ROLE REDEFINITION AS AUTONOMY SUPPORT: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

by

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Abstract

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a well-established theory of motivation that posits that we grow optimally to the degree to which our contexts afford us autonomy support, the collective term for the ways in which others afford us opportunities to satisfy our basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Although Ryan and Niemiec (2009) suggest that self-determination theory can be “critical and liberating,” I trouble their assertion, making use of literature on student voice, student-faculty learning partnerships, and radical collegiality, and propose that redefining the student role is an essential form of autonomy support if we wish to follow through on SDT’s liberating possibilities. To that end, I undertook a narrative inquiry into five students’ experiences of transformation through role redefinition in a set of non-traditional university courses. Participants described their experiences and relationships with peers and instructors before, during, and after this set of courses. A thematic analysis revealed that students experienced their post-secondary courses as largely controlling, with concomitant negative effects on their engagement and well-being, while they experienced these non-traditional courses as highly autonomy-supportive, with concomitant positive effects. Analysis also revealed that students underwent two transformative processes: an incremental process of integration and a more epochal process of role redefinition. This latter process in particular was fostered through persistent messages that students’ educations belonged to them, through de-emphasis on the instructor-student hierarchy, and through being supported through their struggles with transformation. Once students redefined their roles, they took more responsibility for their peers’ well-being, offered them autonomy support, and engaged more agentically in other courses by expressing themselves more, taking more risks, and even standing
up to and defying miseducative instructors on their own and their peers’ behalves. They came to perceive themselves as agents of change not only in their institutions, but also in other arenas, following through on the critical and liberating potential of SDT that Ryan and Niemiec had envisioned. This study has broad implications for how educators engage with students and how our institutions are structured, as well as how SDT research is conducted, if we wish to capitalize on this potential.
Lay Summary

This study looked at what happened in a set of non-traditional university courses when instructors treated students like colleagues or partners in the process of learning. Students who took on this new role felt better about their learning and learned more. They supported their peers’ learning more. They spoke up more in their other classes, took more risks, and stood up for themselves and their peers more. They came to see themselves as agents of change in their institutions and in the world. What this shows is that reducing the difference in power between instructors and students is a powerful way to support their learning and well-being.
Preface

This thesis is an original, independent intellectual product of the author, Tierney Wisniewski. The procedures for data collection and analysis involved in this study were covered and approved by the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board, Certificate number H16-00789, and received additional approval from the Kwantlen Polytechnic University Behavioral Research Ethics Board.
Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. ii

Lay Summary ......................................................................................................................................... iv

Preface ..................................................................................................................................................... v

Table of Contents ................................................................................................................................... vi

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................... xi

Chapter 1: Introduction and Review of Literature .............................................................................. 1

1.1 Self-Determination Theory .............................................................................................................. 6

1.1.1 Basic Psychological Needs: Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence ................................. 7

1.1.2 Autonomy Support ....................................................................................................................... 8

1.1.3 Agentic Engagement ..................................................................................................................... 11

1.2 Student Voice .................................................................................................................................... 13

1.3 Radical Collegiality .......................................................................................................................... 15

1.4 The Current Study ............................................................................................................................ 17

1.4.1 Research Question ....................................................................................................................... 18

Chapter 2: Research Design and Methodology .................................................................................. 20

2.1 Narrative Inquiry ............................................................................................................................... 21

2.2 Participants ....................................................................................................................................... 23

2.3 Data Collection ................................................................................................................................ 23

2.4 Data Analysis .................................................................................................................................... 24

2.5 Validity and Rigor .............................................................................................................................. 26

2.6 Ethical Considerations ....................................................................................................................... 27
Chapter 3: Thematic Analysis

3.1 Participant Collaborators and Their Narratives

3.1.1 Abbey

3.1.2 Chelanna

3.1.3 Connell

3.1.4 “Maya”

3.1.5 Sana

3.2 Experiences of Control and Need Deprivation

3.2.1 The Need for Autonomy: “I wasn’t in control of my own education. . .”

3.2.2 The Need for Relatedness: “We never really have time to stop in our day and just talk to somebody. . .”

3.2.3 The Need for Competence: “. . . you can’t because it’s not in the curriculum.”

3.2.4 Effects of Control: “God, that was a nightmare. . .”

3.2.5 The Disciplines

3.3 Experiences of Autonomy Support

3.3.1 The Need for Autonomy: “We had a lot of freedom in what we covered. . .”

3.3.2 The Need for Relatedness: “A sense of community. . . was huge there.”

3.3.3 The Need for Competence: “Having someone tell you, ‘You can do it!’”

3.3.4 Effects of Autonomy Support: “. . . IDEA provided me with the ability to learn and grow as a person.”

3.3.4.1 Growth, Engagement, and Well-Being

3.3.4.2 Ease and Play vs. Work
Chapter 4: Two Transformative Processes ................................................................. 70

4.1 Transformation through Integration...................................................................... 70
  4.1.1 Fostering Self-Awareness: “... the way to figure it out is from within. ...” .......... 78
  4.1.2 Becoming Visible: “You’ve gotta take the stage in IDEA.” .............................. 81

4.2 Transformation through Role Redefinition: “... I’m learning to trust that I’ve got the answer within myself. ...” ................................................................................................. 84
  4.2.1 Supporting Role Redefinition: “You know, this is for you.” .............................. 87
    4.2.1.1 The Circle..................................................................................................... 89
    4.2.1.2 The Labyrinth, the Sword, and the Spool of Thread .................................. 92
  4.2.2 What Partners Do: Sharing Responsibility ....................................................... 97
    4.2.2.1 Offering Autonomy Support ..................................................................... 99
      4.2.2.1.1 The Need for Autonomy .................................................................... 100
      4.2.2.1.2 The Need for Relatedness ................................................................. 104
      4.2.2.1.3 The Need for Competence ............................................................... 106
  4.2.3 Transformation through Role Redefinition ...................................................... 106
  4.2.4 Outcomes of Role Redefinition ....................................................................... 109
    4.2.4.1 Agentic Engagement ................................................................................ 110
    4.2.4.2 Defiance .................................................................................................. 118
    4.2.4.3 Risktaking ................................................................................................. 124
    4.2.4.4 Student Voice ......................................................................................... 126
    4.2.4.5 Criticality and Liberation ....................................................................... 129

Chapter 5: Discussion ................................................................................................. 132
5.1 Summary of Results: Role Redefinition as a Form of Autonomy Support ............... 132

5.1.1 How Did IDEA Instructors and Peers Foster This Process of Role Redefinition? 133

5.1.2 What Impact Has This Role Redefinition Had on How They Engage with Their Educations? .................................................................................................................. 134

5.1.3 What Impact Has This Role Redefinition Had on How Others in Their Educational Contexts Engage with Them? .................................................................................................. 135

5.1.4 What Were Students’ Lived Experiences of Integration? .................................. 136

5.2 Implications for Individual Practice ...................................................................... 137

5.2.1 “You Matter”: Valuing Students’ Uniqueness .................................................. 137

5.2.2 “This Is For You”: Restoring an Internal Locus of Control ............................... 139

5.2.3 “You Can Do This”: Communicating Competence ......................................... 140

5.2.3.1 Slack ............................................................................................................ 140

5.2.3.2 Shared Narratives ......................................................................................... 141

5.2.3.3 Self-Reflection ............................................................................................. 142

5.3 Situating Findings in a Broader Context ............................................................... 143

5.3.1 What the Campus Mental Health Crisis Tells Us ............................................. 143

5.3.2 The Cognitive Agenda ....................................................................................... 144

5.3.3 The Job Training Agenda ................................................................................ 145

5.3.4 The Legitimacy of Learning ........................................................................... 146

5.4 Limitations and Strengths ..................................................................................... 147

5.4.1 Radical Collegiality as Methodology ............................................................. 148

5.4.2 Student Voice .................................................................................................. 149

5.4.3 Self-Reflective Participants as Lay Experts .................................................... 149
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Review of Literature

Originally developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan some 40 years ago, self-determination theory (SDT) is an empirically-based, cumulatively built macro-theory of motivation, emotion, and personality (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). According to SDT, we are anything but passive agents who are pushed and pulled by environmental stimuli; rather, we are active agents who choose what to do with the opportunities that external stimuli present to satisfy our needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 2000; Ryan & Niemiec, 2009). The contexts we are embedded in foster or thwart this propensity towards growth and motivation to the degree that they provide opportunities to satisfy our basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, which is a concept SDT collectively refers to as autonomy support (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These three needs will be described in greater detail in the review of the literature that follows, but briefly, the need for autonomy is the need to feel one’s actions emanate from one’s own self, the need for relatedness is the need to care for and feel cared for by others, and the need for competence is the need to feel that one is effective in the world.

The various components of SDT have been extensively researched using largely quantitative methods (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009). SDT has been applied to a variety of contexts and activities, including healthcare, counselling, relationships, mindfulness, health promotion, and education (selfdeterminationtheory.org, 2017). The current study focuses on post-secondary educational contexts (for a review of studies in post-secondary contexts, see Orsini, Evans, & Jerez, 2015) but the bulk of SDT research has been conducted in K-12 settings. A wide and impressive array of positive outcomes of autonomous forms of motivation include educational persistence (e.g. Bonneville-Roussy, Vallerand, & Bouffard, 2013; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004), reduced dropout rates (e.g. Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997), academic achievement (e.g. Black
& Deci, 2000; Guay & Vallerand, 1997; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005), depth of learning (e.g. Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004), preference for optimal challenge (e.g. Boggiano, Main, & Katz, 1988), creativity (e.g. Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984; Sheldon, 1995), and positive emotions and well-being (for a review, see Guay, Ratelle, & Chanal, 2008).

In a 2009 article, Ryan and Niemiec ask whether an empirically derived theory such as SDT can be “critical and liberating” (p. 263). They argue that a criticality of hegemony and a tendency towards liberation are theoretically embedded in SDT. Practically speaking though, when research on SDT is undertaken in traditional academic settings, it serves to perpetuate cultural and economic reproduction instead of challenging it; schools are part of a web of institutions whose latent function is to preserve structural inequalities, which is often achieved through sorting students and teaching them different values and dispositions (Apple, 2004). Students who are expected to enter the managerial and professional classes, for instance, are often granted a great deal more autonomy – and thereby taught a disposition towards it – than those expected to enter working class jobs. While I do not intend to fully take up this line of critique in the current study, this point bears keeping in mind during the discussion of appropriation of student voice. The current study intends to explore whether SDT has been limited up to this point by the imagination of existing systems, institutions, and hierarchies, and whether the ways in which we describe autonomy support have been limited by mainstream praxis. For example, self-determination theorists have focused on what Michael W. Apple (2004) refers to as ameliorative reforms, which are measures that seek to improve our day-to-day experiences within hegemonic systems rather than transforming the systems themselves. The overarching goal of the current study is to, as Fielding does, “[ask] of those who intend a future
that is more engaging, more imaginative, more just, more democratic, and significantly and sustainably different to the one we are likely to inherit whether the methodologies and developments they advocate are able to bear the weight of aspiration they embody” (2004, p. 296). Might social constructionist and critical perspectives and qualitative methodologies contribute to the critical and liberatory potentials of SDT in ways that empiricism alone cannot?

As Henry Giroux states, “critical pedagogy. . . is. . . about encouraging students to take risks, act on their sense of social responsibility, and engage the world as an object of both critical analysis and hopeful transformation” (2011, p. 14). Cook-Sather adds that critical pedagogy has a commitment to “redistribute power not only within the classroom, between teacher and students, but also in society at large” (2006, p. 365). SDT has not yet framed itself in such daring ways. Ryan and Niemiec take care to redefine the role of the teacher, “away from viewing [them] as controllers, monitors, and trainers to being facilitators, guides, and supporters of development” (2009, p. 270), but do not concomitantly redefine the roles of students. They go on to suggest that schools and educators “can become liberators,” situating students as passive objects of liberation, and not agents in their own right. But Freire himself argued that a liberatory pedagogy had to be “forged with, not for,” those it intends to liberate (1972, p. 33).

Reeve and Tseng’s (2011a) proposal of the addition of agentic engagement to our definition of student engagement introduces the possibility in SDT that students themselves can be agents of their own liberation. Engagement, which is the publicly observable manifestation of private, unobservable motivational processes, had previously been conceptualized as consisting of three different aspects: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Reeve, 2012). Behavioral engagement is indicated by such observable behaviors as on-task attention, effort, and persistence. Emotional engagement is indicated by expressions of “task-facilitating”
emotions such as interest and enthusiasm, and the absence of “task-withdrawing” emotions such as frustration and anxiety. Cognitive engagement is indicated by the use, for example, of sophisticated learning strategies and self-regulatory strategies such as planning. However, as Bandura (2006) notes, agency is not only exercised individually, but also by proxy – through influencing others who may act on our behalves – and collectively. Therefore, Reeve defines agentic engagement as “the process in which students proactively try to create, enhance, and personalize the conditions and circumstances under which they learn” (2012, p. 161).

Although Ryan and Niemiec (2009) argue that SDT acknowledges the importance of giving voice, a review indicates that student voices are still all but absent in the empirically-derived self-determination literature. Research on agentic engagement repeatedly characterizes agentic achievement as “constructive” contribution to and engagement in classroom instruction (see e.g. Reeve & Tseng, 2011a). However, from a social constructionist perspective, researchers and instructors’ ability to define what constitutes a “constructive” contribution grants them power and serves to marginalize alternate ways students might choose to express their agency (Burr, 1995).

What I have attempted in the current study is what Fielding and Rudduck refer to as a “rupturing of the ordinary” (2002, p. 5) so that we may see what is problematic in SDT and what might lie beyond its imagination. I intended to do this in three ways. First, I propose that redefining the role of students is both conceptually important to SDT’s self-professed aim of being critical and liberating and a potent and transformative form of autonomy support for adult students. I employ the literature on student voice and radical collegiality to think afresh about self-determination, autonomy, and agency. Second, as Fielding and Moss state, “education today needs fewer large-scale quantitative studies comparing performance on pre-determined
outcomes, and more critical case studies of possibility, opportunities to enrich our imagination and vocabulary. . .” (2011, p.16). To this end, I have undertaken a narrative study of students’ experiences of role redefinition, autonomy support, and agentic engagement in a set of non-traditional university courses, drawing on the literatures on student voice and radical collegiality, among others, to frame my questions and “enrich our imagination and vocabulary” (p.16). Methodologically, I wished also to engage my participants in ways that attempted to more explicitly honor their autonomy, agency, and plurality of voices.

The context I drew participants from is a set of six expressive arts courses called Interdisciplinary Expressive Arts (IDEA) that had been offered by Kwantlen Polytechnic University in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. These courses were electives open to students in any discipline. While the prerequisite for many was 30 prior credit hours in any area, this requirement was sometimes waived, as it was in my case. At its peak, seven sections of the various courses would have been offered throughout the year, each with a cap of 35 students and typically full (R. Laird, personal communication, October 10, 2017). IDEA grew out of the creative writing department and early IDEA courses were crosslisted in that department – that is how I became involved in it – but later, students typically became involved through word of mouth. IDEA courses used the expressive arts (visual arts, writing, music, drama, and dance and other movement practices), contemplative practices such as meditation and t’ai ch’i, and nature and travel activities as jumping off points for discussion and development of self-awareness, creativity, leadership, and other personal growth. Echoing SDT’s emphasis on autonomy and autonomy support, one student in the courses told the student newspaper, “I think I put more work into IDEA than any other course, time-wise. I put more effort in. I learn more, because I’m allowed to decide what I want to learn” (Oetter, cited in Mann, 2013). The courses
also placed an emphasis on relatedness; classroom seating was arranged in a circle and collaborative activity and small and large group discussion comprised the majority of class time. This seating arrangement also telegraphed the lack of formal teacher-student hierarchy that characterized these courses. Instructors de-emphasized grades and emphasized formative feedback that fostered students’ developing competence. Most relevant to the current discussion was frequent in-class discussion about students’ dissatisfaction with the current educational system, and their desire to pursue more meaningful aims than those post-secondary institutions typically promote (R. Laird, personal communication, Aug 19, 2015). Anecdotally, a number of students who had taken these courses had become quite involved in improving the student experience in a variety of ways, both through formal university initiatives and through their own learning and practice as radical educators. This particular context therefore seemed ideal for expanding our existing understandings of such concepts in SDT as autonomy support and agentic engagement and making more explicit its liberatory possibilities.

1.1 Self-Determination Theory

One of the unifying principles at the heart of SDT is that everyone, across the lifespan, crossculturally, and regardless of other interpersonal differences like gender and socioeconomic status, has (at minimum) three innate psychological needs – for autonomy, competence, and relatedness – that must be satisfied for us to achieve optimal psychological development and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Whether we are consciously aware of them or not, we actively seek their fulfillment, and when our social environments thwart our ability to meet these needs, we tend to cope in maladaptive ways that provide a hollow, short-lived satisfaction (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Whether we have opportunities to meet our
basic needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence influences the quality of our motivation and our more general motivational orientations (Ryan & Deci, 2002; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). The supportiveness of our environments also influences the types of goals we pursue (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010).

1.1.1 Basic Psychological Needs: Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence

The need for autonomy refers to our need to perceive that we freely choose and endorse our actions, absent any feelings of pressure and control (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Deci & Ryan, 2000). In autonomy, our behavior is consistent with our values and interests, and we experience a sense of ownership over it. It is important to note that, from an SDT perspective, autonomy is not the same as independence or individualism; it does not preclude acting with and for other people, as long as those actions emanate from our sense of self (Hodgins, Koestner, & Duncan, 1996). Nor does it mean the absence of structure; chaos and lack of clarity do not enable students to achieve progress and self-determination (Reeve, 2006; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). The opposite of autonomy is control, which consists of directing others’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; employing overt methods of control such as directive language, rewards, and punishments; and covertly manipulating others through the use of shame, guilt, and conditional regard (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). Performance-contingent rewards (of which grades are an excellent example), threats of punishment, deadlines, evaluation, imposed goals, competition, and surveillance all tend to be experienced as controlling (for reviews, see Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Relatedness refers to our need to relate to others authentically, to care and feel cared for, and to belong (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 2000). Relatedness also involves being responsive to others’
distress (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). While early formulations of SDT placed greater emphasis on autonomy and competence, relatedness is also important – the sense that an instructor likes, respects, and values their students (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). We tend to internalize the values and practices we experience with those people we feel, or wish to feel, connected to and in those contexts where we feel a sense of belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2002). A lack of connection, or worse, an active dislike between instructor and student, does not provide the basis for this process.

*Competence* refers to the need to exercise our capabilities to have an effect on and master our environment, including our social environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 2000). The need for competence drives our pursuit of optimal challenge; we continually seek opportunities to stretch our capabilities and to exercise newly acquired capabilities (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). But as tasks become unchallenging through repetition, we grow bored and lose motivation.

### 1.1.2 Autonomy Support

*Autonomy support* is the collective term SDT uses for any practice that helps a student meet their basic psychological needs. Reeve and Jang describe autonomy support as “the interpersonal behavior one person provides to involve and nurture another person’s internally locusced, volitional intentions to act, such as when a teacher supports a student’s psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence, relatedness), interests, preferences, and values” (2006, p. 210). Autonomy-supportive instructors identify these and strive to tailor the curriculum and classroom activities to these, rather than shaping students to meet curricular needs (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). If students do not approach learning enthusiastically, an autonomy-supportive instructor rethinks how material and activities are presented (Reeve, 2006).
In general, Ryan and Niemiec (2009) describe the shift to autonomy support as the shift away from teachers as controllers, monitors, and trainers who are responsible for making students learn, toward teachers as facilitators and guides who support student development. This conceptualization of the role of teacher as facilitator and guide is consistent with the ways in which instructors in IDEA courses conceptualize their own roles.

Although I do not wish to foreground my experiences, these courses form the context of the current study because of my experiences of autonomy support within them. One way in which these courses offered autonomy support is through their emphasis on large and small group discussion and frequent check-ins to see how students were faring, which provided students opportunities to talk and instructors to listen to them, be responsive to their comments and questions, and acknowledge their perspectives and experiences (Reeve, 2006; Reeve & Jang, 2006). A sense of care and concern for students seemed to pervade these courses; instructors provided autonomy support through communicating warmth, affection, and approval (Reeve, 2006), similar to the Rogerian concept of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961). As experienced facilitators, instructors also provided autonomy support by reading students’ emotions and ways of thinking, their levels of engagement, and their comprehension, and adjusting teaching accordingly (Reeve, 2006).

Because apart from in-class activities, students in these courses chose the projects they wished to engage in and the topics they wished to present on, these courses inherently offered meaningful choices about what to do and how to do it (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2002), and tended to offer learning activities that were optimally challenging (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), since, left to their own devices, students who have experienced abundant autonomy support will tend to choose activities that are optimally challenging for them. Experiments in
student-led curriculum design are one prominent example of the ways in which these courses provided autonomy support by asking students what they want (Reeve & Jang, 2006).

By de-emphasizing the types of critical feedback that students typically receive, asking them to self-evaluate and focus on the process (and not the outcome) of completing their projects, and emphasizing the strengths of students’ work and the efforts they put in, instructors provided autonomy support by praising evidence of improvement and mastery, encouraging effort, and emphasizing their students’ effectance (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). I remember many times being encouraged to simply “Keep going.” Instructors also de-emphasized deadlines for creative projects, permitting students to take extra time (within institutional limits) to complete them if needed, giving autonomy support by providing sufficient time for students to work on things in their own way (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2002).

In these courses, instructors seemed unthreatened by lack of engagement, resistance, and conflict. They used check-ins to uncover reasons students were not engaged rather than directing engaged behavior and accepted and acknowledged students’ resistance and complaints rather than targeting their “negative attitude” (Reeve, 2006).

One way, however, in which these courses challenge our current understandings is that SDT has focused largely on autonomy support in the student-teacher dialectic. In their study of cohorts and learning communities, Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, and Adkinson (2011) distill the contribution of cohorts down to the feelings of relatedness they foster. However, this excludes the important roles that peers can play in providing other forms of autonomy support to each other, when their roles are defined in ways that allow them to do so. The current study explored the ways in which students in the IDEA curriculum contributed to the autonomy support of their peers.
1.1.3  **Agentic Engagement**

Under SDT’s dialectical framework, it is understood that students indirectly contribute, through their engagement and disengagement, to classroom instruction; teachers tend to respond to engagement by becoming more autonomy-supportive, and to disengagement by becoming more controlling (Reeve & Tseng, 2011a). Reeve and Tseng’s proposal of the addition of agentic engagement is an important contribution to SDT’s dialectical framework in that it describes the direct, rather than merely inferential, ways students can contribute.

According to Reeve and Tseng (2011a, p. 258), students engage agentically when they:

- offer input, express a preference, offer a suggestion or contribution, ask a question, communicate what they are thinking and needing, recommend a goal or objective to be pursued, communicate their level of interest, solicit resources or learning opportunities, seek ways to add personal relevance to the lesson, ask for a say in how problems are to be solved, seek clarification, generate options, communicate likes and dislikes, or request assistance such as modeling, tutoring, feedback, background knowledge, or a concrete example of an abstract concept.

Reeve and Tseng (2011a) take care to differentiate between such “constructive” contributions and “defensive” and “counterproductive” ways in which students evade lessons (distracting themselves from the learning task at hand), reject lessons, and speak up in ways that are perceived as challenging the teacher’s authority and implying incompetence. However, not all instances of student resistance should be characterized as unconstructive. Reeve and Tseng use an example from Winograd (2002, p. 358) of a student telling him, after the novice teacher loses his temper, “You are shouting at us and I don’t think that kids should be shouted at. We
don’t deserve this and you shouldn’t do it. No one likes it and stop it right now!” While Reeve and Tseng characterize this as a non-constructive contribution, in the original article Winograd notes that he agreed with what his student said, but that he experienced it as a challenge to his authority, even going so far as to characterize the “essential issue” as her “counter-hegemony.” If, as Ryan and Niemiec state, SDT is “critical of hegemony in all its forms” (2009, p. 264), there is a contradiction here that needs to be resolved. The literature on student voice helps to illuminate this issue. As Reeve (2013) discusses, highly agentically engaged students may provide teachers opportunities to learn how to be more autonomy supportive. While teachers may not always take up their students’ lessons, neither do students always take up their teachers’ lessons; this is no reason to view the “teachable moments” students provide us with as unconstructive or miseducative.

In their study of adolescent defiance, Van Petegem, Beyers, Vansteenkiste, and Soenens (2015) make a more helpful distinction: defiance for defiance’s sake – to gain freedom from external controls – may come at a cost to autonomy as SDT defines it, because one’s actions are still externally defined. Thus, whether students are defiant for the sake of escaping control, or defiant for the purpose of evoking greater autonomy support seems to be a better criterion for determining whether students’ contributions should be considered constructive. Either way, resistance, whether it takes adaptive or maladaptive forms, ought to be considered a cue that one needs to offer less control and more autonomy support.

Having only been proposed in 2011, agentic engagement is a relatively new construct. It is, however, an essential one if we wish to consider the critical and liberatory possibilities of SDT. To my knowledge, however, the self-determination and agentic engagement literatures have consistently treated students’ bids for greater autonomy, agency, and self-determination as
unproblematic and generally well-received in educational contexts, although the reality, as we shall see from the literature on student voice, is that these are often viewed as threatening by instructors and institutions. As such, a qualitative exploration of the ways in which students agentically engage with their contexts, how these contexts respond, and how self-determined students accommodate to these varying responses, seems requisite to understanding the process and practice of liberation.

1.2 Student Voice

As Levin pointedly puts it, “The history of education reform is a history of doing things to other people, supposedly for their own good” (2000, p. 155). Students are treated, in his words, “almost entirely as objects of reform.” My fear is that, in directing autonomy support solely from the positionality of researchers and instructors, autonomy support is, to use Levin’s words, just another thing we do to students, supposedly for their own good. And this is contrary to the fundamental dialectical framework of SDT. As we begin inviting students to speak for themselves, it is important that we do so thoughtfully. In addition to offering a way forward, the literature on student voice offers a number of caveats.

First, student voice work and student partnerships may be misused in the service of existing institutional aims. Fielding cautions against what he refers to as the “personal . . . for the sake of the functional” (2010, p. 66), in which relationships are used instrumentally for the purpose of increasing organizational performance. When SDT researchers examine externally defined outcomes such as retention and academic achievement, they run the risk of buttressing these sorts of instrumental aims. For Fielding, “the functional is for the sake of and expressive of the personal” (2010, p. 66); the purpose of education is learning “how we lead good lives together.” When SDT researchers examine eudaimonic outcomes like intrinsic goal contents – of
which community, relationships, and personal growth are examples (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008) – they fall more in line with this latter approach.

Citing Beth Humphries’ work on empowerment, Fielding (2004) describes three further dangers: those of accommodation, accumulation, and appropriation. Accommodation occurs when students’ challenging ideas are modified and incorporated into existing vocabularies and ideologies so as not to upset the status quo (Fielding, 2004; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002). While the current study confirms and triangulates some of SDT’s assertions and key constructs using qualitative methods, more important is how student voices might challenge our existing understandings of SDT and its liberatory potential.

Accumulation occurs when knowledge gained from listening to students is used to better manage or marginalize them (Fielding, 2004). While Ryan and Niemiec focus in their 2009 article on the liberatory prospects of SDT, it is not difficult to imagine instructors using the techniques prescribed by SDT to manage students, as Fielding and Rudduck (2002) discuss, by giving them insubstantial choices, just as one manages cattle by giving them a wider pasture.

 Appropriation combines both of the previous processes, accommodation and accumulation, to reinforce existing views and power dynamics (Fielding, 2004). In her discussion of ability grouping, Jo Worthy (2010) describes teachers’ difficulties in increasing autonomy support for students in “regular” and not honors classes who were accustomed to more controlling contexts. The most persistent and positive of the teachers she spoke with got their students to come around to enjoying new ways of being students, but others failed once and stopped trying, reinforcing their negative beliefs about students. Worse, some did not try at all for fear of failure. Corbett and Wilson (1995) speak directly to the issue of role redefinition in the success of reform efforts; students are often required to redefine their roles without any say in
the process, without a grace period for adaptation, and without additional support dedicated to this crucial process. Previously disenfranchised students may remain disenfranchised throughout the reform process, while “good” students maintain their “good” status. This brings us back to the issue of cultural and economic reproduction and how SDT may find itself complicit in this process if it is not implemented consciously and carefully.

1.3 Radical Collegiality

In his 1999 article introducing the concept of radical collegiality, Fielding speaks of “plac[ing] students firmly within the collegium, not merely as objects of teachers’ professional gaze, but as agents in the process of transformative learning” (p. 22). This is SDT’s agentic engagement taken to its logical end, encompassing the full dialectic of not only students learning from and being influenced by their teachers, but teachers learning from and being influenced by their students and students learning from and being influenced by other students. If we marry the role of teacher as facilitator that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) suggest with, for example, the role of “students as radical agents of change” that Fielding’s 2001 article of the same name suggests, we now have a more complete picture of what a truly autonomy-supportive and liberating education might look like. I intend to address the implications of a radical collegiality for SDT research in general, and for the current study, in my discussion of the rationale for my research design.

Such an approach is not without its challenges. Drawing on Meyer and Land’s notion of a threshold concept – a “transformed way of understanding” – Cook-Sather and Luz’s (2013) work describes student-faculty partnerships as a threshold concept both students and faculty may initially struggle with and find “troublesome.” As Fielding and Rudduck assert, “What students have to say about teaching and learning may be feared as personally challenging or as
threatening to the institution” (2002, p. 3). However, threshold concepts, once transcended, tend to be irreversible (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2013); students who fully assume the role of partners experience a shift in their sense of self that reflects an epistemological maturity. They see themselves not only as consumers of knowledge, but also producers of it (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2013), a conceptual shift that increases their possibilities for exercising both autonomy and competence.

This description reflects the nature of role redefinition as a process of transformative learning. For Mezirow, transformative learning is a process that involves exploring, trying on, building competence in, and integrating new roles and relationships (cited in Kitchenham, 2008). It requires first becoming “critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 101), assumptions he refers to as meaning perspectives. He characterizes maturity as the process of moving towards meaning perspectives that, among other things, enhance our sense of agency. Cook-Sather and her colleagues’ notions of learning partnerships and Fielding’s notion of radical collegiality are two such meaning perspectives. Like Cook-Sather and Luz, Mezirow (1978) recognizes the often threatening nature of this process of challenging assumptions, as well as its irreversible nature.

Mezirow (1978) characterizes transformative learning as a process unique to adulthood. Illeris (2014) concurs that the learning that occurs in childhood is development, not transformation; one must first have an identity in order to transform it. While this is outside of the scope of the current study, the notion that transformative learning cannot occur in childhood is a notion worth troubling. However, SDT’s focus on generalizability across the lifespan may help to explain why the theory focuses on continua and not on the transformative processes that
researchers have presumed to occur only in adulthood. The current study will therefore explore the ways in which IDEA courses might foster this transformative process of role redefinition as a form of autonomy support, in this case in an adult population.

1.4 The Current Study

This study sought to extend the basic concepts in SDT through examining them in a non-traditional setting as well as making use of qualitatively-derived concepts that challenged the taken-for-granted assumptions that SDT is researched and practiced in critical and liberatory ways simply because these potentials are embedded in the theory. Although the results of this study are not intended to be generalized, I hope to suggest concrete ways in which SDT can follow through on its goal to be critical and liberating. These recommendations may provide material for autonomy-supportive instructors to reflect upon their own teaching practices and strategies to support students in the transformative process of role redefinition. This study, drawing as it does upon a social constructionist epistemology and qualitative methods, also hopes to suggest fruitful new avenues for research in SDT in aligning more closely with social constructionist and qualitative approaches.

To this end, I invited students who had taken multiple IDEA courses and who experienced them as transformative to give insight into their experiences of transformation and role redefinition through their participation in IDEA, as well as the impacts of this process on their educational experiences in general. To be clear, I did not make the assumption that all students experienced transformation as a result of their engagement in IDEA, nor that those who did had undergone a process of redefining their roles as students. However, the context of IDEA seemed a fruitful one in which to explore such possibilities. My choice of this context was
guided by my own experiences of role redefinition as a long-term participant in IDEA courses. I often spoke of “majoring in psychology, but being an IDEA student” because this encapsulated my sense of the transformative nature of IDEA courses and the new role that I came to embody through my involvement in them. I also watched my peers in IDEA take on new ways of being students, some with ease and enthusiasm, others with initial feelings of trepidation and overwhelm. My thoughts on the role of peers in offering autonomy support were prompted by my own experiences as a veteran IDEA student of attempting to help students adapt to these new roles through, among other strategies, reassurance and explanation. Although I was not the instructor, I often felt responsible for supporting my peers’ learning as well as my own, a mentoring role I typically could not fully enact in other courses because my more narrowly defined student role did not permit it. However, this ability to transcend old roles and support other students offered me opportunities to exercise my growing competence as a facilitator and educator. And while sometimes I was able to contribute “constructively” in ways that expanded my options for exercising autonomy, at other times, my frustration at not being able to be the student I was capable of being provoked disengagement and defiance on my part. In one of these instances, my marked disengagement eventually yielded to an inversion of roles in which I was able to offer autonomy support to my instructor and suggest ways that he could offer it to his students as well.

1.4.1 Research Question

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the lived experiences of long-term students in IDEA, focusing on the processes by which they were encouraged to redefine their role as students as a potential contribution to SDT’s understanding of autonomy support.
Thus, the central research question I considered in this study is:

*What are IDEA students’ lived experiences of role redefinition in the context of their IDEA courses?*

Because I wished to propose role redefinition as a form of autonomy support, and because I wished to explore how agentic engagement plays out when students have redefined their roles, I also focused on the following subquestions:

1. Does role redefinition emerge as part of students’ experiences of transformation?
2. How did IDEA instructors and peers foster this process of role redefinition?
3. What impact has this role redefinition had on how they engage with their educations?
4. What impact has this role redefinition had on how others in their educational contexts engage with them?

Because role redefinition is a process that often occurs over time, incrementally (Mezirow, 1978), I engaged in a narrative inquiry that captured this temporal element, engaging with five participants who were likely to have undergone a process of role redefinition over the course of their participation in IDEA.
Chapter 2: Research Design and Methodology

“The qualitative researcher,” writes Stake, “emphasizes episodes of nuance, the sequentiality of happenings in context, the wholeness of the individual” (1995, p. xii). So, while SDT posits a common human nature that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) argue is a basis for the use of quantitative methods that produce generalizable results, they also acknowledge an alliance with qualitative researchers in their acknowledgement of learning as situational and meaning as constructed. According to SDT, there is not a direct correspondence between teachers’ behaviors and students’ motivation; the relationship is mediated by how teachers’ behaviors are perceived and interpreted by students, as well as students’ own histories, motivational orientations, and internal regulatory processes. Thus, qualitative research’s interest in “understanding... interpretations... at a particular point in time and in a particular context” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4) is germane to our aims. Further, as Perry, Brenner, Collie, and Hofer (2015) discuss, the survey self-report methods widely used in SDT research limit participants’ responses to researcher-defined constructs. And by potentially denying participants the ability to choose responses they fully endorse, such research methods deny participants autonomy and voice for the sake of expedience.

This is why I wished to consider a different way of engaging in research that more explicitly honors students’ voices as well as their competencies, by framing those whose narratives I wish to solicit not simply as data sources, but more radically, as colleagues and collaborators, after Fielding’s (2001) work. Whether they were known to me or unknown, in the non-hierarchical context of IDEA, students are indeed my peers and colleagues. And if, as I propose, it is true that peers in IDEA are an important source of autonomy support, then they are both potential participant and potential audience for the current study. Ideally, in order to fully
honor their agency and voice, I would want to collaborate with participants from the very beginning, seeking their collaboration in not only answering research questions, but in formulating them. However, the scope of the current study precludes such extensive collaboration.

Implicit in my reframing of participants as colleagues and collaborators is the possibility of participants as co-authors, which necessitated a wider range of confidentiality options such as those suggested by Kaiser in her 2009 article on protecting respondent confidentiality. Deductive disclosure, which refers to the ability of those not privy to the identities of participants to nonetheless identify them from their data, is especially a risk in qualitative studies where rich descriptions are the norm (Kaiser, 2009). This is of particular concern in this study, in which the identity of the context I drew participants from would be impossible to conceal because of my personal and professional involvement in it. Even with identifying information redacted, participants would likely be internally identifiable by peers and instructors through the contextual identifiers in their narratives. And as Giordano, O’Reilly, Taylor, and Dogra (2007) point out, making assumptions about participants’ anonymity and confidentiality denies them autonomy and voice, two outcomes that are distinctly contradictory to the aims of this study. As I will discuss in the section on Data Analysis, I addressed these issues through the use of modified consent procedures modeled after Kaiser’s recommendations.

2.1 Narrative Inquiry

Behaviors . . . were expressions of an individual’s stories within a particular context at a particular time. Because behaviors were narrative expressions, it was important to consider the characters who were living the stories, the characters
who were telling the stories, the times at which stories were lived, the times
stories were told, the places in which stories were lived and told, and so on.

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 25)

Narrative inquiry is a particularly appropriate methodology with which to examine SDT
because both my methodology and theoretical framework acknowledge the ongoing influence of
context. Although I have chosen to focus more narrowly on autonomy support, agentic
engagement, and role redefinition, SDT acknowledges that the degree to which our needs are met
over time determines our causality orientations, the relatively stable individual motivational
profiles that develop over time, through our interactions in different social contexts (Deci &
Ryan, 1985a; Ryan & Deci, 2002; Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010). Echoing
Clandinin and Connelly, we might say that engagement is the expression of individual stories
within a particular context at a particular time. As Fraser (2004) discusses, narrative interviewing
may uncover hidden ideas that challenge “official accounts and established theories”; this is
precisely the reason I employed narrative inquiry in this study.

Potential collaborators, owing to the nature of IDEA courses, tend to be practiced in and
capable of engaging in and communicating self-awareness and critical reflection, and therefore
capable of providing “rich and experiential” data (Morse, 2000, p. 4). Additionally, because I
intended to inquire not only about collaborators’ experiences but also those of their peers, the
study included what Morse refers to as shadowed data, information that helps to indicate a range
of experiences that is not limited to those of participants.
2.2 Participants

Participants in this study were 5 individuals – four women and one man – who had taken multiple IDEA courses, who identified as having transformed as students as a result of their involvement in IDEA. This number of participants was chosen based on Morse’s (2000) suggestion that qualitative studies involving narrow scope, a clear topic, and quality data require fewer participants.

I consulted with the former primary IDEA instructor (my key informant), who had read my proposal and was familiar with the selection criteria. He forwarded my recruitment advertisement to a pool of 87 potential participants he had identified as meeting the criteria, and whom he had contact information for (R. Laird, personal communication, July 4, 2016). Nineteen potential participants responded. I then selected five participants using convenience sampling, arranging meetings with participants who expressed an interest in engaging in joint inquiry into the process of their own role redefinition, and who were available to meet in a short timeframe. Convenience sampling is efficient, but may affect the quality of information one can glean from participants, as well as the generalizability of the data (Creswell, 2007). However, neither of these was of particular concern, given the expectations I had of participants’ ability to provide rich data, as well as the study’s exploratory nature. All participants were over 19 years of age at the time of their participation.

2.3 Data Collection

I used interviews as my primary source of data, although I welcomed participants to provide other materials such as written course reflections, as well as any further thoughts that they deemed pertinent to the study. None chose to contribute additional materials; the additional
data consisted solely of feedback they offered through our e-mail conversations. The semi-structured interview prompts I created (see Appendix A) used open-ended questions to address the central research question and subquestions I had identified. Because this was a narrative inquiry, I clustered my questions temporally – before, during, and after IDEA. Many of my questions addressed participants’ relationships with instructors and peers during each of these time periods, as well as the nature of the transformations they underwent during their involvement with IDEA. While these questions guided my inquiry, participants were encouraged to lead the conversation, which often went in surprising and fruitful directions, introducing new themes that in many cases echoed findings from empirical studies on various aspects of SDT.

In order to establish trust, I provided pertinent information about the study (see Appendix B) to my key informant so that he could introduce me to potential participants via e-mail and invite them to participate on my behalf. Those who responded were provided with a copy of the information letter and consent form (see Appendix C), offered an opportunity to ask questions, and asked to suggest meeting times within the next month that would be convenient for them. I reviewed consent and collected their forms upon meeting with them for our face-to-face interview. The interviews were generally one-and-a-half to two hours in length, conducted and recorded in a location convenient for participants such as their home, their current campus, or a quiet park.

2.4 Data Analysis

Heather Fraser (2004) offers a straightforward guide to her method of narrative analysis, which I used as guidance in conducting a cross-narrative thematic analysis. Analysis began, of course, at the interview. I transcribed the interviews in order to fully immerse myself in the data.
I edited interviews into narrative form, putting them into chronological order as much as possible but not substantially altering participants’ words, and asked them to review and approve these co-constructed narratives for fidelity prior to formal analysis. The Participant Information Letter and Consent Form (see Appendix C) provided participants with the opportunity to determine whether they wished to use their real names or pseudonyms and which identifying details would be retained or redacted in the final narratives, as well as their interest in ongoing participation in the research process. However, I also revisited issues of participation and permission with participants throughout the process. As I returned their narratives for review, I reminded them that they could modify the participation and disclosure options they had initially selected, asked them if there was anything they wished to change, add, omit, or redact, and confirmed I had permission before sharing their narratives with the other participants. Later, I asked them to review the draft data analysis and a complete draft of the manuscript, paying particular attention to the portions of their narrative I included, and if necessary correct my interpretations thereof, even if they chose not to review the entire manuscript. One participant read both the draft analysis and the completed draft of the manuscript and provided feedback; two other participants only read the completed draft of the manuscript.

While I was on the lookout for themes generated by the theoretical frameworks and literatures I worked from – and took the time to probe further when a participant introduced these ideas themselves – I also remained open to the unexpected. Fraser (2004) recommended consciously scanning across different domains of experience – the intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and structural – to avoid fixating on just one domain. This cohered nicely with SDT’s emphasis on both individual interpretations and orientations as well as the influence of our interpersonal and sociocultural contexts. Fraser also recommended drawing from the feminist
tradition of “linking the personal with the political”; one of my chief aims was to examine the way in which dominant discourses about what it means to be a student limits our opportunities to meet our needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Following her recommendations, I was also mindful of the commonalities and differences across the narratives, as well as ideas that could be challenging, which, again, were of particular relevance to this study.

2.5 Validity and Rigor

In their 2000 article on validity in qualitative research, John Creswell and Dana Miller provide recommendations for establishing validity based on research lenses and paradigms. For studies operating from a critical paradigm, they recommend three approaches to validity, based respectively on the lens of the researcher, the participants, and those external to the study, two of which I used in this study: researcher reflexivity and collaboration with participants.

I have included my own positionality and reflexivity in a subsequent section, gleaned from a journal I kept throughout the research process and guided at each stage by the prompts Fraser (2004) offers.

In framing the participants in the current study as collaborators, and by emphasizing agency and voice, I necessarily invoked collaboration as another method by which to validate my findings. While the current study forms the basis of a thesis that, to fulfill degree requirements, must substantially be mine, and therefore the research questions are mine, I invited participants into the research as much as they wished to participate, notably, by continuing to engage with them for feedback throughout data analysis and the crafting of the final narrative, as I noted in the previous section on data analysis. For those participants who were willing to use their real names, I offered the opportunity to co-author publications derived from this work.
2.6 Ethical Considerations

As previously discussed, participants were recruited on my behalf by a former IDEA instructor; as such, unless they were already known to me, I was not aware of the identities of possible participants until they contacted me. Potential participants were informed that their choice to participate in this study would not influence their involvement in IDEA in any way and current IDEA instructors would not be informed of the identity of participants unless they chose to use their real names in the final report. However, because the pool of potential participants is small and participants were likely to be known to each other, I was transparent about the risks of deductive disclosure from instructors and peers who know them (i.e., I could not guarantee they would not be identifiable through the content of their narratives). To protect the privacy of non-participants, I replaced the names and identities of instructors and other students mentioned in the narratives with pseudonyms or otherwise obfuscated or omitted their identities. I provided participants with oral and written descriptions of the study, as well as their rights as participants, prior to their involvement, and negotiated consent and confidentiality with them on an ongoing basis. Collected data were securely stored both physically and digitally, in accordance with UBC policy.

2.7 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a qualitative researcher, I am the instrument of both data collection and interpretation (Merriam, 2002). As such, I am obligated to acknowledge my own perspectives, biases, and limitations. For Peshkin, researcher subjectivity is not only a potential limitation, but a virtue, “for it is the basis of researchers’ making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the
unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (1988, p. 18).

I am a white, heterosexual, cisgender female, who grew up in the southern United States, lived for a few years in the Midwest, and immigrated to Vancouver, Canada in 2003. Autonomy and self-determination are central themes in my own personal narrative, and my family upbringing bred in me a deep distrust of and desire to move beyond dominant discourses, as well as respect for defiance and resistance as potentially healthy impulses. I was the daughter of an authoritarian father and quietly tried to resist in all the ways I could and as long as I could; meanwhile, my educational contexts, particularly in middle and high school, offered me a great deal of autonomy owing to my designation as “gifted” and my teachers’ willingness to differentiate the curriculum to meet my needs. I was fond of most of my teachers, and they of me; they offered me a sense of relatedness and competence that was largely absent at home. I also greatly enjoyed learning, in spite of my father’s push to achieve academically; no doubt it was my connection with my teachers that proved crucial in this regard.

In my first semester of university, outside of my father’s reach and the immediate threat of punishment, I engaged deeply in some of my courses and disengaged completely from others. Shortly thereafter, I ran away from university altogether. I eventually resumed my post-secondary education in counselling and psychology, taking a variety of elective courses in the humanities, including some of the IDEA courses that form the context of this study.

The role redefinition I experienced as a student in IDEA was two-fold. I not only intuitively understood these new ways of being a student and adapted quickly and easily to them, but also, for the first time, embraced the possibility of becoming an educator. I learned, through my involvement in IDEA, to more explicitly value ways of being a learner outside of the narrow,
traditional definitions of academic achievement that I had been exposed to in my earlier educational endeavors. And, most relevant to the current study, I began to engage with my instructors as radical colleagues in a variety of ways: through serving as a student member and facilitator in partnership with administrators, faculty, and staff on a number of institutional initiatives, and inviting staff and faculty as collaborators on projects I initiated.

However, the stark contrast between the expansive role I was permitted to enact in IDEA and the restrictive role I was expected to enact in some of my other courses strained my morale so badly I wrote a creative non-fiction piece about it as a means of coping. As I note, my and my peers’ reactions ranged from defiance to (more typically) disengagement:

*I am too committed to finishing my degree to consider quitting, but in some courses I become the kind of student I don’t even recognize: bored, present in body only when my attendance is required, skipping sometimes when it isn’t. I do the bare minimum to get the grade I want, or settle for something slightly lower. I am too polite to text in class, but a couple times I sit in the back and hide a crossword puzzle in my binder.*

*(Wisniewski, 2012)*

In the interests of transparency and reflexivity, it seems important to contextualize IDEA within the political climate of Kwantlen, and my own history there. What it was about IDEA that made it work so well had been an idea I wanted to develop since before I began my graduate studies in fall of 2013. I had chosen to pursue a research degree at a research institution because I viewed myself as a potential liaison between traditional academia and this very non-traditional
set of courses, someone who, as Chelanna will speak about in her narrative, could blend the worlds of red and purple. Due to its non-traditional nature, IDEA had long been a set of courses under threat; this was not a secret among IDEA students. After graduating, I had been part of the IDEA Steering Committee, which aspired to the creation of a certificate, a minor, and/or a program, and which was abruptly dissolved in May of 2014 when it became clear that the university was not interested in IDEA’s further development. I worked that summer as a research assistant with Kwantlen’s INSTL (Institute for Innovation in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning), researching and creating new learning outcomes and rubrics to be piloted in the Amazon Field School and hopefully to be used throughout IDEA. However, the curriculum committee never approved the new learning outcomes. A course in Motivation (EPSE 584) in fall of 2014 finally provided me with a bridge between red and purple, a theoretical framework that offered explanatory power for IDEA: self-determination theory.

Because the threats against IDEA were intensifying, my first drafts of my proposal angrily set out to demonstrate IDEA’s legitimacy using SDT. As you will read in my data analysis, many of us recognized the learning that occurred in IDEA courses as legitimate and essential, even as some administrators and faculty did not. But through months of engaging with the literature and critically reflecting upon it, my ideas deepened and my aims shifted. It was no longer about using SDT as evidence for the pedagogical soundness of IDEA; it was about using IDEA as a lever for understanding and extending SDT. At the end of 2015, Ross Laird, my key informant and the instructor who had founded IDEA, announced that he would no longer be teaching IDEA courses, although they would still be offered by the institution. The sense among IDEA students was that IDEA would change irrevocably under new leadership, and that the courses were no longer worth taking. IDEA as we had known it was dead.
The overwhelming response I received to my call for participants seemed to represent the desire on the part of many IDEA alumni to collaborate on one more joint project together, creating an epilogue of sorts to the experiment of IDEA. I was happy that the spirit of IDEA persisted in so many of us, sad that these voices had not been heard by the institution, and disappointed that I could not include everyone in this project. The voices that are represented here are just five of the voices that could have represented IDEA; to include some was to necessarily exclude others. I was careful as well to avoid the assumption that the loudest voices – the students I knew to be most vocal in their support for IDEA – would necessarily be the most informative voices, and held off on their inclusion. The five voices represented here were those of students I knew at an arm’s length or not at all prior to this project. Many were eager to have off-the-record conversations about IDEA after our formal interview. Some of us continued to interact for other reasons during the process of data collection and analysis – attending the same workshops, or interacting on social media. I was mindful of my dual roles, and often privately joked about this with my participants, but I felt an affinity for them through our shared participation in IDEA, as well as a growing fondness for them as individuals through our joint participation in this project.

As I will discuss in my data analysis, one powerful way of offering autonomy support is to leave a thread others can follow to get out of their own struggles and stuck spots. My first interview, with Connell, left a thread I could follow during the difficult process of completing my Masters degree. I had completed my coursework, was concerned about my career prospects, and felt a great deal of pressure to conform to the expectations of academia, although I was clearly a different sort of scholar from many of my peers. Connell’s wisdom reminded me that
“output follows truth,” that forcing output is something we do out of insecurity, and that I ought to slow down and trust in the process.
Chapter 3: Thematic Analysis

This chapter and the next outline themes that I identified in participant collaborators’ narratives, as well as my and their interpretations. Working as I am within the framework of self-determination theory and other literatures such as those on student voice and radical collegiality, I had pre-identified a number of themes, such as students’ experiences of control and autonomy support, role redefinition and agentic engagement, and defiance. However, the conversations I had with participants were wide-ranging and often touched on topics that I hadn’t anticipated, but that were present in the self-determination theory literature.

In broad terms, participants characterized their post-secondary experiences as largely controlling, and often felt driven to seek out more autonomy-supportive disciplines, of which IDEA was an exemplar. I will first discuss students’ experiences of control in their educational contexts prior to IDEA. I will then discuss their experiences of autonomy support within the context of IDEA. While my research questions focused on transformation through role redefinition, my findings indicate that students’ experiences of autonomy support helped to foster not one, but two transformative processes, which I will discuss in order in a subsequent chapter. First, participants underwent a process of integration that allowed them to resolve conflicts between different parts of their identities and incorporate them into their self structures, as well as take on frames of reference that expanded what constituted legitimate learning and ways of learning.

Second, participants underwent a process of role redefinition that radically expanded the ways in which they could engage as students with their instructors and peers. Supports for these two processes intertwined in many ways; autonomy support provided the ground for both of these processes to occur. But however necessary autonomy support, as it has traditionally been
conceived in the SDT literature, was to both processes, it was not sufficient to support this latter process of role redefinition. As I suggested, the role of peers also proved crucial in this process. As I predicted, students’ enactment of these new, more expansive roles was not always welcomed by their other instructors, and was sometimes perceived as defiance, but students themselves found their new roles promoted critical engagement and liberation, following through on Ryan and Niemiec’s (2009) vision for SDT.

3.1 Participant Collaborators and Their Narratives

Before we hear from the participant collaborators, I will first introduce them. With the exception of Maya, all participant collaborators chose to speak in their own names.

3.1.1 Abbey

Abbey and I sat together on her deck to conduct our interview. Abbey is a white, married female in her early 30’s, and a new mom. She is a multimedia artist and makeup artist and recently built her own studio. She says she enjoys “pretty much everything creative, everything expressive. So, everything from poetry to fine art to dance to music.” After switching out of business, she earned her Bachelor’s degree in psychology from Kwantlen, where she wrote her Honours thesis. She is still a member of her supervisor’s research lab, though she is on hiatus while spending time with her new baby. She took a number of IDEA classes as part of an effort to create her own unofficial minor in fine arts so that she would be able to work as an expressive arts therapist.

Before Abbey came to IDEA, she describes herself as having been Type A, driven, and competitive with herself, but also as an “against-the-grain kind of person” who didn’t always fit
in the boxes others provided for her. She had gone back to school for business so she could make money, but found it was the “worst idea” ever for her, and approached her business courses instrumentally, trying to play the game and get the best grades she could. She didn’t make the effort to get to know most of her classmates; she didn’t like the kind of people they were and didn’t share their values. Doing art – playing piano, for example – provided her an outlet that gave her the energy to persist through these more “square” pursuits.

Abbey then changed her major to psychology out of an interest into pursuing a career in expressive arts therapy, and found the sense of belonging there that had been lacking in her business courses. She signed up for IDEA courses because she believed they would help her in that career, but quickly found the courses were quite different from what she expected. She found them disorienting and frustrating at first because no one was telling her what to do. She initially perceived the courses as being easy because they tapped into the kinds of expressive arts projects and self-reflection she already did for refreshment when she found herself in “squarer” disciplines, and thus felt like she was faking it. Nevertheless, she persisted and started to feel more comfortable and even curious towards the end of that first course, and signed up for more. Along the way, she decided she would simply do whatever she wanted in the courses and that it was the process that mattered. She began focusing more on the people in the courses, and the discussions that occurred in class. She felt that, over time, her projects became “uglier,” but more authentic. As she took more IDEA courses, she perceived them as boxing her in more, perhaps owing to institutional pressure to outline everything, and have required readings, and actually resisted these changes.

However, after IDEA, Abbey found herself taking more risks and following the rules laid out for her less stringently. She asked more questions in class, and tried to nudge her other
instructors to provide more flexibility. She also expressed her ideas about education to the administration, but was disappointed when nothing came of her suggestions.

3.1.2 Chelanna

Chelanna and I talked together under the trees at Trinity Western, where she was in the final stages of getting her TESOL certificate to be certified to teach adults English as a Second Language. Chelanna is a married white female in her mid-20’s. She was born and raised in Surrey, BC, attended an alternative program for most of junior and high school, and spent a year-and-a-half working with Youth with a Mission (YWAM) on a boat in Europe. Chelanna recently graduated from Kwantlen with a BA in General Studies and a “brand spankin’ new” minor in Language and Culture, Japanese stream. She took three IDEA courses as electives, including the Amazon Field School.

Chelanna described her elementary school experience as having been “pretty standard,” but attended an alternative program from grades 8 through 11 with high academic standards in a non-traditional educational setting. There, she felt very close to her teachers and peers, and felt teachers provided students with a great deal of freedom and an atmosphere of mutual respect. She left after 11th grade because the other students had requested a more science-based curriculum that didn’t match her interests.

Like Abbey, Chelanna had initially taken business courses because it was a path to a good job that she knew would pay off her investment in education. About halfway through her Kwantlen experience, she sought the help of a counsellor because being in business classes was making her miserable. The counsellor suggested that she take an IDEA course, and that became part of her creating a custom general studies curriculum for herself with language and culture
components that were eventually recognized as meeting the requirements of a minor. She immediately took to IDEA courses because they reminded her of her previous educational experiences, and the sense of community reminded her of her church experiences. She found that she was able to bring parts of herself to IDEA that weren’t welcome in other disciplines. When Chelanna chose to sign up for the Amazon Field School, she found that her family’s perceptions of learning and education came into conflict with hers, and that her involvement in IDEA helped her challenge those societal and familial notions of what properly constitutes a classroom. Chelanna described herself as always having engaged with her instructors, but increasing her engagement after IDEA in ways that were largely, though not universally, well received.

3.1.3 Connell

Connell and I lay on a grassy hill overlooking Granville Island Market to conduct our interview. Connell is a white, straight male in his mid-20’s. He was born in Vancouver, but has lived most of his life in the US. He attended a Montessori elementary school in the US, a Catholic middle school in the Caribbean, and a public high school in the US. After graduating, he attended McGill University for Biology and English, and left after 2 ½ years. He returned to university in 2013, completing his degree in Creative Writing at Kwantlen, where he also took six IDEA courses as electives, including the Amazon Field School, once as a student and once as a student leader. Connell is interested in going into counselling because of his own experience with depression, is currently taking psychology courses, and volunteers in an addictions recovery center, where he does “really cool therapeutic writing groups.”

Connell described his Montessori school experience as being very inclusive, and appealing to his sense of curiosity, though not working as well for his brother as it had for him.
He commented very little on his other pre-university experiences other than to say that high school was easy for him. Connell had initially gone to McGill for English and biology, but when he didn’t make the soccer team, things fell apart for him. He partied, drank, skipped classes, and began sinking into a depression and failing his courses. He began writing, but simultaneously rebelled against courses he considered to be dry. He had friends outside of classes, but none in his classes.

Connell left McGill and moved to California, and then told his parents if they bought a cabin, he’d go live there. A friend suggested he look for creative writing programs, and so he signed up for the program at Kwantlen, sight unseen. On his first campus visit, he saw promotional materials for IDEA, took a copy of the course outline, liked what he read, and signed up for an IDEA class. He liked what the instructor was talking about and the in-class activities. But overall, Connell found himself miserable, and considered dropping out again in his second semester. He attributed his staying in university to the courses he was taking – two IDEA courses and an online creative course taught by the same instructor – because they offered “slack” and “cushioned” his fall. He was also encouraged to stick it out by his IDEA instructor’s story of overcoming his own struggles to complete his schooling, as well as his own commitment to the group.

Connell’s narrative focused a great deal on the themes of self-awareness and philosophical topics and questions: What are we here for? How do we know what is the most meaningful path for us? How do we maintain our own integrity? How can we trust ourselves? For Connell, the transformation he underwent in IDEA was about remembering who he was, and chipping away at everything else.
3.1.4 “Maya”

“Maya” and I sat together on her back patio to conduct our interview. Maya is in her mid-20’s and has lived all her life in the Lower Mainland in BC. Her father is from West Africa; her mother is Canadian. She earned a degree in psychology from Kwantlen and took a number of IDEA courses as electives. Maya did not offer additional biographical details for the current study, but her narrative greatly enriched my findings.

Maya described having not been very engaged in her education prior to IDEA. She achieved well, but did only what she needed to in order to get these results. She didn’t develop relationships with instructors or peers or seek additional feedback. She took her first IDEA course because it satisfied a degree requirement and fit best into her schedule. Maya was surprised at the freedom she was given in her IDEA course in contrast to all of her other courses.

Maya’s initial focus on trying to figure out how to play the game of IDEA and maintain her high GPA resulted in lower grades than she wanted in her first couple IDEA courses; nevertheless, she stuck with it, and once she let go of her grades and focused on the process of learning, her grades in IDEA improved. Where she had not previously sought out friendships with peers, she found herself enjoying spending time with peers in IDEA and cultivating deep, long-term friendships. She also found herself connecting deeply with her IDEA instructor and feeling known and empowered. One semester, already having signed up for five courses, she added an IDEA course that she said got her through the semester. Another semester, she chose as her semester project the ambitious task of learning to break a horse, which she described as one of the best experiences of her life.

Through her involvement in IDEA, Maya got to a point at which she did feel in charge of and took control of her education. Through IDEA, she began to think critically not only about
disciplines but also the systems and institutions she was part of, and began bucking practices she perceived as unfair or damaging, as did her other IDEA peers, although she noted that they had been “branded” as troublemakers. She strategically disengaged in courses in which her engagement wasn’t welcomed. But whenever it was possible, she made an effort to make course learning relevant and interesting to her and her classmates, and found that she performed even better in classes in which she was able to do this, as well as enjoying them more.

3.1.5 Sana

Sana and I met in a quiet park to conduct our interview. Sana is in her mid-20’s. She immigrated to Canada from Pakistan when she was 16, completed grades 11 and 12 here in Canada, and went straight to Kwantlen, exploring a number of disciplines, such as business, fine arts, and psychology, before earning a degree in creative writing. She took five or six IDEA courses as electives, including the leadership course, which complemented her work with Model UN students in high school.

Sana described herself as frustrating her teachers in Pakistan because she was clearly capable, but wouldn’t do the work. She went through the typical three years of highly structured O-level training and sat for the exam, and got sick from the stress, particularly in the months leading up to the exam. Her parents, like many others, had encouraged her to go into the sciences. In school, rote memorization was the norm, and her teachers were unenthusiastic about the material, although they were on the whole deeply invested in their students’ success. She did have a sense of connection to her peers, all girls, and they helped each other survive the system. Although she didn’t appreciate the way it was done, Sana was grateful that her education had prepared her so well to transition to life in Canada.
Sana explored a variety of disciplines before settling on creative writing, and learned about IDEA through word of mouth. She felt unsettled by having to sit in a circle with nothing to hide behind, but “fell in love” with IDEA, and found her IDEA courses to be the most liberating she’d experienced, creative writing being the next most liberating. Her experiences in IDEA taught her how to be a more autonomy-supportive leader in her extracurricular involvement in the Model UN and in other aspects of life, and she approached her IDEA instructor as a sounding board when she had difficulties as a leader. She found her IDEA classes also helped her be more outgoing and make friends, and be more confident in herself. Her IDEA peers then exposed her to a wide variety of activities and interests. Through IDEA, she realized she could pursue a career she was passionate about – writing – rather than doing something others deemed “practical.” After IDEA, Sana found herself engaging agentically in a strategic manner; she would if she believed instructors would be open to it, but did only what she had to if they seemed “closed off.”

3.2 Experiences of Control and Need Deprivation

Recall that self-determination theory asserts that every person has three basic psychological needs – the need for autonomy, the need for relatedness, and the need for competence – and that optimal growth, well-being, and motivation are fostered through satisfaction of these three basic needs. Participants described how their post-secondary courses outside of IDEA often failed to satisfy these needs, or even actively thwarted their satisfaction, resulting in disengagement, feelings of stress, and psychological and physical ill-being.
3.2.1  The Need for Autonomy: “I wasn’t in control of my own education. . .”

Most of the participants characterized their post-secondary experiences as more often controlling than autonomy supportive. Maya, who chose to break a horse as one of her IDEA projects, used that experience as a powerful analogy for her experiences in university, and drew a correlation between her experiences of being controlled and her feelings of disengagement.

The whole idea was, I wasn’t breaking him. The skills that I learned about was natural horsemanship. That is about building a partnership with the horse, as opposed to beating it and molding it to your will. Which is almost what university does, forcing [students] into this and they will do what you tell them to do or else. . . I feel so much of the time you have to do this, do that, you’re always just being told what to do, and after a point, you’re just like, ‘When are you going to treat me like an adult, and can I make my own decisions?’ . . . I had a lot of feelings that school wasn’t really helping me, but I think it was just because of that disengagement. I wasn’t in control of my own education. . . and I didn’t feel like I was in control of my future, either.

Abbey echoed the pervasiveness of this control, as well as the pervasiveness of its effects.

I definitely went along with, “No, this is how it has to happen, and this is what they want from us.” Institutionalized is how I would maybe say it; I learned how to play the game. That was probably the way I was most, and even when I graduated after I had IDEA courses, I was still that way because my other courses were like that.
While causality orientations – orientations towards others that develop through consistent experiences of control or autonomy support, or of contexts that are altogether amotivating – were not a primary focus of this study, Abbey’s comments about still interacting in a particular way in spite of her IDEA courses points in the direction of a strong control orientation. Indeed, early in her narrative, Abbey described her own disposition as being perfectionistic and Type-A, characteristics that coincide with the control orientation (Deci & Ryan, 1985a).

3.2.2 The Need for Relatedness: “We never really have time to stop in our day and just talk to somebody. . .”

In addition to the lack of autonomy that Maya and Abbey spoke about, Connell, Maya, and Abbey discussed a lack of relatedness with instructors and peers. For Connell, these crucial social ties developed solely outside the classroom at McGill.

My relationships with my instructors were basically non-existent. I made a few strong friends, but all the friends I made weren’t from classes, they were from residence, and then friendships going out from there.

But keep in mind that Kwantlen, unlike McGill, is a commuter school. If students do not develop relationships with peers in the classroom, they typically have few other opportunities, as Maya pointed out.

I missed out on friendships, for sure. Before IDEA I didn’t really get to know my teachers in any way. . . It was a really hard time, I found, because the transition from high school to university, people are all over the world now, so you don’t have that core group of friends, and when it’s Kwantlen, there’s no housing on
campus, so you don’t get to build those bonds that a lot of people build when they do live in dorms.

Before IDEA, for Maya, going to most of her classes was the feeling of being alone in a crowded room.

Even though we are constantly going to classes, we’re running around, we’re not actually in contact with people. We see them, we’re around them, but it’s still really lonely because we’re just trying to get to our next thing. We never really have time to stop in our day and just talk to somebody. . . I feel like a lot of people don’t even talk to people when they get to class. They just sit in their spot and wait for the teacher. I’ve been in so many rooms where it’s just dead silence. Thirty of us, just silence. Nobody’s saying anything. Nobody knows anybody. We’re all just waiting for the teacher to come in. Nobody’s like, “Hey, I’m so-and-so.”

Abbey commented specifically on the instrumentality of her peers’ relationships in her business classes. Her description of her and her classmates’ style of interaction echoes the interpersonal characteristics of the control orientation: a tendency to relate to others in a “defensive, strategic, and intolerant way” (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec, & Soenens, 2010, p. 127).

In the business school, I didn’t have any friends outside of classes at all. I find that I didn’t know anybody personally, in the square peg people. . . Nothing was shared in those classes, other than those rote answers. You have “What did you guys get from this chapter, and what were your answers for such and such?” Those were the conversations that we had in those classes. Talking with these
people was a means to an end. When you had to do group projects, everyone would roll their eyes. “Oh, I have to interact with these idiots.” And you just don’t really get to know them unless you’re in several classes together, with those people. Some of them I had 6, 7 classes with, so I got to know those people. And those people I enjoyed getting to know, or I would talk to them outside of class, but for the most part it’s like, “No, we recognize that we’re all just using each other to get a good grade here, so let’s just roll with it and not try to make it something it’s not.”

For Sana, her secondary school in Pakistan offered relatedness with both instructors (as she describes below) and peers, and competence, but not autonomy.

My [Pakistani] teachers. . . were stuck in a system that didn’t support learning, it supported, like, education. You can differentiate between those. Learning is something you do out of interest, but there you had to do this, there was no other choice. That’s education, the way I look at it. But the teachers were very helpful. They wanted you to get to where the school wanted you to get to. So they would spend extra hours on you. They would meet up with you after hours. They would invite you to their home. “Come over, I’ll help you get better at this,” and stuff like that. . . So I had a good relationship with my teachers, who were supportive. . . I don’t regret my education there. I don’t appreciate the way it was done, but I think it was the best education I’ve received because it helped me come to Canada and feel at home. It didn’t stop me in any way. I was ready to take on the world when I came here.
Sana’s gratitude for her education, in spite of it not meeting all three needs, suggests the crucial role of relatedness as the ground of motivation and well-being. While Sana experienced relatedness and competence in the absence of autonomy, Maya and also Abbey – who, remember, described having “learned to play the game” – overwhelmingly expressed feelings of frustration bordering on disgust for their experiences of competence in the absence of both relatedness and autonomy. Indeed, as Deci and Ryan (2000) discuss, supports for relatedness and competence in the absence of autonomy can facilitate internalization, but not integration of values; autonomy is thus a key component in the process of integration.

3.2.3 The Need for Competence: “...you can’t because it’s not in the curriculum.”

Thwarting of the need for competence came in more subtle forms. Participants were, without exception, students who had achieved well academically, indicating that more controlling post-secondary environments do satisfy the need for competence at some level for at least some subset of students. What came out of participants’ narratives was that learning was often deterred outside of the prescribed curriculum, and building certain types of competence was also often deterred. Sana was driven by a natural curiosity to expand her own knowledge and competence, but the way some of her instructors responded frustrated her need satisfaction.

_I took geography, anthropology, and it’s all fact-based. There are certain facts, and you need to memorize them and you need to learn about them, and that’s it. I found those courses interesting, but they were restricting, because if I wanted to learn more or step ahead, you can’t because it’s not in the curriculum. So IDEA took away all of that. It was where you stood as a student. So if you are at what you would consider a level 2 in a geography class, then you could start at a level_
2 and go on to a level 5. But if you’re at a level 2 and you’re taking a level 1 class, then the professors would force you to go back to level 1 rather than acknowledge the fact that you’re at level 2 in most courses. I felt that, a lot of the times, when I would ask questions, they would say, “Oh, we’re not covering this in this semester or this course. Maybe you should take this course.” Why do I need to spend another $400 just to learn something that you could teach me right now? And that happened quite a bit with me. So it was frustrating.

Maya had similar experiences of instructors limiting what their students were to learn in their courses.

. . . there’d be something really interesting that we’d be talking about, and I’d be like, “So, what about this?” and they’d be like, “I don’t know. Anyways. . . moving onto the next thing.” And that’s happened so many times, so many times. There’d be super interesting little facts, and I ask for more information, and they just don’t know, and it’s almost like the teachers themselves have been put in these boxes: This is what you need to know for this course, and that’s all you’re gonna know for this course. And then that’s all we learn. And it’s like, after the course is gone, well, we’re moving onto the next thing. As much as I might have enjoyed something, well, again, I’m moving onto the next thing. I don’t have time, necessarily, to find out that information on my own. It’s kind of frustrating because it’s almost a hassle to them, it seems sometimes, to have to answer the questions. They don’t appreciate that. . . It’s almost like we’re being deterred from knowing what’s outside of the syllabus.
Maya also received the loud-and-clear message in some of her courses that it was not acceptable to think critically, question established ways of doing things, and create new knowledge and new ways of doing things. So, although she may have been capable of it, she was not permitted to and certainly not encouraged to grow that competency in those courses.

_I think that sense that we can create knowledge [a term I introduced] has always been there. I think it’s always there for everyone, but I think it’s a matter of being told, “Oh, hey, you are able to do this.” Because so much of the time, you’re told, “Don’t do that, don’t do that, don’t do that.” I think everybody probably has this feeling, like, they think outside the box, or they’re questioning, but then they think, “Oh, nobody else is doing it, so I should probably get back in line and do what everyone else is doing.”_

As I discuss the outcomes of role redefinition, I will return to this issue of critical thinking. But on the whole, moderate gains in competence for participants in a context that did not consistently meet their needs for autonomy and relatedness came at great effort and personal cost.

### 3.2.4 Effects of Control: “God, that was a nightmare. . .”

Maya spoke at length about her feelings of disengagement, frustration, and stagnation as the result of an education she felt had been largely controlling. Although according to the most pervasively used criterion for academic success – GPA – she was a high achiever, she described an absence of both external rewards such as career or further educational opportunities and personally valued outcomes such as learning, enjoyment, and personal growth.
Before IDEA, for the most part, I wasn’t very engaged in my education. I kind of just did what I had to do to get the marks, as opposed to doing things to actually make what I had to do enjoyable. So a lot of it was just basically trying to get through it and get everything done, as opposed to actually enjoying the journey, which is what [IDEA] would say is more important. I was definitely super hardworking and everything. My GPA is 3.95, and I was always on the Dean’s Honour Roll and stuff like that. So I always did really well, but I mean, it was basically like a means to an end. I just wanted to get my degree and be over with it. I wasn’t really enjoying, or necessarily learning things about myself from university, because I guess it’s a period of self-discovery for a lot of people, but only, I think, if you allow it to be. So if you kind of have your blinders on, and you’re just doing what you have to do to get to the end of it, you miss a lot. I kind of just did my work and got the marks I needed to get. I never went to office hours or anything like that. I never touched base on things. I never got feedback really. I never bothered. It wasn’t necessary at the time; I didn’t feel like it was. . . I felt like when I got to the end of the degree, I wasn’t necessarily sure that it was gonna get me the job that I wanted. Because basically, you’re told, “You do this, you do that. You go to college, you get a job.” And so at the end, I’m like, “I don’t think that’s what’s gonna happen.” And so I was kind of feeling upset about that, almost like I had been gypped, kind of, because I’d put in all this work, and I’m like, “I don’t think it’s gonna work out,” and grad school isn’t working out.

Maya used the word “nightmare” a few times throughout her narrative to describe many of her educational experiences.
. . . I feel like, when I got my diploma, I was like, “Wow, it’s not even on thick paper. I did all this work for this. Great. Like whoa, big whoop” . . . When I think back on the other things I did, even projects I’m proud of, I’m like, “God, that was a nightmare” . . . I feel like some courses I took were nightmares, like stats, business math, stuff like that. I’ve retained nothing from those courses, so it’s not like I even really feel like I gained something, so at least I have this to hold onto, even though it was an awful experience. No. All of it just left my head the second the test was over. . . if I could have figured out how it was something that related to my world, that would make sense with me, “Oh, this is how I would have figured this out. That’s important. Ok, I get it.”

Interestingly, Maya acknowledged that she could have had different experiences if she’d “allowed it,” or, perhaps more accurately, been able to figure out how; as I will discuss later on, IDEA helped to give her the tools to get more out of her other courses. Note also that Maya identifies a key form of autonomy support that was lacking: the process of communicating value in such a way that “. . . students essentially say to themselves, ‘Yeah, okay, that makes sense; I’ll do it.’” (Reeve, 2006, p. 230). This fosters the process of internalization: that of taking on the values promoted by others as one’s own.

In describing her feelings of boredom, Sana also acknowledged that things didn’t have to be that way, and noted the role of the dialectic between instructor and student that preserved the status quo.

A lot of the times, I was sitting and looking up at a professor, and getting bored. I’m looking at the clock. I can’t wait to leave. And it’s just getting more and more boring. And the reason for that is because the teacher has accepted their role of
being at the front and telling you what to do, going over the slides or whatever
they’re doing, and you’ve accepted the role of writing that stuff down.

For both Sana and Connell, controlling environments resulted in psychological and ultimately physical ill-being. Though Sana expressed gratitude for her educational experiences in Pakistan, she acknowledged they came at a price.

It was difficult. It was definitely stressful. It came to a point where O-levels took a toll on my body and I got sick.

Maya spoke more generally about these effects.

[Regular academics makes] you sick. It’s true. Depletes your immune system.

Does a lot of other things too.

Maya’s intuition about some forms of education making students sick is reflected in Reeve and Tseng’s (2011b) finding that controlling teachers increase students’ levels of cortisol, a stress hormone that, with repeated exposure, literally does take a toll on the body, increasing risk of certain illnesses, as well as impairing cognitive and emotional functioning.

Connell’s experiences at McGill closely mirrored my own early university experiences of skipping classes in favor of spending time online and becoming more and more depressed and physically ill.

I started drinking and partying a lot. In high school, I had, like, a 100% attendance record, and I lost that pretty quickly. And then my social identity cracked as well. . . And I started spending more and more time at home, sleeping, and playing video games, and getting more and more depressed. I remember taking Spanish classes at 8:30 in the morning, 3 times a week, cycling down to
them, and I didn’t really like any of my classes – these huge, like 700-person math and English and social psychology courses. And then I’d just skip most of them and I’d watch the lectures – which were recorded online – before the tests in, like, a 24-hour period, and usually pass. But it sucked. I didn’t like it. I was skipping courses, making excuses, then I’d go home for holidays and be exhausted, and, like, just get sick from the stress. I started failing.

Returning to the issue of relatedness, Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall and Abel (2013) found that university students’ relatedness to peers in the absence of relatedness to instructors was a risk factor, particularly for male students. Connell’s experience – recall that he described in particular having not pursued friendships with more academic peers, and having a social life that was separate from his school life – certainly bears this out. However, this is a limited view of the roles peers can occupy for each other. As we shall see in my discussion of role redefinition, there are other possibilities.

3.2.5 The Disciplines

Before I discuss students’ experiences of autonomy support and integration, it seems important to point out that a pattern that repeated across all of the narratives with the exception of Maya’s was a move from disciplines with a greater prevalence of control to those with a greater prevalence of autonomy support. As Ryan and Niemiec (2009) have pointed out, some cultures, systems, and institutions foster heteronomy, which is the opposite of autonomy, more than others, and the academic disciplines seem to be no exception. Sana’s family had steered her towards the sciences and engineering. She tried business, fine arts, and psychology before
settling on a major in creative writing, which she considered on the whole to be the most autonomy-supportive discipline she had experienced outside of IDEA.

_I was taking sciences at that time, not arts. My parents encouraged me to go towards that because they felt that if I took sciences, I could always go back to arts, but if I took arts, I could never go back to sciences. That’s just how it is back home, you know? They force you to go into either sciences or engineering. Education there was something you had to do. There was never an appealing aspect to it. Here it was different. Here teachers are so passionate about what they’re teaching you. They’re so interesting. Over there it was more like, “Copy out this page of the textbook into your notebooks and memorize it.” And that was how exams went most of the time. There was never an interesting aspect to it, like, “This is so exciting, don’t you understand, this is science!” No no, it was just memorizing. I had to memorize the periodic table. I had to memorize all these things just because I had to. I was never explained things. I was never intrigued about it. . . It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do. I spent three years trying different things, and I finally settled on creative writing, and I did my degree in that. . . I’ve taken pretty much everything. I’ve taken business, psychology, pretty much everything at Kwantlen. And, putting it all together, if IDEA didn’t exist, I would say the most liberating program would be creative writing. Even when I took fine arts, I felt constricted, because the instructor is seeing my work from their point of view, and how it needs to be perfect in a certain way: the colors and the drawing, and the lines, and all that. I know they’re teaching me, but I always felt like, “I can’t do it.” That feeling of “You_
can’t do it” is very strong there in fine arts. They expect you to be at a certain level. And even there, there’s a lot of critique. In creative writing, particularly, when you wrote, the instructors would say something like, “Sana has this unique style of writing that’s this this this this.” To be able to sit in a classroom and hear that a person is taking your work as a unique style of writing that is unique to me, you don’t hear that in sciences.

We have already heard from Abbey about the controlling climate in her business classes; according to Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, and Ryan (2007), American corporate capitalism, which is the predominant form of capitalism globally and thus appropriate to call on in a Canadian context, consists of values and goals that are largely antithetical to human development from an SDT perspective. Chelanna also began (quite miserably) in business and ended up creating her own general studies curriculum that anticipated Kwantlen’s creation of a minor in language and culture, an area of study she was passionate about.

I’d come to IDEA after I switched out of business. I went to Kwantlen thinking I’d get a 4-year ENTR – entrepreneurial leadership – degree. Because I wanted to go to university, I didn’t have any money, and I had to justify how I was going to borrow all this money from the government. I needed a job and I needed to pay it back. And I ended up at the counsellors’ office because that was making me miserable. . . In general, the later half of my academic career was much freer. And probably largely because of IDEA. And it was at that time that -- I think back, and I had some great business teachers and profs, but my favorite profs were all in that later half. They were all teaching the things I wanted to learn.
Within the SDT framework, financial success is considered an extrinsic goal, one that focuses on outward signs of worth and tends to impede need satisfaction (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). The pursuit of extrinsic goals is correlated with a number of negative outcomes, such as increased depression and anxiety and lower life satisfaction.

Although Maya started in and stayed with psychology, recall that she had also been ushered into post-secondary primarily as a path to a job. Over the course of Maya’s narrative, however, we see a shift towards intrinsic goals such as growth and community contribution that foster need satisfaction and thus psychological well-being.

### 3.3 Experiences of Autonomy Support

As I just discussed, while participants’ experiences of autonomy support were certainly not limited to IDEA, they all spoke about IDEA as a context that was highly supportive of need satisfaction, with concomitant positive outcomes. Recall that the outcomes of autonomy support include not only such externally defined outcomes as retention and academic achievement, but also intrinsically desirable outcomes such as engagement, deeper learning, creativity, psychological well-being, vitality, and growth. These latter outcomes are the outcomes participants valued and focused on. But I will first discuss how IDEA met students’ basic psychological needs.
3.3.1 The Need for Autonomy: “We had a lot of freedom in what we covered. . .”

For some participants, IDEA was reminiscent of earlier autonomy-supportive educational experiences. Connell had attended a Montessori elementary school, and said that for a few months he “spent most of my time looking at maps with my friends.” Chelanna had attended an alternative high school.

I think IDEA hearkened back to what I had been used to in high school. The fact that all of our classes were done in a circle, instead of rows. It was more based on our choice. We had a lot of freedom in what we covered, even within the umbrella of the specific IDEA class. We had our own personal project, and [the instructor] didn’t really tell us, “You have to write a 500-page essay on whatever, and that’s what you’re going to do.” Some of them he made us do some writing, to fulfill requirements, and also just as an exercise in reflecting in a very specific way. I think we all, everyone, had to do the same kind of write-up at the end, the reflection papers, but the main project could be whatever. They didn’t have to be writing. They could be whatever. It was done in a circle. It was very free with the time. It wasn’t like, “Ok, I’m going to lecture you.”

Maya in particular expressed shock and disbelief at the contrast between IDEA and her previous experiences.

I loved IDEA. IDEA was really great. When I first took it, I was kind of surprised. Things like, “Yeah, there’s gonna be no marks.” [The instructor’s] like “You can write a paper on whatever you want.” I’m like, “Really, whatever I want. I could write it on Twilight if I wanted to.” He’s like, “Yeah, go for it.” And I’m like,
“What?! What is this? No!” You expect handouts and outlines where everything’s like, “You must do X, Y, and Z. You must do this to this extent. You must do that, and blah blah blah. All these things need to be included.” And it doesn’t require much creativity or thinking on your part. You’re just mindlessly doing something that you’re being told to do, whereas with [IDEA], it’s, “Oh, find something that you find interesting and go learn about it and then tell me.” And it’s like, “Whoa, what is this?” It’s crazy!

Maya used the word “freedom” to characterize the support for autonomy in IDEA.

It was the freedom, to be honest. Because everything else is like “You must read this book and you must read these chapters within this book,” but [the instructor] is like, “Read whatever you want, and if there’s something within that that’s not really an interest for you and is not benefitting you, move on to something else.” There’s not such a restrictive feeling constantly. It’s very stressful to constantly be feeling like you must always be within this sort of little box that they want you to be in, and not be able to go out of that, and even just learn things about yourself.

For Chelanna, it was “freedom.” For Abbey, it was “freedom,” “slack,” and “flexibility.” For Connell, it was “openness” and, like Abbey, “slack,” which for him carried two connotations: the space to pursue one’s own interests, and also room to struggle and make mistakes without facing dire academic consequences. I will discuss this second meaning of Connell’s “slack” later on.
3.3.2 The Need for Relatedness: “A sense of community. . . was huge there.”

Each participant discussed the role of relatedness in IDEA, not only to instructors, but also peers. Of her relationship with her instructor, Maya commented:

[Our relationship] was really great. Not only do you just give him a project at the end, but you give him a reflection on everything that went into the project. So I feel like he really gets to know you and he gives you really deep, intense feedback that you can really take and think about. And so you really build a really good relationship with him.

Sana described lingering after class to talk to her peers.

A sense of community. . . was huge there. So after class, most of the time, unless I had a class right after, most of the time I’d just hang around and talk to people, and I was never in a rush to leave the room. . .

Maya volunteered that she had done the same thing. She discussed a couple ways in which this sense of relatedness among peers was fostered. First, students were given opportunities to talk about what mattered to them and what was happening in their lives through the use of check-ins. Sometimes this took the form of sharing their struggles (a theme that I will discuss later), but it also took the form of sharing positive feelings.

We have time at the beginning or end of class to just talk about things we had done through the week, if we wanted to share with the group. Most people didn’t share every week, but sometimes it was good to share, because not everybody has that right now. Some people are from overseas, so their family and friends are not around. Or some of us, our friends and family have all left, so we’re the only ones
left. And so you just don’t get that chance to have these conversations, or share
about your life or something you’re proud of. But IDEA gives you that
opportunity.

It also gives you that opportunity to share in other people’s joy. You don’t
get to do that in other classes. You really don’t. It feels so good. It’s a really
pleasant, wonderful thing.

Maya makes a crucial point: students have been displaced from contexts in which, ideally, they
experienced relatedness with friends and family, and have been placed in contexts where such
opportunities for relatedness to others whose social values and norms they could internalize are
largely absent. It is no surprise, then, that post-secondary students, often cast adrift without the
strong presence of adults who care for them, suffer disproportionately from mental health issues
and engage in compensatory behaviors such as alcohol abuse (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013;
White & Hingson, 2013).

Another way Maya indicated that these relationships were fostered in IDEA was through
asking students to collaborate with as many peers as possible. To clarify, this most often
occurred in low-pressure, low- or no-stakes in-class activities, and small group discussions.

. . . in other classes, there’s maybe one group project, so you get to collaborate
with one or two people in the entire class, whereas in IDEA, [the instructor] tries
to get you to collaborate with every single person in that class. So you really do
get a chance to get to know these other people.

For Maya, as for others (myself included), these in-class relationships grew into deeper, longer-
term friendships that sometimes included classmates’ families.
There are people who I took courses with in IDEA, and I know I’m gonna be lifelong friends with these people. I know their kids, I know their husbands, I know their wives, and we go and we do things. We’ve gone on trips. There’s people I took IDEA classes with that – I mean, I don’t necessarily talk to them on a regular basis, but we still message with each other and touch base with each other. . . There’s nobody else, really, in other classes where I’ve met them and I’m like, “Oh, hey, we should go away together.” That’s weird in other classes. With IDEA, you make friends. That’s honestly what it is. It’s a community. It’s not like an institution. It’s a community. Because you actually got a chance to get to know them. And it’s really important, I think, those friendships, that human contact, especially in university.

As Ryan and Powelson (1991) discuss, relatedness consists not only of connecting with others, but connecting with them in ways that promote well-being and integration. The satisfaction of relatedness that IDEA promoted through a sense of community among peers and instructors is a thread I will pick back up when I discuss the role of peers as partners.

3.3.3 The Need for Competence: “Having someone tell you, ‘You can do it!’”

It was Maya who spoke most about how a sense of competence was fostered in IDEA: through explicit messages that students were capable of learning the skills they needed.

[My IDEA instructor] was like, “Look, you can make your own stuff. You can do things yourself. You can repair things at home yourself. You don’t always have to call somebody. You don’t always need an expert to come in. You can figure out how to do things on your own and then be proud of yourself for doing it.” It’s
very empowering, I found. Having someone tell you, “You can do it!” Because most people don’t. Most people don’t even get to know you enough to know what you want to do.

This is a crucial point. I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on your own experiences and ask yourself whether you received messages such as “You can do this” with any regularity from the majority of your post-secondary instructors. Recall, for example, the strong feeling of “You can’t do this” that Sana had taken on from her fine arts courses. That such simple messages of competence are not regularly delivered to students (and that messages of incompetence, whether implied or explicit, so often are) points to higher education’s function as a gatekeeper more frequently than as a facilitator of learning, growth, and integration.

Support in IDEA for satisfaction of the need for autonomy, combined with support for competence in the form of pointing out appropriate resources, led Sana to deeper learning about a topic she was interested in.

[The instructor] didn’t force us to learn a certain curriculum. It was whatever you were interested in. A lot of students would take on stuff, whatever they wanted to. And I took that opportunity to do one of the presentations on a goddess. And when I went to him and I’m like, “This is what I want to do,” he’s like, “Cool, so here are some books that can help you. Take these out of the library and they can help you.” So for me, that somebody was supporting something so silly, like a goddess, but was putting an educational spin on it in a way where I was learning way more than I ever could have, was interesting. And he used books as a medium rather than the Internet as a medium. So again, I was reading books from like the 1940’s
Note that, rather than seek out Internet sources for expediency’s sake, Sana took her instructor’s suggestions and delved into more scholarly sources, even though she considered her interest in mythology “silly” or frivolous. Such a topic would be a legitimate subject of scholarly study in a classical studies course, for example, but Sana had introjected the message that it was not, just as gaining competencies in certain topics outside of the prescribed curriculum and certain skills was deterred in other courses.

3.3.4 Effects of Autonomy Support: “. . . IDEA provided me with the ability to learn and grow as a person.”

One of the primary effects of autonomy support, as I will assert in a moment, was the transformative process of integration. However, I would like to first focus our attention on some other outcomes of autonomy support that participants experienced.

3.3.4.1 Growth, Engagement, and Well-Being

Sana and Maya in particular spoke about their autonomy supportive experiences – for Sana, in both creative writing and IDEA, and for Maya, in IDEA – as being the most meaningful courses of their undergraduate educations as a whole. Sana valued the personal growth she experienced through her involvement in IDEA.

So I just wanted to keep learning and keep exploring, and keep doing what I wanted to do. And, in all honesty, the semesters that I had with writing and everything, it was a break. I could focus on myself during those classes. I could
learn what I wanted to learn, I wasn’t forced to learn what I had to learn for the sake of getting my degree, and things like that. One of my biggest things was, I did not want to graduate looking back and thinking, “I did not gain anything from this degree. I did not learn anything.” So IDEA provided me with the ability to learn and grow as a person. It really changed a lot.

Maya characterized this growth as being difficult at times, but still looked back on these experiences with fondness and appreciation, unlike her other experiences, which she characterized as “nightmares.”

. . . with IDEA, it was the journey. You remember that, you think back on it, and when you think back on it, you have a fond, pleasant memory. . . With IDEA, even the bad stuff that happened, I’m like, I learned from this. [The instructor] doesn’t let you skip over those things. He makes you. If you do skip over it he calls you out. He’s like, “No, go do this again. Go deeper on this part.” No one else does that. You’re not gonna do that with stuff that makes you miserable in everyday life in general, because it’s hard. But at the end of it, you appreciate it, for sure.

In the current university climate, the distinction between nightmare and growth experience seems an important one to make. Which of these definitions are we referring to when we talk about academic rigor? Is it simply making students’ lives difficult and stressful, or is it giving students challenges that they can, in retrospect, feel grateful for having gone through and conquered?

3.3.4.2 Ease and Play vs. Work

Chelanna had picked up the message from many of her educational experiences that for learning to be serious, it couldn’t be easy or fun and had to feel like work.
There were times, too, where some of the activities were just exactly what we needed, but you wouldn’t do them in school. Like we did coloring quite a bit. There were a few coloring activities. And this was right before adult coloring became the trendy thing. We were slightly ahead of that curve in IDEA. And it was like, this is school. This is adults in school and we are doing this, and that’s ok, because it’s ok to do that. It’s just a different kind of learning that I think the traditional school system doesn’t want to consider learning, especially as an adult. We talk about socializing children, and I think we understand that kindergarten is important, those fine motor skills and socialization and things like that, things that most of us have by the time we take IDEA, but I think we kind of miss out on the other stuff too. Like fun is bad, somehow?

Chelanna had also received these messages from her family regarding the Amazon Field School, a three-week trip to Colombia in which students learned about sustainable design, community development, and culture.

When I was trying to talk to my grandparents to help fund the Amazon trip, my grandpa was like, “Well, what are you going to learn?” “Well, I’m going to go to the Amazon. I’m gonna experience it. I’m gonna be in the Amazon, and that’s gonna be awesome. And we’re gonna go to Bogota, and we’re gonna see things, and there’s some stuff about architecture and design.” And he’s like, “Yes, but what are you going to learn?” He wanted to know what the academic value was, and I had a hard time articulating that. “It’s going to the damn Amazon! What more do you want from me? I wanna do it! <laughs> It’s for school, and credits. .” And he’s like, “But why?” And I’m like, “Why not? Just give me the money!
Let me go!” And I ended up going, but he was from a more traditional paradigm of “That doesn’t sound like school,” and IDEA says “Yes, this is school. You can go to the Amazon.”

Sana had received the same messages from her family.

I think one of the best things [IDEA] did was show me that I could love writing and I could make a career out of it without having fear. That was the fear I grew up with. “What are you gonna do with writing? This is a hobby. This is not a career. How are you gonna make it into, like, a career thing?” But IDEA showed me that it’s possible. You can do whatever the hell you want as long as you’re passionate about it and you believe in it.

Because Abbey already had many of the skills IDEA called upon, and because her projects were self-chosen, the ease with which she was able to complete her projects made her feel like a phony when she evaluated herself according to externalized standards that promoted the idea that a feeling of drudgery was necessary for work to be worthwhile.

. . . I would do something, I would whip something up in a matter of a couple of hours, that maybe took someone else three weeks to do. And it was nothing for me. So that’s why I felt like a fake. I felt like I wasn’t getting anything out of it. And then the reason why I came back was because by the end of that semester I realized that it was something I needed, that I thought it had merit, that I thought it was my squiggle that I needed, whether I actually got anything useful in conventional terms for my education. Like, people who look at my CV or my resume now, they’re like, “IDEA? Well, what the hell is that good for?” Because
it doesn’t fit into a lot of criteria lists, I guess, when they’re checking off the boxes. But useful to me? Absolutely. It was a course that I now realize was – someone putting together shit that I already do. . . I was doing these self-expressive measures, and I guess that’s why I thought that it was just so easy, because I do tend to tap into that quite easily.

Connell connected a lack of self-awareness with having to force output out of a sense of insecurity. While he acknowledged that pursuing what is personally meaningful is also a hard path, he perceived it as a worthwhile path. He implied that following passion was the less effortful path, and one that more easily produced opportunities than doing what was contrary to one’s nature.

When we force output, it’s almost out of insecurity. It’s definitely out of insecurity. You go into business, and some people are legitimately passionate about business and entrepreneurship, but some are not and some go out of the security of it, and then you just force the output. You could go into creative writing for the same thing. I think you just need time to figure out what you’re really passionate about and once you start on that path, it’s really hard, but it doesn’t. . . it’s worth it.

And then opportunities arise all over the place. Whereas output, forcing output, you never get to that point of, I don’t know if it’s a point of stillness or a point or wondering, or a deep search or something, but you’re just always walking around and never coming to a point of realizing what you’re passionate about. Once you realize what you’re passionate about, you can pursue that and it creates opportunities, but you need that time, you need that slack, that cushion, to fall,
and then to realize it’s ok to hit the ground and you can get back up. You need to
lay there for a while too.

As a student I often encountered the perception, particularly from educators, that IDEA courses shouldn’t be taken seriously because they seemed too much like play. But this ease should not be taken as an indication that IDEA courses are what Abbey referred to as “bird courses” – that they lack rigor – but as an indication that what IDEA asked of its students was concordant, rather than in conflict with, their own goals and interests. Werner, Milyavskaya, Foxen-Craft, and Koestner concluded from their research that “self-concordant goals feel easier to pursue, regardless of whether they are actually difficult or not” and “people were more likely to successfully accomplish more self-concordant goals because pursuing those goals was perceived as being more effortless, and not because more effort was exerted” (2016, p. 240). Connell connected this back to the notion of mobilizing students’ inner motivational resources. The day I met with him, he had been making a t-shirt that he created from a panel out of a graphic novel.

I think there’s something to not being forced to output. And to be given the
patience for when we’re ready to do something. Because when we’re ready, man,
we’re ready. Like, I just spent the whole day doing this, right? And I’ve never
really done anything like this before. I straight copied it from here. Anyway, it
was just an idea that came to me last night, and I sacrificed my day for it, which
was good. It was therapeutic, actually. You just never know what’s going to come
out when the opportunity arises. And you can’t force that opportunity. And so
often we force the opportunity, force the opportunity, force the opportunity, that
we as students get overwhelmed and just start putting out shit very early that we
don’t care about, to fit the teacher’s needs, and the class’s needs.
IDEA courses may have felt subjectively easier because they permitted students to pursue self-concordant goals, but they were not necessarily objectively easier; students learned quite sophisticated intrapersonal, interpersonal, and even epistemological skills in IDEA, and pursued ambitious projects that, despite their difficulty, left them feeling energized rather than stressed out and depleted, as I will now discuss.

3.3.4.3 Vitality

As Ryan and Deci have demonstrated, satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs – for relatedness, competence, and autonomy – enhances vitality, which they define as “energy that one can harness or regulate for purposive actions” (2008, p. 703). Maya’s project of “breaking” a horse entailed a substantial time commitment, but it also “energized” and “invigorated” her.

A lot of the projects I did for IDEA were out and around. One thing I did was – I hate the word break – but I broke a horse, so I trained him. I was the first person to ever ride him. That was my project for the entire semester, and the owner of that horse, he’s amazing, and he was so happy with it. I really took the time, I educated myself, I wanted to do this so badly. And then the instructor was like, “Ok, go do it,” and I was like, “Oh my God, really?” I was so happy. Honestly. I probably spent maybe 20 hours a week on this project for the entire semester, but it invigorated me. It energized me. I was so excited to get up at 5 in the morning, to go out to the barn, to work with that horse. It was so good. I loved it. I really hadn’t gotten the chance to do that in university, even in a subject I loved, where I was so pumped to do it. I was so excited.
Maya also coped with a heavy course load one semester by adding a sixth course – an IDEA course – that, rather than placing an additional burden on her, gave her the energy to persist through her other courses.

Most of the time at university, when I’m there, I didn’t have pleasant, wonderful feelings. It’s just high stress, high pressure, go go go. I ended up craving going to IDEA. There was one term where I ended up taking six courses, but one of them was an IDEA one, and that’s the class that got me through that semester. It really was de-stressing. It was great. And it totally got me through the term.

Chelanna also used IDEA and some of her other “fun” courses to balance the quantitative requirements of her degree. Maya and Chelanna’s vitality lay in stark contrast to the psychological and physical ill-being many of the participants admitted to having experienced, including the intense fatigue Connell had experienced at McGill.

So far, I have contrasted participants’ experiences of control in many of their undergraduate courses and their resultant experiences of boredom, stress, stagnation, and even physical illness with their experiences of autonomy support in IDEA and their resultant experiences of engagement, well-being, growth, and vitality. These autonomy-supportive experiences in IDEA helped to foster students’ experiences of transformation, which I will discuss in the following chapter.
Chapter 4: Two Transformative Processes

Although my research questions clustered around the process of role redefinition, two types of transformative learning emerged from participants’ narratives: transformation through integration and transformation through role redefinition. Integration is not, to my knowledge, described as a transformative process in the SDT literature, but it can certainly be characterized as one. According to Mezirow, what is being transformed during the process of transformative learning is an “acquired frame of reference — a mind-set or worldview of orienting assumptions and expectations involving values, beliefs, and concepts” (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006, p. 124). Such changes, as Mezirow notes, may be epochal or incremental. When participants, most notably Chelanna, Connell, and Sana, spoke about transformation through integration in IDEA, they described it as being incremental, steady growth along a continuum – in Sana’s words, an “ongoing thing.” However, as I will discuss in greater depth, transformation through role redefinition more often represented an epochal change. I will first talk about transformation through integration before I offer answers to my research questions about students’ lived experiences of role redefinition.

4.1 Transformation through Integration

The integrative process, Deci and Ryan suggest, “may be the prototype of the spontaneous activity, both psychological and behavioral, that occurs in the absence of extrinsic inducements” (1985b, p. 121). Connell phrased this spontaneous activity in this way:

*If you don’t have to do anything, what do you do?*
I mean, there were expectations, like, you had to facilitate a group, usually several, and do your project. You had to bring something to class, although you didn’t have to show up. It goes back to the sense of, if you don’t have to do anything, what do you do? And you don’t have to show up to an IDEA course, so when you do, there’s a personal stake in it.

Themes of transformation through integration were present in all of the narratives, but they appeared most strongly in Connell’s narrative. Connell poetically described integration as an act of solidification; this is consistent with SDT’s formulation of the self as “a unified superordinate structure that provides the sense of identity and coherence” (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, p. 120). Like SDT, Connell recognized growth as a process of nurturing one’s own inner resources: “the seed of wisdom and creativity within ourselves.”

Transformation in IDEA is almost like a solidifying. It’s like if you imagine yourself as this mist, and you’re slowly solidifying. I think transformation can be such a buzzword today, and most people don’t understand what it really is. There’s a magic to transformation, and there’s a magic in this world, and we don’t know what magic is anymore. It’s not becoming something new; it’s becoming something ancient. Or it’s not even becoming something ancient, “be coming” – a coming into, I guess that’s legitimate, but it’s almost like nurturing the seed of wisdom and creativity within ourselves. And so it’s not changing who we are, but it’s solidifying who we are. Because, man, we get into this world, and especially now in our culture, and we just don’t know who the fuck we are, and what to do, and it’s really tough as a young person. There’s this great degree of uncertainty. We can do anything, and yet nothing is really... we’ve been
watching commercials all our lives, and the commercials cater to our sense that, once you get this outside thing, you’ll be fulfilled. And that’s the thing with addiction, too, that once I get this, I’ll be ok. I’m high and I’m fine.

In this passage, Connell also touched on the pursuit of extrinsic goals (such as wealth, fame, and attractiveness) and hedonic outcomes (pleasure, i.e. the pursuit of positive affect and avoidance of negative affect), neither of which promotes need satisfaction and thus psychological well-being and an integrated self (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). Again, SDT instead favors the pursuit of intrinsic goals such as “personal growth, affiliation and intimacy, contributing to one’s community, and physical health” (p. 151), which, as I have discussed, IDEA promoted in spades, particularly a commitment to community.

For Connell, the process of integration was also one of eliminating everything that wasn’t him. This is consistent with the self-determination theory perspective, in which one’s self might be host to a variety of introjected regulations (e.g. Deci & Ryan, 1985b). The process is one of sorting among the regulations to determine which of these one wishes to internalize and integrate into the self.

I don’t really see the changes I underwent in IDEA as transformation.

Michelangelo’s got a great quote. A guy asks, “How did you carve David?” And he says, “Well, I just chipped away everything that wasn’t David.” And it feels like that. It’s just the time to chip away. And with each little chip you’ve got to ask, is this David, or is this not David? And that takes time to figure out.

As I have discussed previously, the ideal of self-determination theory is an integrated, unified sense of self. Although my research and interview questions did not focus on this aspect of the theory, participants volunteered a great deal about their experiences of integration through IDEA.
Some of Sana’s most profound learning experiences occurred outside of the classroom, in her work with the Model UN, but most of her instructors viewed this profound learning as a distraction and an inconvenience, or, at best, irrelevant to what was occurring in the classroom.

My experience with other teachers has been very diverse. I’ve been shocked and I’ve been disappointed. Every March, for about three or four years, I would travel for a Model UN conference abroad. I had to let my teachers know that I would be away for a week, which meant that I was not going to be able to submit stuff or participate in stuff. And it was on me. I had to work around it and figure things out. There’s a difference between accepting, which is what I’m expecting. Just accept the fact that I’m doing this and try to accommodate me, because I want to be accommodating as well. And that’s in the middle. On one end of the spectrum there’s, “I’m not going to help you. I don’t care.” And so my expectations were between those two, and some of the time I would get either one. But from IDEA, and from one of my other creative writing professors, the response that I got, which I wasn’t expecting, was “Oh my God, that is so cool! Yeah, whatever you need.” I’m like, “Are you sure?” “Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And, you know what, how ‘bout this, when you come back, tell the class about it.” And they would tell the class that “She’s going away on this really cool thing, and she won’t be here next week, and let’s try to make this accommodating for her, and let’s do this so she doesn’t miss out.”

Until IDEA, Chelanna had been taught to keep her “home me” and her “academic me” separate. In SDT terms, she had internalized both identities – she had come to personally value both – but as they existed separately and perhaps sometimes in tension with each other, she could not be
said to have integrated these identities until her involvement in IDEA. Interestingly, she spontaneously used the word “integrate” to describe this process.

I think IDEA really helped me unlock a part of myself that I didn’t feel could really fit in an academic environment. I feel like I have different parts – not that I’m schizophrenic, but there are definitely parts of me. I’m a different person at school, particularly now, at Trinity, than I am at home. I’m not afraid to admit that, for the record. And I’m not the same person around my grandparents as I am around my sister, necessarily. Even though there’s always been that academic part of me, I think IDEA really helped bring in more of that relaxed, home me into an academic environment. And that was cool. I don’t really know how I could say that I transformed over those few years and just a few classes, but I really feel like I kind of became more of myself through them. And that that wouldn’t have happened at school if not for IDEA. It’s hard to say how I would be today had it not been for that. I mean, I’d probably be doing just fine. But I feel like it really helped integrate my interests and kind of opened my mind to the idea of what school could or should be.

In Chelanna’s perception, this attitude came from instructors who largely did not view their students in an integrative way.

Within the context of school, that’s not something that most profs worry about, the holistic view of your student. It’s just like, show up, sit there, ask some good questions, don’t talk too much, and give me a good paper for me to mark. And honestly, I’ve had some really good profs outside of IDEA, that you get the
impression that they really care about you. And for me, that's always really
important. And I think that I always felt IDEA was a safe space, that [the
instructor] actually did care about us as people, as students. Not just as students,
but as people, where other profs might only care about us as students, or that was
the impression. And I think that really allowed me to open up and explore those
things in school.

Maya, picking up again on the theme of ease and play, noted that her parents had also delivered
messages that kept her “fun” self and her “school” self separate. In reflecting upon others’
narratives, Maya notes that IDEA had helped unlock (and I would argue, integrate) her “kid”
self, prompting greater creativity, curiosity, and fulfillment. It was a process she found difficult,
but worthwhile.

I think a lot of times, too, parents say things like, “You go to school to work. You
don’t go there for fun.” My parents said that. “Everything has its place. This is a
place for learning. This is not a place for fun.” But learning and fun are the same
thing. Learning and play are exactly the same thing. Kids learn by playing. If kids
don’t play, they don’t learn.

But through IDEA, students formed a more expansive definition of what constituted legitimate
learning. Sana was able to bring her Model UN experiences into the classroom, Chelanna was
able to integrate her two parts, and Maya came to see play and learning as being one in the same,
not diametrically opposed. What IDEA seemed to legitimize and integrate was students’ lived
experiences with theory, and, as Chelanna noted, students’ learning outside the classroom with
that inside the classroom.
But I think part of maybe one of the hidden agendas of IDEA is to expand... like, everything is your classroom. Life is a classroom. If you see something and you're interested in it and that inspires you to go seek out more information about this thing, how is that any less academic or any less valid than a reading you had to do for a class?

Maya expressed frustration that maintaining physical health was often perceived as subordinate to academic aims, and not integral to – integrated with – them. I recall having discussions in IDEA devoted to the importance of sleep and exercise, and students’ final projects (one of mine included) sometimes addressed health and fitness goals.

I heard one time in the psych lab, somebody said they were trying to quit smoking during exam time. And somebody was like, “No, no, now’s not a good time to quit smoking because there’s too much going on.” And I’m like, “Really? Now is not a good time to take care of your health because you have tests that you need to do well on?” This is what they’ve built. This is the kind of mentality that they want you to have. Ignore your outside life, just focus on this. This is what’s important. Whereas [IDEA] is like, “No, it’s all important. Take it all in. Everything deserves equal attention. You need to look after yourself. Sure, yeah, grades are important, but so’s your health, FYI.” It makes you stop and really think about what you’re doing.

While Chelanna and others framed this as their academic context thwarting the integration of students’ personal selves into their student selves – demonstrating the academy’s perception and propagation of its own centrality to students’ lives, which students themselves had introjected – in actuality, the process of integration is one of “reciprocal assimilation,” with
neither identity subsuming the other (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). This subversion of the academy’s primacy and power in the lives of students is worth keeping in mind later as we consider the process of Transformation through Role Redefinition.

IDEA fostered integration in a couple of other ways. For Maya, IDEA broke down siloed disciplines and permitted her to access knowledge from other disciplines.

Another thing too is that IDEA brings together so many different people, from all the different areas, and faculties, whereas I feel like with the other faculties, they almost exclude you. This is the psych lab: Only the psych students go here. This is the geo lab: This is for geography. This is for socio. Whereas IDEA, all of you finally get to come together, and you realize how much we have to learn from each other.

Sana noted that it seemed as if the administration had artificially imposed differentiation among IDEA courses similar to what was present in other disciplines.

The IDEA courses were all very different, and I think it’s because the school forced him to make it that way, where one would focus on mythological narratives, and another one was about drumming and stuff like that. I know he was forced to put labels on them by the school, I am aware of that, but I know they all basically followed the same format.

This tendency to impose compartmentalization on the curriculum mirrors the tendency to compartmentalize students’ identities and suggests that interdisciplinarity may be a powerful form of autonomy support that, to my knowledge, has not yet been proposed in the literature.
Overall, participants’ narratives reflected Vansteenkiste and Ryan’s notion that “people ongoingly refine their interests, preferences, and personal values, while simultaneously bringing them in harmony with one another” (2013, p. 264), a process that best occurs through the rich provision of autonomy support and thus need satisfaction.

4.1.1 Fostering Self-Awareness: “... the way to figure it out is from within. . .”

One of the prerequisites of being able to meet one’s own need for autonomy, and thus undergo the process of integration, is to have awareness of “one’s own abiding values, pressing needs, and the true demands of the situation” (Ryan & Brown, 2003, p. 75). Connell spoke again of the role of self-awareness and of mobilizing one’s own inner resources in the service of integration.

You could go back to the big question of life, what are we here for? How great can we be? What can we accomplish? What level of mastery can we have over ourselves? Not over our environment. Once we get the self thing, the environment happens anyway, but the self thing of how much we can trust ourselves. And I think that’s what self-esteem is. How much do I trust myself in an awkward situation to do the true thing, to be true to myself? And so it’s a becoming of the truth within ourselves that is so easily buried. And so it’s not transforming into something else from what we were before, but it’s a remembering of who we are, and discovering of who we are. And so it goes back to IDEA, and slack. We need that time to just begin to figure that out. To even realize that there’s something to figure out, that the way to figure it out is from within, and most people don’t know that. . . But IDEA is a space in which that is honored. And that that is more
important than output. And to trust that output follows truth, and not truth follows output.

Maya reiterated the role of self-awareness and self-reflection, in particular with respect to relationships.

What IDEA teaches you is the ability to look inward and to examine your own thoughts and feelings. Being able to introspectively assess yourself is super helpful. If you think about most conflicts that happen, conflicts aren’t usually about the people, it’s more about the situation and how they interpreted it. It’s not actually about the problem, it’s just about misinterpretations. But each person isn’t understanding how they’ve misinterpreted. They only see how the other person is wrong. They don’t see how they might be wrong as well. Whereas IDEA, it helps you to assess, “Oh, maybe I do need to rethink this,” or “Maybe this isn’t what I thought it was.” It makes you assess your own thought process, which I think everyone needs to be able to do.

Chelanna spoke about self-reflection and self-awareness as being the “basis of” IDEA.

And due to the nature of all the projects, you get to engage with yourself on a deeper level. You have to for the reflection. And no other class I took at Kwantlen, or even in high school, really requires that level of self-reflection. If you want to reflect about it, you can. I mean, no teacher’s going to tell you, “And don’t think about how this made you feel.” But it’s not encouraged as the basis of class, which IDEA does, which is great. That’s what IDEA is, really.

Like Chelanna, Abbey acknowledged that these skills were not taught in her other courses.
I figured that all these other people who were taking it as a breadth course were
taking it as a bird course. They were just taking it as a filler, right? And some of
them were. But other ones would break down emotionally in class, start crying
and come up with things that they didn’t know about themselves or that they
didn’t realize about themselves. And I realized that that was what was important
to a lot of people. What they got out of that class was learning to do what I had
known how to do quite easily, and I had taken that for granted. . . Nobody teaches
you how to do that. Nobody teaches you how to express yourself in this type of an
institutional learning scenario. You write essays not to express yourself, but to
regurgitate and parrot out the information that you learned in the course or that
you got from the textbook. They’re not interested in your opinion. They’re not
interested about how it makes you feel. They’re interested about what the expert
opinion is on whatever topic you’re talking about.

Self-awareness was presumably one of the tools Maya felt IDEA had given her that other courses
had not. As she pointed out, sometimes this took the form of mindfulness practices, which Ryan
and Brown (2003) advocate. While self-determination theorists have only recently begun to
consider the role of awareness and reflection in service of autonomy and of eudaimonia – living
a good life – Ryan, Huta, and Deci (2008) highlight its crucial role. The literature on self-
authorship (e.g. Baxter-Magolda & King, 2008) focuses more on this cultivation of reflection
and seems a fruitful avenue for enriching our understanding of these aspects of SDT.

And as Vansteenkiste and Ryan discuss, not only do need-supportive contexts promote
growth through need satisfaction; they also buffer “against the emergence of malfunctioning
through helping to build inner resources that contribute to subsequent coping” (2013, p. 265). As
we shall see when we examine the outcomes of transformation through role redefinition, IDEA students had built the internal resources to cope with, engage agentically with, and challenge subsequent need-depriving and need-thwarting experiences.

4.1.2 Becoming Visible: “You’ve gotta take the stage in IDEA.”

As I discussed, the provision of autonomy support had a variety of outcomes for participants that have been discussed in SDT literature. It promoted personal growth, engagement, and psychological well-being rather than the stagnation, disengagement, and ill-being they had experienced prior to their experiences in IDEA. It prompted a sense of ease, play, and vitality in their work. However, one theme that arose that I am not aware of having been addressed in the literature was that the provision of robust autonomy support and the process of integration prompted a sense of becoming visible as individuals whose unique and authentic contributions mattered.

When I discuss how role redefinition was fostered through IDEA, I will discuss, particularly in connection with classroom seating arrangements, how academic settings often permit and even encourage students to hide, while IDEA rendered them visible. Connell put it this way: “You get to see who people are. You’ve gotta take the stage in IDEA.” In contrast, Abbey commented that, in many of her courses, she felt as if she was being created to fit a particular mold.

You feel like a student number. You don’t feel like you’re creating something new and interesting and genuine and authentic. It’s just, I’m just a cog that’s regurgitating everything that the other cogs before me did. And we’re all getting
the same cog degrees. We’re all getting a second cog to add onto our other cog to make an actual gear mechanism to work in the big machine.

Maya expressed similar sentiments, and contrasted this with IDEA, where she felt her learning had been made relatable and tailored to who she was.

*I feel like they’re making too many of the same person. We all have the exact same requirements, so we’re all coming out with the exact same knowledge. So you’re not learning anything that’s personal about the topic to you, really. Everything’s so distant. It’s almost like there’s something between you and the knowledge, whereas [in IDEA], [the instructor] talks about how that relates to you, which I find is more helpful. And if you think about psychology, or whatever, there’s so many different aspects that you don’t even get to in your degree. . . They’re not changing the role to suit you, it’s a role that you’re filling for them. Whereas with [IDEA], it feels like the learning really is about you. I felt a lot of times in school like the teacher was just trying to get through the material they have to get through, and they’re not trying to make it relatable to you. They’re just trying to get it out there, so basically their butts are covered, so everything they put on the test, they make sure they get it all out to you. Nobody really takes time to make it actually relatable to you on a non-academic level. Whereas with IDEA, everything is about you. Everything comes back to you at the end of it. Everything. They’re so different.*

Chelanna had made a clay coffee cup during the Amazon field school that she used as a metaphor for authenticity. As she pointed out, producing something authentic didn’t preclude
meeting certain technical guidelines or requirements; she was able to work within those requirements to produce something that was authentic to her.

And so to have an Amazonian clay little cup that I made in the Amazon, with my own hands, is... it’s about connection, and my own personal touch that I feel was a huge part of IDEA for me. Plus there was amazing coffee! Amazing coffee in Colombia. And that was also part of the cup – amazing coffee in this little cup. I think there is an aspect of authenticity to it. And because it wasn’t for an art class – I mean, there’s some technique. We fired them. When you’re working with clay, you want to keep it even. You don’t want bubbles. You don’t want the thing to explode and ruin everyone else’s stuff. You want the bits of it to stick together, like you’ve got a handle on it, you want it to stick, but I didn’t have to follow a pattern. It was whatever cup I wanted. In that sense, very authentic. Make a cup. There you go, I’ve made a cup. This is the cup I’ve made. It wasn’t “Make this cup.” Or like, “We are going to examine the theory of cupmaking as expressed by Picasso.” No, it was your own cup, so I think authenticity is a part of it.

Recall also Sana’s discussion of creative writing as the most autonomy-supportive discipline she had experienced, apart from IDEA. For Sana, an important feature of this context was the acknowledgement of her style of writing as unique.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the rich provision of autonomy support in IDEA and its outcomes. Thus far in this chapter, I have discussed the process of integration. I would argue that these processes, in valuing the uniqueness of each student, laid the ground for the transformative process of role redefinition; in order to interact with an instructor as a colleague, peer, or partner, a student must be acknowledged as making a contribution in kind, through their
own unique configuration of interests, qualities, experience, and perspective. They are not simply a less developed version of the instructor. We will now turn to the research questions that prompted the current study.

4.2 Transformation through Role Redefinition: “. . . I’m learning to trust that I’ve got the answer within myself . . .”

As part of my research questions, I asked, “Does role redefinition emerge as part of students’ experiences of transformation?” The answer was a resounding yes. Themes of transformation through role redefinition were present in all of the narratives, but they appeared most strongly in Maya’s narrative. As Sana described, IDEA leveled out the teacher-student hierarchy, with the instructor and students meeting as peers or colleagues. Although Sana and other participants who had taken creative writing considered it to be the most liberating discipline besides IDEA, with the instructor acting as a facilitator, that separation and hierarchy of roles was still apparent.

[The IDEA instructor] did not take on the role of a traditional professor. He did not take on the role of a traditional instructor. He was one of us. He sat down with us, and that, in itself, is a huge role-breaking, when you’re not sitting ahead. Even when we took creative writing, we would join the desks together in a square or a circle, but you could always tell where the teacher was sitting. We were all looking at her. But the way [the IDEA instructor] did it, he was just one of us. He didn’t have a big pile of papers in front of him, or a laptop in front of him, working. No, he was just one of us. We’re all looking around the room, and he’s just one of us. Even in that setting, creative writing, which I consider the most
liberal in terms of education, you know where the teacher is. She’s the one who’s talking. He’s the one who’s talking. In certain creative writing classes, they didn’t even bother with the whole circle thing. The instructor sat at the front; we looked at him. IDEA really challenged that, and broke down that traditional sense of who’s who. It worked out better.

In the scenario Sana just described, echoing the “teacher as facilitator” model that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) discuss, the teacher holds power more loosely and more benevolently, but it is still evident who holds the power. In models such as radical collegiality, for the most part no one inherently holds the power; rather, its ownership is continually negotiated and shared. Maya also characterized the relationship between instructor and students in IDEA as a partnership, and one in which students were encouraged to take more control and supported in doing so.

You couldn’t rely on [the instructor] for a lot of stuff. He would give you advice, or he would tell you how to find the answer to this, but he wouldn’t necessarily just give it to you. I feel like he wasn’t just that all-knowing body that you go to for all your answers. He was like, “Yeah, but you can figure this out by doing this.” “Oh, that’s a good idea.” That’s what partners do. They help each other, build each other, they don’t just give each other answers, doing things for each other, because that’s not helping. That’s not building anything. So he really just helps to give you the tools to do things on your own.

For Sana, reconceptualizing the student-teacher relationship as a partnership rather than as one in which someone else had power over her radically altered whether she was willing to seek help and show vulnerability: crucial moves if one wishes to develop competence.
I think that’s what it did, not having that hierarchy. Because I considered [my instructor] a friend, and not a teacher, I wasn’t afraid of judgment. I wasn’t afraid of feeling like he would look down on me, or if that would in any way affect any future relationship with him. It wouldn’t affect him writing a reference letter. I did not feel any of that. These are things I’m thinking of now, but at the time I felt comfortable enough to go to a teacher and be vulnerable. I would have never been able to do that with anyone else. I would have been afraid of judgment. I would have been afraid of how that might affect them looking at me later on, in other classes.

Through being elevated to a partner in a relationship between equals, Connell began to trust his own authority, while still seeking input from someone he respects.

And it’s come to a point – it’s interesting – where I’m learning to trust that I’ve got the answer within myself, and I’ll answer it myself, and then I’ll ask him to see what his answer is, because it’s usually similar, but not quite. There’s something unexpected in it.

Maya specifically described this process of reclaiming her authority over her own education.

For the most part you see this teacher as, like, the head, and you just need to obey them. And I found a lot of teachers have that sort of mentality that they expect that from you as well, but with [IDEA], your life is about you, for the most part, so take control of it. I did, eventually, get to the point where I didn’t see teachers necessarily as special, or up there, or they’re in charge. No, I’m like, “This is my
Having affirmatively answered my first research question – whether role redefinition emerged as part of participants’ experiences in IDEA – I will now move on to the second.

4.2.1 **Supporting Role Redefinition: “You know, this is for you.”**

As part of my research questions, I also asked, “How did IDEA instructors and peers foster this process of role redefinition?” Abbey believed students’ reclamation of their own authority happened in two primary ways: through a lack of structure and through shifting the locus of control for their educations back to students. Although she used the phrase “lack of structure” to describe the first way, participants conceptualized structure differently from self-determination theorists. Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010, p. 589) define structure as primarily informational.

*Structure refers to the amount and clarity of information that teachers provide to students about expectations and ways of effectively achieving desired educational outcomes (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Skinner et al., 1998). Its opposite is chaos in which teachers are confusing or contradictory, fail to communicate clear expectations and directions, and ask for outcomes without articulating the means to attain them.*

When presented with this definition of the construct of structure, participants characterized IDEA as being somewhere in the middle of the continuum between structure and chaos, or perhaps leaning slightly more towards the structured side. Abbey’s “lack of structure” seemed closer to a “lack of constraints,” i.e. support specifically for the need for autonomy. “Lack of
structure” seemed to overlap more with “freedom,” “flexibility,” and “slack;” Abbey did, in fact, place “structure” in contrast with “freedom.” I have already discussed this support for fulfilling autonomy needs in IDEA.

The second way in which Abbey believed students were able to reclaim their authority was through persistent messages that the locus of control of students’ educational pursuits was not outside of them. It wasn’t just that they were given greater autonomy within the context of a course or a course activity, as the SDT literature typically conceptualizes autonomy support. It is that they were told the entire enterprise of their learning and education belonged to and should be directed by them – that control over it should belong to them, and them alone. In addition to the repeated nudges towards an internal locus of control that autonomy support has traditionally entailed, IDEA delivered large pushes in the form of explicit messages.

*I think his lack of structure was what did it, and his emphasis on, “You know, this is for you.” No one had ever told us that. No one had ever told us, “This is for you to get something out of it.” I sure as hell was never told that in those square courses. Ever. Even in my art courses! Even in my art courses I was never told that. Nothing was ever supposed to be for us. It was to please the instructors and get your grades, and to please the system, ultimately. So with him refusing to give us structure and then telling us, “No, this is for you to grow, I don’t care what you do with this. It’s not affecting me at all.” Well, he cared deeply about every single one of us, and our own journeys. And he would always talk about us walking our own labyrinth and all that, but it didn’t matter what you did as long as you got something out of it, and what you got graded on was how you interpreted it. That was never given to us before. The freedom is both terrifying*
and beneficial. So I guess that’s what it is, the freedom was different. We didn’t get that before.

The labyrinth Abbey mentioned was a frequently used metaphor, which I will discuss shortly. But the predominant metaphor that emerged in IDEA was that of the circle.

4.2.1 The Circle

Every participant, without exception, spoke about the circle in one way or another. In IDEA, whoever arrived at the classroom first was asked to set up the circle. Whoever didn’t need to rush to their next class was asked to put things back the way they were for the subsequent class. At the start of a new semester, those of us who had taken an IDEA course before would typically set up the circle on the first day. Abbey describes her initiation into IDEA.

. . . I get there, the desk and chairs are all in a row and facing the board and everything, and my friend comes in and immediately starts hauling the desks all around, moving the chairs off to the side, and I just said, “What are you doing?!”

And me knowing that he’s a free spirit, a sand person from Burning Man, so I figured it was just him being him, and we’re just gonna try things unconventionally, and I said, “What are you doing? The instructor’s not even here yet! Put it back how it was.” And that was me speaking linearly, from my education.

And then he looked at me confused, and he’s like, “No, no no, this is how we do it. It opens up your mind.”

I’m like, “Leave it until he gets here.”
“Ok. . .”

What happens when [the instructor] gets there? We move it all around. That was a physical metaphor for how it rearranged my way of thinking. The circle was actually a very very appropriate physical representation of how my education went before and after IDEA. Of course, I had to finish off my degree so I had to go back to the linear way of doing things to function in the other courses, and to appease the other instructors, but it definitely gave me a different outlook on things.

In my experience, and in that of my participants, it wasn’t necessarily unusual to have a classroom configuration in which students and instructor were able to see each other. But, as Sana had described – and I will reiterate her statement here – the circle in IDEA was used by the instructor in such a way that it minimized the trappings of authority.

[The IDEA instructor] did not take on the role of a traditional professor. He did not take on the role of a traditional instructor. He was one of us. He sat down with us, and that, in itself, is a huge role-breaking, when you’re not sitting ahead. Even when we took creative writing, we would join the desks together in a square or a circle, but you could always tell where the teacher was sitting. We were all looking at her. But the way [the IDEA instructor] did it, he was just one of us. He didn’t have a big pile of papers in front of him, or a laptop in front of him, working. No, he was just one of us. We’re all looking around the room, and he’s just one of us. Even in that setting, creative writing, which I consider the most liberal in terms of education, you know where the teacher is. She’s the one who’s
talking. He’s the one who’s talking. In certain creative writing classes, they didn’t even bother with the whole circle thing. The instructor sat at the front; we looked at him. IDEA really challenged that, and broke down that traditional sense of who’s who. It worked out better.

Maya also pinpointed the importance of the physical environment in conveying expectations of equality among instructors and students in the classroom.

It’s a very odd dynamic in the classes, because with IDEA, we move all the chairs out, and there’s a circle, so there’s that feeling of equality, whereas, with [a traditional] teacher, the setup is very structured, and they’re at the front, and it almost feels like you supposed to fall in line, that you’re supposed to sit there with your hands like this and just absorb everything.

While Reeve does suggest that teachers can offer autonomy support by “[arranging] learning materials and seating patterns so students manipulate objects and conversations rather than passively watch and listen” (2006, p. 231) and by taking care not to monopolize learning materials, this merely shifts student involvement towards the more active end of the continuum. As Sana and Maya explained, how instructors relate to the physical space of the classroom and physical objects in the classroom has the potential to transform the relationship between student and instructor (and, in fact, among students) into something much greater. As Abbey noted, the relationship between student and instructor in IDEA took a backseat to the relationship among the students themselves.

It was the circleness of it. The desks, the square setup of a classroom gets completely turned on its head and made into a circle so everyone can actually see
each other. Because [the IDEA instructor] always said that it’s more important that we learn from each other instead of some idiot standing in front of the class.

Returning to the theme of making students visible, in a typical classroom, particularly when lectures are the norm, only the teacher is visible to students. For both Connell and Sana, the circle meant no longer being able to hide.

_I liked the circle. I liked sitting around in a circle. At first, it was very – it was strange. You can hide behind a desk. But you can’t really hide in a circle._

_[The instructor] made us sit in a circle, which was like, whoa. I’d never done this, and I was self-conscious because nothing was hiding my legs and I didn’t know what to do with them. I kept doing this and that. Usually your legs are hidden and you do whatever you want with them. But it was weird. I had to get used to it._

But, whatever fear this might have induced, this visibility also fostered students’ ability to attune to their peers, and also a sense of responsibility towards them, as I will discuss in a moment. But first, I will talk about the labyrinth.

4.2.1.2 The Labyrinth, the Sword, and the Spool of Thread

Though only Abbey explicitly spoke about the labyrinth, it was a metaphor often employed in IDEA, particularly in the mythological narratives course. In Greek mythology, the Cretan labyrinth was a maze constructed by Daedalus to house the Minotaur, a monster with a human head and a bull’s body (Bulfinch, 1855). The Athenians were obligated to pay human tribute to Minos, the king of Crete; these youths were then sent to the labyrinth to be eaten by the
Minotaur. The hero Theseus offered himself up for sacrifice to the Minotaur in the hopes of slaying the beast, and sailed off to Crete. When he arrived, the king’s daughter, Ariadne, fell in love with him and gave him a sword with which to slay the beast, and a ball of thread to mark the way out. With Ariadne’s help, Theseus proved victorious.

In IDEA, the labyrinth was used as a metaphor for facing great trials, and also a metaphor of becoming lost, disoriented, confused, and struggling, and eventually finding one’s way out. The labyrinth provided students a framework in which to understand and persist through their lived experiences of transformative learning. Maya described the panic of being dropped into the labyrinth of university and not knowing how to find her way out.

> We have so much more power than we realize. And IDEA helps you to realize you have that power. That is where, I think, a lot of the confidence comes from. We have that, and sure, in regular academics, they expect the same thing, but they don’t do anything to empower you so that you feel like you can do this. Whereas IDEA does that. And so you’re like, “Yeah, ok, I got this.” And so maybe they’re expecting the same things, but one of them is giving you the tools: the ability to reflect on yourself and to analyze things. Whereas the other one is just, “Go do it.” And you’re out on your own, and you’re like, “Crap! What do I do?”

When faced with the task of navigating the Cretan labyrinth, most of the Athenian youths sent to be fed to the Minotaur were on their own. But Theseus received aid in the form of the sword and the spool of thread. Ariadne wished him to successfully escape. She could not slay the beast for him, nor lead him out of the labyrinth, but she gave him the tools with which to do it himself. Maya talked about this. She described such assistance as having been offered not only by the instructor, but also by others, presumably peers, echoing the role of peers in offering autonomy.
support, which I will discuss shortly. Note how she uses the collective “we” when she says “we’re gonna make sure everybody’s floating.”

_A lot of academics tells you that you need to be accountable for yourself, but it doesn’t give you the tools. It doesn’t tell you how. The [IDEA] instructor helps you with that. He helps you all along the way. And when you’re struggling, he’s there, or somebody else is there. There’s a lot more tools being provided. You should be figuring things out on your own, but you’re not being set up for failure, I feel. You’re being set up to succeed. It’s not sink or swim. It’s like, we’re gonna make sure everybody’s floating._

Connell described wrestling with his own desire to give up, and being encouraged to keep fighting it out. The instructor’s shared narrative became a thread he could follow out of his own struggle.

_So my second semester, I almost dropped out of Kwantlen. Structure is tough for me, or consistent structure over time, so I was at the point where, that winter we’d had a ton of snow, and I was miserable. I was living in this cabin, and I was just feeling like, “Fuck this,” and I sat down with [my instructor], and I told him what was going on, and I was almost at this breaking point, at this point of flight. I had dropped out of McGill, and that worked really well. “I’m going to do it again, I’m going to drop out.” I don’t think I said it, but I was like, I asked him, “Do you think I should do this,” or, “I’m considering,” or whatever, and we talked about a few other things, and he said, “This is not the time for flight, this is the time to fight it out.” and he said, “Keep going.” And I was like, “Ok. . .” And he told me_
a story about his last semester at UBC and how he wanted to drop out. He had two courses left before his degree, and he just had to finish these two courses, and his girlfriend, to-become wife, said, “No! What the fuck are you thinking? Stick it out.” And he did. And so I stuck it out, and it turned out really well.

When Connell chose to go to his IDEA class after braving the snowy roads near his cabin, a story I will relay in a moment, he literally followed the tracks left by others who had successfully gotten out. And when he told the story of his internal struggle between staying home and being responsible to the group, he left a proverbial thread that others could follow out of their own internal struggles.

As previously discussed, students are often expected to take on new roles without additional support and grace periods dedicated to these processes (Corbett & Wilson, 1995). As Chelanna pointed out regarding her peers’ narratives, although they had experiences of disengagement, all of the participants could be characterized as “good” students even before they took IDEA, so none fit Corbett and Wilson’s description of “disenfranchised” students who remain disenfranchised through typical reform efforts. And, as she suggested, it would be interesting to know how typically disenfranchised students respond to IDEA. However, grace periods and additional support for role redefinition in IDEA were evident. As Maya affirmed, “we’re gonna make sure everybody’s floating.” And as I previously discussed, when Connell used the term “slack,” it had two meanings, one which was support for autonomy, but the other of which was a grace that permitted him to make mistakes and fail without suffering overwhelming consequences.

*If I had been in three random other courses, I don’t think I would have made it.*

The openness – I talk about openness, right, but it’s almost like this slack, in a
way. It’s not just slack, but it’s... because I was falling in that semester. It had
the cushion. Whereas other courses are hard in their structure, it had the cushion
to contain me, to contain my fall, so that I could get back up on my feet rather
than breaking my legs and crawling away.

Chelanna echoed this in her reflection upon the other narratives, adding that the “journey [was]
just as (if not more) important than arriving at any predetermined waypoint.” Maya described
this slack in detail, and contrasted it with the rigidity she experienced in her other courses.

With IDEA, things build. You can get better and better. You can do super poorly
for the first ¾ of the term, but then switch things around at the end and prove,
“I’ve made a difference.” And [the instructor’s] like, “Yeah, you did. Good job.”
Basically, everything you should have done all term, you fit into this last quarter
of the course, but you’ve addressed it, you explained it... It doesn’t matter if you
bombed a couple of exams early on. There’s teachers where I found people were
failing just because they formatted things incorrectly. It wasn’t the content; it was
just because they improperly formatted things, and they’re losing letter grades.
And by the end, they got it, but tough. Everything at the beginning, you’ve already
lost all that. It doesn’t matter that you know it by the end of the course, because
that was already done and taken care of. So it’s that nothing can go at your
speed. You have to go at the teacher’s speed. It’s not very accommodating or
adjustable or flexible in any way. It’s all very rigid.

Connell described the impact that “slack” in IDEA had on one of his peers and the work he
believed it enabled her to produce.
There’s another person last year who was quiet through the whole course, and didn’t participate much. And I was like, “Ok, fine.” I’m like, “That’s not cool, but ok.” And I heard [the instructor] talking to this person about something personal that was really tough. I didn’t really get the gist of it, though. Then, at the end, this person brought in this absolutely beautiful project that just blew us all away, about what had been going on in this person’s life. There wouldn’t be that opportunity in a different kind of class. Again, it’s that sort of thing with slack. To give slack in areas where we need it, and that gives the opportunity to do something meaningful, out of that cushion. Just time, and space, and support, and patience. Most courses are: if you don’t do this, this, and this, you fail, and that’s bad. And [IDEA], it’s basically, if you don’t do this, this, this, and this, that’s ok. And keep coming back. There’s a great Rumi poem about that, and I can’t quote it exactly, but it goes, “Come again, all ye wanderers, lovers of leaving.” Basically, “All you fuckups, it’s ok. Come again, come again, come again.”

As we shall now see, the role of students as partners or colleagues to their instructors also offered more expansive possibilities for how they engaged with other students.

### 4.2.2 What Partners Do: Sharing Responsibility

As students redefined their roles and regained their own sense of authority over themselves and their educations, they also came to recognize how their actions, their attitudes, and even their presence impacted others. They came to recognize themselves as being part of a web of partners, colleagues, mentors, and leaders of their peers, instead of merely students engaged in parallel learning with the same teacher. Importantly, they learned how to offer
autonomy support to others, thereby also helping to foster their integration. Maya spoke about the influence of her and her peers’ actions, thoughts, and mindsets:

*I really think IDEA just opens your mind and makes you more self-aware, and conscious that how you act and how you think really does affect the world. Because even if you just hold a certain mindset, that has an impact on the world.*

Connell spoke about his sense of responsibility for showing up. He had awoken one morning to discover he had been snowed in and considered using it as an excuse to stay home and play video games instead of going to class, but he could see that other drivers had made it up the hill by his cabin, so he decided to go.

*And it came down to something like personal integrity. It was a commitment to myself. I think it was mostly myself. But it was to the group as well, to [the instructor] and to the group, to be there. I’ve certainly felt that commitment to the group before, in soccer teams and other places, like Montessori school, but it’s something that slipped in McGill. It was a wanting to be there, wanting the group to be whole. And a knowledge that I didn’t like it when other people missed. What the fuck? C’mom.*

Sana recognized that this responsibility to others extended to how she behaved in leadership positions towards those she was leading.

*I took business classes, and even though there was an ethics course, there was never any emphasis on, bluntly put, on humanity. It was on, “You, as a leader, should be doing this this this this to make sure this.” Yeah, but there was never any talk of sitting down with a group and talking to them about how they feel their*
leader should be. Which rarely happened. It’s a sign of weakness for a leader to come up to a group of people and say, “How do you feel I should lead?” Never! Because it’s a sign of weakness for them. It’s not! It’s not a sign of weakness. It’s you making sure that your team respects you in a way where they feel comfortable enough to tell you, “You actually hurt my feelings when you said this. I don’t feel respected when you said this.” Nobody would do that. People have learned to just deal with it, and this is how it is. That’s wrong. We can’t change that because it’s so ingrained within the society. It’s everywhere. It’s sad. IDEA challenged that.

This sense of responsibility towards others fostered the desire to support them, which manifested itself in a number of ways.

4.2.2.1 Offering Autonomy Support

There were a number of concrete ways in which students offered each other autonomy support, coinciding with satisfaction of the three basic needs. As a pre-requisite to offering autonomy support, participants learned how to “read” or *attune* to their peers and instructors. Participants described how peers exposed them to possibilities they weren’t aware of or had never considered; in order to satisfy the need for autonomy, one must first be aware of the meaningful choices one *could* make. Participants also described how they came to care for and feel cared for by their peers, coming together as a community and offering attunement and non-contingent positive regard, satisfying the need for relatedness. And, finally, participants described how their peers modelled persisting through struggle through sharing narratives of overcoming struggle, and sometimes assisted them with their own struggles in instrumental ways, helping to satisfy the need for competence.
4.2.2.1.1 The Need for Autonomy

Just as self-awareness is a prerequisite for meeting one’s own need for autonomy, attunement is a prerequisite for meeting others’ need for autonomy. “Attunement,” writes Reeve (2016, p. 232), “occurs when teachers read and sense students’ state of being and adjust their instruction accordingly; a synonym for attunement is sensitivity.” Maya used the example of “breaking” a horse as an analogy for the attunement to others that IDEA cultivated.

Whereas what I did with the horse was kind of like what [my IDEA instructor] did: you develop a relationship. You really pay attention to what the other body is saying as well. The horse is learning, but he’s also teaching me. I was learning tons of stuff too. So I also had to be aware of that.

This attunement is a prerequisite to providing autonomy support; according to Reeve, an instructor must first . . . know what students are thinking and feeling, how engaged they are during a learning activity, and whether or not they understand the lesson. Attuned teachers know these things because they listen closely to what their students say and make a special effort to be aware of what their students want and need. This sensitivity allows the teacher to be responsive to students’ words, behaviors, needs, preferences, and emotions. (2006, p. 232)

Maya recognized attunement as a crucial form of awareness that some of her other instructors lacked.
If the horse isn’t understanding something, or doing something that I want it to, then I’m probably not explaining it clearly enough. It’s not him, it’s me. Whereas when a teacher is like that, they’re like, “Oh, it’s you.” I’ve had teachers like that, where I’m like, “I don’t understand,” and they explain it to me the exact same way. And I’m like, “Ok, you said that, but I still don’t get that. You saying it again doesn’t help me either.” It seems like they don’t have that awareness, like, this explanation’s not working, so maybe I need to try something else.

Out of this attunement, Chelanna picked up on her instructors’ interests and helped foster them.

I think the way [our IDEA instructor] interacted with us really helped me to see my other professors as people with lives and interests outside of, or related to, what they were teaching me.

I gave my linguistics prof a bunch of books that were full of wordplay and things. “Oh, this will be right up her alley. I should just give them to her.” I don’t know if I would give a gift to many other of my professors. One, I definitely would and did, but again it was, I think [IDEA] kind of inspired me to see and interact with them.

The autonomy-supportive leadership style Sana learned in IDEA began with attunement: having a sense of the unique skills of the people she was leading.

So when I was leading, I would meet up with people and I’d say, “You know what? I think you are good at this, are you comfortable doing this?” and they would go ahead and do it. And it was stress-free leading. You didn’t have to be worried about people. Everybody was happy, and they felt accomplished. In each
thing there was problems, but for the most part it worked out really well. And I try to do that even now, even with the wedding and stuff like that, with my bridesmaids, I’m using that approach, and so far it’s been stress-free and it’s great. Everybody’s happy.

It is interesting to note that, in many ways, students do typically attune to their instructors, albeit in an instrumental way. A few participants spoke about the process of figuring out what it is their instructors wanted from them so they could do well in their classes, and often approached IDEA early on with the same strategy and skills. However, the attunement learned through IDEA was not motivated by extrinsic goals, but by intrinsic ones: a sense of community. I will discuss this cultivation of community in a moment. However, first, I will talk about how students exposed each other to the myriad possibilities that life has to offer.

As Maya discussed, and owing to its interdisciplinary nature, IDEA brought together students with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. In congruence with self-determination theory’s focus on eudaimonia (e.g. Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008), Maya saw the possibilities her IDEA peers introduced to her as an opportunity to not just survive, but thrive.

It’s just the exposure, too. It’s so different, and there’s so many different people, and it’s constantly new, and you just don’t know what’s going to happen. And it’s really good. That’s like life. You don’t know what’s gonna happen. Every day is really different. It’s really just getting to, not just cope with life, but thrive, and enjoy, and really get what you can from it.

Sana felt inspired by the possibilities others introduced her to. It hadn’t been enough to know that other people engaged in a pursuit – that someone she knew, someone like her, engaged in it
made it a possibility for her too. She spoke multiple times of how her peers had exposed her to new possibilities. Here are just two examples.

*One of the guys refurbished a chair as a project, and I was like, “People do that? You can do that with your own hands?” I had no idea that people did stuff like that. It intrigued me. I wanted to do it too. So it really opened up my eyes to what people can accomplish, and what stuff people are interested in. We learn from each other, we talk to each other.*

People would talk about their experiences and stuff like that. I think one of the interactive group projects, we would go out and, “If you get attacked by zombies and you’re out in the woods, what are you gonna do?” “I don’t know.” So we were out in those little woods behind Kwantlen and she points to a leaf, and she’s like, “If you eat that, you’d be dead.” I’m like, “What?! It looks harmless.” Things like that, you never even think about. That got me thinking. Oh my God, if I was ever lost in the woods, I’d die within a day because I would have no idea. This is something I need to learn. I need to get a book and read about this. Who would have thought? Somebody thought of that, and thought it was important enough to share with the class, and I learned a whole lot. How long would you last? Ten seconds. How would you make a tent? I don’t know. It’s raining. What would you do? It was a lot of fun.
This sense of astonishment and surprise students tend to experience when they are autonomously guided also promotes competence because it allows them to more quickly learn new information and skills (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

4.2.2.1.2 The Need for Relatedness

As Chelanna mentioned, a feeling of community was largely absent from her post-secondary experience, but cultivated within IDEA.

Community has been a huge part of my church experience and community was a huge part of my IDEA experience. Not so much my regular academic experience, even within a discipline. I don’t think there was that community, and so I think that part of me, those parts of me, were able to come together in school and through the catalyst of IDEA. That made school the place where that happened for me.

Maya described how the community created in IDEA rallied around its members.

Everyone’s just so supportive, I guess. There’s so much support. Everybody just wants everyone else to be good, and if you’re not good, you can talk about it. It’s fine. We’re really open and we help problemsolve. And that’s so helpful for everyone, because you’re just learning how to deal with life. I remember, there was this one girl who was having a really hard time that term, and she thought she was gonna marry this guy, and he eventually just got up and left her one day. It was really tough. And so she made all these scrapbooks, and she really opened up with the class, and was brutally honest about everything that was going on
with her, and she was crying, and it was really sad, but everyone was so supportive for her, and everyone was there for her and we just did whatever we could to make her feel better. We couldn’t do much, but we did what we could.

Otherwise she would have just gone through class miserable, all that bottled up, maybe shared with her friends and family. But there was like 30 people supporting her. She wouldn’t have had that if she hadn’t shared. She wouldn’t have shared if [IDEA] hadn’t provided that platform. I think that’s great.

In reflecting upon the other narratives, Chelanna mentioned that while this supportive community aspect of IDEA may not have been institutionally advertised, it was often communicated through word-of-mouth to other students. This is another instance in which the outcomes prized by the institution are not the same as those prized by students; participants also consistently valued intrinsic goals over the extrinsic goals promoted by the institution.

Sana talked about the role of the community in clearing space to hear voices that might have been self-silenced in other courses.

There was a girl who had trouble with speech. When she spoke, it would take her longer to get something out, but everyone listened to her. Nobody interrupted her. This is what we were there for, to hear your voice. And I’m sure that, even though that would have been fine in other classes, I’m sure that she would have felt people judging her. Because I used to feel self-conscious when I talked during class. I think she felt comfortable enough to talk for minutes at an end. I think that’s how it was, people felt comfortable enough to share, and not be judged.

The willingness to hear every voice comes back to the issue of each student being made visible, contributing in unique and authentic ways, and mattering.
4.2.2.1.3 The Need for Competence

I had previously discussed how narratives of struggling through and overcoming challenges offered students a thread out of their personal labyrinths. Sana affirmed learning more vicariously through peers’ experiences than she did from reading books. She also reported seeking the guidance of her peers for her own projects.

[The instructor] would get us to talk about our process, and stuff like that. What we were going through and where we’ve gotten to. He didn’t have a strict timeline on when it needed to be submitted, but progress on it. “What have you done?” I read some books here and there. But you learn more from how people are going through stuff. And we learn from each other. So I would go to my classmates and be like, “You’ve done this before. What do you think? How should I go about it?”

When there is no hierarchy in the classroom, it becomes natural for students to seek help where they are most likely to find it, and from those whom they resemble, rather than relying solely on an expert instructor whose level of experience is much further removed from their own.

4.2.3 Transformation through Role Redefinition

For Maya, who seemed to have had the most controlling history of my participants, the transformation through role redefinition that IDEA asked of her was quite challenging, and most closely resembled the uncomfortable process of wrestling with and transcending a threshold concept.
That change was so hard, so hard. I definitely wasn’t used to it. At this point, I’ve had I don’t know how many years of schooling, including high school and stuff like that, in this one way. And now [IDEA] is trying to change everything. It’s super uncomfortable. Change is really uncomfortable. It was definitely hard, and I felt that I definitely resisted it. I almost felt angry sometimes, because I just wasn’t getting it. But if you keep going, and you really open yourself up and allow yourself to do things differently and take what the course has to offer, I feel like you’ll do well. I think a lot of people, you have to be in IDEA at the right time. Some people aren’t necessarily ready for it. A lot of people don’t take it seriously, I found. A lot of people were like, “Oh yeah, it’s just easy marks, easy marks. It’s a GPA booster.” Things like that. A lot of people, they didn’t even come most of the time, because [the instructor] doesn’t do attendance or things like that. You’re supposed to be an accountable adult for yourself. And so I think you really need to be open to it, and so I was open to it, but it was still difficult, for sure.

A lot of what got me through challenging times was just feedback. [The instructor] is constantly wanting to know what’s going on, what your thought processes are, and what you are struggling with. So you do have that communication with him.

Abbey, whose previous educational experiences had been “linear,” also found her IDEA transformation challenging.

What I would get from other instructors was, “Ok, this is what you’re doing wrong, this is what you’re doing right, and this is what you need to do.” I would
ask [my IDEA instructor] those same questions, and he would just sit there and stare at me, and ask, “Well, what do you think you need to do?” Like, “No no, I need an outline.” I told him that first class, I was on him for weeks. . . And in later classes, he actually ended up doing that, because I guess enough people were asking for some sort of guidance. I was just asking him for some sort of guideline as to what we’re doing here. . . [It] was actually really frustrating for me because I had been groomed in this linear fashion, and then having no structure.

I guess it’s like someone in the military learning military ways on how to make your bed and how to line up your boots, that everything has a place. I’ve never been that kind of person, but I learned to be in this world. And then, not having that, it’s like all hell breaks loose, because you don’t know what you’re doing. And it actually caused me more anxiety than following the rules of the other instructors. [The IDEA instructor] not giving me any instruction was causing me more anxiety than, like, a stats course. Because I didn’t know what to do. And I was finding myself making stuff up just trying to figure something out, and not knowing, “Is this what he’s after?” I don’t even know. . . And then I think I took three or four IDEA courses in the end, and by the end of it, I got the hang of it, and I was just like, “I’m gonna do whatever the hell I want.” And I saw myself in the other newbs that were coming up, and they couldn’t figure it out, and I had to just explain to them, “Just do something you want to do, and the grade is in the process.” That’s the biggest thing that I learned from that.
Abbey in particular had a difficult time going back to the way things had been before, a characteristic of transcending a threshold concept. As I discussed in my section on reflexivity, IDEA had been under continual pressure and threat from the administration to conform to its strictures. Although Abbey had initially begged for more structure in IDEA courses, she had become a fundamentally different person by the time she received it, and thus rejected it.

   And, like I said, the fact that I feel like the administration, or the bureaucratic pressure, made him structure those courses, I was disappointed, to be honest, in those courses. I was disappointed and it made me sad that he had a full outline. And because I had had those conversations with him at the beginning, now this is three classes after that first one, I think? I got an outline, and I was like, “What the hell is this? What is this? What are you doing? I don’t want this.” He’s like, “Well, you got what you asked for.” And it came with assigned books and shit. And I didn’t want that.

As I discussed in my review of the literature, self-determination theory has previously focused on the continua of development, but the incremental change of integration evidenced in participants’ narratives lies in stark contrast with the epochal nature of role redefinition. I will now discuss my last two research questions.

4.2.4 Outcomes of Role Redefinition

   As part of my research questions, I asked, “What impact has this role redefinition had on how participants engage with their educations?” and “What impact has this role redefinition had on how others in their educational contexts engage with them?” I will move back and forth between these questions, beginning with a discussion of participants’ agentic engagement.
4.2.4.1 Agentic Engagement

Just as their previous educational experiences seem to have informed their experiences of transformation within IDEA, Connell and Chelanna made efforts to agentically engage prior to taking IDEA courses. Chelanna characterized this as being the person she’s always been; she seemed to have a strong autonomous orientation.

> From the beginning, I definitely wanted to engage with my professors. I made sure to speak up a lot in classes, ask questions. I wanted my professors to know my name – a little strategically. But also just because that’s kind of always been the person that I am, not so much the teacher’s pet, but I’ve spent so much money to be here, I’m not gonna sit at the back of the class and not squeeze every drop of value out of the people I’m paying to stand at the front and talk to me for a while, right? Which is what most university classes are, with the exception of IDEA and maybe some other ones. Most of them, that’s how that works.

Connell’s attempts to agentically engage by asking questions that interested him were partly met by his instructor, but his attempts were insufficient to effect the changes he would have liked to see: less lecturing, and (presumably) more discussion.

> That first semester I’d also taken an introduction to East Asian religions course, which was interesting. We talked about Buddhism, and Hinduism, and I don’t think we touched on Taoism, which I quite like, and it was interesting material, but it was just lecture, week after week, for three fucking hours. And I talked throughout that much more than anybody else, asking questions, and I sat up at
the front. She loved it. By the end I felt a bit frustrated and I missed a class or two, but certainly at the beginning and through the middle, she really liked the participation and the engagement. And she’d answer them, and then go on with her stuff. I had come back to school after a couple years off, and I was raring to go. But by the end of that course, I was just. . . I walked out of the exam halfway through, and I’d finished it, but I was just sick of it. I was sick of the lecture.

Even after her IDEA experiences, Sana only engaged agentically when she perceived her instructors as already being somewhat autonomy supportive. She often felt as if she was limited in the amount of change she could effect by herself.

The way I read instructors is that, if you’re open, I’ll be open back. But if you’re closed off, then whatever. I’ll do my due diligence and that’s it. I’m not gonna work hard to try to change it or anything like that. Because I’m one student. They deal with students every semester. If I was in a different position, maybe, but what are four months gonna accomplish? . . . I didn’t try too hard. I’m not that kind of person. I don’t like to force people to change their opinions. I can’t bring about that change. To each his own.

Faced with an instructor who didn’t respond to her attempts to agentically engage, Maya strategically shut down in class, while continuing to explore her interests on her own. Agentic engagement is intertwined with effectance; students will agentically engage in the ways in which the context enables them to feel competent enough to do so.

There was one course I took, a science course, and I found that it was just so boring. Nobody was talking or anything like that, and it was so dull, and the
professor was just so monotone, and for the most part, I basically just came to class and played Candy Crush, to be honest. There was some interesting stuff going on, and I just read it at home or did it on my own, because that was the only way I was able to stay engaged. . . Because there was no interaction with the class, or questions, or anything like that. There was no collaborative anything at all. So people just stopped coming, or weren’t paying attention. When I’d try to engage I’d totally just get shut down. I’d ask a question. “What about this?” “Oh, I don’t know. That’s not for this course.” You get those kinds of responses, like, “We don’t cover that in this course. Go look it up on your own, or take this other course.” It’s very frustrating.

Instructors’ responses to students’ agentic engagement are also intertwined with their effectance as instructors. Sana relayed this story of her peers attempting to agentially engage with an instructor who responded frankly that he didn’t know how to do things any other way.

A lot of professors I know – one professor, a lot of people take his classes because they have to, but all he does is just sit there and read. And it frustrates a lot of the students because we’re not learning anything. We took him with us to a Model UN conference, and we became close enough with him to actually talk about it, like, “We don’t feel like we’re learning anything.” We had to get to that stage with him. I hadn’t taken a class with him, but my peers did, and they’re like, “Yeah, you’re just talking. We just sit there and get bored ten minutes in. There’s no interaction.” For him, he’s old, so he’s like, “I’m sorry, I just don’t know any other way.” This is how he was taught. This is how he grew up learning, and this is what he feels a teacher should do. So he doesn’t know any other way.
Thus, agentic engagement from students is only effective when paired with instructors who have the skills and the desire to be autonomy supportive. Reeve (2009) discusses the institutional, contextual, and individual factors that lead instructors to favor controlling styles over autonomy-supportive ones and a variety of ways to address these. As Sana points out, receptiveness to agentic engagement (here, in the form of feedback on teaching practices) varied by discipline, just as autonomy support did.

*It’s really varied. I can’t say that creative writing professors handled [feedback] better because some of them didn’t. But most of them did. A lot of traditional education courses like sciences could not handle it at all. It was very difficult. Arts, sociology, stuff like that, yep, still a bit better but not as accepting. Business, don’t even. You can’t tell them. They think they’re the best at everything. You can’t even go there.*

Chelanna, likewise, reported having had a negative experience in the sciences in response to her agentic engagement, an incident I will discuss in a moment. Although Chelanna reported having engaged agentially throughout her undergraduate courses, she attributed an increase in this behavior to her involvement in IDEA courses.

*I just think that the other profs were much more open to my level of engagement. I wanted to engage at a slightly deeper level than fit the paradigm for that science class. Whereas with other classes, I was able, I think, to ask teachers other questions, be a little more familiar with some of them. And I think due to the kind of people they were, due to the kind of person I am, and just kind of feeling*
encouraged in being that way through IDEA, that worked out for most of my profs, except that one.

Maya and Abbey in particular spoke about the ways that their involvement in IDEA, and their feelings of empowerment, increased their attempts at agentic engagement. Maya learned the skills through IDEA to approach instructors and to create meaningful choices for herself.

In classes that I took after IDEA, I’d go through books, and I’d find a topic that was super interesting to me, and I’d be like, “Oh, I’m going to read more articles on this. This is what I’m gonna write my paper on.” Even if the teacher was like, “These are the topics,” well, then, I’d go speak to them and be like, “Hey, I’m super interested in this. I would really like to write something on this.” And they’d be like, “Oh, sure.” Because, you know what, teachers actually like to see students engaged, believe it or not. They love to see that. They’re like, “Oh, hey, that’s great.” . . . After IDEA, I took a neuroscience course, for example, and I decided to write what I wanted to write about, and write it how I wanted to write it, and I took a chance. I was taking an IDEA course that term also, and I was like, “I’m just gonna take a chance. I’m a do things my way. I’m a see how it goes.” And I got an A+. I got like 95% on this paper, and the teacher wrote, “It was a pleasure to read.” He said I wrote a really nice story or something. But I mean, this is neuroscience, right? It’s all technical. Neurons, things like that. Not really stuff that would make a good story, but I tried to make it at least interesting to me, and I think by making it interesting for the professor to read is where I got a lot of marks. Because I talked to him later on, and he said just so much of what he gets is basically what he’s said to us, just spewed back at him. And he’s like,
“Oh, I really like that you decided to pick something completely different, and go off on it.” Wow! This works!

Maya framed agentic engagement overall as a set of skills that she had learned through IDEA, and the resultant outcomes as deep learning, in contrast with her classmates’ superficial learning.

That’s how I made neuroscience interesting to me. I did something that was applicable to me, and I explored it, and I really was able to grasp the concepts, and that’s what the teacher was looking for, because a lot of people were just spewing out what something is, but it didn’t really show that they knew what it was, because it was almost word-for-word from the textbook, the definition, basically, whereas I was able to explain it in a way that was different, or how I understood it, and he was like, “Oh, yeah, that’s exactly it.” That’s where IDEA came in. I don’t think I would have enjoyed those courses – no, I wouldn’t have enjoyed neuroscience if it hadn’t been for IDEA. It’s so dry. The instructor’s great, but even he can’t make neuroscience that interesting if it’s not that interesting to you. . . So that’s the thing: I took control of my own education. It’s the only reason I got through that course and did as well as I did. I made it a point of being in control of my learning: how I learned, what I learned, and making sure that I understood things in a way that was good for me. That class was a fulltime job. Doing that was super hard, but I feel like I had the skills to do that. I felt like a lot of other people had no idea how to do that. They didn’t know that was something that would help them. That wasn’t something that was taught. It was very technical. Everything was just broken down, deconstructed. Other people just didn’t have those tools.
Abbey also increased her attempts to engage agentially because of her experiences in IDEA, though she highlighted the risk she was taking in doing so. In the quote that follows, Abbey echoed Sana’s sense that there was only so far she could push her instructors on her own, and Maya’s frustrations at getting “shut down.”

After IDEA, I maybe pushed the envelope a little bit more. I didn’t follow the rules as much. And not to say that I was defiant, I just looked for more grey area than maybe was intended to be there. I was looking for flexibility. I guess by me pushing it, or even in asking questions in class. . . I think I just – not expected, I think expected is the wrong term for it – hoped for more flexibility from my other instructors.

You either get knocked back, in that you don’t get the grade, or you get “Stay on topic,” or something like that. “This wasn’t in the criteria.” . . . Over time, you develop a learned helplessness. . . You try to get out of the cage enough times to no avail, and you give up, and you just go along with it. It’s not that I tried too many times, and it’s not that I tried too hard, to be honest, to change the system, but I tried maybe with a couple of papers here and there. . . [and] I was met with the equivalent of the slap on the wrist in terms of grades or the lack thereof. And so I learned not to do it again. It wasn’t punished. It wasn’t “I’m out to get you because you’ve taken your liberties with this,” it was the lack of positive reinforcement. You didn’t check the boxes, so therefore you don’t get the points. Or you didn’t check the right boxes. . . [Y]ou feel like a little person, like, I’m just one person in this completely established way of doing things, and I’m not going to be able to change it.
The welcoming in IDEA of feedback as informational rather than controlling fostered Maya’s inclination to interpret it in the same way: not as punishment, but as a path to greater competence.

> And there have been times when I’m like, “Hey... you know, if we did this like this, and this like that, it would be a lot less chaotic,” and [the IDEA instructor’s] like, “Oh, that’s a good idea. Let’s do that.” He was just open to that. I think a lot of people take that as a negative. Like, if you’re being given feedback, you’re being criticized, and that’s a bad thing. But it’s not. Especially in IDEA, it’s a good thing, because you’re building. Next time you’re gonna do it even better. Whereas in the rest of academia, it feels like you’re almost punished for doing things wrong.

Maya’s IDEA experiences also helped her to cultivate a sophisticated epistemological attitude, in which she saw herself as being capable of creating knowledge and not simply absorbing it, that backed her willingness to engage agentically.

> People are almost, like, afraid to talk to teachers. It is a huge power difference. I don’t know if it’s even really there. It’s just like it’s expected to be there, or you’re supposed to act like this, but there’s no reason for it. Because if you see a teacher as this untouchable authority figure that you can’t question in any way, you’re not going to learn from them. That’s not how learning takes place. Paulo Freire talked about the banking model of education, and you don’t really learn from that. You can’t evolve on that learning. As a society, we don’t get any better because this is a quicker way of doing this, this is a better way of doing this, or
look at this, but everybody’s just like, ‘Oh, ok, no, we’ll just do what you say.’

But that’s not helping anyone, really, at the end of the day. It might be easier for
the teacher, if everybody’s just doing what they’re told, but it really doesn’t help
our species. In terms of the evolution of knowledge, if you’re too scared to ask
questions, how are you gonna build on anything? You’re expected to get to this
level, and that’s it.

4.2.4.2 Defiance

As I previously noted, IDEA students’ bids for greater autonomy were sometimes
welcomed by their other instructors, and other times declined. In these latter instances, students
disengaged or found other ways of engaging that did not require their instructors’ cooperation, as
Maya did when she played Candy Crush in class and explored what interested her outside of
class. However, students’ bids were sometimes perceived as being outright defiant, particularly
when they came up against instructor behavior they perceived as not only controlling, but
outright miseducative. As Maya described, it was not uncommon for IDEA students to take a
strong stand in their other courses. More importantly, the stands they took were often motivated
not just by self-interest, but out of concern for their peers’ success and well-being; recall that one
of the ways in which peers supported each other as partners in IDEA was through their
commitment to the community.

They don’t want that combative person in there. So I feel like that’s part of the
reason why they don’t like that. I think probably a lot of IDEA students are also
the ones who have stood up for themselves in situations where other students
wouldn’t. They’re the ones who are like, “You know what? I’m gonna go to the
dean with this, because that’s not right.” I have talked to a lot of other IDEA students who have had conflicts in courses, and it’s had a significant impact on their experience of the course, or their grades, or whatever, and a lot of the people around them do nothing. But these students who have been through IDEA, who are in control of their education, who have this empowered, confident feeling, are like, “You know what? This isn’t right, and it shouldn’t continue. It’s not fair for the next group of kids to have to go through this too.” So they do bring these issues forward, and there’s always a lot of backlash when that happens. Nobody likes the kid who goes to the dean, but sometimes it’s necessary, and I think that a lot of times kids – students, I should say – are just afraid of it. Because we’re taught to be afraid of the teacher. Like they’re the ones who are in control of everything. They’re supposed to be in control of everything; we’re supposed to give them control, almost. But they don’t like it when you keep your own control.

Chelanna described one instance in which she gave critical feedback on a group presentation, in the hopes that the groups that followed might better engage her and her classmates. From her instructors’ reaction, she perceived that her assumption of a different role – that of an active partner in her peers’ learning – had caused tension in the relationship.

I was in a science course to fulfill the requirement when I had switched from business to general studies. The prof had asked for feedback on students’ group presentations. I don’t think I was mean, or rude, or wrong, but I kind of gave some critical feedback about their presentation. I couldn’t hear them. They basically read off their PowerPoint slides. I just don’t feel they made the best use
of their time. And I think I kind of got blacklisted in the class, a little bit, for that. I just kind of felt like that comment had caused some tension with the prof. . . . It wasn’t like me and that prof had a terrible relationship, per se, but I kind of felt the strain after that. . . . I gave slightly critical feedback. . . . [n]ot just to put them down, that wasn’t really my intent, but to inspire the rest of the class to give good PowerPoint presentations. Like, if we’re going to have to sit through, like, 20 more of these, we might as well make them good, and that one wasn’t.

One of Maya’s instructors accused her of being entitled when he confronted him about a situation she perceived as unfair.

And I had one teacher tell me, because basically what had happened was he gave us criteria for an assignment, and we did the assignment, and he ended up losing the criteria, so he rewrote his own criteria, and that’s what he used to mark the paper on. And so I had the original criteria, and so I came to his office, and I’m like, “I have some issues with this. Can you just go over this? This is the original criteria, so this is what you should go on.” He goes, “You Canadians are so entitled.” I’m like, “Excuse me, I’m not entitled. I’m paying thousands of dollars to be here, and I’m trying to do what you want me to do, but if you’re going to be changing the criteria after the assignment is due, what do you expect to happen?” I just feel like it was expected that I was just supposed to quietly get in line with everybody else, but, I mean, I didn’t, and then I got my way. But nobody else did, and all their marks ended up suffering.

Although I am not aware of any literature that examines the legitimacy of instructors’ accusations of student academic entitlement, these can, like accusations of defiance, be used
simply to reinforce instructors’ hegemony and to resist students’ exercise of their own agency. And as Graça, Calheiros, and Barata (2013) found, more autonomous students have a greater need for autonomy support in the classroom, and they tend to view controlling teachers as less legitimate, increasing the possibility of clashes between them. This also lends itself to explaining how students came to choose IDEA courses in the first place, as well as their movement away from disciplines they generally perceived as more controlling and towards those they perceived as more autonomy supportive.

Maya sought the dean’s help twice in response to another instructor’s miseducative behavior, which included never using the required (and expensive) course textbook, not following the syllabus, and promoting unfounded, unscientific beliefs about “psychic forces.” The situation culminated in Maya speaking out in class against the instructor's mischaracterization of a rape scene in a movie. She cited her responsibility to her younger female classmates in particular as the reason she spoke up.

If it hadn’t been for IDEA, I wouldn’t have stood up for that. I would have been like, “Wow, that’s awful,” and just gone on. I wouldn’t have said anything. And people need to start saying things. It’s important. Especially when it comes to something like that. And I mean, nothing came of it because he was only a sessional prof and it was a summer course, and he was gonna be gone anyway. So nothing could really happen, but yeah, it was a very bad experience. It was really negative. One of my IDEA classmates was in that course too. She lost it. We still talk about that. She works for a friggin’ women’s shelter. She deals with women who have dealt with this, and he’s like, “That’s not really rape.” And I’m like, “Oh, buddy”. . . If it hadn’t been for IDEA, I wouldn’t have stood up for myself.
It’s so wrong. But the thing is, I was the one person who did something, who said something. But only because I felt this confidence that had been given to me, or that I had been allowed to build because of [IDEA], but everyone else was just accepting it. That’s awful. That’s scary. Because, you know, that’s what the Nazis did. They just mindlessly followed their leader. “Oh, it’s fine to kill the Jews. That’s not really rape.” That’s scary. That’s legitimately a scary thing.

Maya was able to draw parallels between standing up for herself in class, and the broader role of defiance in society. Such dispositions are essential to preserving the societal gains we have already made and creating even more liberating possibilities. Maya went on to express the underlying philosophical commitment in IDEA to caring both for herself and for others that she had assimilated as her own.

It was bad between us. Every time he saw me, it was dirty looks and stuff like that. But tough. Tough. If you’re gonna walk around like that, that’s what you get. It’s not right. That’s one thing. IDEA tells you to stand up for what’s right, I feel. It tells you that you need to do what’s best for yourself, but it also teaches you to be mindful of others.

And finally, Abbey reiterated the purpose of her own defiance not as “mutiny” – the defiance for defiance’s sake that Van Petegem, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, and Beyers (2015) discuss – but defiance as motivated by her own self-determination.

And actually, you know what? I got less out of IDEA courses that had more structure. Later courses, like the mythology course, [the instructor] actually assigned books and I didn’t read them. I didn’t want to. I was like, “Why?” I
bought the books. I have the books. I didn’t read them. I didn’t care to read them.
I was like, “No.” I will talk about the mythologies behind this and that and how it
relates to life, stuff like that, but I don’t want to read your book. You just put
something [in the course outline]. . . it’s like, I almost feel like he was selling out,
because I feel like the administration made him do something like that. Like,
assign books, or put structure on the course, and I felt like, “Augggh, I don’t want
to.” Because at that point, that was later on in my IDEA journey, and I was like,
“That’s not what this is. It’s too much like a real course, and I don’t want it.”
And I would say – it is a “real course,” that’s how I felt about it. I don’t even
know if anybody read the books. Maybe they read them after the course was over,
just for leisure, but I didn't want to on principle. It wasn’t an act of mutiny. I just
didn’t understand why he was assigning it. And there’s a lot of stuff that gets
assigned to you and you just do it, in the other courses, because it’s required. But
those courses are testing you on that material. They’re testing you, or you’re
gonna have to choose one of those books to write an essay, or write a paper on,
whatever. It is a means to an end in those courses. With [IDEA], [the instructor]
just picked out those books because there was something in them that was
interesting about mythology and he thought that we would like to read it. There
was no motivation for me to read them whatsoever. I will probably read them at
some point or flip through them at some point, just because I want to. But, again,
when I’m intrinsically motivated to do so, I will probably do it. But I felt like that
course was so different from other IDEA courses.
Recall that one important form of autonomy support is providing rationales to students as to the utility of an activity they are being asked to undertake (Reeve, 2006). Whatever rationales might have been given for the readings, they were insufficient for Abbey to take them up. But interestingly, even while defying her IDEA instructor, Abbey was able to empathize with the constraints she perceived as having been placed on him.

As Vansteenkiste and Ryan (2013) discuss, need thwarting, in which contexts are actively antagonistic towards need satisfaction, is much more insidious than need deprivation, in which contexts are merely neglectful towards students’ needs. Students’ acts of defiance, Maya’s in particular, often targeted this active undermining of need satisfaction.

4.2.4.3 Risktaking

Defiance wasn’t the only form of risktaking students engaged in. As his project for his first IDEA course, Connell had created a musical instrument out of bamboo and rope that he referred to as the bamboogan, a portmanteau of “bamboo” and “organ.”

I brought it to class and I set it up in class, and people were like, “What the hell is this thing?” Because you look at it and you don’t know what it is. It doesn’t really look like an instrument until I start banging on it, and what I’d done after I finished it at home, it was my sister’s birthday, and she lived across the country, and I videotaped myself. I happened to be shirtless and wearing a scarf, and I sang her Happy Birthday as I was banging on this thing. And I’m not a musical person, so it was completely like I could only keep the Happy Birthday tune with my voice, and then I was just banging randomly on this instrument. And I was also kind of embarrassed, which added to the randomness of it, so I sent this to
her and I brought this into the middle of class and I hit it a few times, and so I told the class I’d done this, and someone said, “Hey, will you sing Happy Birthday for us?” So I did. I yelled out Happy Birthday banging on this thing in class. It’s funny. . . Aesthetically, it served no real purpose. It’s something you make as a kid, except that my sister really liked it, the video, and the class thought it was funny, and I was really proud of making this thing. . . It was spontaneous, and it’s not like I learned a specific skill having done that, but it was a practice in following through with a strange idea, and in terms of invention and creativity and research, anything that’s new, that is our most valuable skill, is following through on that strange idea.

Connell also detailed the emotional bravery of the projects his classmates had created.

In the last IDEA course that I took, there was a student who was quiet through it and then produced this work of great creativity and deep personal meaning and beauty at the end, and put it out in the center of the classroom and it was very moving. And there was another person in that class, it was a woman who had been kicked out of her dance program when she was 18, and it was very traumatic, and she had not danced since then, for 6 years, or 8 years, something like that. And she danced for us. She prepared this dance routine, and on the last day of class, she danced for us, ballet. There was another woman who – oh, it was gorgeous. She probably put in a hundred, two hundred hours. She made this Bonsai tree out of wire, gold wire, wrapped at the base around a rock, its roots, and then twisting up, and it had little gnarls in the trunk, and it branched out, and there were 60 or 70 leaves she dyed with tea, and they were cut out from a piece
of paper where she’d written all these times she was ashamed of in her life, around one central theme. And she cut them out and made them leaves, and wrapped them into this tree, this beautiful golden tree, and you could read little snippets. All three of those, the first one was photography of the person’s family, the quiet moments within a household after an event. That, to me, is meaningful, and to those people it was very meaningful.

It is also worth noting that many IDEA students, including Chelanna and Connell, had taken substantial emotional and intellectual risk in leaving the comfort of their lives in Canada to attend the Amazon Field School in Colombia.

4.2.4.4 Student Voice

One particular form risktaking took was in students’ expression of voice. Sana had discussed how a student with speech difficulties who might have silenced herself in other courses felt free to express herself in IDEA. Chelanna spoke of “more reserved individuals finding their voice through IDEA.” Abbey spoke about the centrality of student voice in IDEA. She acknowledged that those in charge didn’t always want to hear student’s voices – as we’ve seen with students’ attempts at agentic engagement – but that IDEA gave students permission to express them, whether or not they were heard. Just as Maya spoke about the locus of control regarding her education moving from external to internal, the locus of control for their own voices also moved from external to internal. They speak not to please or to be listened to, but because something inside of them impels them to do so.

_I think a lot of them had a pretty profound change. Like I said, those ones that were maybe sheltered and never told that they were allowed to express_
themselves, maybe they come from a family where it’s not OK to express yourself. Maybe they come from a background where it’s not OK to express yourself, and maybe your voice isn’t supposed to be heard. You’re supposed to listen. Maybe they’re just introverts, and they didn’t really know what they were getting into with these classes. I’m not really sure. But I think a lot of them had a lot of growth. . . Oh, someone wants to hear what I have to say, and it doesn’t even matter if someone wants to hear it, it’s what I want to hear from myself. I have the right to say it.

As I discussed in my review of the literature, accommodation occurs when students’ challenges to the system are accommodated to existing vocabularies and ideologies to maintain the status quo. Abbey described her immense frustration at taking the risk and effort of speaking up at the Engaged Learning Symposium (an event I also took part in) and having her input ignored.

I guess I was a little bit spoiled. Ok, I’ve had this little taste of freedom. Now I’ve gotta go back in the cage. I would still do the assignments as they were intended, but I think I was still hoping for more slack in the leash. Because I think a lot of those other courses would really benefit from being a little bit more student-led. I think that’s why we had the Engaged Learning Symposium, and then nothing happened as a result of it. They "wanted to hear from us", but they didn’t want to hear from us. On paper, they were supposed to hear from us, and they wanted -- on paper -- to say “We held this symposium because we care about students’ thoughts and opinions.” But they didn’t really, and nothing happened. Nothing came of it. You didn’t listen to what we said. Maybe you listened, but you didn’t do anything about it. We told you what we wanted. We told you what works for us,
and everything just stayed the same. So what good was it? What was the point?
Was it just so you can state to whoever is important, to the overall school board, to the government, to whoever it is, that you had this symposium? “Oh, we’re implementing affirmative action blah blah blah blah.” Windbags.

Nothing happened. It felt very ineffective. We went to a lot of effort, and I think a lot of passionate things were said in that symposium, a lot of things that were, “This is how we feel about our education. This is what we’re looking for. And hopefully you can make it happen.” And it went in one ear and out the other. And we didn’t feel heard. I didn’t feel heard, and I know I spoke up during that whole thing. It’s disappointing.

Sana was acutely aware of this pitfall, and students’ self-silencing in anticipation of this response.

So there’s this disconnect between the students and the instructors where students are afraid to give feedback – they think it’s just a formality thing that they’re asking for feedback – and so they never tell them and it never gets fixed.

Accumulation occurs when students’ feedback is used to manage or marginalize them, and appropriation occurs when instructors combine accommodation and appropriation to reinforce existing views and power dynamics. When Maya’s instructor used her insistence that he grade her by the original rubric to reinforce his view that “You Canadians are so entitled,” he engaged in appropriation.

In a broader sense, IDEA’s inability to gain traction constituted a failure of the institution to take student voice into account. Many IDEA students were outspoken in their support of
IDEA, but even while IDEA faculty were formally recognized for teaching excellence, IDEA itself was prevented from growing, felt under continual threat, and indeed lost traction year after year. IDEA courses are still offered by the institution, but it is unclear for how long, and the Amazon Field School is now crosslisted under the Design and generic Arts departments, not under IDEA.

4.2.4.5 Criticality and Liberation

Returning to the issue of SDT’s potential for criticality and liberation that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) engaged with, the students I spoke to did become engaged in this work in a variety of ways due to their experiences in IDEA. Maya, for whom “questioning” came up multiple times, spoke of how IDEA taught her not only to engage critically with her discipline, but to engage critically with the systems and institutions in which she was embedded.

But I also think that, in general, [IDEA] is teaching free thinking, creative thinking, employing critical thinking in a different sense. Because university always wants you to think critically, but they want you to think critically about a certain topic. They don’t necessarily want you to think critically about how the course is set up, or how the school is run.

Sana felt similarly, and saw how she could, through her teaching, become an agent of liberation, and prompt her students to also become agents of liberation.

For me, IDEA changed the way education was looked at, and I took what I learned from there into my other courses. So rather than look at my writing from a traditional point of view, I was looking at it from a different point of view.
Hopefully, when I start teaching, I start to implement that in my own way of teaching, and it goes on and on until there is a change. Because change doesn’t happen overnight. It’s gonna take a while. I think it helped – at least we’re thinking about it, thinking about the difference, and we have something to compare it to. That’s what IDEA did. It showed us: there’s this, and then there’s this, which you really had never seen before. So that’s definitely something it did, challenge traditional education. So hopefully when I start teaching, I’m definitely gonna take from IDEA and implement that in how I teach. And hopefully my students take from that and keep going forward with it.

Maya saw her classmates engaging with the community as agents of liberation, and had hope that, once enough people learned how to stand up against oppressive systems, together they would become an unstoppable force for liberation.

I feel like a lot of us have been branded. One of my friends who would go to the dean, probably me, because I’ve gone to the dean a couple times as well. That’s what happens with people who stand up for themselves. But I mean, it’s not gonna change until more people start doing it. Because it’s like, if everybody starts: “Hey, that’s not right, that’s wrong. We’re all gonna stop this,” they can’t do anything. Too bad if they don’t like us. If there’s this many of us, they can’t do anything. I think it’s important. A lot of IDEA people, too, I see them going to protests and stuff like that. Whereas a lot of other younger people, they’re really not engaged at all with what’s going on. They don’t know. They don’t vote. They’re just so disengaged from society, but IDEA tells you to be part of your community.
This is the realization of the critical and liberating possibilities that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) envisioned for SDT. Liberation ultimately lies not in the hands of benevolent instructors, but in the hands of students who recognize their own power to change the systems they are embedded in.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine IDEA students’ lived experiences of role redefinition in the context of their IDEA courses. In this chapter, I will provide a summary of the results and discuss my findings in relation to self-determination theory, as well as the literature on agentic engagement, student voice, defiance, transformative learning, and models such as students as learning partners and radical collegiality. I will also discuss the strengths and limitations of this study, as well as its implications for practice and research.

Based on my analysis and interpretation, participants’ narratives indicated that redefining the role of students was indeed a crucial part of the transformations they underwent in IDEA. They emerged from IDEA as individuals who felt in control of their post-secondary educations, and who increasingly recognized their own authority, particularly when it came to decisions about their own learning and lives.

5.1 Summary of Results: Role Redefinition as a Form of Autonomy Support

First, it is important to reiterate that participants’ post-secondary experiences prior to their engagement with IDEA were often quite controlling, and these controlling experiences failed to satisfy their needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, or even actively thwarted satisfaction of these needs. The amount of control varied by discipline; business and the sciences were perceived as more controlling, while creative writing in particular was perceived as generally being more autonomy supportive. Under the conditions of strong external control that constituted much of their university experience, participants did not feel as though they were in charge of their educations and their learning process, they did not feel connected to peers, and
they felt limited in their ability to expand their competence in the ways they wished. As such, they felt demoralized, disengaged, “stressed out,” and sometimes even physically ill.

However, through their involvement in IDEA courses, participants were able to redefine their roles as students and come to feel in charge of and engaged with their educations and learning. They also built the skills and resources to better cope with contexts that weren’t always need supportive.

5.1.1 How Did IDEA Instructors and Peers Foster This Process of Role Redefinition?

The process of role redefinition occurred against a backdrop of teaching practices that I identified as autonomy supportive in my review of the literature and data analysis. Participants were free to choose their own project topics, the products they produced, and the process they went about to produce them. They were encouraged to expand their competence, and given positive messages about their ability to do so. A sense of relatedness among peers was cultivated through providing ample time for students to share about things that mattered to them, struggles, and triumphs, as well as encouraging students to collaborate with as many different peers as possible. These in-class collaborations often grew into deeper, longer-term friendships.

Abbey identified this support specifically for satisfying the need for autonomy as having been crucial to this process of role redefinition. With their IDEA instructor claiming almost no ownership of the process and product of students’ course projects – even the due dates, downplaying evaluation, and imposing no attendance or reading requirements, students had the space to claim full ownership over their learning. They were also persistently given the explicit message that their learning belonged to them and was for them.
One of the practices that was essential to reducing the teacher-student power differential and elevating students to the position of partner or colleague was the circle: the way the physical environment of the classroom was set up and used. While it is not uncommon, particularly in seminar courses, for instructors to use classroom setups in which all participants in the class can see each other, the instructor typically telegraphs their role and power through how they relate to the physical space of the classroom and use physical objects. While an IDEA instructor would certainly have come to the fore when facilitating activities and discussions, they balanced this with receding into the group. Students in IDEA were also given the explicit message that they were there to learn from one another as much or more than from the instructor, and as students assumed a more expansive role that permitted them to be leaders, mentors, and colleagues, this peer-to-peer learning became a real possibility.

5.1.2 What Impact Has This Role Redefinition Had on How They Engage with Their Educations?

Participants who underwent this process of role redefinition did in fact change how they engaged with their educations in a number of ways. They took more intellectual risks. They became more critical not only within their disciplines, but also more critical of the systems and institutions they were embedded in. They became more attuned to and autonomy-supportive of others, caring for them in new ways, introducing them to new possibilities, recognizing and fostering their interests, coaching them to persist, offering guidance that promoted competence, modeling persistence through struggle, and leading them in more facilitative ways. They increased their attempts to engage agentically with their other instructors, in and out of the classroom. In situations of injustice, they spoke up where previously they would have remained
silent. They spoke up not because others always wanted to hear what they had to say, but because they themselves felt impelled to speak.

Returning to the issue of liberation that Ryan and Niemiec (2009) had aspired to for SDT, participants did come to see themselves in this way, as agents of their own and others’ liberation. They were realistic but hopeful; they recognized that there were not yet enough people like them to produce change on a mass scale, but that they had a responsibility to stand up and do what they could and to pass the baton to others through how they led and taught.

5.1.3 What Impact Has This Role Redefinition Had on How Others in Their Educational Contexts Engage with Them?

Although participants increased their agentic engagement, they did so strategically and not globally. They tended to do so only when they felt their attempts had some chance of success or if the stakes were particularly high; if they suspected their instructors would not be responsive, or were asking simply to say they had asked, they sought other ways to engage that did not require their instructors’ cooperation. When participants did make bids for greater autonomy, these were met in a variety of ways. Some instructors welcomed these attempts, and offered greater autonomy in response, permitting students to write papers on a self-chosen topic, for example. Other instructors briefly engaged, then returned to their previous mode of teaching. Some declined these bids altogether, claiming to “not know” or suggesting that the things students’ were learning from extracurriculars or wished to learn from their classes were unimportant because they were not part of the curriculum. For some highly controlling instructors, such attempts at engagement were branded as defiance, and the students who made the attempts as entitled or as making trouble. Institutionally, the university itself sometimes took
advantage of these forms of student engagement without meeting them in kind. This exploitation of earnest student engagement bred frustration and distrust.

5.1.4 What Were Students’ Lived Experiences of Integration?

Although my research questions only addressed the issue of role redefinition and not of integration, integration emerged as another transformative process students underwent because of their engagement in IDEA. Through the provision of autonomy support in IDEA, students underwent a process of integration that permitted them to sort among introjected regulations and choose which to internalize, resolve tensions between different parts of their identities, and reconceptualize what constituted legitimate learning and ways of learning. Students came to integrate their “home” selves and “academic” selves, came to see that play and learning were not at odds with each other but one in the same, and came to understand that anything they were curious about was a legitimate topic of learning. They also became critical of the hard lines differentiating academic disciplines and classes.

One crucial skill that fostered this process of integration was self-reflection, which in IDEA was promoted through reflective discussion, reflection papers, and mindfulness practices. Connell had used the story of Michelangelo carving David and chipping away everything that wasn’t David as a metaphor for integration. In order to sculpt the self, one must first know what constitutes David and non-David, and the way to know this is through the self-reflection that results in self-awareness.

The provision of autonomy support in IDEA had a variety of outcomes that have already been evidenced and predicted in the literature. However, the process of integration had an additional outcome that I am not aware of having been addressed in the literature. This outcome
was participants’ sense that they had become visible; that their unique and authentic contributions mattered. This sense that they mattered as individuals had previously been absent from their educations. I will devote additional attention to the issue of mattering in the next section on the implications for individual practice.

5.2 Implications for Individual Practice

One of the most profound ways in which IDEA offered support to its students in service of the dual processes of integration and role redefinition was through explicit messages to students of “You matter,” “This is for you,” and “You can do this,” backed by implicit versions of these messages, delivered through already identified autonomy-supportive behaviors. If we did nothing more than wholeheartedly believe and communicate these messages to students, explicitly and implicitly and without substantial self-contradiction, our teaching practice would transform.

5.2.1 “You Matter”: Valuing Students’ Uniqueness

The sense that their unique configurations and contributions mattered in IDEA had a profound effect on participants. Crucial to promoting a sense of mattering is the act of seeing and valuing students as whole people, not just in their role as students, and welcoming their other aspects into the classroom, thereby fostering the process of integration. Viewing students as experts in their own selves, interests, and experiences paves the way for radical collegiality. I had suggested earlier that we cannot engage as radical colleagues with those whom we only see as less developed versions of our own selves; students’ self-knowledge, as well as their knowledge from other disciplines and other pursuits, constitutes a contribution in kind to the collegial
relationship. On a practical classroom level, welcoming students’ wholeness can look like taking the time to check in with students about what’s happening in their lives, encouraging self-care, and negotiating and implementing course policies and practices that are friendly towards students’ family, work, health, and extracurricular involvements. In terms of the course content, it can take the forms of connecting the course material with their lived experiences, and encouraging interdisciplinarity. And, finally, these practices are supported through classroom habits such as physical seating arrangements that foreground peers and background the instructor.

At an institutional level, the university that perceives students as just another cog in the machine, to use Abbey’s analogy, is quite different from the university to which students and their authentic and unique contributions matter. If we commit to students by admitting them into our institutions, and then insist that the unique contributions of each student matter, then everything, from our efforts to retain them to how we interact with and evaluate them, must shift. We are obliged to abandon the gatekeeping model of “Look to your left, look to your right; only one of you will still be here at the end” (Hannah-Jones, 2015), as it rests on a core assumption that individual students do not matter, they are utterly interchangeable, and two thirds are even disposable. It also rests on the assumption I pointed out earlier that a hellish university experience constitutes an academically rigorous one. And it is the epitome of contingent regard: “You only matter,” it implies, “if you can succeed on our terms.” If we are to be consistent with the aims of SDT, we have an ethical imperative to, as Maya had said, “make sure everybody’s floating.”
At the end of her narrative, Abbey expressed her ideas about concrete changes that could be made at the institutional level. I would like for her to communicate these to you in her own words:

*I just kind of wish that maybe they’ll implement the things we asked for – more flexibility, more student-led courses, more open learning spaces/unstructured classrooms – in some of the programs, and that’s how they’ll start it. Like, they’ll make the degrees that are possible to get a little bit more varied, so you can customize your learning experience a little bit more.*

5.2.2 **“This Is For You”: Restoring an Internal Locus of Control**

The explicit message “This is for you,” backed by autonomy-supportive practices, had a profound effect on students by moving the locus of control for their educations from external to internal, and was one of the primary ways in which IDEA courses fostered this process of role redefinition. The message “This is for you” is the logical next step of “You matter.” If students matter in their wholeness and uniqueness, then making education be *for them* entails a number of changes, some of which I have already enumerated in the previous section. It means giving meaningful choices as to the product and process of their learning. And it means allowing students to define what outcomes matter most to them, focusing evaluation on growth in areas students themselves identify as challenging and important. This process of identifying students’ valued outcomes goes hand-in-hand with the process of self-reflection, which I will discuss in a subsequent section. And making education *for* students strongly suggests that if we struggle to convince students of the relevance of a particular topic or discipline, we must rethink how we justify it, how we teach it, or perhaps even whether we should include it in the curriculum.
5.2.3  “You Can Do This”: Communicating Competence

As participants discussed in their narratives, the message “You can do this” was frequently communicated in IDEA. In addition to this message, students felt they were being given the tools to succeed: chief among these were “slack,” shared narratives, and self-reflection.

5.2.3.1  Slack

Participants used slack both to describe autonomy and to describe something akin to grace. Here, I use slack in this latter sense. As Connell described,

> . . . you need that time, you need that slack, that cushion, to fall, and then to realize it’s ok to hit the ground and you can get back up.

In many courses I have taken, a poor test score or poor performance on a project in the beginning forecloses on the possibility of successfully completing that course. However, in their IDEA courses, students were given the space to make mistakes, not “get it” for much of the semester or even multiple semesters, or struggle with personal issues, and still succeed at the end as long as they were able to demonstrate their growth and learning. Courses can be structured to give students slack in a variety of ways: through low- or no-stakes tests and assignments, especially in the beginning, that give them opportunities to experiment and calibrate to course expectations; through flexible grading/weighting practices and deadlines; through the ability to improve their performance by addressing formative feedback and resubmitting; or through rewarding the process of self-reflection on their mistakes in addition to the products they produce. Note that slack favors the cultivation of students’ actual competencies, rather than students’ ability to adapt well to the peculiar strictures of academic environments.
5.2.3.2 Shared Narratives

Peers in IDEA played a crucial role in supporting each other in developing competence through shared narratives of working through learning and struggle from people just like them, and thus space should be made in classrooms for talking about difficulties and how they were overcome. However, it is not sufficient simply to make space for such discussion; it is necessary to transform the instructor-student relationship into a relationship between colleagues in which vulnerability can be expressed without fear of reprisal. It is also necessary to transform the relationship among peers into one of mutual responsibility and mentorship, in which students feel a purpose in telling their stories, as Connell did when he told his IDEA class about braving the snowy roads.

The process of role redefinition is, in itself, a substantial way of communicating to students that “You can do this”: Not only can students be responsible for their own learning, but they can also contribute substantially to their peers’ learning by growing the various capabilities (attunement and so on) required for mentoring and leading others. Fostering collegial relationships among peers is crucial to this process, and can be accomplished through prioritizing the peer-to-peer relationship over the instructor-student relationship and facilitating low- and no-stakes reflective discussion and collaboration among peers. The oft-contentious politics of traditional group projects do not foster the same collegiality among peers, nor does the common practice of grading on a curve; care must be taken to avoid these and similar practices that set peers up as competitors and adversaries and thus thwart the creation of a collaborative culture.

It is important for us as educators to recognize that the transformative nature of role redefinition is not simply something that students struggle with. As educators, we may struggle
with the idea of negotiating power and sharing it with our students, until the day that we don’t, and we cannot imagine going back to the way things were before. Sharing our own difficulties with the process and how we overcome them – as we have no doubt been through similar transformations before – offers us the opportunity to model vulnerability and leave our students a thread they can follow through their own difficulties.

5.2.3.3  Self-Reflection

Self-reflection and self-awareness, in ourselves and in our students, are key to the transformative processes of integration and role-redefinition. These are offered up in the SDT literature as pre-requisites to autonomous behavior, since one must know what one’s own values, preferences, and interests are before one can exercise choice. Unfortunately, there is little in the self-determination literature about how to cultivate such skills, apart from engaging in mindfulness practice (Ryan & Brown, 2003). In IDEA, such reflective awareness was promoted through reflective writing and reflective discussion, two practices that can be employed in the classroom. The literature on self-authorship, a concept employed by Baxter-Magolda and originating with Kegan, more closely examines how to cultivate this reflective capacity in undergraduate students (see e.g. Baxter-Magolda & King, 2008).

In his discussion of teacher education, Combs (1978) employs the idea of “self as instrument” that is so prevalent in the fields of humanistic counselling and education and is also a cornerstone of qualitative research methods. What the current study suggests is that this concept of “self as instrument” has a place in how we help students think about themselves as students, regardless of their discipline. We must also consider our own cultivation as self-
instruments: who we are, how our opportunities, goals, and contexts permit us to meet our own needs, and how we can use these to fulfill our own uniqueness as educators.

5.3 Situating Findings in a Broader Context

Throughout my data analysis, I connected my findings with the SDT literature. Many of SDT’s empirical findings were supported by the qualitative content of participants’ narratives. I would like now to take a step back and situate my findings in a broader context, and discuss the implications of these findings for institutional aims and practices.

5.3.1 What the Campus Mental Health Crisis Tells Us

The transition from late adolescence to emerging adulthood is a particularly fraught one, marked as it is by a number of crucial developmental tasks such as identity exploration, moving away from home (in many cases), renegotiating old relationships and creating new ones, and taking on greater responsibility for one’s own life (Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014). One powerful indicator that our institutions are no longer meeting our students’ developmental needs during this transition is the campus mental health crisis in the US and Canada. Students are experiencing dramatic increases in mental health issues such as mood disorders, and campus counselling resources are overwhelmed by the demand (Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013; Prince, 2015). While a variety of societal and structural factors contribute to these increases, I would argue from an SDT perspective that need deprivation and frustration in the new educational context in which students find themselves contribute substantially to students’ psychological ill-being and lack of coping skills and supports. Despite their academic achievement, participants in the current study experienced distress, disengagement, stagnation, and psychological and physical
ill-being at the hands of controlling instructors with whom they lacked a sense of relatedness. They also experienced a lack of relatedness with peers that might have helped buffer against these effects.

5.3.2 The Cognitive Agenda

As Ryan and Powelson (1991) discuss, this lack of relatedness is the result of the cognitive agenda that has been placed at the heart of educational institutions, to the detriment of the affective processes that are so crucial to development and well-being, not to mention more robustly supporting the cognitive development that the cognitive agenda targets in the first place. Participants in the current study certainly did make modest gains in narrow areas of competence, but they learned more deeply and broadly when they were embedded in a context that supported fulfillment of their affective needs, and experienced greater psychological and physical well-being while doing so. Recall that partial internalization of societal values can occur even in the absence of autonomy, but not of relatedness; relatedness is crucial.

Ryan and Powelson liken institutional learning to the production of enriched white bread (i.e. Wonderbread): Take grains naturally rich in a variety of nutriments, strip these nutriments away to retain the bulk, and then artificially add some of these nutriments back, piecemeal. Even researchers such as Conley et al. (2014) who have an understanding of the problem of campus mental health recommend artificially enriching educational settings with modular affective components, such as new student orientations, workshops on stress and coping, and outreach in order to address the problem, rather than weaving care throughout our educational institutions, including recreating caring learning communities like the ones participants described in IDEA.
But to create caring learning communities requires a different type of instructor than the academy typically selects. This focus on the cognitive agenda also results in the hiring of faculty primarily for their cognitive skill – their ability to do and publish research – rather than the interpersonal and affective qualities that are required for autonomy support. As bell hooks wrote in *Teaching to Transgress*, “The vast majority of our professors lacked basic communications skills, they were not self-actualized, and they often used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power” (1994, p. 5). If we wish to promote students’ optimal development, we must begin with prioritizing a different set of attitudes and skills, at least for faculty directly tasked with teaching students.

5.3.3 The Job Training Agenda

The second agenda that the academy imposes upon students is the job training agenda that began to take precedence in the late 1960’s in the US because of its promotion by the newly instated governor of California, Ronald Reagan (Berrett, 2015). Reagan suggested that anything that did not directly result in greater employability was a frivolity unworthy of taxpayer funding. Reading through participant narratives, it is easy to see how these societal notions “introjected” themselves into how participants thought about education before their experiences in IDEA. Participants were often driven to the academy and to particular disciplines by messages from their families and from the broader society that they needed first and foremost to make themselves employable. In doing so, they pursued extrinsic goals such as wealth that negatively impacted their need satisfaction and thus their well-being, learning, and development.

As Berrett (2015) describes, Reagan had become governor during a time of increased campus unrest; a focus on job training may have been one way in which he sought to quell the
criticality of institutions that had prompted the unrest in the first place. In my study, Maya in particular recognized that only certain forms of critical engagement were deemed acceptable; criticality within disciplines was prized, but criticality of the systems and institutions (particularly the corporations?) one was embedded in was frowned upon.

Echoing Reagan’s emphasis on intellectual curiosity as a “luxury,” participants had introjected messages that devalued certain pursuits: the pursuit of play, the pursuit of certain disciplines, the pursuit of hobbies, and the pursuit of “silly” topics of interest, like Sana’s interest in classical mythology. Interestingly, this devaluation is more often applied to disciplines in the humanities (like IDEA, creative writing, and linguistics in the current study), which also seemed to coincide with, on average, greater autonomy support. I would like to offer the idea that this is a primary reason these disciplines are devalued; their focus on making us more fully human, both in topic matter and in generally more autonomy-supportive teaching methods, threatens to subvert societal control.

Before I expand on the topic of what constitutes legitimate learning, I would first like to suggest devaluation as a means of control that I have not yet seen in the SDT literature but that was pervasive in my and my participants’ experiences: the framing of student preferences, concerns, and interests that did not align with external agendas as frivolous, silly, or as fine for hobbies, but not for a career.

5.3.4 The Legitimacy of Learning

One of the repeated findings in the current study is how often learning was deterred, how often certain types of learning were devalued by the academy or deemed illegitimate, and how often, as Sana described, “education” was antithetical to “learning.” If we wish to be truly
supportive of students’ autonomy, then we must consider *everything* they might be interested in to be a legitimate topic of learning, and make reasonable efforts to incorporate these interests. If we wish to foster integration in our students, then we must also alleviate the tensions within the university more generally that prevent integration. The designation of certain activities as extracurricular – outside of the curriculum, such as Sana’s work with the Model UN – prompts educators to treat these activities as problematic diversions, rather than inviting them into the classroom to enrich the curriculum. Recall that exposure to new possibilities was a form of autonomy support that peers in particular offered to other IDEA students.

While there are legitimate reasons to compartmentalize the disciplines and to create a progression of course curricula in which each course builds on prior knowledge, the boundaries between disciplines and courses need to be permeable enough that students can range more freely among their interests and forge connections between them. Here, cultivating interdisciplinarity – which, continuing the theme, we might think of as a radical collegiality with other disciplines – at the undergraduate level or even before, would help students to integrate their many interests and roles and to differentiate themselves as unique individuals with unique contributions to make.

### 5.4 Limitations and Strengths

I had suggested in the introduction to this study that, while criticality and liberation are potentials embedded in SDT, current research and practice within the theory do not live up to these ideals. The purpose of the current study was to examine students’ lived experiences of role redefinition and to propose this as an important, and heretofore unexamined, form of autonomy support for adult students that would follow through on the aims that Ryan and Niemiec set out
(2009). However, the use of qualitative methods in a non-traditional setting with particularly self-reflective participants did serve to, in the words of Fielding and Moss, enrich our imaginations and vocabularies. In particular, participants in the current study offered more metaphorical and narrative ways of talking about the phenomena SDT has described, as well as offering new possibilities for behaviors we might consider investigating as forms of autonomy support.

5.4.1 Radical Collegiality as Methodology

Participant collaborators engaged less in my study than I had hoped. Some participants, balancing a variety of personal roles, may have understandably decided it entailed too much time commitment; this came out in my conversations with them as I worked with them on approval of their narratives and data analysis. In retrospect, I recognize that I failed to provide them adequate structure to undertake a more collegial role. In a more defined and structured program with greater supports for students, such as in Cook-Sather’s work with students as learning partners, a more expansive participant collaborator role may have been easier to enact. In an e-mail, Chelanna relayed this feedback:

*I agree that this endeavour lacked the structure for me to be involved at the level you expected. Perhaps having more than one face-to-face meeting would have helped, though it probably would have been logistically challenging. To apply the terminology of SDT, I definitely was granted the autonomy, but due to lack of experience in this role I didn't feel competent to be a "participant collaborator."
I've never done anything like this before, so I don't know how to do it. I think meeting in person more frequently would have also fostered a sense of*
relatedness. That being said, as someone who was granted autonomy, I realize now that I too could have asked to be involved in a bigger way.

However, conceptualizing participants as participant collaborators or colleagues had the important effect of altering how I approached my work with them and interacted with their narratives, something I found natural given the radical collegiality I had also experienced during my involvement in IDEA.

5.4.2 Student Voice

While Ryan and Niemiec (2009) claim that SDT research has been aligned with student voice, the use of qualitative-interpretive, rather than empirical-analytic, methods in the current study indicates that, while my participants’ voices did not outright challenge SDT’s empirical findings, students have so much more to say than these methods and measures have given them the space to give voice to thus far, and that perhaps we ought to also spend time listening to them as much as possible without forcing them to respond along the lines of our preconceived notions or theoretical constructs. In particular, participants offered a more nuanced and realistic view of agentic engagement as something that they certainly felt empowered to do more of, but also sometimes held back on. As I will now discuss, making real space for participants’ own voices and stories permitted these self-reflective and self-aware participants to emerge as lay experts on their own development.

5.4.3 Self-Reflective Participants as Lay Experts

What became apparent through working with participants’ narratives was that they had intuited a great deal about their own motivation and growth through their experiences of control
and autonomy support and through their tendency towards and skill at self-reflection that IDEA had promoted. Their expressions of self-knowledge confirmed a number of SDT’s findings, but also added a layer; participants spoke about their experiences not in the language of theory, but often in the language of metaphor and story, suggesting an enhanced role for these literary devices in enriching our understanding and communication of the theory to non-theoreticians. Such narratives might also help educators work through what being autonomy supportive might look like. In this sense, participants emerged as valued colleagues, each with unique contributions to make to SDT, rather than simply as interchangeable cogs in the research wheel.

5.5 Directions for Future Research

The current study proposed role redefinition as an important form of autonomy support for students and did find ample evidence of this phenomenon in participants’ narratives. I outlined some of the ways in which instructors can foster role redefinition, as well as some of the challenges students who have redefined their roles face when they encounter instructors who are more controlling. I also identified integration as a parallel transformative process, as predicted by SDT. However, the current study was just a preliminary investigation into these phenomena in a naturalistic setting. Having identified that they occur, and some ways in which they are fostered, we ought now more closely examine the phenomenological experience of such transformations, identify what the crucial ingredients are for fostering these two different types of transformation, and explore what strategies students subsequently use to cope in settings that are more controlling and their relative success. I would now like to offer a number of concrete recommendations for how we conduct research and assess outcomes.
5.5.1 Other Literatures

A great deal of research has forged connections between SDT and other empirically based theories and constructs. However, despite Ryan and Niemiec’s (2009) invocation of critical theory and student voice, apart from the current study I am not aware of any earnest attempts to forge a connection between SDT and these literatures; indeed, they are not cited in the article. If we are to make the claim that SDT has the potential to be critical and liberatory, we need to ground ourselves solidly in those traditions before we can credibly assert that we are indeed aligned with them.

There is a rich landscape of literature that could provide philosophical gestalts that inform how we think about SDT from a critical perspective. To build the argument that forms the basis of the current study, I had consulted Cook-Sather’s work on students as learning partners, Fielding’s work on radical collegiality, and Levin’s work on democratic education. There are many others. In my discussion on self-reflection, I had mentioned Baxter-Magolda’s work on self-authorship. Kegan describes self-authorship as an “ideology, an internal identity. . . that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states. It is no longer authored by them, it authors them and thereby achieves a personal authority” (1994, p. 185). While I did not incorporate Baxter-Magolda’s work in my review or analysis because I was working from an SDT framework, she came to similar conclusions in her work on learning partnerships. According to her, learning partners cultivate others’ capacity for self-authorship in six ways:

• Respecting their thoughts and feelings, thus affirming the value of their voices,
• Helping them view their experiences as opportunities for learning and growth, and

• Collaborating with them to analyze their own problems, engaging in mutual learning with them. . .

As well as

• Drawing participants’ attention to the complexity of their work and life decisions, and discouraging simplistic solutions,

• Encouraging participants to develop their personal authority by listening to their own voices in determining how to live their lives, and

• Encouraging participants to share authority and expertise, and work interdependently with others to solve mutual problems. (Baxter-Magolda, 2009, p. 3)

Thus, the cultivation of self-authorship appears to have much in common with the assertions made by previous SDT research and the findings of the current study, and so a closer examination of these two frameworks together may also yield fruitful new avenues of research.

5.5.2 Research in Non-Traditional Settings

I hope that situating the current study in the context of the non-traditional setting of IDEA courses has brought out the value of conducting more research in SDT as “critical case studies of possibility, opportunities to enrich our imagination and vocabulary. . .” (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p.16). Xavier University in New Orleans, which I will discuss in a moment in
relation to the role of peers (see also Hannah-Jones, 2015), is a case that exemplifies the sorts of blind spots we encounter when we repeatedly conduct research in mainstream (predominantly white) institutions and assume our incremental innovations in those settings offer something vital to us and to those in other communities. The reality is that we are the ones who have much to learn. Paraphrasing Xavier’s past president, Norman Francis, Hannah-Jones writes that “American schools have not absorbed the lessons that historically black colleges have to teach about how to better develop and support talented students stifled in poor communities across the land.” I would argue that we have wholesale neglected the attitudes, ideologies, and methods that the black educational and academic communities, and other marginalized communities, have used to best support their members and foster their growth, development, and liberation under oppressive circumstances. We have been looking in all the wrong places. If we wish to know how SDT can support critical engagement and liberation, the best people to ask are those embedded in learning communities that have been actively engaged in that work for centuries.

As bell hooks wrote (1994, p. 7), hearkening back to her earlier experiences being taught by black women educators in predominantly black schools,

Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process. To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress. Not only did it require movement beyond accepted boundaries, but excitement could not be generated without a full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for
spontaneous shifts in direction. Students had to be seen in their particularity as individuals. . . and interacted with according to their needs. . .

What these settings seem to offer is an ethos that naturally supports relatedness, autonomy, and the sorts of affective engagement that are so crucial to quality learning. We would do well to learn from and emulate them.

5.5.3 Rethinking the Role of Peers

One thing Xavier University did to address the shrinking numbers of black doctors in the 1970’s was to address students’ – particularly low-income students’ – poor preparation through high school by enlisting the help of better-prepared students to catch their peers up and creating a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility for success among peers and faculty so profound that one researcher at another institution characterized it as “dumbfounding” (Hannah-Jones, 2015). This has echoes of Maya’s characterization of IDEA: “You’re being set up to succeed. It’s not sink or swim. It’s like, we’re gonna make sure everybody’s floating.” And with their assumption that not all entering students would be equally prepared, and some would require more time and attention to catch up than others, they also provided the slack and cushion that Connell described as being so crucial in IDEA.

Taken together, my participants’ experiences of supporting and being supported by their peers in IDEA and the collaborative culture of Xavier University highlight the role that peers could play in each others’ learning, development, and growth, if only we would permit and encourage this. In the predominant model, peer relatedness is relegated to extracurriculars and dorm life, setting up a tension between peer relatedness and instructor relatedness that peer relatedness often wins, to the detriment of students’ well-being and academic achievement.
(Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall & Abel, 2013). If we are truly interested in criticality and liberation, then we must challenge the predominant model and offer up a better one. In the model of peer as radical colleague, everyone is on the same team: promoting student well-being, growth, and development. And in this regard, each peer has a unique and valuable role to play, as well as a host of competencies to develop. Future research can more fully explore and elaborate how we create the conditions under which peers can take up this role.

5.5.4 Qualitative Research

In their 2009 article that forms the impetus for the current study, Ryan and Niemiec characterize and critique qualitative approaches as resistant to generalizations and assert that “At best... what a qualitative researcher can hope for is to deeply interpret one’s own situated viewpoint” (2009, p. 267). This is an extreme view of qualitative research and I would like to challenge that. As Stake writes, “Quantitative researchers regularly treat uniqueness of cases as ‘error,’ outside the system of explained science. Qualitative researchers treat the uniqueness of individual cases and contexts as important to understanding” (1995, p. 39).

While Ryan and Niemiec argue the case for empirical investigation in SDT because of its ability to produce generalizations based on a common nature, I hoped to use a qualitative approach for particularization in a couple different ways. First, my approach demonstrated where the generalizations asserted by SDT required qualification. For example, although agentic engagement has been treated in the literature as unproblematic, the use of qualitative methods in the current study uncovered some of the nuances of participants’ agentic engagement: specifically, that their willingness to engage agentically with their instructors interacted not only with their autonomy orientations, but with their perceptions of the situation, their sense of
responsibility to others, and their own histories. Instructors’ reactions to students’ agentic engagement also varied, intertwined as it was with their own sense of effectance at providing autonomy support.

Second, where SDT research has typically been conducted in traditional academic settings, I felt the aims of SDT research, in particular Ryan and Niemiec’s stated interest in criticality and liberation, would be well-served by examining an “edge case,” in which it was clear to me that autonomy support was being robustly practiced, and other things were also happening that hadn’t yet been described or predicted by SDT. If we continue to engage in research in non-traditional settings, as I suggest, the most appropriate approach for this exploration is a qualitative one. Rather than disintegrating into the sophisticated navel-gazing Ryan and Niemiec assert, the use of qualitative approaches largely served to bolster SDT’s empirically-based generalizations by triangulating them, as well as by showing how its moving parts worked together, over time.

5.5.5 Reassessing Outcomes

A great deal of SDT research employs academic achievement as one of its positive outcomes for SDT-based interventions. Low achievement does seem to be a reliable indicator that something is wrong, but the experiences of participants in the current study indicate that high achievement is not necessarily an indicator things are right. Additionally, academic achievement would seem, in many cases, to fall along the lines of an extrinsic goal, since it is frequently used as an external indicator of worth. As such, there is a conflict between the types of goals SDT promotes as offering greater opportunities for need satisfaction and well-being, and the outcomes it measures. I propose that, although it may be advantageous to retain academic
achievement as an outcome from a promotional aspect, that we do so with caveats, and indicate a preference for intrinsic outcomes.

5.5.6 Challenging the Primacy of the Researcher

Finally, in proposing that I wished to work with participants as colleagues and collaborators, I implicitly challenged the primacy of the researcher in SDT. Our participants, particularly those who have received abundant autonomy support and who have learned to be particularly self-reflective, bring their own expertise through their lived experiences. It is important to remember that our purpose as researchers is ultimately to support, through the data and interpretations and platforms we provide, the growth and development of those we do research with (not “on”), those we engage with in teaching and learning, work with in organizations, partner with to foster positive physical and mental health outcomes, or engage with as parents and mentors. As such, we must always ask ourselves whether we, through our research, are empowering them to express their own voices and ideas, or simply imposing our own agendas upon them. While there are very good reasons to conduct empirical research, we ought always be forthright about its limitations, particularly the ways in which it fails to, as Fielding wrote, bear the weight of our liberatory aspirations.

I hope that SDT researchers will continue to engage with theoretical frameworks, methods, and methodologies that are inherently better suited to carry that weight. Given the potential for participants to make unique contributions to our understanding of SDT, I would like to see us engage more with participants as collaborators in the spirit of radical collegiality. What that collaboration might look like is a matter that should be jointly negotiated between researchers and participants/teachers and students. The literature on learning partnerships offered
the preliminary guidance I employed in the current study. However, this type of collaborative relationship is the province of participatory action research (PAR), and researchers interested in pursuing more collegial relationships with participants would do well to consult that body of literature. And as Chelanna noted in her feedback on the process of engaging as a participant collaborator, SDT principles themselves offer a guiding framework for such collaboration: participant collaborators need not only autonomy, but a sense of relatedness with researchers and adequate structure in which to feel capable.

5.6 Conclusion

In a very real sense, what I have undertaken in this thesis is an act of agentic engagement: a plea for space in SDT for qualitative-interpretive approaches, and not just empirical-analytic ones, and a plea for others to claim that space with me. Through modelling my own navigation between these two approaches, I hope to provoke a radical collegiality between researchers in both traditions, one that acknowledges the contribution in kind of each range of approaches and the unique qualities of the researchers in each. When I first learned of SDT, I found that it had profound explanatory power for not only my IDEA experiences, but for a variety of phenomena. I was not troubled by its empirical-analytic nature; I was grateful that others were willing to engage in that type of research when I wasn’t. And this is a crucial point that is missed when we argue that there is one best way, whether that is in our research or our schools: we close off possibilities for others to act autonomously out of their interests, values, and histories, and thereby lose the unique contributions they could make to their respective fields.

I would also challenge researchers to follow through on the critical and liberatory potentials embedded in SDT and take more of an advocacy approach. We should not only
continue to hone the theory, but engage agentically with policymakers and administrators to change the systems we are embedded in and push for solutions that offer greater opportunities for need satisfaction. Again, participatory action research can inform our practice in this regard.
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Appendix A: Interview prompts

The following prompts are intended only as an interview guide. Participants will be encouraged to lead the conversation; I may use the prompts in a different order, omit or modify prompts based on participant responses, or follow up with requests to expand on a particular topic: “Could you talk more about. . .?”

Before IDEA

Could you give me a little background information about yourself?

Could you tell me about your educational experiences up until the point at which you started taking IDEA courses?

1. How would you characterize yourself as a student during this time?

2. How would you characterize your relationships with your teachers and peers during this time?

IDEA

Tell me about IDEA.

1. How did you come to take your first IDEA course?

2. What struck you about IDEA compared to the other courses you’d taken?

3. What prompted you to take more than one IDEA course? What brought you back for more?

4. How would you characterize your relationships with your instructors and peers in IDEA?

5. Could you tell me the story behind the object you brought?
6. What changed for you during IDEA, and how did taking these courses help this transformation to come about?

7. Was this transformation easy or hard for you?

8. What about your peers in IDEA? What sort of transformations might they have undergone?

**During/After IDEA**

What was going on in your other courses during and after the time you were part of IDEA?

1. How would you characterize your relationships with your teachers and peers outside of IDEA? What, if anything, changed?

2. Did you ever feel like there was a mismatch between what happened in IDEA and your other courses? How did you handle that? How did they (instructors and peers)?

**Wrap Up**

Is there anything else you’d like for me to know about the things we’ve talked about?

Do you have any course reflections that bear on the things we’ve talked about and that you would like to provide?
Appendix B: Recruitment Ad

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

My name is Tierney Wisniewski and I am currently doing my MA in Human Development, Learning, and Culture (HDLC) at the University of British Columbia. When I was an undergrad at Kwantlen, I took a number of Interdisciplinary Expressive Arts (IDEA) courses – some before they were even labelled as such – and later became curious about how taking IDEA courses transformed me (and my peers) as students and how that affected how we engaged with our education and how others engaged with us. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study, “Role Redefinition as Autonomy Support: A Narrative Inquiry,” which has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at UBC. Dr. Jennifer Shapka is the Principal Investigator and Dr. Nancy Perry is our Co-Investigator.

I have asked [key informant – to be named in the e-mail sent to students] to forward this information to students and alumni age 19 and older who have taken multiple IDEA courses and whose experiences might help illuminate this topic. My aim is to help researchers and practitioners better understand how to support the continued growth of adult learners.
In the interests of what Michael Fielding refers to as radical collegiality, I would like to invite you to be involved as much as you would like to in the research process as a whole. At minimum, I will ask you to participate in a face-to-face (audio recorded) interview of up to 2 hours in length at a time and location that is convenient for you. If practical, I would like for you to bring and talk about an artefact that represents the transformation in question. After the interview is transcribed and lightly edited into narrative form, I will ask you to review the narrative for fidelity to your voice and experiences. If you are interested, I would also, throughout the analysis and writing process, like to ask your ongoing input and feedback to ensure that I have accurately captured your voice and experiences and drawn appropriate conclusions. For those participants who are willing to use their real names, I would like to offer the opportunity to co-author publications derived from this work.

Your participation in this study will be confidential, and you will have the option of using a pseudonym and redacting identifying information. Because I am selecting participants from a relatively small pool, I cannot mitigate the risk of deductive disclosure – the ability of others who know you, including instructors, fellow participants, and other peers, to guess your identity through the details of your narrative. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without consequence, at which point you have the right to decide whether you will permit me to use the information you have already provided.

If you are interested in participating, or have further questions, you are welcome to contact me by e-mail at tierney.wisniewski@alumni.ubc.ca.
Thank you for considering participating.

Tierney Wisniewski
Title of Study: Role Redefinition as Autonomy Support: A Narrative Inquiry

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Shapka, University of British Columbia
Co-Investigator: Dr. Nancy E. Perry, University of British Columbia
Researcher: Tierney Wisniewski (MA Candidate), University of British Columbia.

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
You are invited to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as having taken multiple IDEA courses at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. This study is the project of Tierney Wisniewski, a Masters student at UBC. She will be supervised by Dr. Jennifer Shapka at UBC.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?
This study is being done to understand the experiences of IDEA students in redefining their roles as students and how that affected how they engage with their education. This study may help researchers and practitioners better understand how to support the continued growth of adult learners.

WHAT AM I BEING ASKED TO DO?
You will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview of up to 2 hours in length at a time and location that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio recorded. After the interview is transcribed and lightly edited, to ensure accuracy, you will be provided the resultant narrative for your review and feedback (estimated 1 hour). If you are interested, I would also welcome your input and feedback during the analysis and writing process to ensure that I have accurately captured your voice and experiences and drawn appropriate conclusions (estimated 4 or more hours). Participants who choose to collaborate in this manner are advised to complete the CORE (Council on Research Ethics) tutorial (TCPS2) if they have not already done so. The tutorial takes on average 3 hours to complete.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS?
You will be asked questions about your experiences in IDEA, as well as your experiences in your education more generally. The questions are not expected to cause you discomfort, but if
they do, you are not required to discuss anything that you do not wish to discuss, and you do not have to answer a question if you prefer not to answer it.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS?
There is no direct benefit to participating in this study. Participating provides an opportunity to reflect upon your learning experiences. And, because most motivation research is quantitative, this study provides the opportunity for you to contribute much-needed student voice to the literature. The information which comes from this study may help researchers and practitioners better understand how to support the continued growth of adult learners. Optionally, your ongoing participation presents an opportunity to learn more about the research process itself. For those participants who are willing to use their real names, I would like to offer the opportunity to co-author publications derived from this work. Regardless of your level of participation, you will be offered a copy of this study when it is complete.

WILL I BE PAID TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?
You will not be paid to participate in this study.

WILL THERE BE ANY COSTS TO ME IN THIS STUDY?
No, there are no costs associated with your participation in this study.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY PERSONAL INFORMATION?
All identifying information and interview transcripts will remain confidential. Demographic information such as your name and age will be kept separate from any interview information which will be identified only with a study number. The thesis supervisor and thesis committee will have access to final narratives but will not be privy to your identity unless you choose to use your real name. Data files such as audio recordings and unedited transcripts will be encrypted and securely stored on servers at the University of British Columbia. Print copies will be stored in locked file cabinets in the Principal Investigator’s office. All data will be destroyed after 10 years.

Transcripts of interviews will be edited into a final narrative from which identifying information has been removed (per your instructions below). You will be given the opportunity to amend and approve the final narrative. With your permission, your final narrative will be shared with participant collaborators in its entirety. Otherwise, only excerpts, descriptions, and analysis of the narratives will be shared with anyone outside of the thesis committee.

CAN PARTICIPATION END EARLY?
You may withdraw from this study at any time, at which point you have the right to decide whether you will give permission to use the information you have already provided. You may decline to answer interview questions, and may stop the interview at any time. Rather than assuming consent after forms have been collected, I will negotiate consent with you on an ongoing basis.

IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY, WHO SHOULD I CONTACT?
If you would like to participate or you have questions about this study, please contact Tierney Wisniewski at tierney.wisniewski@alumni.ubc.ca or [phone number], or Dr. Jennifer Shapka at jennifer.shapka@ubc.ca or 604-822-5253.
IF I HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT MY RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT, WHO SHOULD I CONTACT?

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

It is our goal and responsibility to use the information that you have shared responsibly. We would like to give you the opportunity to provide us with additional feedback on how you prefer to have your data handled. You will have an opportunity to revisit this issue when you review and approve your final narrative. Please check one of the following statements:

___ You may share the information just as I provided it. No details need to be changed and you may use my real name when using my data in publications or presentations.

___ You may share the information just as I provided it; however, please do not use my real name. I realize that others might identify me based on the data, even though my name will not be used.

___ You may share the information I provided; however, please do not use my real name and please change details that might make me identifiable to others. In particular, it is my wish that the following specific pieces of my data not be shared without first altering the data so as to make me unidentifiable (describe this data in the space below):

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

___ You may share my final narrative in its entirety with participant collaborators.

YOUR ONGOING PARTICIPATION

___ I am interested in providing feedback and input during the data analysis and writing phases. The best way to reach me is (provide phone number or email):

______________________________________________________________________________

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.