

“GUERILLA” CONVERSATIONS: THE ROLE OF INFORMAL PEER  
COLLABORATION ON MA RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION  
STUDENTS’ LEARNING AND DISCIPLINARY IDENTITY

by

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all those within my “relationship constellation” with whom I laughed, ate, drank, bitched, and bored to tears about my thesis project. I toast you all: the husband who cleans floors and keeps me in wine; the children who provide emotional support and welcome diversions with a stream of constant text-messaging; the siblings who inspire and love me; and the invaluable care and support of my thesis committee, Becky, Deb, and Eric whom I consider friends. And to the participants of my research project, my cohort, who never realized how much I look up to them for the insight they brought to conversations we had, the energy and vitality with which they approached learning, their generosity to me through the journey—I miss you already.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                   | <b>Page</b> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....                                            | v           |
| ABSTRACT .....                                                    | viii        |
| CHAPTER                                                           |             |
| I. INTRODUCTION .....                                             | 1           |
| Getting My Research Started .....                                 | 10          |
| II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....                                       | 15          |
| Making the Transition into Graduate School .....                  | 16          |
| Distances: Complicating Factors to Early Connections .....        | 19          |
| Beyond Connection: Insight into Meaningful Peer Communities ..... | 20          |
| The Role of Mentoring in Program Acculturation .....              | 24          |
| Peer-Led Learning Groups for the Long-Term .....                  | 26          |
| The Need to Talk and a Place to Practice .....                    | 29          |
| Conclusion .....                                                  | 34          |
| III. METHODS .....                                                | 40          |
| Methodology .....                                                 | 40          |
| Theoretical Framework .....                                       | 41          |
| Methods .....                                                     | 44          |
| IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS .....                                | 55          |
| Anxiety in the Shadows: The Motivations to Collaborate .....      | 60          |

|                                                                                                                  |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Informal Conversations: The Ties That Bind Community,<br>Eases Anxiety, and Develops Disciplinary Identity ..... | 63 |
| Informal Learning and the “Guerilla” Conversations of Mankind .....                                              | 67 |
| “Learning Territories” Are Out-of-Site.....                                                                      | 71 |
| Answers Emerge While Questions Remain: The Incomplete<br>Puzzle of Two Case Studies .....                        | 73 |
| Conclusion .....                                                                                                 | 79 |
| V. SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS: WHERE DO WE<br>GO FROM HERE .....                                              | 82 |
| Relevance to Current Conversations .....                                                                         | 83 |
| Implications for Program Directors .....                                                                         | 85 |
| Implications for Furthur Research .....                                                                          | 89 |
| Final Thoughts.....                                                                                              | 90 |
| APPENDIX SECTION .....                                                                                           | 91 |
| LITERATURE CITED .....                                                                                           | 93 |

## ABSTRACT

When I entered the Masters of Art in Rhetoric and Composition (MARC) program at Texas State University (TXU) in the fall of 2015 I had an idea that it would, in a yet undefined way, be more difficult than my undergraduate experiences had been. The large, dense, and at times abstract reading assignments, the unarticulated expectations from the faculty, coupled with my fears of sounding stupid in class discussions fell under the big question, how do I *do* graduate school? Instinctively I sought out my peers through study groups, grabbed them before and after classes, met them for coffee, even family and friends to talk about all the aspects of the program. These casual conversations provided me with much needed intellectual and emotional support through the acculturation process to the new world of graduate school. Based on my own experience, I wanted to understand how others in the program experienced the transition and if they, too, found these informal discussions helpful. Therefore, I designed my research project around this question, How, if at all, does informal peer collaboration support MARC program students?

In order to answer this question, I designed a case study of five MARC students on the premise that the potential of informal peer collaboration was rich with possible benefits: that students grapple individually with new ideas, then reach out to others who also grapple, and discussing these ideas—in locations outside of the earshot of the professors—to gain a better understanding. My analysis of the findings showed that the “guerilla” conversations they frequently had together helped them to learn and develop disciplinary identity—and

that it was through these repeated casual conversations that several reported surprising learning moments.

As there is much research regarding the benefit of peer collaboration as support to graduate students, there is little focus on MA students nor on peer collaboration in its most informal practices. My research provides this perspective, contributes to the larger conversation regarding how students learn and develop disciplinary identity, and provides important insight for program directors as they design programs with student support in mind.

## I. INTRODUCTION

When I entered the Masters of Art in Rhetoric and Composition (MARC) Program at Texas State University (TSU) in the fall of 2015 I had the idea that it would, in a yet undefined way, be more difficult than my undergraduate experiences had been. The ways in which this proved to be true surprised me. I anticipated working hard to meet expectations of better writing, higher ability to think critically, to comprehend theory, and to enter class discussions in a way that was “academic.” As my cohorts and I soon learned, whatever other expectations there were remained unarticulated by the faculty from whom we sought acceptance and validation and to whom we looked for a sign that affirmed our membership in the program. What was clear, however, were the large, dense, and at times abstract reading assignments, as well as weekly responses—a dialogue in on-line forums to which we were expected to write and respond to the readings and each other. Two results of this challenging routine were immediately apparent to me. One, I often held thoughts, ideas, or confusions inside until I returned to the formal, scheduled class time which met once a week. Two, the reading load permitted little time and opportunity for me to establish connection with my peers. I consistently wondered whether I was understanding the material, entering the “conversation” correctly, contributing to meaningful discussions in class, meeting the professor’s expectations, and most disturbingly, whether I had made the right decision to enter the program.

Some relief from my anxiety came early in the first semester when I received an e-mail inviting me to an informal (outside of our formal classroom setting) peer study group for one of my core courses in which we could discuss the readings and assignments and work together to learn the subject. Unbeknownst to my cohort and me, we were enacting the peer-collaboration theory that Kenneth Bruffee introduced in his article, “Collaborative

Learning and the “Conversations of Mankind,”” to teachers in the rhetoric and composition field that argued for the benefits of this scenario: a social context from which students learn from peers working together (638). In our first meeting, however, there was a level of discomfort and tension in the air at first that prohibited a relaxed attitude that I believe is necessary for the context to be deemed *social*. I know that I for one wanted to be perceived as a serious graduate student, confident and knowledgeable, yet I felt hopelessly lost in the new experience of grad school and needed the reassurance of my peers. I assumed others were feeling similarly as evidenced by the large crowd that was in attendance. I recognized the signs of their intention to ensure connection to others, too, from the sight of backpacks strewn and unloaded, textbook opened, notebook and pens at the ready, and my peers leaning forward in their chairs. We were all attempting to make sense of and correctly perform how to *DO* graduate school. Everyone came prepared to discuss the readings: to hammer out the meanings and purpose of theory; connect them by theme, theory, or context; and to apply them to current scholarship and assignments. At least, this was the ethos we intended to present to one another—our idea of “scholar.”

But the cracks in this façade became quickly evident. Although the major purpose for the gathering was certainly to understand and clarify the difficult readings, what we also needed was a place to talk it all through without the pressure of sounding authentically academic. Within a couple of weeks, we embraced sounding authentically confused instead as we tried to interpret our professors’ behaviors and comments during class discussions: “I think the professor hates my comments.” “What makes you say that?” “He/she leans back in their chair when I start to talk.” “What do you think that means?” “Yeah, what about when he/she leans forward and crosses his/her feet?” “Or when he/she just replies ‘ok.’” “I have a hard time keeping up with the reading responses. Do you think he/she even looks at

them?” “Anybody know if he/she’s a hard grader?” “No idea.” “I just got my first assignment back. I’ve never seen so many comments in my life. It must have been a horrible paper.” The sound of a long sigh and a small shudder signaled our dismay. Although these kinds of conversations didn’t seem to us to be particularly academic, they allowed us to talk about what we were all thinking and worrying about, and by so doing, we quickly established our social context as a comfortable, safe space to express our thoughts and ideas which strengthened our bond as a community of peers. Little did we know that Bruffee’s theory of peer-collaboration emphasized the value of these kinds of conversations. He explains that “the first steps to learning to think better, therefore, are learning to converse better and learning to establish and maintain the sorts of social context, the sorts of community life, that foster the sorts of conversation members of the community value” (642). Now, at the end of my second year of graduate school, I can identify with Bruffee’s argument on this point. I needed to belong to a group where I could be myself, but that also challenged me, pushing the level of informal conversations high enough to contribute to my development as a successful graduate student. At the time, my idea of a successful student, though vague, included learning to think, speak, and write like a rhetoric and composition scholar. I knew intuitively that I needed to delve deep into the foundational texts in the field, mull them over, and discuss them—in order to learn it. To this end, I needed my peers. Although there were still unresolved anxieties that I had to contend with, the study group provided that first sense of belonging that brought me much needed relief.

One of the biggest markers to student success in my mind, and therefore a huge contributor to my anxiety, was grades. It was good grades that propelled me into a graduate program; it was insightful, well-written essays and research projects (that earned those good grades) which inspired my professors at St. Edward’s University (SEU) to write letters of

recommendation for me; it was my writing samples that I presented to the admissions committee that demonstrated my potential as a scholar in the field of rhetoric and composition and verified my suitability to the program. So, it is natural that once I got accepted into the master's program (YAY!) I needed to produce work which met the professors' expectations and that of the program (*uh oh*). In the MARC program, the weekly reading-response assignments weren't graded individually but as a whole at the end of the semester, there weren't 4-5 essays per semester that were graded, the writing projects weren't separated into outlines that were graded, rough drafts that were graded, revisions or reflections that were graded. In other words, I couldn't keep an obsessive eye on my grades because professors in the MARC program didn't necessarily measure "success" in this arbitrary way. I don't think I'm alone in this obsession. Concerns over measuring up to the high standard of graduate school writing was one of the greatest common denominators that drew my cohort and me together and unified us regardless of our different personalities, educational background, goals, or personal value systems. We discussed how the feedback from professors was inconsistent; some gave great feedback, others nothing, and still others good feedback, but only sometimes. Some assignments were not explicitly outlined, while others were. The inconsistency and lack of explicit direction especially during first semester placed me in a strange, paradoxical head space: I was insecure and unsure which paralyzed me, while the ever-closing-in deadlines urgently compelled me to act. I felt like I had been thrown into the deep end of a huge pool and told to swim for it, fast, but I couldn't figure out the direction I needed to go, so I just treaded water. Perhaps this is just my perspective.

Undoubtedly there were individual factors that others in the cohort attributed to their level of anxiety; I was only familiar at the time with what lay behind mine. I know that for me, having the opportunity to talk with the peer study group before class helped me to

navigate the foreign terrain of the culture of our program and to gain my equilibrium. As I began to think about how fortunate I was to connect early with that one group and how my relationships developed from there, I began to notice others ways in which I connected with people inside the program. For example, I spoke to my professors privately about projects, and I caught up with my peers before or after class in the hallway. It was so natural to reach out to my cohort via e-mail to ask questions or talk about assignments as they came up that I don't even remember when it started. Also, in my second semester, I began working in the TSU Writing Center as a peer tutor. This position gave me another point of access to conversations with one of my cohort, a young woman who worked as the coordinator there. It became my habit to drop into a chair at her desk to brain storm ideas for seminar papers, to talk about her future academic plans, to gripe about deadlines—or just to eat lunch.

Working at the writing center also gave me opportunity to discuss my program with people outside of the MARC program. I worked with peer tutors from across the disciplines at our university and was always interested to learn about their writing and research projects, preparation for workshops and presentations, and all things academic and I shared mine as well. It wasn't uncommon to be met with a befuddled look, though, when I said I was in the MARC program. First, I explain it's an English degree, the common response being, "oh, like Shakespeare." "Well, no, that's a literature degree. I study rhetoric and composition." The general understanding for most people of the term *rhetoric* is in the context of politics, as in *mere* rhetoric—the kind of rhetoric that is associated with politicians who blur the line between honesty and lying in order to persuade an audience to their way of thinking to get their vote. But as we in the MARC program learn, rhetoric is so much more than that. It was fun and challenging to explain in peer-tutor terms what the study of rhetoric means to the writing assignments that they looked at every day, how the teachers' prompts (aka, purpose)

for writing projects directed the student writers to persuade, argue, inform, explore, or entertain—with an ever-focused eye on the audience, and how this informed the writer’s use of ethos, pathos, and logos. And because the writing center tutors were trained to develop writers, encouraging them to think about their writing and not just the end product, my fellow peer-tutors and I also had interesting discussions about the importance of the writing process, for example, and how the students had an inflexible and unrealistic model that was a carry-over from middle and high school. I took this opportunity to review the topics I was learning from a core course in our program, Composition Pedagogy, such as the need for time to brain-storm and research, to experiment with multiple kinds of outlines, plan for revisions, and how tutors perform the role of audience—so often a foreign idea to student writers. Retelling what I was learning with the other tutors helped me to clarify the knowledge I was making in class and with my cohort.

One of the more challenging groups outside of the program that I talk with about what I do in the MARC program is with my family, especially my husband. While the kids are really only superficially interested in what rhetoric and composition involves they are content with answers like “it’s an English degree,” or “this is what you study to be an English professor.” I want to talk about it more deeply with them, but as the rhetoric specialist I am becoming, I know my audience so I leave it alone at that. My sisters have a bit more interest in learning about my program; two are directly familiar with the arduous nature of the grad school journey as they have master’s degrees (one is currently a PhD candidate), one has been teaching 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders for fifteen years, and the other is “just so proud” of me. To them I can indulge my excitement about my program for a bit longer before they glaze over. But they, too, have a limited understanding of rhetoric, so I boil it down to purpose and audience with a dash of invention. Sometimes I describe it in visual rhetoric

terms for my artist sister using the choices she made in her work (color, texture, shape, medium) to evoke an image or feeling or message as examples, and draw connections to music (as story-telling, emotion-evoking, pride-instilling, or inspirational) for the musicologist. Or I even use gardening, or cooking to show that why you're cooking a special dinner (purpose/occasion), and who you're cooking for (audience) determines what you put on your grocery list, how you present the food, and what wine you'll serve (invention). They smile and nod their heads in mild amazement and I feel pretty clever.

My husband, however, is a different story. He lives the journey with me in the day-to-day watching me go off to school, my tote bag laden with folders and books and the usual pre-occupied look on my face, and when I come home late he listens to my ideas about research interests or ah-ha moments I had in class, one sleepy eye on me, one sleepy eye on the television. He loves me, he's proud of me, he brags to everyone that I'm in graduate school, patient with my melt-downs, celebrates my moments of ecstasy, keeps me in wine, good food, and manicures, and insists on a weekly date night to counter-balance my intensity. But for the love of Pete, he can't quite grasp rhetoric. For this man, an out-side sales rep for 30+ years, I take the familiar-to-him genres of his trade like email, sales calls, sales presentations, thank-you notes, everything I can think of to describe the everywhere-ness of rhetoric that are especially vivid in the examples of his profession. I prompt him with questions like, how do you prepare for a sales call with the director at St. David's, or Tomball Regional, or M D Anderson? Do you approach them differently? Do you adopt a different attitude, professional with one, a good-ol-boy with another? How about what you plan to say, what's your strategy to emphasize the benefits of buying from your company? See how you invent your strategy using different tactics and pitches to persuade your client? But the fog never quite lifts long enough for the light to fully come on, and the poor guy

continues to ask me, “now when my softball guys (golf buddies, Bible study pals, work people) ask me what you do, what do I say?” Deep sigh, short pause... “Tell them I’m going to teach English.”

As I reflected on my experiences in the MARC program, the early anxieties, developing relationships, my struggle to learn, it led me to consider how the wide circle of friends, relatives, neighbors, cohorts, and academics provided a network of multi-layered support for me. The extent of the support I recognize, including that beyond the obviously academic, i.e. mentor, faculty, organized peer study groups, workshops, etc., may seem antithetical to academic contexts at first. Yet, Monica Higgins and Kathy Kram’s developmental network theory (2001), a perspective they define as the “set of people a protégé names as taking an active interest in and action to advance the protégé’s career by providing developmental assistance,” supports my opinion (qtd. in Baker 811). The purpose of the broad definition as a “set of people” was to expand on Kram’s earlier concept (1985) of “relationship constellations,” which she described as anyone providing support to an individual, including “members from within the organizational context...and friends and family from outside of the organizational context” (qtd. in Baker 811). The developmental network theory, therefore, reflects precisely who I recognize as part of my network which provides me with different kinds of support. For example, when I talk with those inside my program about our shared interest in rhetoric and composition, what we are learning and struggling with, how we are still excited to recognize new ways that rhetoric is prevalent in everyday life, and what might lay ahead in our academic and professional careers, I’m encouraged and inspired because I know I belong to this unique group. When I talk with people outside the MARC program and attempt to describe what I do and learn as a

graduate student in creative ways they can understand, it not only solidifies what I've learned, but also deepens my understanding of who I've become in the process.

Gradually, it struck me that all of the above occurred in community. In fact, according to Bruffee, it was made possible because of community, a “community of knowledgeable peers” (404). I really had to give this some thought because much of what I did in graduate school felt like *my work*. I read, researched, and wrote alone. Or did I? How far should I take the peer-collaboration idea? How much thinking and talking came after the readings, the research, and outlines for seminar papers in and outside of class, during the study group and peer-to-peer, in conferences with my professors, before writing was produced? And what about when a particular theory was explained to me or I learned a new concept from a cohort or borrow an experienced teacher's lesson plan, am I cheating in a way? Eventually, I traced this tendency to doubt the contribution of informal peer-collaboration to my primary and secondary education that only valued individuality in terms of do my own work, do my own thinking, do my own writing in the limits of classroom. Despite the scholarship to the contrary in the field of rhetoric and composition—Bruffee again comes to mind—individual work continues to be privileged in the academy, at least in the minds of students. Returning to my own experiences in the MARC program, however, reminded me of the innumerable ways I could attribute working together, particularly informally, to my success as a MARC student. But it left me wondering how other MARC students perceived informal peer-collaboration. This idea eventually developed into a deeper interest in knowing what other kinds of informal relations and groupings graduate students create and/or participate in and what they get from these informal relations and groupings. Before I began my research, I hammered out a working definition of peer-collaboration that

reflected my concept based on my own experiences, and then reviewed the current literature with this focus in mind.

### Getting My Research Started

The notion of peer collaboration as I perceive it assumes purposes ranging from acculturation into the program and supporting learning to establishing friendships and allaying anxieties. The definition is broadly conceived as any form of conversation that occurs outside of the formal classroom setting with a focus (from superficial to deep) on any topic related to the program. I am interested to know how others in the program engage in these informal learning moments and what forms they take. For an example of deep engagement, I have participated in the peer-led study group described previously which met before class every week on campus in a familiar hall, in which we sought to understand the difficult reading material. But superficially, I consider a drive home from Austin with my husband in which I tried to explain what rhetoric is, what I do in the MARC program, and my research interests as another form of informal learning through conversation. The potential in informal peer conversations originates with me and the reading assignment, theory, or idea; moves towards another individual or group that has grappled with the material; then culminates in various supports as we work to learn together via informal conversations.

Clarifying the definition of informal peer-collaboration in advance of exploring the current research proved beneficial in that it narrowed my search considerably. I located articles that confirmed my experiences of anxiety on entering graduate school and the benefit, both social and academic, of making connections early to calm these fears. One article focuses on the complications of early connection, a problem that also surfaced in my research. Articles that discuss the benefits of peer-collaboration—facilitated and student

led—its purposes for learning, for socializing, for the long haul, and the additional support that mentoring affords graduate students was plentiful and varied, confirming the importance of the topic across programs and disciplines. While the literature shows the relevance of my research to the larger conversation regarding peer-collaboration as student support in general, I found it lacking in three areas. First, there was little research from the field of rhetoric and composition as the majority of the research originates from Education. One exception is Kenneth Bruffee, a major player in the rhetoric and composition field whom I've reference throughout this introduction, who's important work provides the theoretical foundation for my focus on informal peer-collaboration. Another is Stacey Pigg. In her recent article (2014) "Coordinating Constant Invention: Social Media's Role in Distributed Work," she discusses her study of one professional and how his everyday access to social media sites, such as Facebook, was appropriated for work related projects. This article comes closest to the focus of my research project. Secondly, the great majority of research is directed to PhD students and my research focuses on a master's students. Finally, current research doesn't inquire into the multiple forms, groups, and contexts that students engage in informal peer conversations, spaces far beyond the familiar peer-led study group. As a master's student myself, I am personally interested in learning more about what kinds of support the master's student requires to support them through the graduate school journey and how informal peer-collaboration might meet that need. My research, then, is an attempt to contribute to the conversation by delving deeper the motivations behind students' compulsion to connect with their peers and others informally. I want to learn what their understanding of informal is. What forms does it take? With whom to they participate in casual conversations about their graduate program, and where does this occur? Importantly, what do they report as a result from these encounters?

To begin my research, therefore, I started with this overarching question: How, if at all does informal peer-collaboration support MARC students? I conducted research based on a qualitative design, a case study of five MARC students currently enrolled in the Rhetoric and Composition program at Texas State University. I conducted two waves of interviews, the first in the fall semester, with a follow-up interview early into the following spring semester. These interviews were held on the TSU campus. I remained flexible to the busy schedules of the cohort by arranging interviews at various locations such as the Writing Center, a classroom in the English Department hall, and the MARC GA's office for their convenience. As a member in this cohort, it was important that I resist using my own experience as a way to interpret their meanings. To do this, I often repeated back to them what they said, and asked them to clarify what they meant. I used the following questions as a guide for my research:

- a) What forms does informal learning take?
- b) How might the social connection with peers assist them in gaining a sense of relevance and identity to the program and discourse community?
- c) How does working together assist in confirming the students' decision to enter the program?
- d) How does working collaboratively help students in the MARC program engage in the reading material, broaden and enrich their understanding, and gain confidence?

Briefly, my research shows that anxiety over performing and succeeding in graduate school motivated the peers to seek each other out to form friendships (suffering together is easier) and to learn, and participated in informal peer-collaboration to achieve this. When

pushed to identify the all the groups and situations they engaged in informal conversations to talk about anything pertaining to the program, some of the participants had trouble recognizing opportunities other than an organized peer-led study group at first, although one reported having conversations outside of the cohort and the program, such as with friends from college and family. But for others, recognizing conversations with people outside of the program or in contexts other than strictly academic as informal peer collaboration proved more difficult. They did, however, identify other locations as places they talked with their peers. Gathering together outside of class to hang out and “talk shop” after class became a routine for several of the research participants, and it was in these locations and during casual conversations that they reported “ah-ha” moments, learning something that went beyond just getting a better grip on the terms and theories. That deep learning has occurred for some as a result of this series of recurring events, building relationships outside of class by talking together in a casual environment, provides significant insight to how or if informal peer collaboration supports MARC program students.

In Chapter 2, the Literature Review, I survey the current literature relevant to my research question which focuses on the benefits of peer collaboration as student support and the benefits they report. In chapter 3, I discuss my methodological approach, a case study, and the tools I used to address my research question. Chapter 4, Findings and Discussion, reports on the key findings, how early connection brought a sense of belonging for the MARC cohort which eased their anxieties and lead to surprising learning outcomes, and discuss these findings as evidence of the importance of informal peer collaboration to enable this learning process and how site proved to be a key element in this equation. And in Chapter 5, Significance and Implications, I make my case that informal peer collaboration—in all its forms, locations, and participants—should be recognized as a scholarly practice that

supports graduate students emotionally and academically as it leads to benefits, and therefore, be explicitly highlighted by program directors to incoming graduate students.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In my last chapter, I sought to provide a context to my research project by giving my account of the challenges that meet MARC students as they attempt to make the transition into graduate school, as well as the forms and contexts of informal peer-collaboration that I participated in that helped me navigate this unknown terrain. I also described some of the forms, contexts, and communities included in these opportunities, and how they provided me with extended support by building a large and diverse relationship base and opportunities to learn beyond the walls of the university. This chapter begins with a look at the current literature that speaks (if only peripherally) on the topic of informal peer-collaboration its relation to student support. The literature I include provides a look at the topics of focus of scholarship regarding the purpose and value of peer collaboration to graduate student success in general, demonstrating the importance for us as researchers to be able to step outside of ourselves and examine from the outside of ourselves. And, importantly, I discovered the relevance of my research to the larger conversation, the majority of which involves PhD students in more formal contexts of peer collaboration.

I organize the research from the general to the particular beginning with the awkward transition to graduate school and factors that complicate early connection. I then look deeper into what factors contribute to successful peer communities, the ways mentoring offers additional support, and specialized, peer-led learning groups. Finally, I provide a look at the need for students to converse to learn, and how environment and location affect the process.

### Making the Transition into Graduate School

I begin with the transition into graduate school because for me and others in my program, once the success of getting accepted wore off, the reality of entering a new territory began to set in. It was valuable to learn, therefore, that according to the research I include in this section, the issues of self-doubt and anxiety during the transition period of acculturating to graduate school were not unique to MARC students. Like many graduate students in other programs, we entered our program with some semblance of confidence based upon a skill set which was developed during the undergraduate journey. Study skills, writing and research skills, and time management skills are examples of some of the more elementary tools that are foundational to student success in graduate school. Regardless of the confidence that these tools provided, it was the unexpected, cultural difference which I found difficult to apprehend or articulate adequately which complicated my transition, at least mentally. The graduate school culture requires new members to perceive themselves as a member of the larger, scholarly community. I felt an immediate disconnect to this notion, an inadequacy which moved me to find connection in more familiar territory—with my peers. My early connections eased anxiety enough to allow me to focus less on myself and more on the work ahead. The research in this section reports on the experiences of other graduate students entering their program and the ways they made these connections.

Locating that early connection is not always a seamless effort. For example, an orientation to university life is usually offered for undergraduates prior to the start of classes and may even include an overnight stay with staff-organized activities to bring a sense of belonging for the entering population with their university. Although program directors often offer a more intimate introduction to their program through such means a meet-and-greets with current faculty and students, and universities sponsor orientations for graduate

students, neither one necessarily brings the benefits of personal connection. Christy Erving et al investigate the disconnect that many students feel including a sense of isolation within their own program in her article, “The First Year of Graduate School: Navigating the Hurdles.” Using the narratives of first year graduate students who describe both their successes and stresses they argue lends insight into how the awkward beginnings might be overcome. For example, one particular student, Jamelle, details her introduction into her program during the summer semester in which the faculty is unavailable to assist her transition into the community. The false assumption that the responsibility lies with the faculty notwithstanding, Jamelle takes the initiative by seeking out friends among her lab colleagues. It is here that she could

“freely express my thoughts and opinions about the decisions we were making each week. I acquired good research experience, and gleaned all that I could from my fellow lab members. That said, at the end of the summer research program, I believed that my interactions in this lab group had been very positive, and so I regarded it as the place I would call home throughout the course of my graduate studies” (24).

Erving et al study shows how successful students navigate the foreign social and academic terrain as well as the learning environment of graduate school through initiating early peer connection. Furthermore, engaging in informal conversations enhances free expression that works to develop research skills and establish a sense of belonging.

Even prior experience of the graduate school culture in a master’s program doesn’t eliminate the need for social connection in a doctoral program. Similar to Erving et al findings, Susan Gardiner’s research results also emphasizes the benefits of early connectivity for a group of experienced students who are self-motivated to socialize. The results in

Gardiner's study, "I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Doctoral Student Socialization in Chemistry and History," illuminate the socialization process and its evolution over time in the program, which is shown to positively influence the success of doctoral students within the chemistry and history programs. The qualitative design of the study includes interviews with 20 students to understand how vital interaction with fellow cohorts is, particularly at the primary stage of entrance in the community, "The Informal Stage," to orienting into the program and establishing a new identity. The study further shows that once identity is transformed, students are learning and successful in the program. It's good to mention here that in another aspect of the study, students regularly and frequently mention that peer support is necessary for support and even guidance within the disciplinary field.

The common factor reported in both research projects indicates that students gravitate to connection with each other early into their grad school journey in order to grapple with the ambiguous expectations of their programs, regardless of the presence of faculty/leadership. For Jamelle in Erving et al research, there was no faculty to guide her when she arrived, a point she was intent on making; for Gardiner's study the cohort self-initiated establishing a community, despite the presence of faculty. Although this is a minor point in the research, it does highlight a common misconception that faculty members are solely responsible for the students in the program. Regardless, peer connections are reported to have been made early and deepened over time which brought emotional and academic support for those who continued in the program. The results also indicate a two-fold development that occurs for students who make a successful transition: self-reliance, and reliance upon peers. I had assumed that self-reliance was a necessary quality for doing well in graduate school, yet underestimated the need as well for early connection to my peers at first, even though it was what I pursued. While these articles represent some of the

conversations regarding the benefit of early connection to student success, other research takes a wider look into the factors of distances that can co-exist in a cohort. Due to language barriers, distance-program delivery, cultural differences, age and life experiences that some populations encounter, the feelings of isolation deepen regardless of their willingness and effort to build relationships within the program.

### Distances: Complicating Factors to Early Connections

Building relationships in graduate school is often achieved through the peer-led study group venue, but when students don't share the dominant language of the group, travel far distances to campus, attend class through on-line courses, or just struggle with the "nature" of graduate school, for example, it can negatively affect their sense of belonging, and as a result, their well-being. The need for a sense of community is no less desired for students who choose to attend graduate programs through on-line course work. Although access to graduate programs is made convenient through this medium, it offers less opportunity to connect with peers. To better understand the level of disconnect that this population experiences, researchers Elizabeth Erichsen and Doris Bollinger conduct mixed method research, including surveys and interviews, which offers insight into the depth and breadth of isolation felt by both traditional and on-line students of a PhD program, and significantly by international students. In "Towards Understanding International Graduate Student Isolation in Traditional and Online Environments," the researchers determine that among the top four concerns, students feel a significant need to socialize both inside and outside the realm of the program, whether formally or informally organized, in order to gain a sense of community. The results are further analyzed to explore ways to improve the opportunity for connection as suggested by the participants. The dilemma of the difficulty for on-line students to integrate into the academic community is undeniable, though other research

shows that some students gained connection through on-line forums as a way to overcome the distance (Hurst; de Villiers).

The article also raises awareness of the difficulty for the international student to communicate successfully even when they attend group research and peer study groups. This barrier underscores the need for effective conversation for every population for students to move beyond initial connection. Erichsen and Bollinger's article complicates the simplistic assumption that peer connection alone solves all the problems of isolation in graduate programs as it highlights the struggle that L2 language users sometimes face when they miscommunicate via the on-line forums (the solution for other distance issues) this experience can exacerbate their feelings of isolation. The following section focuses on the factors that are present when meaningful connection succeeds that sheds some light to resolving these issues of isolation.

#### Beyond Connection: Insight into Meaningful Peer Communities

During my first semester in the MARC program, I was aware of ways that I didn't identify with my cohort which I based mostly upon my age and life experience. These factors affected the ways in which I socialized with them informally—limiting it in some ways but not all. I know that I could have suffered from isolation within my cohort due to these limitations. But we quickly became a tight learning community, therefore, these “differences” didn't inhibit meaningful collaboration either in or outside of class. Despite differences in personalities, identities, purposes, backgrounds, study/learning style, etc., we connected. While I never analyzed what the factors were that enabled this connection, other researchers have looked into the motivations to connect early and successfully, and what students' attribute to that success from their perspective.

Many students seek peer connection to learn from each other. In their article, “Online Graduate Student Identity and Professional Skills Development,” by Deborah Hurst et al, they present findings from qualitative studies (workshops) designed to measure interest in and effectiveness of these attempts. An important and recurring theme in the findings was that the workshops provided meaningful connections for the students that built their sense of community. The students also reported that interacting in the workshop helped develop professional skills such as researching, presenting, communication, and writing (48). Based upon their findings, Hurst et al argue that students welcomed social connection with their peers in order to converse intentionally on various topics in an informal way, which indicates that motivation, in this case the motivation to learn, plays a key role in building strong connections among the peers.

The connections formed through partnerships of informal collaborative study groups also creates an environment from which identity and knowledge is constructed, resulting in a sense of well-being through belonging. In the qualitative study, “Facilitation: A Novel Way to Improve Student’s Well-Being,” researchers Hanne Adriansen and Lene Madsen investigate what constitutes a successful environment for effective study from the graduate student perspective within peer-led groups, how this leads to higher feelings of well-being, and finally, how facilitation might support success. By conducting voluntary questionnaires, interviews, and observations, the research acquires varied student perspectives, all of which support the notion that integration among students is a key to a sense of belonging with one another and within the program. The results suggest that due to the nature of graduate programs which makes interaction and socialization among students more difficult, facilitation is a necessary addition to peer-led study groups to improve a successful study environment for deep learning and to make them more inclusive, resulting

in a sense of well-being. The article focuses on ensuring the well-being of students who enter rigorous graduate programs, which characteristically leads to feelings of isolation. Previous to the potential results which are ultimately found through the research project is the informal environment in which the study group operates, which ultimately (intentionally?) leads to a sense of belonging through learning outcomes.

Neither physical presence nor academic setting, whether physical or digital is required to establish an environment conducive to socializing or learning, according to Ruth de Villiers and Marco Pretorius' findings detailed in their article, "Evaluation of a Collaborative Learning Environment on a Facebook Forum." They support their argument based upon their findings of a qualitative study of a cohort of postgraduate students who access a Forum on Facebook as a means to engage socially and academically to study the 'Concepts and Principles of eLearning.' The mixed-methods approach includes qualitative analysis on reflective essays and heuristic evaluation applied to forum (participation) discourse, both of which confirm that faculty facilitated Facebook forums provided "a good social climate and conducive, well-facilitated environment. Inter-personal relationships were fostered between distance learners, and academic value arose from independent research, peer-learning and social negotiation" (1). De Villiers and Pretorius' research confirms other research findings, that one of the potentials inherent in informal collaboration among peers is meeting learning outcomes, regardless of the medium in making the connection. Although the cohort studied in this particular research project do not initiate the group, the study did imply that the academic benefit is contingent upon the initiative that the individuals exercised in community participation, even when it's conducted online. I would have liked to hear more about what steps the facilitators took to ensure a "good social climate" and how relationships were "fostered." Such insight would be valuable to others who work to

facilitate student connection online. As I learned in Erichsen and Bollinger's research, there are variables that contribute to and limit the success of connection for students on-line.

For some determined students, the "problem" of distance worked as a catalyst to motivate building community on-line. Linda Bloomberg investigates this phenomenon in her research of a unique cultural group in her article, "How a Learning Community Enhances Individual Learning in a Graduate Distance Education Program." As the title implies, this article discusses the findings of an empirical case study of distance learners in a master's degree program that is designed specifically for adult Jewish learners, and how the notion of community enhances the learning experience. More than that, the research illuminates various motivations that leads students to take the initiative to form community for the purpose of learning. And in the case of these students, the distance worked as the facilitator of the students to form a community, and the learning community worked as the *corrective* in the distance education environment (194). Although the article speaks to particular motivations for a specific cultural identity in the population of students, the results the researcher find continue to originate from an informal environment in which conversations occur among peers. It also harkens back to the importance of self-reliance and reliance on peers to achieve success both in social and academic contexts.

When I began this section, I was pondering what elements were consistently present when meaningful relationships were built within a cohort, regardless of the "distances," that might be replicated to ensure potential benefits, whatever they were. Did it rely solely on student initiative, attitudes, intention? Does informal peer-collaboration require facilitation to be successful? And where do meaningful conversations occur between peers and by what means? According to the research, the where and by what means are virtually irrelevant. There were successes in both student initiated peer-collaboration as well as facilitated. It was

evident that students in the research projects all acknowledge a need and a respond to the need to connect with their peers on a social and academic level. On the whole, according to the student responses, the environment created by this coming-together provided a sense of belonging that resulted in learning, critical thinking, research development, and well-being.

### The Role of Mentoring in Program Acculturation

Mentoring programs are occasionally offered through graduate programs and are designed in part to help students learn the ropes while providing immediate social connection. Although this connection is a common expectation for both the mentor and student, research has begun to inquire into the subjective expectations and experiences of students to better understand what more undiscovered potential might exist within the peer connection. The compelling results, according to the research of doctoral students in this section, revealed a surprising benefit: confidence and motivation developed for both mentors and students based on the relationships established.

Mary Jo Noonan's et al "Peer and Faculty Mentoring in Doctoral Education: Definitions, Experiences, and Expectations," describes their research on the nature and outcomes of mentoring from the perspectives of students, including whether they share common beliefs, expectations, and experiences. Three focus groups are organized for and participated in recorded interviews: doctoral student protégés, mentors, and faculty mentors. Results of the coded findings, particular to my research interest, emphasize the informal nature of the relationship among peer mentors, and the importance of this relationship to their learning experience described as "personal, professional, and collegial" (256). Furthermore, the results show an increase in motivation as a result of mentoring in general that support students' confidence. This study not only identifies expectations that are anticipated and met prior to students' participation in peer mentoring communities (such as

social connection), but also indicates that the relationships it builds provides unexpected benefits, such as motivation and confidence.

Often program directors anticipate the needs of students to develop confidence for large academic assignments, particularly as when the program culminates in writing a research thesis. In “Supporting Education PhD and D.Ed. Students to Become Confident Academic Writers: An Evaluation of Thesis Writers’ Circles,” Wendy Larcombe et al critically evaluate a program designed to meet the needs of post-graduate students (for both English and second language English speaking students) to develop the writing skills needed and to gain the confidence required to prepare a research thesis. The results reported in the paper come from the evaluations of the students, which upon deep analysis indicate the fundamental need to give priority to the “interplay between knowledge, language, and identity” which facilitates the development of these skills. The “low-stakes” context of the writing program requires students to develop identities that reside in community participation through peer collaboration (54). The quasi-informal environment of the writing program in Larcombe’s et al research project sheds light on the fact that on the spectrum of informality to formality, peer collaboration (however it is defined and practiced) remains fundamental to student success via mentoring programs that may help to ensure that students are supported.

Both Noonan and Larcombe report immediate social connection and learning outcomes respectively for student participants. While Noonan’s research focuses upon the social aspect of mentoring, and Larcombe’s research looks for learning outcomes, both projects highlighted that peer connection is a real need that program directors recognize must be met before such outcomes can occur. I was most struck by the raised level of confidence that is reported as a result from mentoring, a quality that the graduate programs

recognize as vital to student success in completing the course work and thesis/dissertation. Finally, the reciprocal nature found in the relationship dynamic between student and mentor that is revealed in Noonan's research shows a provocative quality of possibility in terms of surprising benefits inherent in these practices.

### Peer-Led Learning Groups for the Long-Term

In an earlier section, "Distance: Troubling Factors to Early Connection," the notion of *intention* surfaced as an element in the equation of success for students who connected with their peers and the program. Although approaching connection to build social networks doesn't necessarily lead to learning outcomes since that is not the objective, it shouldn't be assumed that learning doesn't happen. Neither should it be assumed that "learning only" peer study groups eliminate the possibility of socializing. An assumption might be that the lines between learning/socializing blur, although when one aspect is in focus the environment is constructed to support it. Therefore, the intention, or motivation, affects the environment and possibly the outcomes. The research in this section investigates how the outcomes are affected when the intention for peer connection through study groups is strictly learning. As the purposes are more clearly defined for the peer-led group work that the research investigates, some groups articulate more formal expectations for accountability to the members to the group. Illuminating instances of a more in-depth approach to peer group-work, the articles offer excellent guidance for organizing and maintaining consistent group membership for the entire graduate program, both emphasizing accountability to the group and insight into the benefits that result from such a commitment.

Implicit within the connections formed through formal peer collaboration is professional development which informs personal identity as a scholar in any academic context. Acknowledging this and other developments for students who belong to long-term

study groups during graduate programs, authors Martin K. Remmes and Linda Ko articulate these experiences in a personal retrospective, “Thoughts on Being Productive During a Graduate Program: The Process and Benefits of a Peer Working Group.” This retrospective is written to promote an expanded look at the purposes of the “peer working group” to support academic and research development while providing encouragement for students in undergraduate, graduate, and professional contexts. According to the authors, “peer working groups can be a supportive environment to strengthen writing skills, establish goals and time-lines, gain confidence in one’s research skills, and explore factors central to professional development” (16). The article outlines specific guidelines to ensure the longevity of the group such as shared purposes, goals, and accountability. This team of doctoral students initiate their own “peer working group” which endures throughout their entire program and creates social connection, increases productivity, and enhances learning.

The sense of accountability as part of group identity is examined further in the narrative case study conducted by Carol Mullen and Elizabeth Tuten in, “Doctoral Cohort Mentoring: Interdependence, Collaborative Learning, and Cultural Change.” The authors investigate an informal “hybrid” structure of a mentoring cohort in a doctoral program which receives little institutional support or research attention. The research is conducted to evaluate the success of a semi-formal mentoring group, the Writers in Training (WIT), which is designed to provide students with a sense of accountability by being associated with a group, offering mutual support, gaining a sense of well-being, and making social connections with peers. Results of the study indicate the productivity of the hybrid cohort, “one that encourages group learning through the support of a socially vibrant mentoring model. By exchanging knowledge about writing/research practices, WIT members contributed to the learning gains of the group, as did the professors who fostered conditions for intellectual,

emotional, and social growth” (27-28). Mullen and Tuten’s research results shows that strict lines between scholar/social within the doctoral students they investigate are if not absent, are at least crossed in an effort by the professors to include a more holistic approach to the learning experience. It was interesting to read that the reciprocal nature of learning was not limited to the grad students, but also was acknowledged by the professors who worked closely with the study group, similarly to the mentors in Noonan’s research.

It is reported that some students who initiate informal study groups come with the assumption that learning occurs in a social context—whether the environment is formal or informal—and they often locate opportunities that present organically rather than intentionally. While much research is interested how institutions and graduate programs organize students together, alternatively some research now exists to better understand the former instance to know better how students move themselves together informally. In “Peers in Doctoral Education: Unrecognized Learning Partners,” authors Emma Flores-Scott and Maresi Nerad seek to locate and investigate how such occasions occur which provide “informal peer pedagogies” in which exchanges and interactions through shared work space such as an office environment and lab work leads to developing organized learning opportunities in doctoral programs. Based on two studies, Flores-Scott and Nerad show the important role that peers play in “learning with and across disciplines” which works to “develop independent researchers for members of their academic community,” expanding the current understanding of community of learning to include peers as “learning partners” (74, 80-81). The research results illuminate how “cohorts” collect organically as opportunity is made available in the natural sphere of the academic process (research, lectures, workshops, etc.) of a doctoral program. The movement that the students take from the semi-formal work environment towards the more formal and organized learning

opportunities with each other speaks to the need that originates in the individual student to develop academically. Finding that desire or instinct unexpectedly in others in the program is another point of connection for the cohort, which develops a team mentality that supports learning.

The students in this section reported to expect and accept a high level of accountability to their group members, regardless of how the groups formed. The deeper commitment to one another informed their self and collective image as learning partners interdependently and provided a secure environment to operate and practice. The difficulty in succeeding either academically, professionally, or personally without deep connection to cohorts in a graduate program is evident in the growing desire to maintain a long-term group as demonstrated in this research.

#### The Need to Talk and a Place to Practice

For graduate students who grope their way through the mysterious world of graduate studies, talking with others in the program plays a big part in finding their way through the mist and to gain understand about the work associated with it. These ‘talks’ enable them to untangle the new meanings, theories, and ideas related to their field and to practice the discourse of their community. That these conversations are important to the learning, reading, and writing process is well established in research, while newer research looks into the purpose of place where talking occurs, and pushes the boundary of what is understood as ‘scholarly.’

In Kenneth Bruffee’s seminal work in the field of rhetoric and composition, “Collaborative Learning and the “Conversation of Mankind.”” he addresses English teachers to propose that peer collaboration be integrated into the reading and writing process of the classroom, a challenge to the traditional classroom teaching methods at the time (1984). One

argument he makes is that learning occurs in a social context through conversation, “we learn one from the other” (639). Furthermore, collaborative learning allows for the creation of communities of knowledgeable peers, or groups of people who accept the same standards, values, and assumptions. And the practice of peer collaboration, per Bruffee, “helps students join the established knowledge communities of academic studies, business, and the professions” (650). At that time (1984), Bruffee’s notion to incorporate collaborative learning into the classroom was novel and pushed against the traditional classroom learning practices which were primarily individual and silent. But as Bruffee argues, peer collaboration, or talking, has many attributes: it is part of student learning, including the reading and writing process, builds community among the students/peers, and helps to develop an identity in a new culture.

In Alice Kolb and David Kolb’s article, “Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education,” they provide a brief outline of their Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which is strongly influenced by scholars such as Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, Jung, Freire, and Rogers. Within the six propositions of their learning theory, they articulate “learning is” statements. Briefly:

- “Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.
- Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person—thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving.
- Learning is the process of creating knowledge. ELT proposes a constructivist theory of learning where by social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner” (194).

It is within the ELT theoretical framework that Kolb and Kolb also introduce the concept of learning space which “emphasizes that learning is not one universal process but a map of learning territories, a frame of reference within which many different ways of learning can flourish and interrelate. It is a holistic framework that orients the many different ways of learning to one another” (200). The notion of learning territories they describe refers to psychological space, or regions related to learning styles. Kolb continues: “Human beings naturally make meaning from their experiences through conversation. Yet genuine conversation in the traditional lecture classroom can be extremely restricted or nonexistent” (208). And here’s why the classroom isn’t ideal: “Indeed it appears that feelings and emotions have primacy in determining whether and what we learn. Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety can block learning, while positive feelings of attraction and interest may be essential for learning” (208). Kolb and Kolb seek to emphasize the impact of the social context, i.e. space, location, environment, to the learning outcomes of conversational learning.

In Kendall Leon and Stacey Pigg’s “Graduate Students Professionalizing in Digital Time/Space: A View From “Down Below,”” the authors investigate the writing practices of two rhet/compr graduate students who access digital social sites for both professional and social purposes to learn what value these practices offer for student professionalization. In contrast to the positive reports from the students, such as adding contacts from conferences they attended, listening to theories, participating in reading blogs, they also reported feelings of guilt for the time they spent on these sites because it felt like a distraction from “real” work. The authors are quick to point out that, “even when we are not writing on computers, there are plenty of ways to become distracted, and also plenty of moments when personal and professional activity can productively collide outside of the digital space.” Importantly

for the students, however, the extent to which these writing practices on social sites differed from the students' professional expectations, what it would look like and feel like, left the impression that it did not seem "normal."

Leon and Pigg's research project reveals the importance that digital social sites play in offering a valuable venue for building relationships, sharing knowledge, and developing an on-line professional presence, as well as the discomfort master's students experience when the line between social and academic sites and practices are blurred. The article provides a salient perspective to the current understanding of what is considered legitimate writing practices for professionalization for graduate students. As conversation is an important element of the writing process (Bruffee), and location impacts the experience (Kolb and Kolb), Leon and Pigg challenge academics and students to both the practices in and locations of digital space as relevant for professional development.

Stacey Pigg provides one more look at the value of social media to professional work. In her article, "Coordinating Constant Invention: Social Media's Role in Distributed Work," she investigates how the personal with the professional are incorporated in the "embodied practices of symbolic-analytic work" and how technology affects these practices. Pigg argues that "networked writing environments help symbolic analysts gain access to communities of practice, maintain a presence within them, and leverage social norms to circulate texts through them" (69). Pigg explains that the place, or environment, in which the analysts coordinate texts to complete projects, manage multiple projects, and work with various technologies to solve problems is the locations in which knowledge is shared and is "built" through writing. As she conceives it, the act of writing facilitates building relationships with the team, understanding epistemic norms, listening and learning from ongoing conversations—which are frequently exchanged through technological means.

There are occasions in which these technologies are not in place to support sharing knowledge and information which the team needs, at which time the burden to coordinate disparate means of communication must be invented by the analyst. The purposes of this “range of rhetorical activities,” i.e. opening the means of communication, building relationships with the team, conversing, writing, and sharing information, is to create community among fragmented members, with whom they produce texts and establish work practices (72). And one of the best resources to reach these members, Pigg argues, is through social media (73).

Pigg’s emphasis on the importance of social media as another site for building community and enacting the professional practices has great relevance to the graduate students’ endeavor to make connections with their peers while juggling personal, academic, and work-related concerns. She also shed’s an important light on the “range of rhetorical activities” that the student must initiate to make these connections happen. As Pigg’s example of an individual symbolic analyst shows, the cultural and epistemic norms that a new member of a work-team must learn requires their own initiative to reach other members and gain access to understanding.

This section includes the foundational text from Kenneth Bruffee who argues the benefits for bringing the practice of peer collaboration into the classroom, while the others show how the conversation has evolved towards understanding the importance of location as it relates to practice and learning outcomes. And more to Kolb’s claim, do the students who engage in informal conversations, recognize its value to their learning experience? Or dismiss these occasions as non-productive for academic development (Leon, Pigg)?

## Conclusion

The research in this chapter provide a look into the ways that peer-collaboration is a foundational support for graduate student success across disciplines and programs that provides connection and a sense of belonging on a social and academic level. When it is achieved, peer connection calms the stresses associated with entering the new territory of a graduate program and membership in the new community, as seen in Erving et al and Gardiner's research. Not only do they emphasize this benefit, but also underscore the quality of self-reliance and reliance on others to enable graduate students to initiate and maintain this vital connection. However, other research complicates the assumption that the opportunity for connection is easily made.

There are obstacles that complicate making the first connection. In Erichsen and Bollinger's article, they cite instances for which facilitation is required to create these opportunities for international students, especially those who attend graduate school online. In this study, facilitation provides opportunity by way of on-line forums that brings students together, but with mixed results. Communicating effectively proves to be a vital yet challenging component for L2 students. Rather than feeling closer to their academic community, they report deeper feelings of isolation. Erichsen and Bollinger bring up an important aspect of relationship building, that without effective communication, simply connecting is meaningless. And as Erving and Gardiner's research shows, the potential for building meaningful relationships is there. How, then, is meaningful connection achieved? Other research inquiries into the complexity of meaningful peer communities locate some of the factors that are present.

While the potential to provide support to students is an inherent quality of peer-collaboration, how this potential is realized depends in large part by the intention or purpose

for which it is organized. Hurst et al research shows the purpose to learn as the motivating factor that provided meaning to workshops in which students in this study participated. This particular meaning was assigned by the students who reported that they “valued the chance to interact with and learn from other graduate students” (48). The common purpose of learning together defined the ethos of their community, and provided a sense of belonging. While learning together was the impetus that drove these students to come together meaningfully, Linda Bloomberg’s research describes a circumstance in which determination to building the community came first.

In Linda Bloomberg’s research project the students use the issue of distance as the motivation for creating a learning community online. The outstanding factor present for this group of graduate students is that rather than perceiving a problem in distance, they embrace community as the “*corrective* in the distance education environment” (194). This phenomenal response places the distance as facilitator and demonstrates an exemplar of self-reliance and reliance on others. Bloomberg’s research highlights the potential inherent in peer-collaboration when clear purpose motivates students to develop meaningful connections with intention.

Recognizing the importance of membership to student success, Adriansen and Madsen’s research focuses on the environment factor to encouraging meaningful relationships in peer-led study groups. Their research found that facilitating *interaction* in the informal setting helped to establish an inclusive attitude to the environment, an important counterpoint for students who work within the rigorous nature of the graduate program context. De Villiers and Pretorius’ study moves the discussion to the importance of establishing the best environment for the on-line student, also recommending facilitation to provide “a good social climate and conducive well-facilitated environment” (1). Both articles

claim the students experience deep learning and develop independent research skills, as well as build interpersonal relationships. Implied from the research is active participation of the students; yet, before that can happen, the appropriate environment must be present.

The desire to connect with peers socially and academically, the ability to create a conducive environment to facilitate learning and a sense of belonging and well-being, and the initiative to determine a purpose that brings meaning to the community all serve as contributing factors that moves peers past the initial point of connection towards building meaningful relationships. Indeed, these examples represent the ideal. However, there are variables that are common to students entering graduate programs that are counterproductive to a smooth transition. For many students, then, a mentor program may help to provide the immediate social connection and guidance to bridge the gap.

The research I include is not exhaustive, but it offers a quick look at the ways mentoring programs offer additional support to graduate students. For example, in Mary Jo Noonan's et al study emphasizes the informal nature of the relationship between peer and mentor, and how the aspect of informality provides a low-stakes context for a learning experience, described as "personal, professional, and collegial" (256). Such outcomes as learning and immediate connection are an expected result for students who connect with a mentor. Additionally, the results show an unexpected increase in motivation in confidence, as well as a reciprocal nature in which both peer and mentor gain learning outcomes. Some programs are designed with a more particular purpose. Wendy Larcombe's et al research evaluates a program designed to offer specific student support to build writing skills for both English and second language English speaking students. She reports that the semi-formal context of the program gave preference to the "interplay between knowledge, language, and identity" that students require to build writing skills. Designed by the program director in

anticipation of the need of their graduate students, the writing group provides additional support for students as they work together through thesis and dissertation writing challenges. Both articles acknowledge that program directors anticipate the real need for peer connection for their students, and their effort to provide a solution to that need through collaborative learning supports.

The following section of research articles return to the discussion of the intention to potential connection to emphasize the length to which peer-collaboration can be stretched to fit very particular purposes. In their retrospective, Martin Remmes and Linda Ko promote an extended purpose for peer-work to focus on developing academic and research skills while offering encouragement through accountability. The article offers an explicit guideline to achieving academic goals and professional development in a semi-formal peer-led study group that lasts through out the graduate program journey. Carol Mullen and Elizabeth Tuten's research investigates a unique writers' program which includes a high expectation of accountability as a necessary component to the longevity of the group. Borrowing from the mentor framework, the hybrid Writers in Training's (WIT) purpose is productivity, while it offers support through social connection that results in a sense well-being. The research findings claimed reciprocal learning outcomes for every member of the peer, peer-mentor, professor-mentor dynamic. Both Remmes/Ko and Mullen/Tuten describe conditions in which peer-groups are formally initiated for an explicitly academic purpose, and that social needs are met consequentially. The unexpected consequence of social connection further demonstrates the unlimited potential inherent in peer-collaboration.

In contrast to the formal way that peer-collaboration is initiated above, Emma Flores-Scott and Maresi Nerad conduct a study to explore the circumstance in which peers move together informally in the natural academic process of working in a shared work space

of labs, workshops, and research labs. The PhD students in their studies take the opportunities available in the semi-formal contexts to form “cohorts” with peers both within and across disciplines. From the organic context in which the peer connections were initiated, the group develops into a more formalized unit with a shared purpose unique to their academic needs.

In the final section, I include the foundational work of Kenneth Bruffee who argues that the learning process is fundamentally a social one, and as such peer collaboration benefits learning outcomes in the classroom. As peer collaboration has long been established as student support, Kolb and Kolb’s article sheds light on the importance of place (via their “learning space concept”) to establishing an environment for the conversational learning experience, both in and outside of the classroom. And Leon and Pigg seek to push the notion of informal site further as they research students practicing writing in digital spaces, and the mixed results of student perception of the benefits. All of these articles provide a great point of departure for my research into the deeper meanings of the experiences of peer collaboration.

Through this body of research, I provide a sense of the scope of the larger conversation regarding peer collaboration and the focus of interest in which scholarship is concerned. These concerns include the anxieties that come with entering the foreign land of a graduate program, the need to sense membership in a community, to develop research and writing skills that perform on a higher level, to engage in an environment that is conducive to learning and building meaningful connections, and that students must engage with intention to gain results. The findings consistently show that students have a sense of support and well-being as a result regardless of how connection was initiated or for what purpose. However, the most of the research is focused on more formal contexts of peer-

collaboration, and often with a population of PhD students. I read nothing about peer collaboration in informal contexts (with the exception is Leon and Pigg), or what motivates students to gather informally, how informal groups gather and what locations it occurs, the forms it takes or modes used, or what benefits students perceive as a result. And little of the research is focused on master's students. It's important to note that some master's students plan to go straight into the work place after graduation, while others plan to apply to PhD programs. Their first initiation into the academic community is through a master's program in which the experiences there carries the potential to both positively and negatively influence the decisions students make regarding their future after graduate school. Therefore, it is important for research to focus on this population to better know how to support them.

### III. METHODS

#### Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the methodological approach and methods I used to address my research questions, using the following to guide my project:

How, if at all, does informal peer-collaboration support MARC students?

- a) What forms does informal learning take?
- b) How might the social connection with peers assist them in gaining a sense of relevance and identity to the program and discourse community?
- c) How does working together assist in confirming the students' decision to enter the program?
- d) How does working collaboratively help students in the MARC program engage in the reading material, broaden and enrich their understanding, and gain confidence?

My objective was to better understand the differences in meaning and function for graduate students who use this independent means of collaboration.

To address these questions and understand students' experiences from their vantage point, I developed a qualitative case study design grounded in what John Creswell calls a "social constructivism and transformative/postmodern" theoretical stance. The design of a qualitative case study allows researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of individuals at a particular time and during a specific activity by collecting data through a variety of procedures, or methods. For my research project, a qualitative research case study design made sense as it permitted me to investigate the experiences of small group of five graduate students currently enrolled in the MARC program at Texas State University. The methods I

used to collect data included two sets of interviews (which I audio-taped with their permission) in which I asked open-ended questions that addressed my research questions and took notes to document my observations of the participants during the interviews. From the transcriptions of the interview recordings and notes, themes emerged which I then analyzed and interpreted, the findings and significance of which I detail in chapter four, Findings.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of my research project lean on an intersection of social constructivism and transformative/postmodern views. To better understand the link between the philosophical beliefs to the interpretative frameworks, I draw upon the explanations discussed in John W. Creswell's "Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design." According to Creswell, social constructivist theory is concerned with how individuals seek to understand the world in which they live based upon subjective meanings of their experiences in a particular situation. The meanings individuals apply to such experiences constructs multiple realities and shapes identities. Importantly, as Creswell points out, meanings "are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social construction) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (25). Researchers who apply the social constructivist interpretive lens, therefore, approach the research participant with respect as a co-researcher and use an inductive method of collecting data via observations and interviews to discover what emerges through the co-constructed "interaction." This doesn't mean that the researcher has no focus or interest in a particular aspect of what he/she observes. Indeed, the wording of the questions and the order in which they are asked during the interview guides the interview with the research focus in mind, while also accommodating for the unpredictable way in which

human conversations move. This guided-yet-open approach for the qualitative researcher ensures their commitment to see and understand experiences that emerge and to adapt tentative questions, interpretations, and focus as needed.

The transformative/postmodern framework approaches research similarly. Recognizing the disparity between class, race, and gender in the condition of the world in which we operate, the postmodern perspective positions researcher and participants on a more equal footing in order to diminish the negative results that an imbalance of power, or an enacted hierarchy, would have on the interpretation of research data. The approach to inquiry involves a collaborative process in which difference is honored and from which co-created findings emerge (27, 36).

The social constructivist and transitional/postmodern views overlap in varying degrees, which align with my own philosophical perspective that multiple realities are constructed through experience with others. The flexible frameworks allow for objective/subjective ways of perceiving reality, resisting the notion that there is only one, correct way to know anything. This was especially important to understand prior to conducting my research. As a member of this cohort, I was familiar with the anxieties that are associated with the graduate school journey and the motivations that moved me to participate in casual conversations with my cohort to get my bearings. These conversations ranged from semi-formal, as in participating in an organized study group, to considerably informal—dropping into a fellow cohort’s office to clarify (or complain) about a project in a class we share, or talking through a reading assignment on the bench in the hallway outside of the classroom before class begins. Therefore, I entered my research project with a personal understanding of how “non-classroom talk” had worked to support my own journey as a MARC student, and how the relationships I built inside and outside the

classroom—often times in a panic to gain some sense of equilibrium about my place in the discourse community to which I sought membership—provided a way to locate the ground under my feet. This is the lens through which I viewed my research project, the subjective element that allowed me to approach my research participants with respect and empathy and to expect to hear common purposes and motivations. Although my “insider” knowledge in this project influenced my interpretation of the data, my “outsider” status as researcher drove me to remain open to others’ experiences, motivations, and perspectives to allow for and embrace differences, and to maintain an objectivity to discover surprises. I assumed that not all students enter the MARC program for the same reasons or brought the same expectations, and that they have different learning styles, personalities, and approaches to learning. Also, that there were factors that influence the way students socialize, some personal and others more practical, that affect the measure to which they engage in the study group and informal gatherings. The theoretical frameworks worked in tandem to establish an attitude for me, the researcher, to appreciate these differences as vital to the research project to gain a better understanding of the multiple realities of the MARC cohort. Furthermore, the social constructivist and transformative/postmodern perspectives determined how I positioned myself as the researcher in relation to the participants as co-workers in the project, and emphasized my responsibility as interpreter to make sense of their experiences. To get at these factors and to analyze and interpret the effects that these differences have on their experiences, I used a case study design. This design allows the researcher to develop an in-depth analysis of a case—within a set time and activity—and to collect detailed data via a variety of procedures. I employed a collaborative process of research that involved conducting interviews, inductive reasoning to interpret the data, and a narrative style of writing to report the findings.

## Methods

My research project was conducted from an open-ended stance as I depended on the interactions with the participants to discover the motives and meanings for MARC students based on their experiences in informal peer-collaboration. For my research, I defined informal peer-collaboration as any informal conversation among, between, or outside of the members of the cohort that discusses, either superficially or deeply, any topic related to the MARC program, i.e. the professors, the course work, theory, practice assignments, expectations other than that of the formal classroom setting. I conducted semi-structured interviews, which is common for qualitative research, and used an interview guide with a list of open-ended questions to set the focus for our “interaction” and to permit the interviewee to direct the direction of their responses. The interviews were held individually face-to-face, were audio-recorded, and I took notes based on observations I made. I conducted two waves of interviews with my research participants, the first to gain a broad understanding of their experiences, and the second for particularity. Separating the interviews by four months permitted the participants to gain perspective, experience, and develop an identity with the program. By including the distance of time between interviews, I could learn how the trajectory of their academic career moved in response to changes they initiated since the first interview, how this was reflected in their demeanor, responses, and insights, and to discover what MARC students considered to be informal learning and what benefits they perceived it had for student support. Employing a series of two interviews permitted any discrepancies, or inconsistencies, due perhaps to my own subjectivity or biases, to stand out. I am confident that by incorporating two interviews separated by distance in time provided sufficient vantage points from which to collect data, checked myself against the tendency towards bias, and ensured the credibility of my findings.

Prior to beginning my research, I sought approval for my project through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas State University. This process ensures that the research I conduct is not a risk to the participants and that the design of my research is sound. Because my project involved minimal risk to any involved, I applied for exempt status. This required submitting a review application and documents, such as the interview guide, the informed consent forms, and a copy of the recruitment email message. Once I received confirmation that my project was approved, I proceeded to contact the current members of the MARC program via e-mail invitation to participate in my research project. I identified that the purpose of the email was to invite participation in my thesis research project in the subject line, and included the research question, how many interviews I would conduct, the time allotted for each interview, and the IRB approval number in the body of the email. Of the nine emails I sent out, five replied agreeing to participate, two had withdrawn from the program (which I learned about later), one never saw the invitation because he didn't check his email because he was no longer attending classes on campus (which I learned about later), and one didn't reply for reasons I don't know.

Five MARC students agreed to participate, two of whom belonged to a more experienced cohort and three to new cohort just getting acquainted with the program and each other—which I refer to as the first and second cohort respectively moving forward. The benefit of having two distinct cohorts represented in this project is that it provides different perspectives including those of a particular individual or group versus across groups. From these students, I obtained explicit, written permission informing them of the intentions of my research and the questions I hoped to answer as a result. Anyone was free to decline without explanation. As a fellow cohort in the first group and a friend to the others in the second, it was important that I the *researcher* resisted the inclination to presume

my interpretation on their responses to my questions based my familiarity with them by using Rogerian “reflective listening.” To combat this reflex, I maintained what I considered a sense of conversation, one that followed a natural place in the interview from which I restated back to the interviewee in order to clarify the meaning. This not only permitted them an opportunity to reiterate or adjust my understanding of their meaning, but also worked to support positive regard, another Rogerian concept that is vital to building trust between the interviewer and interviewee. This “non-judgmental, accepting attitude toward whatever the [interview is expressing]” worked to encourage more reflective and open dialogue (qtd. in Heim, 295). Granted, I initiated the interviews, directed the topic and order of the questions, and determined the location of the interview, but by leaning on Rogers’ techniques of reflective listening and attitude of positive regard, I established a strong sense of reciprocity vital to a successful interview/interviewee relationship.

I conducted the first 30-45-minute interview (see Appendix A for interview questions) to establish whether or not they participated in informal peer-collaborations, how it occurred, what forms it took and with whom, and what they perceived as the benefit from informal engagement. I held the interviews in spaces, including a meeting room, the GA office, and a classroom in which the participants were comfortable and familiar. As I mentioned previously, the interviews were conducted privately face-to-face, and I provided snacks to enhance the casual environment. In this way, I hoped to emphasize that the space was a safe one for them to openly reply to my questions and to elaborate or move the conversation in any direction they wished it to go. After they got a “feel” of the room and began to relax, I asked their permission to record the interview, which I later transcribed, and informed them that I would be taking notes. Notes were taken from close observations during the interviews of any nuances of tone, hesitations, or body language, for example,

which provided another layer of insight for interpretation and analysis. The themes and issues that emerged determined the direction I took in the follow-up interview. For example, from the transcription of the first interview session, I read through several times and marked common words such as fear, anxious, scared, imposter syndrome with a colored pencil to designate the possibility of this theme. As I found the same words within all the transcripts, I determined that *anxiety* was a common theme. Once determining a theme, I returned to the transcripts and my observation notes to find clues to the reason why anxiety was experienced. I also used my own knowledge of the interviewees, such as being new to the area, entering the program during the spring semester, or having dealt with personal struggles to fill in the implicit details of their personal profile as further evidence from which to analyze and interpreted their experiences. The themes and issues that emerged from the first interview process, from asking the questions to interpreting the meanings, guided the direction I took in the second wave of interviews.

After locating themes and issues, I conducted a second brief interview (see Appendix B for interview questions) to offer an opportunity for the participant to clarify or elaborate on why they sought out relationships in the program, to describe their initial (or ongoing) anxieties, and what, if anything, they would recommend be put in place for student support. Together, the interviews provided the objective perspective of the experiences of the MARC students in my study. It mapped out the steps of their journey from the anxious entry into the graduate program, their move to gather informally to build relationships, which in turn supported learning, and the various road blocks that hindered their progress. I also relied on my own experiences to inform my interpretation of the experiences of informal peer-collaboration that the MARC students reported and to understand how our experiences compared.

Analyzing my personal experience as a member of the MARC program through critical reflection shed light on the universality of the desire to acculturate quickly to our new world, to learn and perform as graduate students, and to connect with others who are doing the same. While the way I experience being a student in graduate school are particular to me in terms of kinds of anxieties, the ways and places I engage in informal groupings, and any benefits the interactions provide, we share the common goal to belong. Reflection gave me a sense of ownership of these experiences as tangible evidence of “progress” along the road to membership with the others in the MARC program specifically, and the discourse community at large. These realities grew out of informal conversations with the community to which I belonged, and each encounter took the roots deeper. Although pinpointing experiences, mine and others, by analyzing a moment in time fails to accommodate the generative effects that the involvement has, it nonetheless offers a valuable contribution to understanding some of the ways that students are supported in graduate school, including informal peer-collaboration. As my case study seeks to highlight how, if at all, other students in the MARC program perceive informal peer-collaboration as support, I first introduce the interviewees as individuals in the following section. The profiles contribute to a better understanding of who the individuals are as personalities and the contexts they inhabit within the MARC program. To protect their anonymity, I refer to them by a pseudonym of their choice.

#### Hilde, member of first cohort

Hilde entered the MARC program at the same time I did, the Fall of 2015. I became acquainted with her as a peer during the classes we took together that first year. I found it unusual that she had a hard science background, yet her interest moving forward is medieval women’s writing. So, when I interviewed her for my project, I inquired why the MARC

program, then? Why not an MA in Literature degree? As she explains in her interview, she was introduced to the idea of studying rhetoric and composition while working at the TSU Writing Center from those who were either already in the program or planning to apply. From these small conversations, her interest in the program grew when she began to understand how rhetoric might enhance the approach she would take later in medieval women's writing. Once she entered the program, it was by talking through the ideas about rhetoric during conversations at a local bar after class with her own cohort and members of another in the program that she began to make the connection in an explicit way. She explained, "I think coming to the program, like I knew that I wanted to do medieval women's writing, so I tell myself just be a medievalist in the future. Now I'm able to see myself being a medievalist who focuses on rhetoric. I don't know. That for me was a big break-through." This break-through showed itself significantly when Hilde attended a major medieval conference later that Spring. Surrounded by literature students, she regarded her understanding of how rhetoric was used by medieval writers to be the very specialty she was looking for as a way to stand out in the field. How she developed this "specialty," she attributed, in part, to the many conversations she had at a bar with her peers.

#### William, member of first cohort

William also entered the MARC program in the fall of 2015. He and I share a common experience of taking two semesters of rhetorical theories at St. Edward's University (SEU) in Austin, Texas as undergrads—which is one of the core courses in the MARC program, and therefore familiar with one of the major texts used in the 5383 course. This being the case, William arrived with a well-informed identity to the field of rhetoric and composition, well-versed in the "conversation," and clear about his research interest. And he was eager to dive in to any and all opportunities to discuss it. So, when I asked him if he

participated in informal peer collaborations during the first interview, I was not surprised that he didn't hesitate to say, "yes, all the time...with my roommate, Daniel. I'm always bouncing ideas off of him, he's always bouncing ideas off of me...whenever I go out for drinks, I end up with Hilde and even with the people outside the program and I'll tell them about ideas and get some feedback. That's become pretty standard since I got into the MARC program."

For William, the environment of the program was a major reason for the successful connection that his cohort made with each other, one that depended on a spirit of cooperation rather than competition. He recalled that it was during his cohort's first social engagement early in the fall semester when "all of that adversarial sort of fear or apprehension went away, and that just suddenly some switch flipped and now this far in, I'm realizing that I have not had a competitive relationship with anyone in the MARC program and it's been to all our benefit." To emphasize this fact, he shared an instance another student, not from the MARC program, attempted to compete during class, because the relationships in the cohort was built upon trust and cooperation, no one engaged in this manner. This trust was first extended to William by the director of the program, and in his experience, was mirrored by all of the faculty as a way "to inspire good will—it's a rhetorical thing...to have human connection."

#### Daniel, member of second cohort

Daniel entered the MARC program in the Spring of 2015, which is an awkward place of entry as far as building a strong sense of belonging to a cohort. He's sort of half-a-step behind the first cohort in terms of experience with the course-work, and therefore, still working out how and when to enter the "conversation" both in and outside of the classroom. Yet, he is William's roommate and has taken at least one course with Hilde,

William, and me. Also, he has the same undergraduate background as William and I, an English degree from SEU. He and I have had casual discussions before class about former professors and the large Capstone project that SEU students are required to complete. Connecting with alums, Daniel had a solid head start to building relationships in the MARC program. But it was the way that the first cohort included him as they discussed topics that he was not familiar with yet that impressed Daniel. In his example, he described the way conversation moved, accommodating everyone, in what Daniel terms an “egalitarian” way. The topics moved from feminism to multilingualism, culture, the rhetorical perspectives and different lenses from which to view these issues making it difficult for him to keep up. He describes the moment,

And this is where that I’m glad that people can recognize that I may just not understand their perspective—like if we’re talking about feminism, I’m be no means anti-feminism, or a bigot or anything like that, but for certain people you have to help them to understand, so that is what is interesting about having these types of conversations. You get this education through these conversations that are more, I don’t want to say heated, but there’s an initial point that someone’s trying to prove, and it starts going these directions and then you have to stop and kind of side step and give and get more. It’s not an argument, but just show me how you’re thinking.

Because the people in the more experienced cohort took the time to explain their ideas, he felt accepted as an equal among his peers. Daniel recognized and appreciated that they were all working through these new ideas in a way to learn together and that he wouldn’t be left behind. It was through informal interactions that Daniel learned to trust them and began to feel like a member of their group.

Taylor, member of second cohort

Taylor is a newcomer to the program, entering in the Fall of 2016 as a recent graduate of TSU. While working as a peer tutor at the university writing center, she made the acquaintance of several graduate students in the MARC program, and from their encouragement she applied and was soon accepted into the program. At the time of our first interview she had only been attending about six weeks, so her experience and perspective was limited. Nevertheless, Taylor shared how glad she was that she made connections to other people early in the first semester. Taylor works as the GA for the program, which places her in the midst of the English Department and gives her access not only to many students inside and outside the program, but also to the faculty. This experience contributed developing her sense of belonging and affirmed her decision to enter the MARC program. As she explained it, her identity as a graduate student in the program was due to

the people in the program, I definitely see it [as] the people in the program because I always [am] thinking of it as...I'm the graduate assistant. I am in the office with the MA director and there's people from the MFA office and MATC office and I'm able to talk to them about certain things versus when I feel like if I maybe was a waitress at a restaurant and I didn't get this every single day, I feel like I would struggle more than I am.

Furthermore, she attributes her growing confidence to ask questions and take chances to the faculty—and reciprocates in kind to others in the program. Like William, Taylor sings the praises of the collaborative and cooperative culture that she experiences in the MARC program, an impression she had earlier from her acquaintances in the program who preceded her. As a peer-tutor at the campus writing center, Taylor was already “friends with a lot of people that have been there before...and able to sympathize with me when I feel like

I'm not going to make it or don't feel qualified. They really encourage me and relate because they have been feeling that way themselves sometimes.” As a member of the second cohort, Taylor appreciated her relationships with the other first cohort and her job as the GA, which provided immediate connection to others and the program.

Neil, member of second cohort

Neil returned to university after an absence of a few years, taking a few undergraduate courses to get his academic cogs turning again. As a frequent visitor to the campus writing center during this time, he became acquainted with the MARC program through the director of the writing center and a tutor with whom he worked frequently. From this introduction to the program, Neil applied, was accepted, and began his course work in the fall of 2016 with Taylor. At the time of the first interview, he was six-weeks into his first semester. I was interested to learn if he had connected to his cohort in this short time, and if so, had it lead to opportunities to engage in informal peer-collaboration of any kind. The opportunities were very limited, as he explained. He had registered up for classes “following his own intuition,” but they were not common to the others in his cohort, as he soon discovered. Already sensing a disconnect because of his personal life-experiences (he is not much older than the other students), this misstep as he viewed it put further distance between he and his cohort and limited his identity with the program. As he explained it,

belonging is always nice from an experiential perspective...I've always belonged to a group, and now I feel on a more personal level, I feel more adrift because I'm very new to Texas again. [Earlier today] I went to the office to pick up the course descriptions and then I noticed a person sitting at the desk with Dr. Chevalier, so I asked her a little bit more about this IA-TA process, whatever it is, and then it was kind of like I'm trying to figure

that out because pretty much all the new MARC members are IAs. I am not, but it just feels, I think it just feels you know, I just feel left out or like I'm missing something I don't have."

Concerned about being able to handle the responsibility of both the course work and working as an IA led him to work instead as a peer tutor at the writing center, a fulfilling position yet limiting to a shared, common experience with his cohort. Quickly he realized that to become a viable part of the community would require his attention to steep himself in the academic culture by making more deliberate choices towards that end.

The profiles of the MARC students provide a loose sketch of their individuality and their experiences, including entrance into the program, early connection to their cohort and faculty, and their sense of membership to the group and the program. It is evident from the profiles that feeling like a member of the community was stronger for those who connected through informal means to peers early. It is also clear that this required opportunity, some of which was available by being in the same classes, in the environment of the program through employment, and through social activities. In the following chapter, I present the findings in more detail including what motivates them to gather informally, what forms it takes, how these connections help develop identity with the program, and how informal peer collaboration helps to deepen their understanding of the content. I then follow with discussions about what I found most interesting and how these findings are connected.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

My analysis of the data I collected from interviews with the MARC students, as well as from the notes I took during the interviews, reveals that building relationships with their peers had top priority when they began the program because it provided opportunities to talk informally about MARC things in particular and life things in general, built a sense of community which helped relieve many of the program stresses they struggled with, and developed their identity to the cohort and the program—and what role these individual components play in the informal learning process. It was through the interviewees' descriptions of their experiences with informal peer collaboration that this process was revealed—a cyclical-style progression over time and repeated experiences of talking together outside of class—and that the answers to my guiding research questions emerged.

First, they identified the forms that informal learning takes including informal conversations in the hallway after class or at the local bar while ideas were still fresh on their minds. Hilde attended workshops at the writing center, and Neil engaged in email conversations with his peers. Taylor reported how she explained the work she does in the MARC program with her parents when she went home for a visit and with friends that she ran into at a local coffee shop. Daniel and William reported that they frequently discussed their reading assignments or research interests in the car on the way to campus, and Neil mentioned impromptu discussions with a peer at the writing center where they both work. Also, Hilde reported that she had productive conversations with the study group before class. According to the interviewees, the forms that informal learning took included informal conversations and groupings outside of the classroom that were organized, such as workshops or study groups, but were often-times spontaneous as the occasions presented themselves through their normal interactions with peers and outsiders of the program. These

forms or groupings built early connections for the MARC students which also provided necessary social connections from which they developed an identity with the program.

Secondly, the social aspect within the peer relationships relieved many of the anxieties that the interviewees associated with the program, such as performing in the classroom in front of the professor or feeling isolated. As Taylor pointed out, when she speaks to others about the MARC program she's not trying to "make a good impression in class so the pressure's off." With the stresses over performing relieved, they were able to focus better on the reading material and other program-related struggles. Furthermore, they developed a sense of belonging. In the comfort of these social connections and from the renewed focus it allowed, the conversations they had with friends about the MARC program resulted in developing their identity with the program. For example, Taylor reported that explaining the meanings of rhetoric and composition for her family developed her sense of identity with the MARC program. Daniel reported it similarly, that as he used "layman's terms" to explain the foundational theories of rhetoric so that his friends at work could understand it, his own identity with the program began to blossom. He "was that [MARC] guy." And Hilde attributed the multiple conversations she had with William and Daniel about rhetoric after class as key to developing her identity with the program. Building social connections with their peers gave the interviewees a sense of membership with the group at a friendship level which allowed them to engage in discussions about the program with less anxiety regarding performance and with more focus which ultimately developed their identity with the program. As their identity as a member of the peer group grew, so did their confidence to direct the focus of their informal peer collaborations, which proved to deepen their understanding of the course content.

During study groups, impromptu meetings, and extended class discussions the interviewees enjoyed the space they needed (in terms of being out from under the gaze of their professors) to engage in informal peer collaborations with a freedom that the classroom could not accommodate. Outside of class, they had a choice, the “freedom to take the discussion exactly where you want to take it,” to “continue prying and asking questions,” or “riff off each other” (Hilde, Daniel, Neil). Having more control of the focus they were interested in allowed them to discuss it thoroughly until they reached a better understanding of the material. In the same conversation above in which Hilde described developing an identity with the program, she also revealed that her conversations revolved around the topic of rhetoric for many weeks which helped her solidify what it meant to her research focus: “having these conversations with different colleagues in the program [brought about] a big breakthrough.” Daniel mentions revisiting prior topics of conversations with William until “[he] begins to get a glimpse of it... I mean you go on and then an idea might pop in your head...[it’s] unexpected.” And William reported “ah-ha moments where [he is] in the middle of explaining something—that’s how it makes sense, that’s the thing that’s missing, you know.” Having the freedom to move the conversation towards another focus, initiate an entirely new topic, or try on an idea and test it with others helped the interviewees engage with the reading material in a way that was meaningful to them, deepened their understanding, and lead to unexpected learning moments.

The findings provided answers to my research questions by clarifying the forms that informal learning takes, how social connection to peers helps to develop identity, and how collaborating informally helps them to learn the content. The answers also lead to interesting discoveries. The importance of site as the key to providing a “learning territory,” a physical place in which the MARC students could gather outside of the surveillance of the professors

and talk openly about issues, ideas, or interrogate topics related to the program. Another interesting discovery is the metaphor “guerilla conversations” which aptly describes the characteristics of casual conversations that invade the every-day-world of the students and illuminates how it leads to learning. Not only does the metaphor draw a static image with which to identify casual conversations, but it also represents its active characteristic to show how casual conversations happen organically and what they accomplish. As an overview of what learning looks like in the lived experience of the MARC cohort, I provide a quick outline of the data from the findings that are organized according to the questions I asked in the interviews:

- 5/5 recognize that in some way they participate in informal peer collaboration.
- 5/5 described other ways, other than semi-formal scheduled peer collaboration, that they participated in informal peer collaboration.
- 5/5 identified benefits of this kind of casual interaction.
- 3/5 affirmed their identity as a member of the MARC program, researcher, and a scholar developed as a result of participating in informal peer collaboration.
- 3/5 reported that their decision to enter the MARC program was affirmed as a result of participating in informal peer collaboration.
- 5/5 affirmed the importance of developing relationships in the MARC program.
- 5/5 reported anxiety as a major issue in graduate school in general, and the MARC program in particular.

Earlier in this document, I described how the potential of informal peer collaboration begins with the individual student's first introduction to the reading material, theory, and ideas which then initiates his/her move towards others (who also seek to gain understanding of the coursework) and continues to move fluidly and iteratively via casual conversations that build relationships, which in turn eases anxiety, and develops their identity, resulting in surprising learning outcomes, such as connecting theory to practice, recognizing new applications of theory, or understanding the relevance of rhetoric outside of academe. Therefore, based on the findings of my research project, I argue that frequently engaging in casual conversations about program related topics leads to learning outcomes and disciplinary identity development. Within these forms, informal learning contexts, students gain valuable opportunities to practice the new community discourse informally through casual conversations with others which cultivate deep relationships and builds community. Gaining a sense of membership eases program anxieties and develops disciplinary identity with the cohort and the program from which informal learning progresses and learning occurs. Furthermore, I argue that the notion of space as a "learning territory" is key to providing an environment conducive for productive casual conversations, hence informal learning, in which surprising learning outcomes result.

It is a complex matter to write in a way for others to conceptualize the lived experiences of learning that the interviewees described, which overlap, intersect, and diverge. Nonetheless, I chose to arrange the findings of this chapter under three subheadings that lay out the facts as the interviewees described them. In the first section I report on the factors that motivated the cohort to seek each other out in "Anxiety in the Shadows: Motivations to Collaborate." In "Informal Conversations: The Ties That Bind Community, Eases Anxiety, and Develops Disciplinary Identity," I report on the various opportunities the cohort

accessed to make connections and build their community of practice with whom they needed to discuss the dense course material. By so doing, the anxieties diminish and disciplinary identities develop. The third section, “Informal Learning and the “Guerilla” Conversations of Mankind” is organized around the metaphor *guerilla conversations* that was identified by one of the interviewees as a way to explain how informal conversations are connected together as extensions of conversations that begin in the classroom and move towards multiple participants at many locations and at different times, working to layer meaning and understanding over time. Importantly, these casual conversations are integral to the learning process. I then argue for the importance of *site* as key to providing an environment that enhances the cohorts’ discourse practices, allowing them to *collaborate* productively in ““Learning Territories” Are Out-of-Site.” Finally, in “Answers Emerge While Questions Remain,” I review the findings, then discuss the factors both known and unknown, which complicate identity development for one of the research participants, and inquire into why another participant struggled to recognize informal learning experiences.

#### Anxiety in the Shadows: The Motivations to Collaborate

The anxieties that the interviewees identified struggling with early in the MARC program include feelings of isolation, not being good enough to succeed, i.e. imposter syndrome, and the difficulty of the material. Although the level of anxiety different amongst the interviewees, all identified the fear of ‘being found out’ and then being asked to leave the program after the excitement of getting accepted into the program faded, although none of the cohort reported long bouts with this insecurity once the intensity of the semester got underway. Two of the interviewees, however, had more pressing fears about being isolated from others when they started in the MARC program.

William and Neil voiced concerns that they might feel alone during graduate school which motivated them to seek connections early. Both referred to personal experiences in which they had felt disconnected from community. In William's previous professional life, he reported having little contact with his colleagues during the work-week and few friends outside of work. These two factors adversely effected his emotional well-being. He felt lonely and unhappy despite being successful professionally. Having once experienced isolation and loneliness, William reported that when he entered the MARC program he was determined to make building relationships a high priority.

The level of Neil's discomfort due to feeling isolated from his cohort and program was tangible during the first interview as seen in his demeanor and heard in his tone. Although regrettable, these feelings did motivate him to initiate changes. Neil's sense of isolation stemmed from a distinct disconnect to his cohort due to many factors, resulting in limited opportunities to meet with his peers for informal discussions about the program. This perpetuated his sense of loneliness. For one, Neil identified his age and life experiences as creating a distance between he and his peers that he found difficult to bridge: "I've come to realize I'm not much older than most of the even younger MARC people, but my life experience makes me feel older so it's so different than the physical age difference...when I have conversations and I feel like interjecting in a way, I don't. Well, the few times I do I feel like I'm ignored or they don't understand." However, he did comment that he wanted to be part of his community and gain a sense of belonging, then he would take steps to build relationships with his cohort.

Another motivation that some of the interviewees identified was imposter syndrome. Neil reported having confidence for writing good papers for class and for presentations, but had doubts that it would be validated by professors, the program, and larger discourse

community. Taylor reported that she compared herself to others in the program, which caused her to doubt whether she was qualified to be in the program, much less as a contributing member. And William reported his initial bout with imposter syndrome came early after he was accepted into the program. His concerns were that he had somehow tricked the program director into letting him enter the program which extended into concerns about performing in a way to disprove this. The anxiety over getting into the program accidentally or failing to meet the expectations of the director and faculty of the MARC program translated as imposter syndrome to these students and helped motivate them to make connections with their peers.

The struggle to learn the difficult course content also motivated several of the interviewees to seek each other out. Worried about talking correctly in front of the professor, or in discussion with the other students in the class, even for reading responses on the online forums at a graduate student level—an expectation I described in the introduction—confronted the graduate student soon after classes began. Grappling and coming to a good understanding of the dense material was vital for them to be able to speak with sophistication, i.e. to participate in rhet/comp discourse, about the reading assignments—which was one proof in the minds of the interviewees that they belonged in the program. This was a strong motivation for four of the interviewees to either initiate or locate a peer-study group. Regardless of the care professors took to design open discussions in the classroom, a point Hilde quickly acknowledged, she and Daniel voiced anxiety or fear to enter classroom discussions. Hilde described an overwhelming course and voiced her concerns about being right or wrong, and sounding stupid around her professor, and as Daniel noted he was always felt stressed to perform in a certain way in class. From William's perspective, there was also pressure to conform to the environment of the classroom and the

group ethic, a cadence or tempo that often controls the direction a conversation can take. The anxieties associated with in-class performance prohibited the interviewees from freely participating in class discussions yet motivated them to find opportunities to talk informally together outside of class in order to take the discussions to their own areas of interest.

Informal Conversations: The Ties That Bind Community, Eases Anxiety, and  
Develops Disciplinary Identity

There were many things on the minds of the MARC cohort that I interviewed for this project that they reported struggling with when they first entered the program. Anxieties over isolation, imposter syndrome, and the difficult material all seemed to work against them. Yet it also worked to motivate these students to move together outside of the context of the classroom into places that felt safer to openly grapple with these issues together. These students are not the first to be challenged in this way, or to seek solutions together. Kenneth Bruffee describes how students work together to re-acclurate in an “alien” situation in which much of their anxiety involves the struggle to understand the foundational texts. He argues that by collaborating, talking about the readings with peers, “[they] learned a lot more from what [they] said to one another about what [they] read...in the process, became a new community” (“Collaborative Learning: Higher” 8-9). Like those in Bruffee’s example, the interviewees reported seeking each other out to talk through the readings and class discussions together outside of the stresses of the classroom, primarily through a peer-lead study group that provided the first connection with others outside of class. Soon, this first connection evolved into a community of practice (Wenger), and from the multiple conversations that occurred within the community, they developed an identity to their disciplinary field. In the following, I report on how engaging in multiple conversations forge deeper relationships and ease anxiety; how the groupings outside of class enhance

conversations; and finally, how these combined experiences work to develop disciplinary identity.

Forging deeper relationships through multiple conversations, helps reduce the sense of isolation and gain a sense of belonging according to the interviewees (Erving et al, Gardiner, Erichsen). William was the most aware that the relationships he built began early in his first semester “in our formal 5383 study group and then they became informal relationships as we kinda spread out our own ways in research.” And William explained how talking with the cohort allowed him to be authentically himself in a group he belonged to: “[The cohort] really fell in. But it was important to do that just because I didn’t feel like I could be my whole self in class, and eventually that kind of thing just happens. You’re [sic] social creatures, you want to be understood in all your weirdness.” Hilde, likewise, identified this study group as her first peer-peer connection outside of class. She explained that she was one of many who responded to an email blast that went out to all the students enrolled in a difficult, foundational course, and as she reports it, “everyone was on board so we just kinda did it.” Meeting regularly every week was the crux to developing the relationships among the first MARC cohort that began there (as the core) through informal conversations with each other, and which lead to incorporating other MARC students that came into the program at a later time.

The friendships deepened outside of the study group as the interviewees found other opportunities to have informal conversations. For one, Daniel and William were roommates which they reported afforded them multiple opportunities to hold casual conversation at home and on the ride to and from school. For another, after the study group concluded William and Hilde established a routine of extending the conversations from the class room to other locations off campus, and Daniel joined in. It was from just “hanging out” at a local

bar after class that integrated Daniel into the culture of the MARC program. William emphasized that through these repeated occasions, the cohort got to know each other well enough to read when someone has “had a bad day...stressed out, or if [he] just doesn’t want to hear it. That’s the thing. We’ve come to know each other so we’ve had much productive conversations and engagement with each other’s work, so that’s really important.” Likewise, Daniel reported that the friendships he forged gave him a “sense of community, [which is] especially important for the small MARC program and for learning in higher education.” He knew he could reach out to his “community” to ask an opinion, to clarify an assignment, and to just not feel alone.

Meeting together in study groups, impromptu meetings, and extended class conversations provided the freedom for the MARC program students to practice their new-to-grad-school understanding of rhet/comp discourse by way of casual conversations in low-stakes environment, peer-to-peer. As a result, several reported having more control over the focus of their discussions, “freedom to take the discussion exactly where you want to take it” (Hilde), whether to continue conversations that had begun in class or to initiate different conversations. Also, as William mentioned, being at the bar or the walk to the bus stop meant not “having to censor myself...I mean it’s freer.” His description sounds similar to Jamelle, the student in Erving et al research findings, who reported that one of the outstanding benefits of collaborating with her peers in her work environment was that she could “freely express my thoughts and opinions” (24). For Daniel, this freedom meant that he was comfortable “to continue prying and asking those questions, “I don’t understand this, how does it work”” while at the bar with his peers after class. In another context, Daniel described an impromptu discussion with a cohort in the meeting room of his study group “where you did get to have this back and forth and no pressure of what we need to cover to

get through this course. It's nice because it's open-ended...we can talk about this one specific topic for the entire hour...or we can talk about each reading and go as in depth as we want." Neil described meeting with a cohort in the writing center where they were able to "sit down and we just riffed off each other." He appreciated the spontaneity of this opportunity to move the conversation off topic and discuss questions he was having. Whether in the writing center, a local bar, a walk to the car after class, or an email, the interviewees reported that their casual conversations provided a freedom to be more themselves and in control of the focus of the discussion, such as to pursue clarification when they didn't understand something, to argue a point, and to try on new ideas.

While engaging in numerous casual conversations over time began to stitch the experiences of the MARC students together from their first connection in a study group to conversations held at a local bar, at work, or while waiting for a bus, and to build their community, the interviewees also reported that the discussions they had helped develop their disciplinary identity. This was shown to be particularly true for those who engaged in conversations outside of the immediate peer group. William reported that he felt more comfortable identifying with the MARC program as he began to be more confident in have conversations about rhet/comp with other academics in other fields. Daniel also reported that when he talked about the program to other graduate students from other disciplines in the IA office (in the English department at the university where he worked) he identified strongly as "that MARC guy." Taylor noted that whenever she "put the discussion and debate even outside of class, then to me that is who you are, it kind of helps you make it part of your identity." These three recognized that conversations they had with people outside of the program not only helped them develop their disciplinary identities by talking about it, but they also realized that others identified them in this way which helped to highlight the

fact. For Hilde, being able “to discuss rhetoric specifically” during the first and into the second semester with Daniel and William after class, allowed her the time she needed to begin to develop her identity to field of rhetoric and composition. Hilde’s example underscores the time and multiple conversations requirement for some to begin to sense the development of identity to the discipline. For Neil, there hadn’t been enough time, conversations, or connections in the program to verify for him that his identity had developed at the time of the interview. However, he was reticent to say it wasn’t in progress. He remarked that, “I’m a growing person even now, and my identity keeps changing so I’m sure these kinds of conversations definitely help build some sort of passive framework for me.” His insight into the role conversation played in developing his identity with the program, as the experiences and reports of the others confirm, was not the only connection he associated with talking with his peers. As he reported in his interview, he anticipated more conversations amongst his current cohort that would support his learning experiences. In the next section, I discuss “guerilla conversations,” an apt metaphor that William used to describe how casual conversations lead to learning.

#### Informal Learning and the “Guerilla” Conversations of Mankind

If boiled down to the bare minimum, the learning narratives that the interviewees reported have a very straightforward structure. 1) They get introduced to readings, theory, and ideas and try to figure it out alone, 2) then they seek others out who are grappling with the same material, and meet outside of class to hash it out, 3) which helps them to understand it better. But the lived experiences of this oversimplified equation defy being boiled down quite so neatly as a straightforward path. The reality is much more interesting because it involves multiple conversations held with a variety of groups in multiple locations over time, which circles back to review, inquire, clarify, then darts off to new ideas or comes

to a complete stop to rest, folding over on itself and making layers of meaning a little at a time: learning is iterative. Informal conversations not only accommodate the natural inclinations of the learning process, but leads to learning outcomes.

How informal conversations leads to the “ah-ha” moments that three of the MARC students identified occurring for them is best comprehended through their descriptive narratives. However, William provided a metaphor that helps one visualize how these conversations lead to learning outcomes. He described the qualities of informal conversations as “guerilla conversations” that begin in the liminal space, the time after class in which the conversations still resonate, and lead to ah-ha moments. In this space, he comes down from the expectations of the classroom, as regards performance, filtering word choice and phrases, and become more natural—even “to curse a little bit.” He engaged in this carry-over conversation regularly in his first semester on walks from class to the bus stop with a peer, but it wasn’t limited to this time/location/peer. There was no line he could draw to predict where the conversation begins and ends as far as what and when something is learned. As informal conversations begin, often right outside the classroom and extend into the bar, chats with roommates, discussions in e-mails, texts, and cohorts in the hallway, the learning moves with it, often arriving back in the classroom. William described a specific time he talked with Daniel

about pedagogy, you know, outside. We talk about Freire for a while then that started to invade our normal conversations when we go to [local bar] after class. Then other people started to attend with us and it started to invade their conversations and then suddenly in the next weeks we’re talking about the same things in class, you know, that the personal informal

conversation invades the classroom, not to use the strong diction there, but it influences the classroom.

The “tip of the iceberg,” is the classroom discussions, but all that’s underneath is open for interpretation and investigation between the students in casual settings where they can move the conversation around and ‘discover’ what it means. He reports “having a lot of these ah-ha moments where I’m in the middle of explaining something—[suddenly] that’s how it makes sense, that’s the thing that’s missing, you know? I found that in conversations all the time now.” All of the interviewees reported similar experiences with “guerilla” conversations, and for Daniel and Hilde, it lead to unexpected learning moments.

Daniel reported learning in the car ride to campus with his roommate where they talk over what’s on their mind. This talking practice revolved around many topics, especially those related to their research interests, and moved in and out of topics as the discussion moved forward. These conversations acted as an extension from the classroom discussions, from previous conversations at the local bar, after classes walking to the car, and so on as Daniel continued to interrogate ideas until he found understanding:

I’m able to continue prying and asking those questions, ‘I don’t understand this, how does this work?’ I asked him to explain it in a different context, give me an example. I can continue trying to learn that one thing and at the end of the day, if I still don’t understand it...I begin to get a glimpse of it. It’s interesting where those kinds of conversations can lead. I mean you go on and then an idea might pop in your head...it’s unexpected. I have definitely been talking to someone and thought something—why didn’t I think of this before?

Daniel understood that these “human interactions” with his friends at the bar and on the drive to class were how sometimes “something will click.”

Hilde reported that the conversations she had in class carried over to her drinking sessions with William and Daniel. The limits in the classroom to take discussions in directions she wanted to explore were relieved in the casual environment, allowing her to dig deeper into the topic of rhetoric specifically in these after-class talks with her peers. She attributed a “big breakthrough” to these informal conversations with her peers:

We’re in the mindset of trying to go above necessarily of our comfort zone or skills...[to] understand it first I need [rhetoric] discussed in layman terms. These informal conversations I’ve had with my peers, it’s helped me to solidify what rhetoric means to me and what it means in terms of my study. I could see rhetoric and I could see medieval women’s writing and I knew that there was rhetoric present, but I just didn’t know how to talk about it. So that really was something that didn’t gel until I had these many conversations with William and Daniel and other colleagues in the program, which has helped me see explicitly how I want to talk about rhetoric and how I’m able to fit it into my thesis. That for me was a big breakthrough.

For Hilde, the carry-over conversations invaded her winding-down time at the local bar after class where, like Daniel and William, the conversations built up on one another until learning caught her by surprise.

The “guerilla” conversations metaphor that William coined helps describe how the discussions that began in the classroom *traveled* with them far beyond the classroom and into their every-day conversations. This “invasion” was a common practice of the MARC students who reported that talking a point or issue through together was how they moved

through their struggle with, for example, comprehending theories, connecting them to life experiences, and to understand vague concepts within the dense material, which eventually lead them towards the light of better understanding—and major “ah-ha” moments.

### “Learning Territories” Are Out-of-Site

At one point in my research project, I began to consider what factors supported the conversations the interviewees had together when I realized the important role that locations played. These were the locations they bonded together before and after class over a coffee or beer and where they talked about their struggles and successes in the program. The sites that the interviewees identified were shown to be the key for providing an environment conducive for *productive* informal conversations that the students engaged in. The common denominator among the locations that the interviewees identified is the absence of the professors. Being in a place beyond the surveillance of the professors immediately diminished the pressure to perform at an in-front-of-professor level, reduced their anxiety to ask questions, supported the freedom to take conversations new directions, and as William, Daniel, and Hilde reported, these were the sites of unexpected learning moments. Due to the profound learning that resulted from the conversations that were held there, I refer to these sites as “learning territories,” a term I borrow from Alice and David Kolb.

To emphasize the importance of these spaces to the conversations the interviewees engaged in, I reinterpret Kolb’s term “learning territories” to include the physical sites that the cohort names as places they relocate. My assertion is that the MARC students don’t leave the only valuable-for-academic-learning spaces when they walk out of the classroom, but create other, more productive spaces. Kolb reminds us of the significance of space to peer collaboration: “Human beings naturally make meaning from their experiences through conversation. Yet genuine conversation in the traditional lecture classroom can be extremely

restricted or nonexistent” (208). I include a quick reminder here that William, Hilde, and Taylor reported that the environment of the classroom in the MARC program invited a version conversational learning. While the presence of the professor is invaluable to help guide the classroom conversations, they also apply a light-handed control on the directions that the conversation could take, the depth they could go, and tangents some students may wish to explore. And I further acknowledge the time constraints and the occasional challenging personality dynamic which can exist in the classroom that also prohibits the full experience of rich conversations. Often, for the incoming master’s student, here is why the classroom isn’t ideal: “Indeed it appears that feelings and emotions have primacy in determining whether and what we learn. Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety can block learning, while positive feelings of attraction and interest may be essential for learning” (208). Hilde and Daniel reported feeling anxiety and fear, and William feeling constricted in the classroom. In contrast, outside of the classroom Taylor mentions her enjoyment when talking with others at home and the coffee shop, and for Neil a sense of freedom to “riff” with a cohort in the writing center, or to laugh (Daniel). The emotional experiences the cohort reported as it related to location not only aligns with Kolb’s assertion regarding the emotional element involved in learning experiences, but justifies my using the term “learning territories” for my own purposes. The ELT theory and its related concept of learning space support my assertion that site is key to providing an environment in which the MARC cohort can be themselves—to feel, think, perceive, and behave genuinely—and that when they hold these free discussions it can lead to learning unexpectedly. The spaces that the interviewees identify, then, provides insight into what spaces they consider conducive for hanging out and talking, yet provokes questions about why they also fail to recognize other spaces.

The sites most frequently identified by the cohort included the hallway right after class while ideas were still fresh on their minds, the local bar, workshops at the writing center, and online via e-mail, and in rooms reserved for study groups. Taylor also identified home (the place her parents live) and the coffee shop as casual spaces she collaborated on MARC related topics. Daniel and William reported that they had regular conversations about their coursework or research projects in the car going to and from class, and later at home. Taylor and Daniel reported that they frequently discussed their coursework and research interests with others at work locations. And Neil mentions the writing center and email conversations as convenient sites for conversations with his peers.

At the time I conducted the interviews, I didn't anticipate finding how important the locations were that students gathered for extended discussions. The value of "learning territories" to creating an environment that supports the informal collaborations that the MARC students practiced, and to the learning that resulted, began to reveal itself gradually as the interviewees described their experiences—highlighting its role in the informal learning process. Prior to this research project, I was familiar with the benefits that hanging out after class brings. It allows students to destress from the rigors of graduate work, to get to know each other outside of the context of class, and to enjoy the friendships they are building. But as the findings of my study showed, not only do these locations provide the MARC students with a space to chill, it also provided a "learning territory," a strong link in the chain of events that leads to learning.

#### Answers Emerge While Questions Remain: The Incomplete Puzzle of Two Case Studies

Motivated by anxieties related to the difficult transition into the MARC program, including issues of isolation, difficulty with the course material, concerns over performing "correctly," the interviewees sought each other out early in the program so that they could

talk about these issues in more casual terms and with less pressure to perform. Gathering outside of the classroom environment, they reported more freedom to take the discussions into low-key and highly social locations resulting in a sense of belonging and well-being—to which site was shown to be key in providing a supportive environment which I call “learning territories.” By engaging in multiple occasions of talking together, they reported that disciplinary identity developed and understanding of the course content grew, resulting in unexpected learning moments. Seen as a learning journey, these seemingly individual steps are in reality interlocked via the casual conversations the interviewees practice together, with one result leading toward and building on another. The culmination of these results in learning outcomes affirmed for some the decision to enter the program; as Taylor is quoted to say, “this is where I belong.”

Both Daniel and Hilde provide excellent examples of the findings. They participated in informal discussions frequently together with peers and with others in the social contexts described in the findings section, and they reported benefits from these conversations, including learning outcomes. While my research project provides strong evidence that casual conversations leads to all of the benefits above, there are some questions remaining, which Daniel and Hilde’s cases also exemplify. I begin with Daniel, who resisted acknowledging his identity as a member of the first cohort despite reporting that he identified with the MARC program, and evaded answering other questions altogether.

#### Daniel

According to my findings, early connection doesn’t always ensure a strong identity with the cohort, a fact clearly shown in Daniel’s strong resistance to confirm or deny developing an identity with his cohort and reluctance to give a direct answer to other questions during the interview. For example, my first question got straight to my point: “Do

you participate in informal peer collaboration?” His cautious answer, “it depends, because sometimes” and a long hesitation, after which he then described precisely what I asked. But for other questions he gave meandering comments, long explanations that were not addressing my question. Carefully I drove back around to the questions I wanted his perspective on, or a description of his experiences such as, “can you put into words how learning is different outside of the classroom?” Answer: “yeah, I’ve been thinking about that lately. One of my biggest things is reflection...” and a long discussion about his research interest. “Has talking with peers and others informed your identity as a MARC student, researcher, scholar?” His discomfort with the idea is visible as he shifts in his chair and takes a deep breath before he answers. This could be due to his understanding at the time that he attributes, or should attribute, any of his progress in graduate school to his individual effort. It’s difficult to know, but he begins by explaining how empathetic he is as a person, then a ramble about not being a “bigot,” having an interest in learning, being open-minded and (again) empathetic. Did he think I thought he was a bigot? Closed minded? I couldn’t tell what this was coming from but I assumed it was based on some of his experiences with people in his past. “But do you feel secure as belonging to the MARC program?” A lot of the time he does. Attempting to clarify his self-perception I ask, “You’re a viable member?” “Well...” scene fades to black, curtain closes. I just let it go.

The discrepancies in Daniels responses are puzzling. How Daniel reports his experiences with his cohort such as the positive impressions about being their equal against his glaring concerns over “being labelled” motivated me consider some factors that might have affected the interview. Were the questions confusing? Did the interview stress him? (Hard to imagine as he ate a huge sandwich while we talked through the interview). Was he concerned that I wouldn’t think his experiences with peer collaboration interesting,

important, “legitimate?” Legitimate compared to what or whom? After analyzing my notes and the transcripts of Daniel’s interview, I surmised that in his mind he needed to measure up to the other two that he hangs out with, students whose grasp on theory (at least in Daniel’s eyes) is much deeper and more important than his own contribution. For one, I had the sense that he felt apologetic about his research interest and considered it less in importance than William’s. He described trying very hard to grasp the research William was focusing on and that after a long time, “the gap was closing a little.” He also appeared to measure himself largely on the *level* of discussion that William and Hilde initiated, and his own (his perception) of understanding. Certainly, coming in to the program a semester behind the others might seem to put Daniel at a disadvantage, however, everybody starts at the beginning in a graduate program. So, he wasn’t actually “behind.” However, entering a program in the Spring does present challenges. Although Daniel will eventually catch up in the knowledge-building sense, he won’t ever catch up with the first cohort on shared experiences. Furthermore, he’s not even at the same place as other MARC students who entered the program in the Fall, who technically make up his cohort. He was certainly in a catch-22 as regards meshing with his cohort. Nonetheless, his desire to over explain his research interest to me, to inform me that was not a bigot, or combative in arguments, but rather “egalitarian” and “an equal” suggests that Daniel felt a need to justify his presence to me in the MARC program and to work hard to show he belongs (to himself? To the others?). The first cohort consists of a very strong personality dynamic, which undoubtedly plays on his insecurities. Daniel took the longest amount of time with me in the first interview: 40 minutes.

I have no doubt that informal peer collaboration played a part in supporting Daniel’s acculturation process into the MARC program, building friendships and a sense of

belonging, and importantly for learning outcomes which he also reported during the interview. How casual conversations either contribute or reduce his issues of insecurity in the context of graduate school, particularly for students such as Daniel who enter during the Spring semester, was beyond the scope of my research project.

In contrast to Daniel's apparent hedging during the interview, Hilde provided concise and clear responses to my questions and reported an outstanding "ah-ha" moment as a result of multiple conversations she had with her peers. Regardless of this stand-out moment, she struggled to recognize some of the locations and occasions that she practiced casual conversations through which this moment occurred.

### Hilde

Hilde stands out to me for being particularly at a loss to recognize occasions in which she engaged in informal peer collaboration: the organized peer-study group; a workshop offered at the writing center; and, when strongly prompted by my interview question, "think *very* broadly," a local bar. I already knew she frequented the local bar after class because I shared classes with her in which this was discussed, therefore, it was common knowledge. But her hesitation to identify the conversations she had there was especially confusing when I learned later in the interview that this was where she had her "big breakthrough." There is another site that I have firsthand knowledge of Hilde talking with a peer frequently about class related topics. It's at the writing center with me. These details aren't huge, but it does lead me to wonder whether she either, a) doesn't recognize other informal conversations outside of the more obvious organized study groups, or workshops as part of her learning process, or b) whether she hasn't considered them in this light. It seems plausible that, like the students in Leon and Pigg's study, Hilde's perception of what she did outside of more formally academic contexts and sites seemed "unsanctioned" and

therefore unrecognizable as sites of learning, regardless of the impressive learning outcome she reported. For what's it's worth, I did not prepare her or the others with the questions before hand, but I allowed 30-45 minutes for them to reflect on their responses. She was there for twelve. This, too, could be explained by her pre-conceived ideas about what informal peer collaboration included—and did not.

There were other groups and occasions that Hilde did not identify having conversations about the ins and outs of the program with. She served as an IA in her first year in the program, but didn't mention work friends as those with whom she talked about the program. As I mentioned earlier, I talked with Hilde all the time in her workspace about school related things. But William, who served as the MARC GA didn't either. Also, is Taylor the only one who speaks with her family about graduate school? Do others communicate with their families and friends outside of the program about their academic plans, their work on campus, their writing projects when they visit home? No one mentioned Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other social media sites that are common networking locations to connect to professors, writers, and researchers in the field. Again, I attribute these choices at least somewhat to the prevalence of the dominant 'academic' narrative that plays strongly in the minds of these grad students. Furthermore, the notion of peer collaboration is often narrowly interpreted as a peer-led study group, workshops, or mentoring. On this point, I realize that had I been more explicit during the interview about how I defined the term, the cohort may have reported on a wider community membership and sites that they engaged in informal peer collaboration. At the time when I designed my interview questions, I took particular care not to lead the interview in any particular direction. Regardless, the locations and groupings that they did identify were the sites they

frequented the most and with whom their relationships grew strong while they talked through the particulars of their personal and academic lives—and learned.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to present the findings in a clear way to communicate the experiences and benefits that the interviewees reported as a result of engaging in casual conversations outside of class both accurately and authentically. I drew particular attention in the first section to the anxieties that the cohort identified when they first entered the program and how these stresses motivated them to seek each other out early. I then showed how participating in casual conversations together eased those anxieties by allowing them to discuss the dense reading material and other concerns in layman's terms and in a less stressful environment away from the eyes of the professors. By talking it out together, their relationships deepened and disciplinary identity developed. While these were somewhat expected results from my research project, other interesting findings emerged.

The metaphor “guerilla” conversations was a term that one of the interviewees used to characterize the casual conversations that the MARC students had together. “Guerilla” conversations move in and out of locations, times, and participants, while it builds meaning over time and results in learning outcomes. Based on the descriptions that the interviewees reported, the conversations outside of the classroom proved integral to their informal learning process.

Another interesting finding was the significance of site as key to providing a supportive environment conducive for productive informal discussions. Based upon the reports from the interviewees, all the locations shared something in common: they were beyond the gaze of their professors. In the comfort of these casual locations, the interviewees experienced the freedom to be themselves and had control over the discussions.

It was in these locations that the interviewees reported unexpected learning moments—hence I refer to these locations as “learning territories.”

While the larger focus of my findings revealed the benefits that the interviewees reported from their casual conversational practices, another aspect of the findings underscores that the conversations are held within a social context among peers and others in the interviewees’ communities and occur frequently. The practices, as described by the MARC students, mirrors current learning theory. In Etienne Wenger’s social theory of learning, termed Communities of Practice, he defines in “Communities of Practice, A Brief Introduction” as “...groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Farnsworth 1). He goes on to qualify the learning outcome that this definition allows as either incidental or intentional (1), and to designate three characteristics:

A shared domain of interest that “implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people.

The community pursues “their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.

The practice element requires that members are not “merely a community of interest—people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance. Members of a community of practice are practitioners (1, 2).

The MARC students in my study fulfils the three requirements outlined above as students who are committed to meeting the expectations of the MARC program and graduate college; are actively engaged in helping each other through multiple opportunities, means, and

locations; and practice their skills individually and in groups. The findings reveal that the interviewees not only meet the conditions described for a community of practice, but also provide detailed descriptions of how these practices happen as a lived experience.

While the findings are separated and organized in a way to demonstrate how casual conversations support MARC students that lead to learning through various steps (anxiety, reduced anxiety through connection and talking, developing identity, learning), I also emphasize how these practices resist this organizational model and move freely, organically, and unpredictably, hitting snags and leaping over hurdles at times which effect the beneficial outcomes both ways. The interviewees' endeavor to enter and successfully complete an MA is ultimately a human one and as such there are many variables for students and program directors to consider in terms of student support. To this end, my research provides strong evidence that informal conversations held outside of the context of the classroom supports that journey in multiple ways. In the following conclusion, I discuss the significance of the findings to the larger conversation regarding graduate student support, implications for program directors, and thoughts regarding future research.

## V. SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Arriving as a new graduate student to my first class, I was prepared to be stressed over the work load, the writing projects, and the eventuality of the thesis. I was also stressed by things I couldn't quite articulate: I had a sense of urgency to act, but little direction to get started; I was self-conscious but in a new, inadequate way; and I was up-ended (I felt lost) by the lack of structure, i.e. writing prompts, rubric, and I couldn't obsessively check grades to measure my level of success because they were few and far between. As my research showed me, stress is common. Anxiety to understand the near claustrophobically dense reading material, to produce MA-level research projects, to contribute meaningfully in classroom discussions, and the need to belong to a group in order to talk with others about these stresses, motivated students (as I did) to move together early for support.

The reports from my interviewees revealed success stories in which they overcame the stresses of negotiating the ambiguous world of graduate school by initiating connections with each other to practice informal 'discourse' away from the eyes of their professor so that they could learn. And when learning happened, it was quite unexpected. The informality of the discussions and the social context of the locations may to some extent explain the reason the interviewees were surprised learning happened. The social context coupled with the casual way they talk at the bar, the coffee shop, in the car, etc., are not how they necessarily envision *academic* conversations. In reality, these sites, or "learning territories," allow more opportunities and freedom to engage with the readings, theories, and ideas, and as Taylor points out, to start applying it to real life. These conversational practices move the abstract discussions of the classroom into the tangible, lived experiences of the students.

Furthermore, the interviewees reported that moving the conversations outside of the

classroom into “learning territories” provides an emotionally safe space for students to be themselves, to discuss in layman’s terms, and to direct the focus of the discussion into areas he/she were interested. Some reported significant “ah-ha” moments as a result. As the “guerilla” conversations demonstrated, casual conversations play an important role in the informal learning process that results in another dimension of deep learning—something that Hilde in particular had difficulty recognizing even though she participated in this way frequently and attributed learning outcomes as a result. The disconnect Hilde experiences is not wholly surprising as the notion of graduate school invokes an image of intense, formal learning for many. It is important, therefore, to enlighten the graduate student to the benefits of every form that peer-collaboration takes, including its least ‘academic.’ Therefore, the need to “sanction” these acts for graduate students is evident (Leon and Pigg).

My research findings suggest the importance of making early connection with peers, building strong relationships, and developing an identity with the program for graduate student support across the disciplines, reinforcing the research on the importance of early peer connection in the literature review (Erving et al, Gardiner, Erichsen and Bollinger, Hurst et al). The findings also reveal the deeply emotional aspects of the journey that the MARC students describe or exemplify through their responses to my interview questions, highlighting the importance of social connection and acceptance as it relates to their development as academics, or in other words, learning outcomes—and how these needs are met through casual conversations and learning happens. How these findings are significant to the larger conversation are in the following subsection.

#### Relevance to the Current Conversation

The majority of the available research, however, is focused on doctoral students and the support peer study groups provides, whether initiated by students or facilitated by

faculty. The focus of my research looks past the predictable peer-led study group to examine what other places discourse is practiced, with whom, and what kinds of benefits MA students in the field of rhetoric and composition report. For me, the importance of investigating this population of graduate students was to examine the earliest experiences of graduate school culture, which influences the professional trajectory that the students follow. The strong sense of community and purpose that support brings makes for a positive experience and results in success. Without these social connections, including a network of people beyond the program and plenty of spaces to talk, feelings of discouragement, isolation, and imposter syndrome can continue far into the journey and negatively affect student success, resulting at times in withdrawal from the program. Although none of the interviewees withdrew from the MARC program, the findings show that Daniel and Neil had a difficult time feeling a part of the program or their cohort, but used this as a motivation to initiate other ways of connecting and finding relevance in the program.

The significance of such descriptions is that it humanizes the current research. The experiences that the MARC students relay brings a vitality by introducing the emotional component into their narrative and showing how that part of their identity accompany them throughout their graduate school journey. As their fears are resolved through early connections, talking together outside of class, laughing together on the way to school, they also move forward academically. Understanding the connection between the emotional and social to learning outcomes for graduate students is not new. However, being able to see the research participants in a holistic way, as humans who express their concerns while they report their successes, as my project sought to do, brings life the research that is already known.

The emotional component emerged again through another interesting finding—the importance of “learning territories.” While anxieties crown the minds of the MARC students while in the classroom with the professor, they melt considerably once away from his/her surveillance. For the MARC students, the spaces that they gathered were found to provide the mental and physical space they needed to relax and focus. Although the classroom with the professor holds value as the starting point for the discussions that move beyond the four walls, according to my research findings, profound learning moments occurred in “safe” spaces, such as the local bar. The value of this space is multi-layered and include providing a social outlet and a place to deepen relationships with peers and others. More significantly, however, is that these spaces underscore the value of informal and unstructured learning.

Finally, my research provides a vivid depiction of current learning theories in the lived experiences the MARC students describe. By providing the profiles of individual students within the MARC program, including the known variables, my impressions, and the emotional and social experiences of their personal narratives, theories are particularized, rounding out our understanding of how learning happens.

Like the students in my research project, who take the abstract theories of rhetoric and composition into their own lived experiences in order to make tangible meaning of it, so should program directors and researchers take what they currently believe about graduate students’ experiences and measure it against the experiences my interviewees report. In the following, therefore, I the implications that my research has for both program directors and research moving forward.

#### Implications for Program Directors

The topic of program design came up indirectly in the final interview I held with the MARC cohort, in which I asked them to offer their own recommendations for student

support. The overarching concern was the lack of structure under which the other suggestions fall. Many wanted a stronger presence from the faculty in a mentoring/sponsorship role to support writing projects, to seek PhD programs, for career preparation, publishing, and conferences. In *Supporting Graduate Student Writers*, Steve Simpson addresses some of the same suggestions that the interviewees bring up that are current in the conversation of student support. Regarding student concerns about writing, Simpson claims that supports are emerging (5). For example, Mary Jane Curry's "More Than Language: Graduate Student Writing as "Disciplinary Becoming"" looks at the role that writing has in the "enculturation and academic identity formation" process that students undergo via the various writing genres they encounter through their writing projects. Curry argues student success is supported when students interact with faculty in the discipline in which students engage in these new literacy practices.

Other writing supports are discussed in Christine Jensen Sundstrom's "Graduate Writing Instruction: A Cautionary Tale." Sundstrom identifies the need for expert writing instruction for graduate students as they are underprepared. William voiced his concerns regarding his writing style as contributing to his imposter syndrome. Making the turn from outsider to insider in the new academic culture is strongly measured by the writing students produce. Sundstrom provides a strong argument for her solution, yet recognizes that the primary reason such structures are not in place is because the faculty don't see the need. Perceived as remedial and unrelated to research, faculty attitudes fail to understand that "this type of writing serves as a vehicle for communicating what a research community is, knows, does, and values. It empowers students to create their professional identities" (201). Regardless of the attitudes of the higher-ups, the MARC students in my research project eagerly seek such writing support as necessary for success. I encourage program directors to

collaborate with writing center directors to develop a program along the lines of the low-stakes program that Wendy Larcombe et al researched. This model might be worth researching further because it not only supplies writing support, but also provides another place of social contact.

Formal mentoring may also help new students transition into graduate programs by providing the first point of contact, although Simpson suggests that orchestrated connections is not always successful. Experiences with set mentors as a main support for instruction in graduate school has shown mixed results, particularly when “the graduate students’ dreams can rise and fall based on the quality or the compatibility of their advisory relationships” (5). Thus, program directors would be well advised to move cautiously towards establishing a set partnership for their graduate students, either faculty-, advisory-, or peer-peer. The mentor-peer partnership is relationship based and requires time to coalesce. There are other variables that must be considered for a partnership of this kind to work, including personality, learning style, available time, expectations (Noonan et al). Having a MARC mentor preferably from the more established cohort serve as a first point of contact could provide an immediate connection for the floundering grad student, while also recognizing the anxiety that a faculty-student mentoring model might be too intimidating.

Despite the non-competitive, welcoming, and inclusive environment that the director and faculty establish for the program, the mystery that surrounds the acculturation process, concerns over expectations such as what is “right” and what is “wrong,” and the lack of explicit direction underscores the interviewees’ need for structure to guide them through. What I learned during my research about the effects of stress on learning, identity development, relationships building, and acculturation begs me to ask, Do the faculty

withhold information that would help me? Should they be more explicit with expectations? Are there models of student orientation that are more effective at calming some of these anxieties? The need to supplement the current support with more structure from the faculty, whether by mentor relationships or writing/career support to ease the anxieties that new MARC students face when they enter the program is clear. Additionally, program directors should acknowledge the benefits of informal peer collaboration that my research illuminates and communicate these benefits to incoming students.

Expanding the notion of informal peer-collaboration to forms, locations, and communities that are not traditionally associated with student support or learning outcomes in graduate school should be explicitly communicated to incoming graduate students by the program director. I posit that if program directors and faculty alike recognize and encourage this expanded model of informal peer-collaboration to the students in the program, two positive outcomes could result. It may help break assumptions surrounding “legitimate,” academic conversations, such as limited to peer-to-peer (or mentor, or professor) on the college campus, or even the local bar or coffee shop and must consist of strictly academic topics for discussion. Also, it may encourage students to recognize and practice all opportunities to talk informally about their program in an informed way, by erasing any doubts that the practice has legitimate value to their learning process, and reap the benefits of surprising learning moments as a result. From the first orientation, faculty and experienced students in the program should introduce discussions highlighting the value of informal peer collaboration in its broadest terms, including who constitutes members of a supportive community, and its potential benefits for the new-to-the-world-of-graduate-studies student. Finally, program directors should emphasize that these practices align with current theories and research by showing the value of casual conversations for gaining and

applying academic knowledge (Bruffee), the benefits that stress-free locations provide (Kolb, de Villiers and Pretorius), and that talking with people outside of the program helps develop disciplinary identity development and supports emotional well-being (Kram) so that learning can happen. By so doing, the program director sanctions informal conversations as an integral part of *being* a successful graduate student.

### Implications for Further Research

As previously discussed, my research provided some valuable answers to how informal learning happens for the MARC students and importance of casual conversations to bring this about and how site plays a key role as a “learning territory.” As I sought to identify variables that effected the benefits for some in the project, such as for Neil who suffered disconnect from his cohort due to his class schedule, other variables stay hidden from view. For example, in Hilde’s case study, I now consider the possibility that she wasn’t reluctant to identify other places and experiences in which she had casual conversations with her peers, nor discounted those instances as “academic.” What other explanations are possible? Was she just intent on giving me precise information? Is it just not in her personality to elaborate? Also, the learning outcomes that are evident in the findings from my research strongly suggests that casual conversations lead to learning as Hilde’s case shows. But how would this be different if she had been aware of the benefits of informal collaborations prior to the results she experienced? Would she identify more experiences? Would she devote more time in these opportunities? Invest more deeply? What if she understood them as academic occasions of learning? Would the results change? And for Daniel, whose answers and demeanor during the interviews implied insecurity, may suggest of other variables that affected his answers. He could lean towards self-deprecation when it comes to taking credit for learning or seeing his own contributions to conversations as

valuable. He might suffer from social anxiety, a learning disability, or other issues of a personal nature. Perhaps he thrives with some level of competition that pushes him during his learning process and hadn't reached his personal goal at the time of the interview.

Introducing other possible variables or interpretations on my research findings shows that there is more to explore in future research projects, particularly regarding what factors contribute or inhibit how informal learning happens for graduate students. Such answers could provide additional insight for students as they approach the difficult task of earning an MA degree, ensuring that they are well informed about the internal supports they can and should build that helps them through their journey. Although program directors are not responsible for meeting all of the emotional and social needs of their students, staying up-to-date on the research that illuminates how students experience learning—including factors or variables that contribute to students' anxieties or help to dispel them in the classroom or in other program related activities—will help them provide an environment that is safe and conducive for learning. How such factors may or may not affect attrition rates in graduate school programs may also be worth investigating.

#### Final Thoughts

My hope is that my findings initiates more research on the matter of how MA students learn outside of the classroom and the role that informal peer collaborations plays in in the process lest we leave other potential benefits undiscovered. I also hope that program directors may draw insight from the student perspective of how informal learning happens based their experiences reported here and keep in mind the emotional and social link to this process, when designing graduate programs for incoming students. In these ways, may we apply current and future research to benefit the students we serve.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### Appendix A

Interview Guide: How if at all, does informal peer collaborations support MARC program students?

Interviewee:

Interviewee's selected pseudonym

Date/Time/Place of Interview:

Length of Interview:

1. Do you participate in informal peer-collaboration? If so, please describe.
2. Are there other ways in which you participate in informal learning, other than scheduled peer collaboration? If so, describe.
3. Upon reflection, what are some of the benefits, if any, of such interactions?
4. Please explain how you came to participate in peer collaboration. Would you recommend it, encourage others to do the same? Why, why not?
5. How, if at all, does this differ from the formal classroom learning experience?
6. How would you describe the results of informal learning to your identity as a member of the MARC program, a researcher, a scholar?
7. How, if at all, does the informal social connection of peer-collaboration work to affirm your decision to enter the program?

## Appendix B

### Follow-up Interview Guide: How, if at all, does informal peer collaboration support MARC program students?

Interviewee:

Interviewee's selected pseudonym:

Date/Time/Place of Interview:

Length of Interview:

1. Why, if at all, is establishing relationships in the MARC program important for you?
2. Do you believe there is some level of anxiety associated with entering the MARC program, and if so, why?
3. What, if anything, would you recommend as support for building relationships and easing anxiety for incoming students to the MARC program?

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