidarity. It allowed students to be confident and motivated yet comprehend the gravity and complexities of power structures and systemic barriers that can make change difficult to overcome. It offered a realistic assessment of the realities faced and yet allowed a way to stretch past challenges to envision a positive future (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Bishundat et al. 2018).

Multiple authors explain the significance of “cultivating and sustaining critical hope as an essential skill .... for leadership grounded in social change” (Bishundat et al., 2018, p. 96; Biesta, 2013; Van der Zee, 2022). My outcomes expand on this claim, noting the essential elements of student empowerment and peer reflection to drive and sustain hope in student movements. The literature invites teachers to “engage with openness towards the future that is radical but not endless” (Van der Zee, 2022, p. 765) and to then pass this ambition onto their students. My findings propose that establishing critical hope must prioritize students leading their peers

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through reflective discussions to stir connectivity and meaning as a foundation of hope in educational student changemaking initiatives.

Hopeful students believe in themselves and can search collaboratively for alternative plans of action as needed. They see their own conditions of possibilities and can connect planned actions to their ideal futures, motivating them to increase their engagement as they pursue their goals (Snow, 2020). With purpose and hope instilled, students are more driven to reconstruct realities and introduce innovative methods that enable growth in agency and action (Schwittay, 2023). After all, reparative hope for contemporary challenges requires transformative action. Students must be offered an educational experience beyond common deconstruction of an issue and instead be provided with opportunities of empowerment and hope to create solutions to the issue itself. An effective way to strive for this transformative action is through creating trust and mentorship amongst their peers.

### **Connectivity**

My research indicated that peer support and encouragement play a crucial role in enabling student to recognize and enhance their social action leadership. It provides students with the opportunity to connect on a personal level, encountering one another where they are at, fostering trust, confidence, and in turn motivation (Iwasaki et al., 2014, p. 324). CC student leaders found that through discussion of shared social concerns, they were able to build peer trust more effectively than traditional methods as it offered a collective peer networking problem-solving approach to leadership. Several studies suggest the need for leadership education to focus on how to understand complex problems that require collective solutions to sustain change (Bordas, 2016; Day et al., 2014; Dugan & Humbles, 2018; Soria et al., 2013). My research

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amplifies this recommendation by indicating the significance of connecting students under the helm of student leaders to host discussions in search of collective solutions.

Trust, being crucial for effective change (Brown, 2012), enabled genuine student exploration of issues' root causes and while supporting them to remain focused on desired future outcomes. Interviewees shared how they quickly learned that fellow participants carried similar yet varied views from their own, however they felt firmly unified in the commonly shared desire to combat the social justice issue at hand. This nurtured a genuine connectivity among peers and fostered a unique environment for open discussion of delicate topics as well as a sense of motivation to make positive impacts for their communities. Students noted the previous absence of meaningful conversations in their educational environments and were grateful for the CC workshops offering a platform for connection and active listening, building trust and reducing fear in sharing opinions and stories students felt an appreciation for their newly formed peer bonds and aspired to connect more regularly with these congenial and socially like-minded students as they craved further discussions to fuel their interest and allow them a place to converse without peer judgement.

The literature clearly identifies the power of student networking and connectivity (Dougherty & Clarke, 2023; Gauthier, 2003; Helferty & Clarke, 2009; Ho et al., 2015). However, based on my research, an inference can be made that building power through peer networking should focus on student-led peer-to-peer connectivity through grassroots student organization and collaboration. It is through this approach where students experience a more impactful connection that can generate student assurance and conviction to be inspired to make future choices and contributions.

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### **Student Choice**

My findings indicated that students in changemaking are searching for freedom to make their own choices regarding social action. Moreover, they demonstrated there is a much greater inclination for students to be socially motivated changemakers and influencers to their peers if offered the opportunity to directly lead social initiatives. Transformational discussions led by students offer guidance and motivation towards peers however it also offers a form of emancipatory teaching for the students in their own changemaking journey as it “leaves it to them to figure out what they do with what they may encounter” (Rawson, 2021, p. 76).

Students interviewed in my research shared how their facilitating experiences were notably meaningful as they were provided an opportunity for “making up their own minds and come to their own understandings – something which teachers obviously cannot do for them” (Biesta, 2021, p. 91). The level of leadership and influence within the CC facilitation experience renewed their sense of meaning and a connectivity to their student peers. These student leaders felt further empowered to make their own choices which stirred their interest to engage in and with the world (Biesta, 2020) through a changemaking lens.

### **Mentorship**

Insights from my research strongly indicated how student leaders can serve as powerful and effective mentors to their peers. As trust and relationships build over mutual understanding and interest, peer-to-peer mentorship can work towards a collaborative approach to promote participation in related social initiatives. Peer-to-peer mentorship is primarily viewed in literature as peer collaboration where students come together and encourage participation in educational initiatives (Sunderman et al 2022; Griffiths et al., 2018; Nowell, 2022; Hastings & Sunderman

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2019; Flores & Estudillo, 2018; Marshall et al., 2021). With CC student leaders reporting an informal peer mentorship role after the workshops, and suggesting a prolonged sense of interest in changemaking, my investigative results offer a differing lens to view student mentorship. One where mentorship is seen as a method to connect students, build trust and ignite reflective sharing, with the potential to activate and inspire one other towards changemaking and social action commitments.

Recent literature cites a sense of increased responsibility arises when “students transition from receiving mentorship to providing it” (Howland Cummings et al., 2023, p. 8). What remains undistinguished is the influence of relatable outlooks when students provide mentorship through reflection on social topics. My research contributes to this as it indicates that student leaders and mentors not only increased responsibility but also the passion to drive solutions forward. Furthermore, my research revealed that when student-led, peer-to-peer facilitation replaced teacher-led sessions on critical changemaking topics, student engagement and commitment increased. Student leaders grew more invested through planning, facilitating, and debriefing workshops, which fostered organic relationships and mentorship among peers. By redistributing power from educators to students, increased student enthusiasm to connect, influence others, and drive social action collaborations.

I would argue peer connectivity combined with student empowerment of leading and mentoring peers through social action engagement drives students to positive outcomes for social engagement and could offer an effective solution to address disconnection and apathy that overwhelmed students may be experiencing today. Genuine roles and responsibilities for students involved social initiatives are necessary to avoid forms of tokenism where decisions are

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still being made by educators (Dougherty, 2011; Howell, 2024) as genuine engagement enables student to exercise agency in determining their own future.

Although mentoring relationships with faculty or student affairs professionals are noted to yield significant collaboration and community participation outcomes, including developing capacity for socially responsible leadership (Campbell et al., 2012), deeper internal impacts such as consciousness of self and change are noted as a gap (Dugan & Komives, 2010, p. 538). My findings demonstrate that when students lead open dialogical initiatives with peers, they can easily become trusted mentors at a substantive and personal level by nurturing peer to peer self and critical reflection. Although the connection between generativity and mentoring using personal narratives has yet to be fully explored (Sunderman, 2022), my investigative results indicate this is a critical component to nurturing interest and student action in changemaking.

The changemaking literature discusses various forms of student mentorship primarily led by faculty or community leaders. Research indicates that intergenerational collaboration supports and enhances social action (Albright et al., 2017; Howell, 2024; Mills & McGregor, 2014; Zeldin et al., 2005; Bragg & Fielding, 2005) outlining a mutually beneficial relationship between students and older generations. Educators are identified as offering experience and decision-making influence, access to resources, and knowledge of processes and systems, while students advocate for more significant changes, which may be necessary in a rapidly evolving world (Dougherty & Clarke, 2023, p 7).

While current changemaking literature limits student to student mentorship to enhance student participation in activities for social impact (Schwittay, 2023; Shakesprere et al., 2020; Lorenzetti et al., 2019; Oddone-Paolucci et al., 2021; Nowell, 2022; Barnes, 2014) my research

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demonstrates how peer-to-peer mentorship can play a vital role in changemaking leadership and engagement. These findings can contribute to the changemaking mentorship narrative and guide it towards the positive opportunity to increase changemaking engagement when students lead their peers through social innovation reflective practices, particularly through the facilitation of dialogue on social critical topics.

### **Safe Space**

The CC workshop changemaking initiative provided students with time and space for peer-to-peer leadership, aimed at facilitating personal and critical reflection on social issues. The data from the semi-structured interviews indicated that the outcomes of the intentionally designed safe spaces in the CC workshops allowed a break from daily busy lives. Students opted to create a casual relaxed atmosphere, such as that of a café, for the in-person workshops, fostering an environment where participants could feel comfortable facing discomfort and recognizing differences as opportunities for collaboration (Haynes et al., 2022).

A sense of security and belonging was essential for fostering honest dialogue and reflection, which encouraged peers to engage in critical deliberation on sensitive topics. Facilitators employed active listening techniques to create an atmosphere of comfort and open-mindedness, sharing their own perspectives to promote participation. Additionally, carefully crafted inclusive facilitation guidelines provided a sense of security for participants and student facilitators alike, enabling them to overcome self-doubt, anxiety, and hesitation, thus encouraging candid perspectives. By having students lead the CC workshop, the power gap was narrowed, as peers are less intimidating (Marshall et al., 2021) which further contributes to a safe and inclusive environment.

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Adequate time, along with a safe for open dialogue, are both required to allow students to work through the realities of social issues through deep reflection practices. In analyzing Biesta's (2020) subjectification, Kirby and Webb explain how it is critical to make room for students to make sense of the world around them and their place within it. Hence slowing down offers an opportunity to "meet the real of the world, and to meet themselves and one's own desires in relation to what is real" (2021, p. 98).

Although current literature highlights the increased necessity for student critical reflection (Schwittay, 2023; Heberle et al., 2020; Fullam, 2017), there is limited emphasis on the intentional investment of time and creation of safe spaces required to facilitate the successful sharing of perspectives needed for meaningful reflection. Afterall, safe environments that allow students to embrace their differences and become comfortable with discomfort are essential for fostering true collaboration (Haynes et al., 2022). Furthermore, while some literature supports the establishment of a comfortable learning environment for educational practices (Abbot et al., 2018, referenced in Marshall et al., 2021, p. 90), it often assumes that educators define and organize these spaces (Kirby & Webb, 2021; Clark & Seider, 2017). My findings challenge this assumption, as my data clearly indicated the importance of allowing students to establish a space that is most suitable for them, thereby enhancing their willingness to actively and openly participate.

The comfortable, collaborative and inclusive peer-led experience of the CC workshops strengthened the connection of ideas and decision making between the students at a grassroots level. A safe space was required so participants felt comfortable sharing personal viewpoints and deconstructing social challenges together honestly. Students determined a more casual student-

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to-student lens also contributed to directly enhancing their sense of understanding, their confidence, as well as their autonomy to make and control choices driving future engagement and action.

### **Dialogue**

My research demonstrated that encouraging student to lead and engage in dialogue supports reflection and leadership development in education. Fostering dialogue across differences enabled CC student facilitators to directly impact leadership by engaging in enriching societal conversations with peers, fostering collective leadership towards innovative solutions.

Integrating discussions into initiatives such as changemaking workshops helps students connect, explore diverse topics, rethink limiting perspectives and consider harmful social dynamics. Student reflective dialogue facilitators learnt that by modelling leadership attributes, they offer a safe space and develop skills beyond their comfort zones. Study participants realized their potential through this process, boosting their confidence and empowerment. They found that reflecting and engaging critically and personally with their peers helped their peers step out of their comfort zones and challenged “assumptions to unlearn dominant systems of knowledge and to decenter themselves as experts” (Kapoor, 2004, p. 641). Reflective dialogue within the CC workshops demonstrated to be a relationship building tool working towards deeper understanding, mutual respect, and empathetic connection between participants.

By whom and how the dialogue was facilitated, as well as deep listening, opens the door for student to develop empathy for the unique perspectives of their peers, and provide students with a circumstance to lead one another through real life situations into real life solutions. Through these authentic discussions, the distinction between students and facilitators became

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less pronounced, fostering both a sense of hope and a collective aspiration for meaningful social change as students naturally assumed leadership responsibilities.

My findings confirm that when students lead reflective dialogical educational experiences, they can be empowered to guide and inspire their peers through meaningful transformational discussions. This demonstrated that such forms of dialogue can also extend their benefits beyond leadership attributes and offer the potential to foster interest and responsibility for social action. Furthermore, my outcomes indicated the potential for dialogical practices to support the subjectification of students. Through student-led reflective dialogue, students are given space to view themselves in their local and global communities and make their choice to act or not act accordingly. Subjectification engenders the use of dialogue to “articulate one’s own voice” while “listening to the voice of others”, that dialogue is “not an individualistic project of personal formation without human responsibility” (Bakker & Montessori, 2016, p. 37-39).

Dialogue contributes to a space where diverse insights and beliefs can be explored openly to actualize new and unexpected possibilities (Van der Zee, 2022). Problem posing education supports student’s voices to bring about critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), therefore it would seem logical that the primary voices in reflective dialogue practices are of students being facilitated by other students. With critical dialogue it is essential for developing leadership skills and stamina to address social issues, it underscores the importance of changemaking education institutions in fostering these skills and enabling sustainable action. Providing students with an explicit role in facilitating dialogue for problem-posing education advances their voices as well as critical consciousness. Moreover, by allowing students influence and ownership of

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changemaking activities where they critically reflect with their peers, models such as CC support can allow student leaders to become their own subjects, who are collaboratively, creatively and critically empowered to discover social alternatives.

The existing literature recommends that teachers make room for subjectification through opinion-provoking questions prompting ‘reality checks and genuine reflection (Van Balen et al., 2022). However, my research was able to advance these thoughts as it indicated positive results through reflection are intensified when students are allowed to create their own thought-provoking reality, their own deep reflective questions and then successfully lead their peers through compelling conversations.

What is common in literature is the encouragement of open dialogue of students in education (Van der Zee 2022; Van Balen et al., 2022; Schwittay, 2023; Kapoor, 2004), yet my investigations results confirm it is imperative that students are actualized as leaders in educational dialogical experiences. Students want to connect personally with their peers, leading conversations and reflecting on their shared realities without direct teacher involvement. This allows for deep reflection, both personally and critically, which can be used to overcome their fears to move innovative solutions into action.

While various forms of open dialogue offer considerable advantages to young people, when such dialogue is predominantly facilitated by educators, it may overlook the profound potential of fostering deeper peer relationships. These connections enhance understanding and diminish hierarchical dynamics, thus enabling the emergence of more meaningful solutions and a stronger sense of commitment among participants.

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Authors such as (Van Balen et al., 2022) have outlined strategies to reduce teacher intervention, thereby ensuring students engage directly with one another during class dialogue activities. However, even when creative praxis facilitates a non-prescriptive dialogical environment, offering future-making discussions beyond typical pedagogy or classroom environments, reflective dialogical learning in today's educational organizations is ultimately guided by educators (Schwittay, 2023).

There is an understanding that distinct pedagogy and educational strategy is of value to permit deeper more impactful student reflection through dialogue, yet what my research outcomes offer is that new educational models should not only prioritize students in the dialogical reflective process but empower them to lead this process with their peers directly.

### **Reflection**

My research highlighted the importance of student reflection in social action engagement. Reflective changemaking initiatives can help students critically assess social issues and decide how to enact positive change. The CC changemaking workshops created environments for open conversations and deep listening, fostering self-discovery and the understanding of others' viewpoints. The sharing of common and contradictory views promoted a broader understanding of social topics alongside individual and collective growth. By supporting and mentoring their peers, the CC facilitators were able to more profoundly reflect on their beliefs and synthesize learnings, enhancing their analytical skills. They learned to identify influences on their perceptions and how their viewpoints 'filter experience' (Rawson, 2021, p. 88) for meaningful future social action.

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Critical reflection can risk student unease as they navigate and adjust to considering realities beyond their own restricted perspective. However, within the CC workshops, students found themselves in a peer-led, collaborative environment that supported the challenging of assumptions and facilitated the collective interpretation of such complex social realities. Feelings of discomfort, often arising from exposure to unique and opposing viewpoints, was not merely incidental but formed the foundation for critical growth. Through facing these challenging moments students could choose to transition into active and motivated changemakers through the support of their peers.

Reflective dialogue is not simply a private contemplation; rather, it is a collaborative process dedicated to making sense of multifaceted social realities. Serving as a vital bridge between learning and action (Deeley, 2015), reflective dialogue encourages the integration of diverse perspectives and supports transformative learning. The discomfort that emerges from confronting contrasting opinions is an essential element, driving students towards deeper levels of growth. Based on Freirean principles, dialogue is regarded as an intrinsically human process that necessitates qualities such as respect, openness, and trust in others. When students participate in critical reflective discussions, they develop increased social awareness, which equips them to address social challenges more effectively. This approach, albeit filled with potential tensions, can offer the opportunity to cultivate a collective sense of purpose and encourage sustained engagement in changemaking.

As students deepen their commitment in student-led reflective dialogue, they begin to embrace the complexities of transformational learning. Risks associated with critically dialogical processes can be overcome with support from their peers in a trusting environment and there is

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suddenly opportunity to see social issues not as obstacles but as opportunities for personal and collective advancement. The encouraging structure of the CC workshops, grounded in principles of mutual respect and authentic engagement, supported the empowerment of students to transcend any initial discomfort and unease experienced through profound reflection and channel these experiences into meaningful changemaking efforts. This ongoing process not only strengthens their ability to collaborate and think critically but also offered the groundwork for developing a resilient, community-oriented mindset.

By establishing trusting relationships with their peers through sustained workshop interaction, students cultivated the confidence to challenge existing paradigms and envision innovative solutions, reinforcing their roles as proactive contributors to positive social transformation. Much like service-learning and community-learning programs that emphasize critical reflection, this study gives student leaders the chance to earn trust and help their peers navigate challenges and uncertainty, ultimately leading to fresh insights about themselves and the issues they face. As students move deeper into sustained dialogue, they are not only equipped to navigate moments of uncertainty and resistance but also empowered to channel these experiences into constructive action.

The significance of student critical reflection in education is noted across literature (Schwittay, 2023; Diemer & Li, 2011; Heberle et al., 2020; Fullam, 2017; Seider et al., 2016). Authors have investigated critical reflection aligning it with student involvement in the analysis of data (Seider et al., 2016) as well as in the analysis of community conditions (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005). My findings broaden this position and demonstrate how students enhance their own and each other's learnings through “critical reflection on their own positionalities” (Schwittay,

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2023 p. 8). Reflective thinking driven by student leader facilitation, not only supported student-driven innovative solutions to organically develop with diverse perspectives in mind, but it also showcased the truth and complexity of the current and future social realities (Nagda & Roper, 2019) through ensuring a variety of student perspectives were openly shared. When students are asked to address pressing social concerns, it is important they embrace uncertainties, rethink their beliefs as well as the existing order of the situation to discover new possibilities.

Although academic literature encourages students to critically reflect and share their lenses regarding social issues (Nagda & Roper, 2019; Schwittay, 2023), my findings suggest that when reflection is led by students, it significantly deepens the peer to peer sharing and thoughtful process stirring motivation for action. Despite any feelings of uncertainty it may generate personal and critical reflection on pertinent social topics has the potential to drive students towards long term social action and changemaking engagement, but this reflection is best propelled by students and amongst students.

By anchoring their growth in collaborative reflection and critical dialogue, students can emerge as resilient, innovative leaders prepared to shape their communities with purpose and hope, underscoring the significance of student agency and peer support in driving sustained social transformation. The student led peer environment, emphasizing trust and collective engagement, helped students engage with the newfound tensions and shift from individual introspection to shared problem-solving, mirroring the transformative outcomes seen in service-learning models. This progression sets the stage for the broader impact where student-led initiatives are recognized as central to advancing knowledge of student leadership in changemaking.

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### **Conclusion**

My research outcomes offer distinct opportunities for educational institutions interested in increasing social action for student leaders in changemaking. The data obtained in my study contributes to student leadership learnings, specifically aligning with the themes of critical dialogue and hope. It additionally offers distinct insight into the value of student-led peer-to-peer dialogue facilitation, which nurtures critical and personal reflection while fostering student empowerment.

It was through action research student feedback that the CC workshop process balanced out the power dynamics of changemaking initiatives. Student-led peer-to-peer workshop facilitation resulted in the ability for students to engage more openly, increasing their sense of belonging and empowerment while expanding their understanding of the various aspects of the local social issue presented. Once MC students were offered the opportunity to lead their peers through reflective learning around social issues, they gained confidence in their skills, meaningful connectivity to other students and an overall sense of promise for influencing their own future. Furthermore, by reflecting personally and critically on relevant and timely changemaking topics student leaders raised their consciousness and developed a sense of self within the world to make informed decisions regarding potential changemaking action. Despite any feelings of uncertainty or being overwhelmed through this process students had one another to trust, to learn from and to drive forward their new perspectives towards changemaking action planning.

My research revealed that student leadership in changemaking dialogical workshops empowered students to move quickly from the roles of workshop facilitators towards agents of

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change who challenge mindsets, interrupt realities and inspire future student leaders. Their peer-to-peer leadership experience broadened their sense of influence and offered them a sense of hope and fueled their interest in positive social change. Becoming architects of their own realities and having the freedom to make their own choices allowed these students to adjust and become primary players in their learning, ultimately establishing roles essential for searching for collaborative and innovative solutions. Results also demonstrated that through the collaborative leadership process, students can organically become motivated to informally mentor their peers and often wish to stay connected and engaged with them for future social action changemaking experiences. This mentorship allowed students to more clearly realize their changemaking potential overall.

Current literature around student leadership, critical pedagogy, critical hope as well as the use of dialogue, and reflective practices in education, indicate there is movement towards emancipation of students in support of their engagement in social change initiatives. These academic measures support the move of educational initiatives away from what Freire describes as the “banking education” (Freire, 1970) model. Whilst a strong focus currently remains on pedagogy and the personal growth of educators to assist students, my investigative outcomes after a deeper understanding of the value of enhancing student empowerment within reflective learning processes themselves. Such an approach advances the academic position for student social engagement beyond evaluating the crucial role of teaching as we know it and directing it towards the students being their own “subjects” (Biesta 2020) of their growth, directing their learning experience through empowerment, and guiding their own decisions through reflection and peer collaboration.

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Academic settings are powerful tools to offer empowering opportunities for students. However, circumstances must intentionally allow suitable time and space for students to develop as leaders, who can then inspire and engage their peers. It remains common practice today for student leadership education and changemaking initiatives to hold educators responsible and at the forefront to drive student changemaking engagement, but my recent investigation suggests there is a valuable opportunity to move towards a more empowering student lead approach.

The intentionally designed CC workshops effectively engaged and empowered students, fostering meaningful reflection and a sense of purpose, and acting as a catalyst for impactful social action. Allowing students to organize and lead the process developed their critical consciousness and gave them the freedom to decide on future student engagement in changemaking initiatives. Freire views education as a space for social change through problem-posing education, supporting students' voices to foster their conscientization (Freire, 1970). This research establishes a changemaking model that encourages students' voices to enhance critical consciousness in education, building student leadership and supporting student liberation.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

This research study investigated the influential role of student-led, peer-to-peer dialogue in fostering leadership for social change within post-secondary education. It highlighted the need for innovative educational models that engage students meaningfully in social justice and civic matters. The findings emphasized the value of integrating reflective and empowering strategies into educational frameworks to support student leadership development and encourage sustained social involvement.

This concluding chapter provides an overview of the significance and context of the present study. It further details the investigation's limitations and identifies prospective avenues for future research. The chapter closes with an analysis of potential implications for educational policy and practice.

### **Contribution of the Study**

This study directly contributes to the understanding of student leadership in higher education changemaking initiatives and explores student-led peer-to-peer reflective dialogue as a tool to enhance student motivation and involvement in changemaking action. Current scholarship frequently addresses instructional strategies for student social action (Dugan & Humbles, 2018; Nagda & Roper, 2019); and often assumes educator leadership roles through this process. However, this study underscores the significance of empowering students to lead their peers

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through reflective dialogical transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990; Biesta, 2013; Van Balen et al., 2022; Poulter & Castillo, 2022; Nagda & Roper, 2019).

Moving beyond traditional teaching models, the study stresses the importance of environments where students direct their own growth by making thoughtful decisions and collaborating productively with other students. Creating a supportive environment that emphasized trust and belonging encouraged open conversations and honest sharing. In secure and trusting spaces, students were more inclined to engage in meaningful discussions, sparking the opportunity and support for both critical thinking and personal introspection. This atmosphere laid a foundation for exploring ideas, challenging assumptions, and learning collaboratively. Furthermore, core values of critical pedagogy such democracy, community, and analytical reasoning shaped innovative ideas at the CC workshops.

Emerging literature suggests peer-to-peer collaboration on social justice topics should be integrated into curricular and extracurricular changemaking activities. (Oddone-Paolucci et al., 2021; Nowell, 2022; Griffiths et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2021). This study advances the existing knowledge in the field by underscoring the need for institutions to go beyond student participation to create opportunities for student-led dialogue paired with both critical and personal peer reflection for empowering student agency in social change.

Grounded in Paulo Freire's theories of critical consciousness and hope, the CC workshop model can help students explore just futures, boosting student self-efficacy and encouraging meaningful student societal contributions. Progress in collaborative student leadership, especially in critical dialogue and hope-building, depends on giving students time and space to develop as social leaders. Informal peer mentoring fuels intrinsic motivation and trust within changemaking

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contexts. When students are active co-creators in critical pedagogy rather than passive participants, they begin to realize their potential and motivate one another as leaders and changemakers.

As these student leaders are nurtured through intentional support and opportunities for authentic engagement, they not only deepen their understanding of collective action but also foster a culture where diverse perspectives and shared aspirations drive transformative change. This gradual development, anchored in student-leading peer dialogue and collaborative learning, empowers students to move beyond passive acceptance and actively shape their educational environments. By embracing the complexities of leadership and social responsibility, students can become catalysts for social action, modeling how reflective dialogue and mutual encouragement can inspire sustained commitment to social innovation and community improvement. This dynamic approach to student leadership encourages educational institutions to further integrate student-driven initiatives, reinforcing the importance of autonomy, agency, and critical hope in cultivating future changemakers.

By focusing on student-led activities as central component to changemaking, the study demonstrated how peer collaboration and dialogical engagement can transform educational settings and experiences. Empowering reflective student-led peer to peer practices enabled students to willingly challenge traditional power structures, examine dominant narratives, and devise creative solutions to social challenges. The greater sense of hope, autonomy and responsibility fostered critical reflection, mutual respect, and collective agency. Ultimately, the integration of student led peer reflective dialogue can foster and inspire changemaking

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engagement and action, encouraging educational institutions to rethink student leadership and participation in this area.

The transformative learning approach employed in the CC workshop facilitated collaborative analysis of local challenges to inform and inspire student-led action planning. Participants were prompted to critically evaluate prevailing practices and question established perspectives, enabling them to develop innovative solutions tailored to their communities. Even when faced with potential discomfort of deep reflection processes, many students cultivated a strong dedication to themselves and their peers in making constructive contributions toward positive social change in their communities.

Critical hope, alongside critical consciousness, helped students confront challenges with a focus on equity and justice. As their perspectives shifted, so did the social contexts around them, driving both personal and societal change. Students discussed how these experiences altered their self-image and views of their environment.

Building on these findings, it becomes evident that fostering environments where student leaders can exercise autonomy and engage in purposeful peer collaboration is essential for sustaining momentum in changemaking efforts. When institutions prioritize structures that encourage ongoing student-led peer reflection and support, they lay the groundwork for a ripple effect where empowered students inspire their peers and cultivate a shared sense of ownership over social issues. Therefore, by embedding student leadership and agency at the heart of changemaking processes, educational institutions can foster ecosystems where innovative ideas and collaborative problem-solving become the norm. As students gain confidence and develop a nuanced understanding of collective action, their ability to innovate and enact meaningful change

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is magnified, highlighting the profound impact of centering student voices and agency in the pursuit of changemaking and social transformation.

### **Conditions of the Study**

When evaluating the contributions of this study, it is essential to consider the broader context of its implementation. Conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, both the data collection methods and the experiences of participating students were likely affected by external circumstances. Variables such as increased isolation, elevated anxiety levels, and impacts on mental health may have influenced the findings.

Although initially planned to be held in person, semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually to adhere to safety protocols and comfort levels during the pandemic. Despite initial concerns of online interviews potentially compromising the personal nature of a semi-structured format, it became clear that the virtual environment was able to support the conversational and exploratory approach beneficial to qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Ultimately, the virtual setting for the interviews was preferred by students and proved effective regarding their adaptability and adherence to safety measures during this unprecedented period in modern history.

Engaging in one-on-one meetings with students within a constructive and investigative context proved to be a valued and highly rewarding experience. I felt privileged to witness, as well as to support an opportunity for student reflective and developmental growth. This experience strengthened my confidence in the potential of student advocacy and their future

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contributions, while prompting me to consider the parallels between their growth and my own experiences as both a student and a leader.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of college students in Canada; however, certain limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. One notable limitation concerns the timeframe for post-workshop reflection. While critical reflection is integral to enhancing student learning and informing future actions, not all participants were afforded structured opportunities to reflect promptly following their facilitation experience. Several students juggled heavy schedules and hence requested to delay their reflection, which required reliance on longer term memory and could have resulted in more surface-level insights or selective recall. This became evident when comparing the quantity of details in the reflections among those who journaled or debriefed promptly after the event, versus those who participated in delayed post workshop debriefs. It is recommended that future implementations of the CC workshops incorporate structured reflection activities both directly after each workshop to capture immediate participant perspectives, and again several weeks later to facilitate more comprehensive, long-term reflection.

It is also pertinent to acknowledge the variability in the student facilitators' foundational knowledge of changemaking as well as the overall structure of the CC workshops. For instance, many student leaders facilitating the workshops had limited exposure to the CC process beforehand, which may have affected the quality of facilitation, initial comfortability, and the

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depth of discussion. Conversely, others had participated in previous changemaking workshops as participants prior to moving up to holding a leadership role. This variability was evident during the data collection, where some interviewees referred to holding both roles and drew comparisons between them. Moreover, the extent of changemaking experiences was distinguishable during the coding process of the thematic analysis as this was when thematic differences emerged between differing groups.

### **Future Research**

The findings of this study highlight several promising avenues for future research aligned with the notable influence of student agency and changemaking initiatives. Pursuing these areas may substantially enhance the literature around understanding how student-driven critical and generative social action educational practices can be supported and extended.

#### **Students as Participants and Facilitators**

A significant direction for future research involves evaluating the extent to which student facilitators, who articulated an increased motivation to participate in social action, pursue these intentions beyond a student-led reflective workshop. Programs such as the campus garden at the University of Sussex, where the responsibilities are passed from one cohort to the next (Schwittay, 2023), offer similar unconventional mentorship opportunities.

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Although many of the participants in this study indicated a heightened sense of civic responsibility and a stronger drive to support social change, including future changemaking initiatives, it is unclear how these intentions are realized over time. Longitudinal studies could systematically track participant progress and examine the various factors that either hinder or promote continued engagement in social action and the lasting influence of changemaking experiences. Similarly, subsequent studies could provide important insights into the changemaking experiences and developmental processes of young people as they progress into adulthood.

Another promising avenue for future research is the assessment of outcomes among students who evolve from a participant role to that of a facilitator role in subsequent student-led peer-to-peer CC workshops. Further exploration of this role transition may yield meaningful insights into peer leadership development, growth in confidence, identity formation, and student empowerment. Additionally, future studies could examine how transitioning from participant to leader affects students' sense of responsibility and sustainable motivation for driving social change, as my research found those who took on the facilitator role embodied a mentorship style rapport with participants.

### **Peer Connectivity**

Further research into the role of peer connectivity in facilitating changemaking, as well as the potential benefits of peer-to-peer mentorship beyond reflective workshops, may present valuable avenues of inquiry. Establishing and solidifying informal opportunities for connections as well as more formal mentorship relationships among peers could yield important insights into fostering relationships critical for student social action engagement and be utilized to support

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sustainable student participation in changemaking initiatives. As noted by Sunderman (2022), future studies could also involve follow-up interviews with students engaged in mentorship programs to learn how their experiences affected their ‘transition into adulthood’ (p. 17).

### **Generativity, Hope and Reflection**

Another area meriting further inquiry concerns the role of peer-led reflection processes in fostering generativity and critical hope. Analyzing the influence of peer-facilitated reflection on relational dynamics, in contrast to conventional educator-led methods, may provide valuable insights into whether collective meaning-making fosters hope and promotes social justice for future generations. Examining the ways reflective pedagogies promote resilience, agency, and visionary thinking among students (Domínguez & Cammarota, 2021 as cited in Howell, 2024; Schwittay, 2023) could provide valuable insights and inform the development of more holistic and empowering educational frameworks for changemaking and other social action initiatives.

Finally, future research may aim to explore factors that limit educators' ability to grant students increased autonomy in their educational experiences (Bishundat et al., 2018). Given the positive outcomes linked to student-led learning environments (Bovill, 2019), it could be beneficial to evaluate institutional, cultural, and individual pressure and beliefs that can influence educational decisions, as these may inform professional development initiatives and broader systemic reforms. Future investigations may also investigate how school policies, accountability standards, and assessment frameworks influence educators' capacity and motivation to adopt and implement innovative co-creative learning and instructional strategies (Bovill, 2019; Bron et al., 2016) that promote student engagement in social action.

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## **Implications for Policies and Practices**

### **Curriculum Design and Pedagogy**

The student-led workshop methodology and its implementation format, as described in this study, provide several recommendations for educators seeking to promote sustainable student-led changemaking within post-secondary pedagogy, as well as for those who wish to support students in co-designing social action initiatives.

Highlighting the importance of authentically integrating student voice beyond simply taking student perspectives into account is crucial in any changemaking initiatives. This requires students to be actively involved throughout planning phases, training activities, and debriefing sessions. Both informal and formal feedback should be consistently solicited, duly recognized, and addressed promptly, with transparent communication of responses and insights. These contributions must then be systematically incorporated into comprehensive debriefs (The University of Edinburgh, 2024).

Integrating reflection throughout each stage of student changemaking initiatives is essential, as it deepens personal understanding of the subject matter while also creating an environment where student feedback is valued as key drivers of ongoing improvement. This process can help drive meaningful student engagement through demonstrating how students can contribute both change and improvements (Iwasaki et al., 2014), which in turn can help ensure sustained student engagement in achieving meaningful social impact. Effective workshop preparation for student facilitators will depend on deliberate efforts by faculty mentors to actively support comprehensive reflective debriefing stages following the entire workshop

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design, as well as providing sustained reflective guidance throughout the ongoing development of these workshops.

To enhance the effectiveness of student dialogical reflective practices related to social justice issues, it is strongly advised to empower students by providing early and frequent leadership opportunities such as facilitation roles in reflective opportunities. Student changemaker leaders should be allotted sufficient time to foster peer connections, participate in peer dialogue and reflection, and develop confidence necessary for successful leadership roles.

Demonstrating a sustained commitment to student changemaking leadership opportunities should be regarded as a key priority, with these leadership experiences fully integrated into both formal and informal academic settings (Arminio et al., 2000; Bordas, 2016). Additionally, offering micro-credentials in changemaking leadership, or recognition through awards and digital badging, may further raise awareness of changemaking opportunities and serve to motivate student leaders by formally acknowledging their dedication and effort (Mitchell-Ashley et al., 2024; Prud'homme-Généreux, 2023).

Students who aim to become changemaker leaders are advised to initially participate in initiatives as attendees. This approach enables them to develop a thorough understanding of the process, gain valuable insights, and build the confidence needed to enhance their leadership skills. Furthermore, providing opportunities for student leaders to mentor their peers beyond individual changemaking activities may help foster sustained student motivation and active engagement. Such ongoing peer support can nurture connectivity and aid in the preparation of future student changemaker leaders by building greater self-assurance and commitment around changemaking.

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### **Capacity Building**

Integrating changemaking initiatives in the classroom can present several challenges. These include the emphasis on predetermined learning outcomes in specific courses (Hunter et al., 2024), an absence of robust assessment tools to evaluate competencies such as empathy and teamwork, and institutional pressures that tend to promote performative rather than substantive learning (Hunter et al., 2024; Ashoka Canada, n.d.). It is therefore essential to dedicate adequate time and resources to professional development in curriculum design, with a focus on student-led learning approaches and flexible assessment methodologies.

As changemaking is an ongoing process that involves navigating various complexities and challenges (Mitchell-Ashley et al., 2024), it requires both trust in the process and a significant degree of flexibility. Accordingly, it is recommended that changemaking pedagogy begin early and evolve gradually, eventually encompassing broader civic and community initiatives. To support this development, it may be essential to transition from conventional academic methods to those that more effectively empower students to engage with social challenges. Educators are advised to purposefully embed student leadership focused on changemaking initiatives and adopt a collaborative, co-learning framework in partnership with students whenever feasible.

Today's educational landscape is increasingly complex and unpredictable, challenging traditional methods (Schwittay, 2023, p. 9). Sustained effort and institutional support are essential for effective changemaking (Mitchell-Ashley et al., 2024), which can be incorporated into both curricula and co-curricular programs. Providing students with opportunities to reflect, engage in discussion, and act, can support their ability to navigate ambiguity and evaluate

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various solutions. Furthermore, fostering an environment where failure is regarded as an element of experimentation encourages adaptability rather than discouragement (Schwittay, 2023). New tools and frameworks, like the *Manifesting as a Changemaker* Model (2024), should be sought after to provide practical resources to guide educators in their efforts to implement changemaking pedagogy.

Cultivating an open-ended and iterative approach to post-secondary changemaking learning can not only enable student leaders to skillfully navigate situations of uncertainty and ambiguity but can also work to facilitate student transition from discomfort to assuming leadership roles in addressing future challenges. Empowering students through peer connectivity can aid them in overcoming discomfort and anxiety, while ultimately fostering sustainable engagement in changemaking efforts.

### **Institutional Strategy and Commitment**

Given the increasing academic demands inherent in the "realities of schooling" (Biesta, 2024), initiatives designed to promote changemaking may be unintentionally deprioritized. Accordingly, it is advisable for institutional leadership to offer a formal commitment to allocate time and resources towards changemaking efforts. This includes empowering students as independent and socially responsible leaders by supporting both curricular and co-curricular activities with dedicated opportunities and resources.

Ashoka-designated Changemaker Campuses exhibit a robust institutional commitment to advancing changemaking initiatives through strategic planning and integration within academic frameworks (Maple College, 2025). Institutional visions aligning with the "Everyone a

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Changemaker” movement can signify a deliberate approach to developing students’ competencies in empathy, collaboration, leadership, and the practical application of changemaking principles (Hunter et al., 2024). Institutions are encouraged to establish Changemaking Committees to strategically prioritize activities and ensure changemaking planning and initiatives remain in alignment with both institutional objectives and community needs.

Educators involved in student changemaking initiatives, such as reflective changemaking workshops, frequently participate due to their commitment to student social action and despite balancing numerous other responsibilities. Recognizing academic dedication to student social engagement is essential for establishing institutional practices that support impactful student empowerment. Therefore, academics engaged in these efforts should be acknowledged as distinct experts whose skills are integral to advancing student participation in social action as well as institutional and community goals.

A fundamental aspect of this work is the principle of intentionality in changemaking education. By providing opportunities for student empowerment and reflection on pertinent social challenges, educational environments can foster deep, purposeful, and critical learning essential for hope and motivation. Therefore, there is an opportunity for educational settings to intentionally and strategically enhance academic social action initiatives and consider initiatives such as reflective peer-led student-to-student dialogue within them.

### **National and Provincial Education Policy**

National, provincial, and regional policies can serve as key enablers in integrating

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effective and sustainable changemaking student engagement within higher education. An important initial measure would be for governmental policy frameworks to formally acknowledge changemaking as essential to achieving national social innovation objectives (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018), and to emphasize the importance of post-secondary environments as prime settings to incorporate opportunities for student leadership in social action initiatives.

To promote innovation in curriculum development, including the implementation of pilot initiatives that incorporate student-led models within both curricular and co-curricular frameworks, it is advisable that government funding mechanisms be intentionally aligned with the advancement of changemaking initiatives and associated competencies.

Government grants (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018), professional development opportunities, and curriculum accreditation bodies can also play significant roles in advancing the post-secondary student changemaking leadership movement. Furthermore, national organizations such as Colleges and Institutes Canada or Universities Canada may support these objectives by disseminating best practices in changemaking, thereby enhancing cross-institutional collaboration focused on student social innovation and civic engagement.

Competencies such as empathy, leadership, collaboration, and systems thinking—integral to changemakers (Rivers et al., 2015)—should be formally recognized by governments as key outcomes for graduates, supporting the advancement of socially just and inclusive societies. Although the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and twenty-first century skills frameworks have contributed to this human centered direction (Alexandrowicz, 2021; Marine, 2022), it is essential for policy to recognize that academic and technical expertise alone does not

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suffice; the effective functioning of society requires an emphasis on core human competencies.

By adopting this foundational approach, academic institutions can more systematically prioritize, assess, and embed changemaking initiatives, thereby promoting long-term sustainability.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The CC student-led peer-to-peer workshops provided a robust educational leadership experience, promoting student engagement in social initiatives and empowering participants to identify and address key social challenges affecting today's students. The program explored critical changemaking topics from both community and institutional perspectives, while emphasizing their relevance to individual students and their peers. Through reflective discussions and active leadership opportunities, students were encouraged to enhance their understanding with one another of social structures and systems within their environments, thereby preparing them to contribute and influence positive change (Freire, 1970).

The investigation, undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, involved a unique set of circumstances. The limitations of the study included varying levels of changemaking knowledge among student facilitators and inconsistencies in the timing of reflective practices throughout the workshop process. Despite these challenges, the study offers meaningful insights into student-led peer-to-peer changemaking leadership and underscores the importance of student connectivity, empowerment, and dialogical reflection.

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Appointing students to authentic leadership positions and cultivating their roles as influential agents of change within education environments empowers and motivates peers and contributes to addressing systemic inequities. Research demonstrates that promoting student empowerment, guided by principles of critical hope and open dialogue, rooted in Freire's theoretical framework, facilitates collaborative efforts toward positive transformation (Bishundat et al., 2018; Schwittay, 2023; Snow, 2020). Thus, recognizing students as active leaders and contributors can enhance their confidence and motivation to assume formal changemaking leadership roles responsibilities beyond the classroom context.

Future research around student leadership in changemaking could examine the progression of students from participants to leaders within changemaking initiatives, as well as assess the long-term impact of these experiences, and analyze the cultivation of generativity and critical hope through student led peer reflective and connectivity. Additionally, investigating the factors and limitations that influence educators' ability to provide students with greater autonomy in their learning could yield valuable insights.

The results of this research offered distinct opportunities for educational professionals, institutions, and broader communities seeking to enhance social engagement among students involved in changemaking initiatives. The findings highlighted the potential for educators and institutions to adopt and implement innovative and true critical pedagogy models of student-led peer to peer changemaking leadership. A review of the literature indicates that educators are often regarded as the principal catalysts for fostering student engagement in changemaking initiatives. Findings of this study indicated educational institutions should aim to push past these traditional approaches and invest in the significant value of advancing co-created student-led approaches (Bovill, 2019). Integrating changemaking principles into academic settings with

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critical pedagogy assists students to become more self-aware, understand social issues, and promotes active participation, leadership, and engagement in social action. Such method enhances the effectiveness of reflective, peer-based strategies and fortifies students' collective agency, enabling them to initiate meaningful changes within educational communities and externally.

As students increasingly seek genuine engagement with social justice issues, it is essential for educational institutions to offer opportunities that facilitate peer-to-peer reflection, led by students, to foster critical hope and meaningful agency. Incorporating changemaking concepts into academic policy, and curricula while encouraging students to lead their peers optimistically with new heightened awareness of themselves and the social issues impacting their worlds, can enhance student participation, leadership, and effective sustained social action engagement. This study revisited established critical pedagogy frameworks as well as perspectives on changemaking leadership by emphasizing collaborative, peer-driven strategies that support student empowerment and collective student agency. This thesis recommends that higher education institutions acknowledge student connectivity and the cultivation of reflective leadership as essential elements of changemaking initiatives within academic environments. Furthermore, it advocates for re-envisioning higher education as a transformative learning space, emphasizing opportunities for students to lead their peers through reflective, relational, and social justice-oriented pedagogical approaches.

In conclusion, by actively supporting peer-to-peer initiatives and fostering environments where students can collaborate, reflect, and assume leadership roles, educational settings help nurture the skills and agency necessary for sustained social change. As Paulo Freire articulates in

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his works, education may not immediately transform the world, however, it has the power to influence and transform individuals who, in turn then can enact meaningful change within society (Freire, 2000). Guided by this perspective, efforts to bridge the gap between theory and practice determine it is time to empower students not only to engage with social justice issues, but also to design and implement solutions with their peers that address systemic challenges.

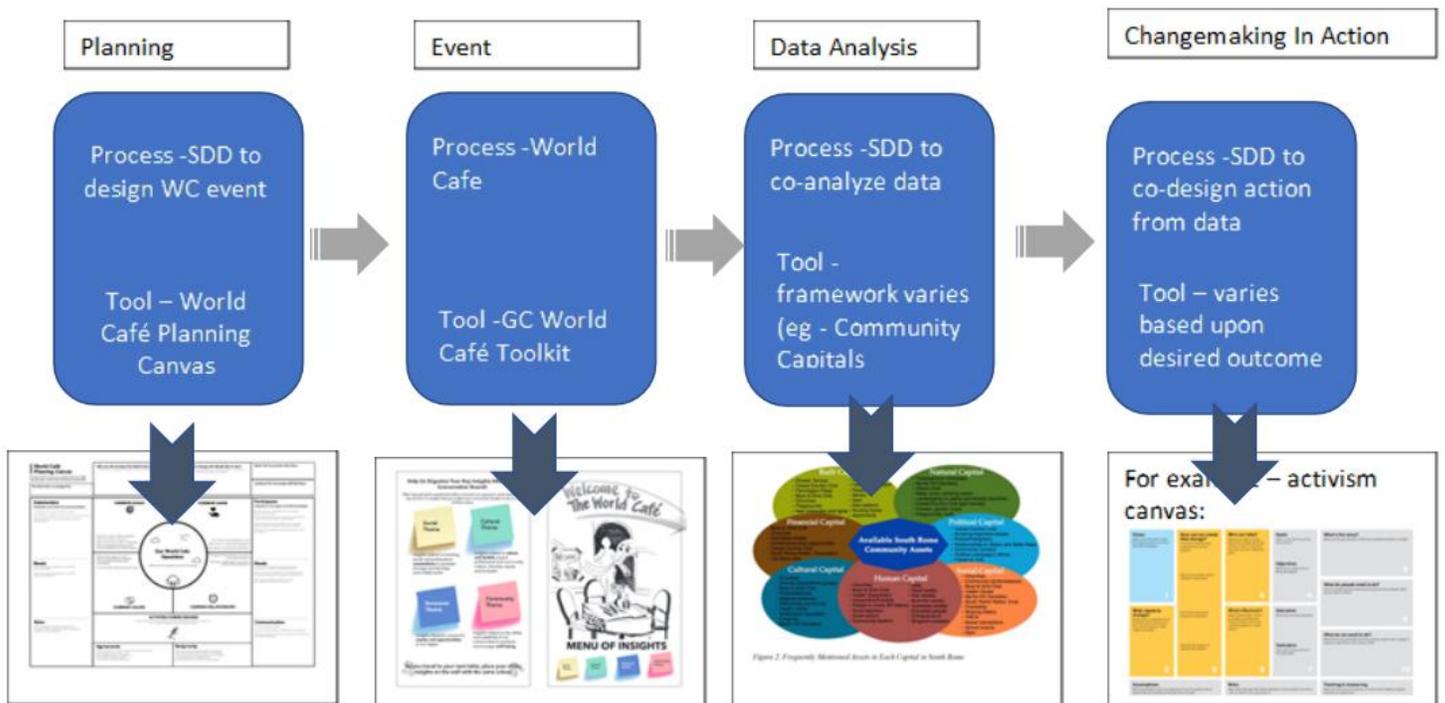
As educational communities continue to evolve, prioritizing student-driven changemaking remains essential for cultivating resilient, inclusive, and socially responsive academic cultures preparing graduates for meaningful participation in society. Contemporary students demonstrate both interest and readiness to assume responsible changemaking leadership roles that contribute to positive societal change, therefore, it is incumbent upon education to provide guidance and support in nurturing these aspirations.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Compelling Conversations Workshop Process

Research Through Design (aka Acton-Research to develop approach tool+process for the conditions for ‘Changemaking In Action’). Developed by Nicole Norris, Director of Social Innovation.



## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### Compelling Conversations Workshop Student Interview Questions

**Title of Research:** *Exploring structured dialogue in support of student social change engagement in Canadian Post-Secondary Education*

#### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview today. If for any reason you wish to not answer any of the following questions, you do not have to do so. You can also stop this interview at any time and choose to withdraw without any impact to your relationship with Maple College.

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This interview will follow a semi-structured format and include 10 questions. Although I will follow a set of questions, I hope the interview will be more like a conversation where you can feel free to share your perspectives and experiences. The time commitment is anticipated to be 30 minutes.

After the interview, if you choose to have your information deleted, this is possible within three weeks after your interview. After this time all interview information will be anonymized, coded as numbers and no names will be shared, collected or saved.

### **Questions**

1. How long have you been involved in Changemaking initiatives at Maple College?
2. Tell me about your Compelling Conversation experience.
3. Why did you choose to sign up for the Compelling Conversation workshops – what were you hoping to experience or obtain? What were your expectations?
4. Did the Compelling Conversation workshops meet your expectations? Why or why not?
5. What did you gain from our participation in this workshop?  
*> provide prompting/examples - Skills, confidence, motivation*
6. Did you learn about social challenges through this workshop? If so, what did you learn?
7. Do you feel your Compelling Conversation workshop experience prepares you for the future, if so in what way?
8. Would you recommend the Compelling Conversation workshops to others? Why or why not?
9. Do you feel you developed or changed from your experience during the workshop?  
*> prompt - tell me more, do you have a specific example/story?*
10. Did the workshops motivate you to become involved in community or social initiatives? Why or why not?

### **Conclusion**

Thank participants and ask if they have anything to add or have any questions about my research. Ask participants if they would like to receive a copy of my research results. If they are interested, explain the results will be available after I present my thesis and it is approved and how this would occur within the next two to five years. Considering this timeframe, request an email from participants that they would prefer to be contacted by or if they would like me to provide an address for me to mail it. I will conclude by ensuring they know that once the results are provided, I will be deleting all their contact information.

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## **Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet**



### **Research Participant Information Sheet**

**Research Title:** *Exploring structured dialogue in support of student social change engagement in Canadian Post-Secondary Education.*

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: [www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection)

My name is Leslie Palson. I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and am currently in the role of Dean, International Education and Development at Maple College. I would like to invite you to take part in my upcoming research study regarding how dialogue may or may not support post-secondary student social change engagement.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide if you wish to take part.

#### **What is the study about?**

This study aims to explore the Compelling Conversations workshop series that uses structured dialogue to help students engage with, and understand, difficult topics. My research objective is to gain insight into perceptions of the workshop and investigate these workshops as a human-centered model and evaluate them as a space to support student social action.

#### **Why have I been invited?**

I have approached you because you have taken part in a Compelling Conversation workshop in either the Summer 22 or Fall 22 semester. I am interested to learn how you felt about the experience. I would be incredibly grateful if you would agree to take part in this study to support my research.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I take part?**

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to participate in a 30-minute interview over Zoom. The interview will consist of ten open-ended questions regarding your Compelling Conversation workshop experience. You do not have to put your camera on; however, you will be asked if the interview can be recorded for future transcribing purposes. All data will be transcribed anonymously, and recordings will be deleted after transcription is complete. Interview questions and a consent form will be sent to you in advance of the interview. The focus of the interview will be on understanding participant perceptions regarding their experience during the Compelling Conversations workshops, if they played a role in their understanding of social justice issues, and if so, how.

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### **What are the possible benefits from taking part?**

Your participation will contribute to better understanding of the method used during the Compelling Conversation workshop, and if this method can support student social understanding.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation is voluntary and completely up to you to decide if you would like to take part. After the Compelling Conversation workshop, you do not have to respond to the request for invitation and your decision will not impact you as a Maple College student or a member of Charlie & Co. Social innovation group. Participation or non-participation will not have any impact on your relationship with Maple College.

### **What if I change my mind?**

If you change your mind after agreeing to take part in the study, you are free to withdraw your participation at any time. The study timetable indicates that data will not be reviewed or accessed until it has been encoded, starting three weeks after the last submission date during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw within the above time, your answers will be deleted permanently. After three weeks all research will be stripped of any identifying data and codes to remove any personal information. Only coded data will be included in the results. Withdrawal from the study will not have any impact on your relationship with Maple College.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is unlikely that there will be any disadvantages to taking part, however, if you feel you may experience any discomfort while discussing the Compelling Conversation workshop it would be advised not to participate as further discomfort may arise. Research participants may leave any questions unanswered and may withdraw at any time. A variety of support sources will be made available to all participants if they may be of use at any time. Please see below for a list of resources.

### **Will my data be identifiable?**

The data from the interview will be coded and anonymized. Should my PhD supervisor request viewing the data to compare and understand it in more detail to assist with my findings, I will only share anonymized data.

### **How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?**

I will use the information you have shared with me only for my PhD Research purposes. This will include my final thesis of the PhD in Education and Social Justice and Lancaster University. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences and use the findings to inform education institutions on the viability of introducing Compelling Conversation style workshops at their establishments. Information shared at conferences or with institutions will be mostly high-level summaries with some statistical data such as percentages and charts.

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If there is anything you answer in the survey that suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with my supervisor at Lancaster University. If possible, I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

### **How my data will be stored**

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that only I, the researcher, will be able to access) and on password-protected computers. I will store notes of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. In accordance with Lancaster University guidelines, I will keep the data secure for a minimum of ten years.

### **What if I have a question or concern?**

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Maple College Research Ethics Board (GCREB) at [reb@Maplecollege.ca](mailto:reb@Maplecollege.ca) or 705.728.1968, ext. 5395.

Furthermore, if you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself at [leslie.palson@Maplecollege.ca](mailto:leslie.palson@Maplecollege.ca) and/or my PhD supervisor Dr. Paul Ashwin, [paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk).

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Jan McArthur at [mcarthur@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:mcarthur@lancaster.ac.uk), Program Director of the Education and Social Justice Department at Lancaster University.

### **Sources of support**

If you were triggered or upset at any point due to participation in this study, we encourage you to contact any of the following local supports:

Maple College Mental Health Counselling student services support

<https://www.Maplecollege.ca/student-life/student-services/counselling/>

Mental Health and Wellbeing student portal page

<https://Mapleatilac.com/mental-health-and-well-being/>

Canadian Mental Health Association supports

<https://ontario.cmha.ca/mental-health/>

Wellness Together Canada program

<https://www.wellnesstogether.ca/en-CA>

Good2talk support services

<https://good2talk.ca/>

Hope for Wellness helpline

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<https://hopeforwellness.ca/home.html>

Guard.me mental wellness support program Keep Me Safe

<https://www.guard.me/keepmesafe.php>

CMHAMPS Crisis Line: 1-800-461-5424

Aboriginal Crisis Line: 1-705-746-2512

Kids Help Phone: 1 800 668-6868; Languages: English and French

The Warm Line, <https://www.warmline.ca/>

<p>This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.</p>
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**Thank you for considering your participation in this project.**

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**Appendix D: Consent Form**



**CONSENT FORM**

**Project Title:** Harnessing the power of structured dialogic design to support student social change engagement in Canadian Post-Secondary Education

Name of Researchers: Leslie Palson  
 Email: Leslie.palson@Maplecollege.ca

**Please tick each box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 3 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 3 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed. If I am involved in focus groups and then withdraw my data will remain part of the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. If I am participating in the survey, I understand that any information answered in the survey will remain confidential to the study facilitator unless I give my express permission.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. This will include coding the respondents to strip any identifying data. This data is planned to be used once anonymized for a Thesis in the PhD Education and Social Justice at Lancaster University.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I understand that my name or any identifying information will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for 10 years after the end of the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature

**I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.**

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Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster  
University

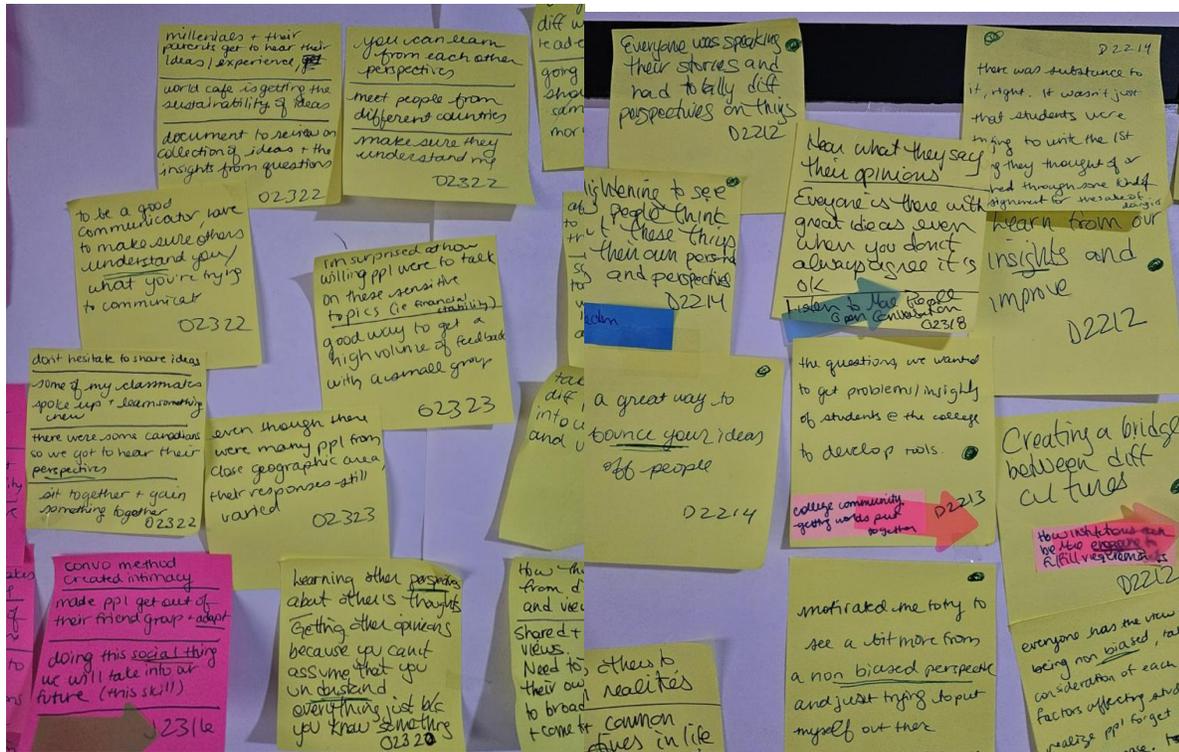
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**Appendix E: List of Compelling Conversation Workshops**

Feb 2020	In-person	Faculty led	Maple Dining Room	0
Nov 2020	Online	Faculty, Part of Changemaker Residency Week during COVID-19	This was not part of the research as it pre-dates this research approval, however it was learned from student feedback that students would prefer to be facilitators.	0
Nov 2022	In-person	Students	Learned that in-person was preferred due to lack of engagement with online.	4
July 2023	In-Person	Students	As a topic option for class assignment	3
Oct 2023	In-Person	Student leaders, Enactus Club Members	The student dining room on campus, where hospitality and culinary students practice their skills, was set up at a café. Paper was placed over top of the checkered tablecloths allowing students to jot down their thoughts in lieu of or in addition to their comments.	6



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## Communities of Student-Led Dialogue: Promoting Empowerment and Advancing Changemaking Engagement through Reflective Educational Practices

### Thematic Analysis Chart Breakdown

Reason for involvement	Challenges	Connectivity/ Community	Nurturing / community	Critical Dialogue/ Thinking	Reflection	Growth/ Confidence	Motivation
<b>connectivity:</b> help others, hear what others think, meet people, networking, being asked (chose group assignment)	<b>Disconnect:</b> covid, online, teamwork, minutiae of life, lack meaningful dialogue, friends don't want to discuss meaningful topics	<b>mentorship:</b> learn from each other, networking, helping others	<b>safe space:</b> comfortable, environment, relaxed space, empathy, no judgement, honest	<b>sharing:</b> different lenses, perspectives, cultures, true insight, share my insights to encourage others,	<b>self-exploration:</b> change myself, my journey, learning, developed understanding of leadership	<b>confidence:</b> able to speak from difference lens, break out of shell, develop, prepared	<b>feelings:</b> motivated, encouraged, desire, flow, desire, inspired, enticing, eager, shared energy, invested
<b>growth:</b> leadership, try something new, professional development	<b>Overwhelm:</b> time, busy, everyone is dealing with own issues and real-life problems, \$ concerns	<b>community:</b> coming together, intimacy, like-minded people, meaningful connections, teamwork	<b>belonging:</b> inclusion, authentic,	<b>Learning:</b> from others, something new, non-bias	<b>challenging assumptions:</b> reconcile, critical thinking, changed mental model, things can change, don't assume	<b>leadership:</b> facilitating,	<b>actions (based words 9x):</b> involved, push, engage, keep going, drive, put out solutions, improve, make a change
	<b>Self-Doubt:</b> shy, self-conscious, anxiety, nervous, worried sound complaining or ungrateful coming to Canada	<b>synergy:</b> leverage each other's strength, hear collective ideas, want to meet again, feel represented				<b>Growth:</b> need growth to change,	<b>future-oriented:</b> change, hope, improve the future, achieve, areas for improvement

# Communities of Student-Led Dialogue: Promoting Empowerment and Advancing Changemaking Engagement through Reflective Educational Practices

Themes	Reason for involvement	Challenges	Connectivity/ Community	Nurturing / community	Critical Dialogue/Thinking	Reflection	Growth/ Confidence	Motivation
D2211	like leadership roles, professional growth. Already involved in student government and wanted to see where students are coming from.	was siloed before pandemic. students in different places in their life.	all playing our part / meeting with like-minded people offers great potential / network building / working together / interacting with others	included everyone / <b>authentic space</b> for people more <b>listening</b> / <b>limit myself to give space to others, make them feel they belong</b>	perspectives from different expertise / appreciate having perspectives / speaking with others / It's general uncommon topic, but you can look at it with different ways / questions were that people contribute from a perspective without prior information. <b>not putting my bias onto others /not force conversation / presence in the room to guide conversation /</b>	trying to <b>change myself</b> , being on the other side / expand understanding / this guided my feelings / unconscious bias / helped me reconcile/	increased <b>confidence</b> in facilitating / <b>feel prepared to lead</b>	<b>passionate</b> people / put out <b>solutions</b> , I can see the <b>future</b> we want to see / <b>engaging</b> environment / <b>sharing</b> to inspire people / <b>motivates</b> you to <b>become</b> more <b>involved</b> because we are doing something on a global scale / <b>want to be</b> in that space and <b>change</b> other things / solution focused approached
D2211 STORY	Looking for Growth and critical dialogue (student perspective)	disconnection, overwhelm	networking, interacting, play our part	inclusion, authenticity, need time and space, belonging	varying perspectives appreciated in order to look at things from different ways, unbiased	expand and change myself, helped me reconcile with bias and weaknesses	confidence, <b>leadership</b>	I can see the <b>future</b> we want to see, inspiring and motivating people to <b>be</b> more involved on a global scale, to be <b>solution</b> focused to make a <b>change</b>
D2212	First time I was asked to be a participant	people were shy, online with less participation. I'd make assumptions at first, took a long time to get people's insights and properly understand them	getting to know people / people approaching and connecting after the World Cafe / people coming to you often with more feedback and concerns / "in person it makes a lot of difference, they were more confident & have a more personal connection / be part of a team with people I don't know / we joined and looked and <b>talked</b> / maintain good <b>convos</b> later	trying to listen to more people so others feel heard and <b>share</b> / getting people comfortable / get their true insights / environment felt safe so people could put in their perspective / <b>if you give people a safe space you can get their insights on things</b>	I might have unconscious <b>biases</b> or biases / being part of this will guide my perspective & feelings / I put my perspective in to make they want to offer their <b>true insights</b> & feedback / internationalization bridge between cultures / <b>learn from our insights &amp; improve</b> / everyone was from different countries and had different perspectives / everyone was sharing perspectives even if shy/ <b>how can I listen to what others say, let them speak? / learn to let them speak</b>	small things make a difference in <b>my journey</b> / insights / small things can <b>make a lot of difference</b> on people's journey	<b>confidence</b> in talking to new people / <b>nonpartial communication</b> / trying to listen to more people so others feel heard and share/ <b>learned</b> leaders need to help others <b>speak up</b> and boost their <b>confidence</b> / on the same level / as a leader <b>have to let them speak up and learn their confidence</b> /	<b>learn</b> from our insights and <b>improve</b> in the <b>future</b> / once people started, the <b>energy</b> went and more people <b>shared</b> / to <b>keep</b> people <b>engaged</b> /

	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Themes	Reason for involvement	Challenges	Connectivity/Community	Nurturing / community	Critical Dialogue/Thinking	Reflection	Growth		
2	like leadership roles, professional growth. Already involved in student government and wanted to see where students are coming from.	was siloed before pandemic. students in different places in their life.	all playing our part / meeting with like-minded people offers great potential / network building / working together / interacting with others	included everyone / <b>authentic space</b> for people more <b>listening</b> / <b>limit myself to give space to others, make them feel they belong</b>	perspectives from different expertise / I really appreciate having the perspectives / speaking with others / It's general uncommon topic, but you can look at it with different ways / questions were that people contribute from a perspective without prior information. <b>not putting my bias onto others /not force conversation / presence in the room to guide conversation / ?</b>	trying to <b>change myself</b> , being on the other side / expand understanding / this guided my feelings / unconscious bias / helped me reconcile/	increased <b>confidence</b> in facilitating / <b>feel prepared to lead</b>		
3	D2211 STORY Looking for Growth and critical dialogue (student perspective)	disconnection, overwhelm	networking, interacting, play our part	inclusion, authenticity, need time and space, belonging	varying perspectives appreciated in order to look at things from different ways, unbiased	expand and change myself, helped me reconcile with bias and weaknesses	confidence, <b>leadership</b>		
			getting to know people / people		I might have unconscious <b>biases</b> or biases / being part of this will guide my perspective & feelings / I put my				

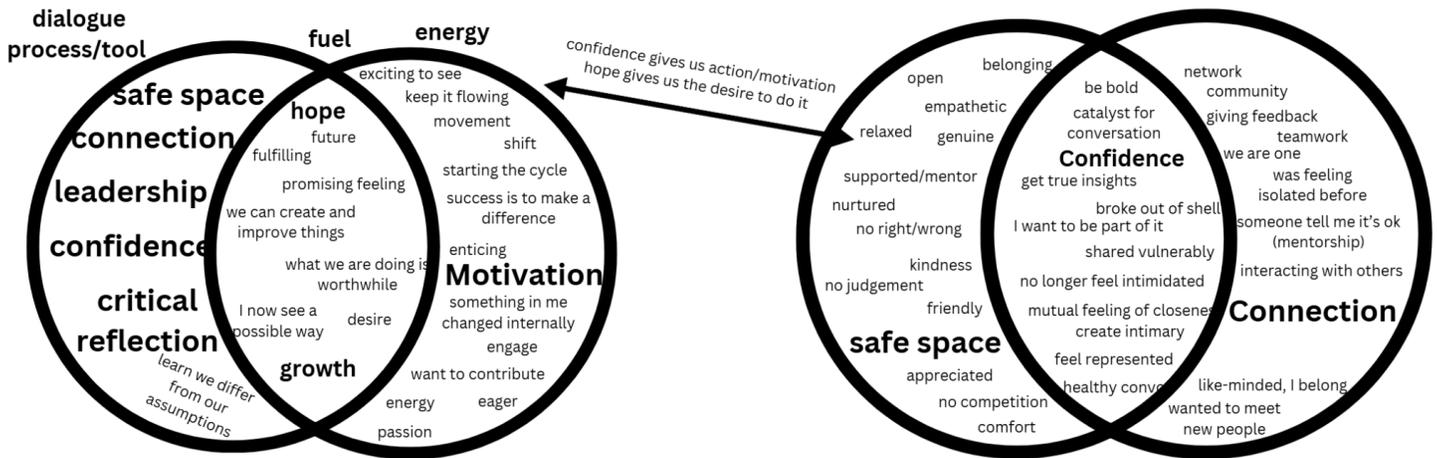
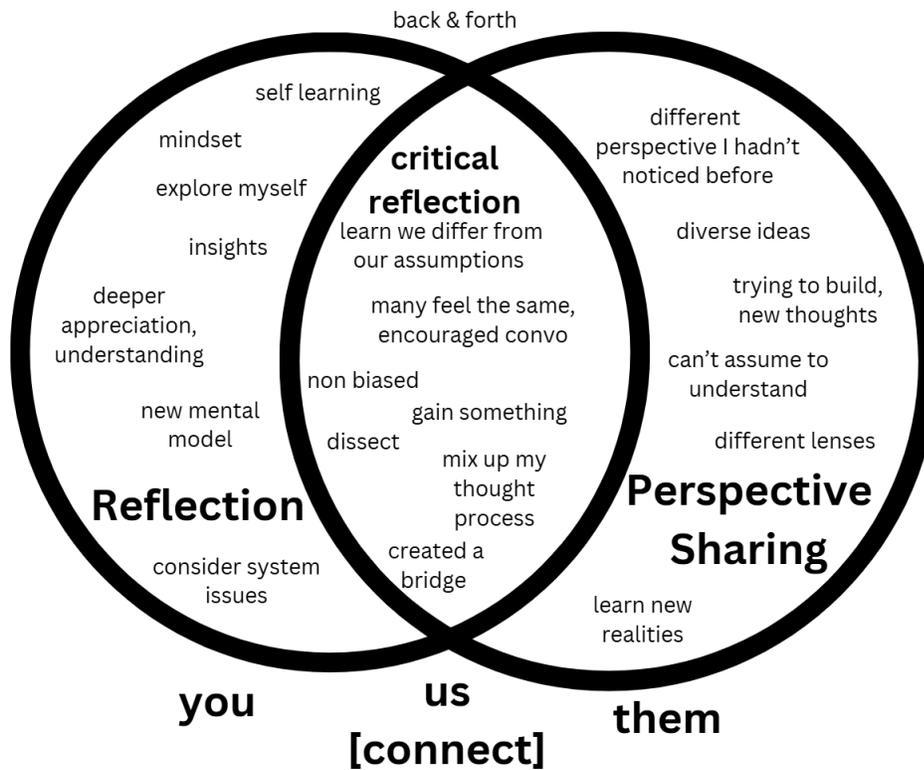
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Bold core of quotes\note overlaps of themes in quotes/ star top quotes

Code	Theme	Quote
D2211	Nurturing	There was no right answer, there was no wrong answer, everyone felt they belonged and welcomed in that space / I tried to <b>limit myself to give them space for others</b> / I was smiling and <b>making people feel they belong, not forcing a conversation to happen</b>
D2211	Critical Dialogue	My goal as a facilitator was to guide them of what changemaking actually might be, <b>how can they contribute to this conversation</b> , be a resource and a guide
D2212	Challenges	At first, I would listen and form a response in my head, then start realizing need to hear them out and make sure understand what they're saying
D2212	Critical Dialogue	Internationalization can <b>create bridge between</b> cultures
D2212	Reflection	I learned how to be an active listener and implemented, I listen first and then provide me insights and don't form an opinion first ( <b>growth</b> )
D2212	Nurturing	<b>Safe space impacted their experience</b> and made people share a lot of feelings
D2213	Motivation	<b>Figure out a wonderful solution (motivation)</b> through <b>digging into healthy conversations (critical dialogue)</b>
D2213	Connectivity	Being a family and <b>creating a mutual feeling of closeness</b> /

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## Appendix H: Mapping the Themes

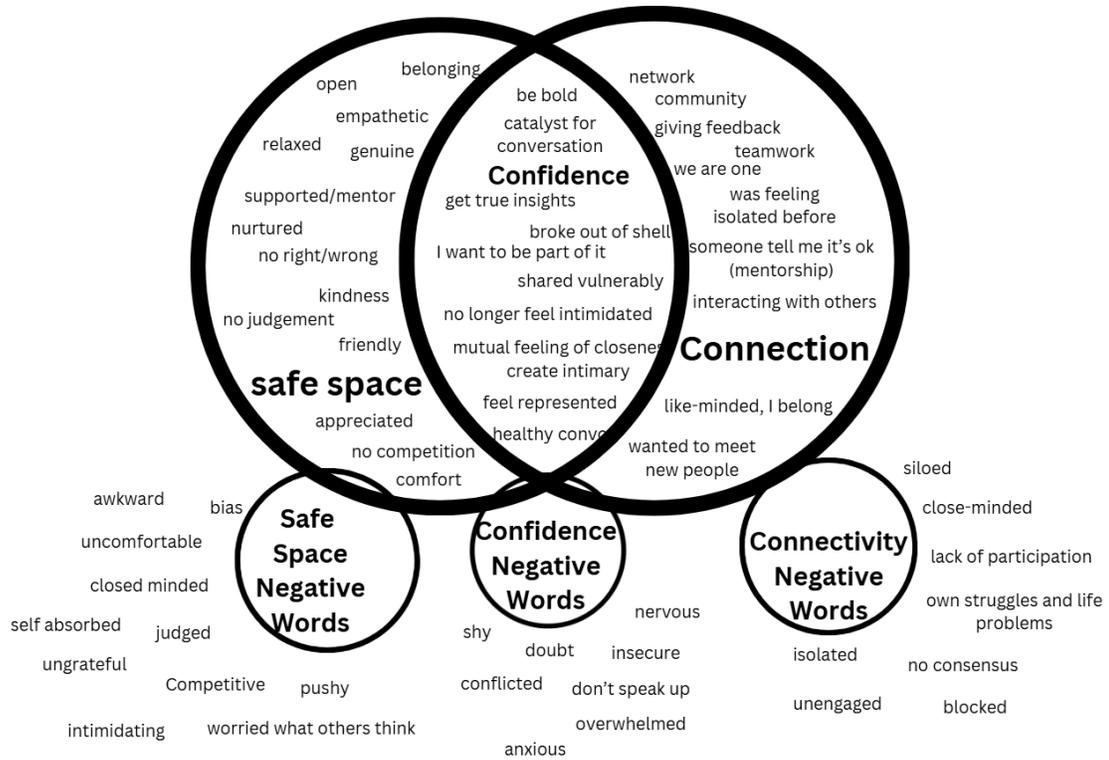


the bike is the machine/tool, peddle it by getting help (mentorship) to get hope and get motivation to get somewhere (get growth out of it as a by-product) you can have confidence but not act on it without hope

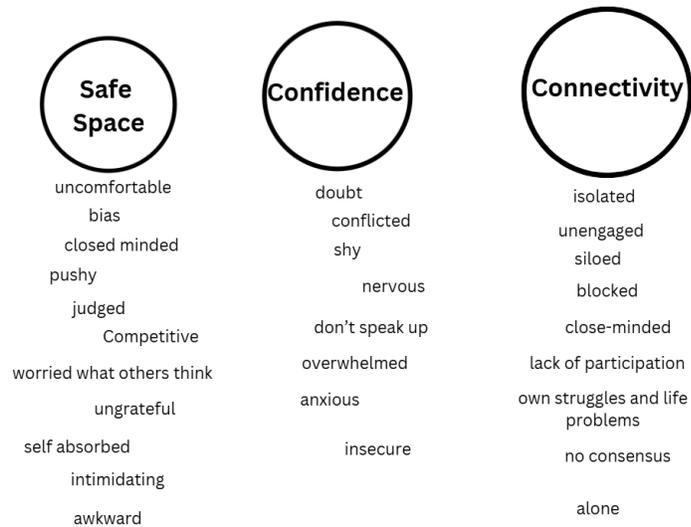
**confidence (COURAGE??) is hope?**

Confident that the connections will be worth it (feeling safe enough) it's with the risk of vulnerability to connect with people

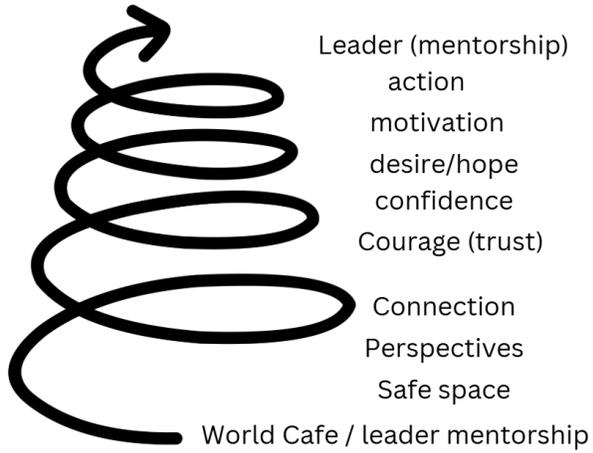
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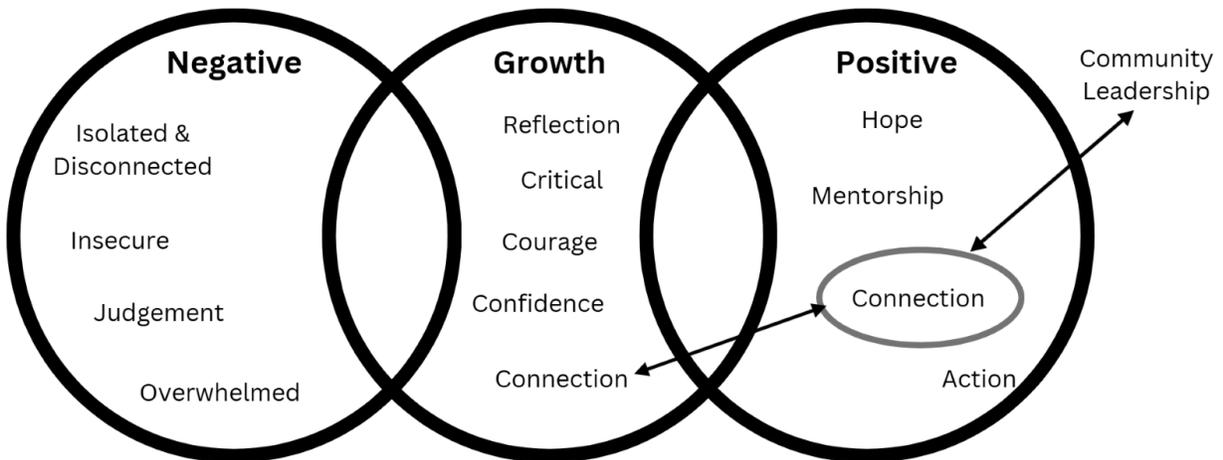
## Negative words



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the design of the dialogue/safe space is the vehicle, the mentor is fuel/energy to get people to self-ignite and process recur (spiral)



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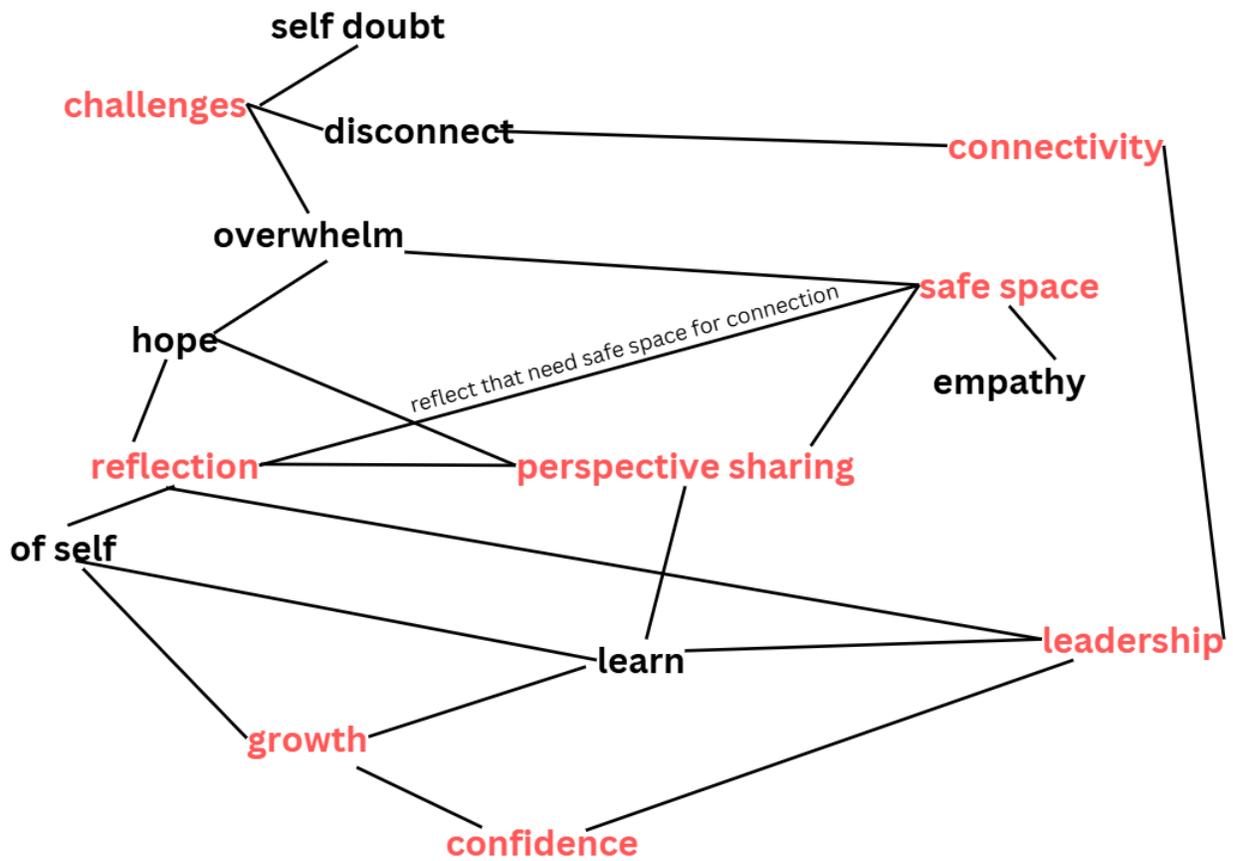


**Gert Biesta Subjectification**

Education is about shaping individuals and their "I", to act or not act upon their autonomous selves. Education is not about teaching morality, but how they can respond based on learning how they fit within the world over time (get to be youth). Learners make up their own minds and come to their own understanding.



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