

**Beyond the Ivory Tower: A First-Person Exploration of Navigating the Intersections of
Academia and Community**

by

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We acknowledge and respect the lək'wəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study investigates my experience as a graduate student engaging in a collaborative and community-driven research project with the University 101 Learning Community. Building on the work of many scholars on the importance of putting research into practice, bringing academic knowledge beyond the campus, and working collaboratively with communities, this thesis investigates the following general research question: *How does one graduate student describe the realities of doing community-driven research, including its opportunities and challenges?* Specifically, my work aims to explore the lived and embodied experience of engaging in non-traditional research as a graduate student. My findings highlight the complexity of trust in the context of community-driven research, the challenges of resisting academic norms in alternative research models, and the opportunities for growth for students taking on this scholarship with commitment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

In his book *Research is Ceremony*, Shawn Wilson (2008) asserted that “research is all about unanswered questions, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers” (p. 6). Research and education have often been conceptualized in the public imagination as existing only in the formal context of an institution, with clear distinctions of who is an expert and who is a learner or research subject. Such narrow understandings of research and education have been sustained by following tradition without questioning these assumptions. Applying a critical lens to how research is understood and conducted enables one to consider alternatives to these unquestioned answers and to think beyond Western research traditions. Questioning and complicating the dominant understandings of research and education have been longstanding debates in social science literature. Paulo Freire’s (1993) critical pedagogy, Ernest Boyer’s (1990; 1996) scholarship of engagement, Pierre Bourdieu’s (2000; 2003) scholarship with commitment, and Michael Burawoy’s (2005) public sociology all aim to break research and education away from the dominant conventions and question for whom and for what research and education are intended.

Over the past fifty years, the work of these scholars—amongst others—has contributed to an increased interest in alternatives to traditional models of scholarship and a growing awareness of the value of community engagement (Milne & Hamilton, 2021). Public engagement, community collaboration, and social advocacy have become increasingly relevant in the expectations and interests of scholars (Milne & Hamilton, 2021) and may be particularly appealing to graduate students and early-career academics (Nelson & Dodd, 2017).

Unfortunately, however, those doing this work face significant barriers—for example, institutional policies and economic realities may inhibit one’s ability to pursue and prioritize community-driven research (Burawoy, 2005; Kilty & Crepault, 2016; Sprague & Laube, 2009). While the literature describes such challenges (Franz, 2013; Matthews et al., 2015), there is little work exploring the experiences of graduate students doing community-driven research, particularly from a first-person perspective.

In my own academic experience, I often felt disillusioned by my discipline throughout my undergraduate education. I felt frustrated by how few examples I saw of sociology being applied in a meaningful way outside the university and was uninspired by the thought of pursuing traditional academic research. I craved community connection and wanted to see my sociology enacted outside of the ivory tower. My pursuit of community-driven research for my thesis was challenging in ways I did not expect, and as I struggled through how to develop a community-based project, I gained an acute awareness of the individual and institutional challenges associated with this work, both for students and for the communities involved. This awareness left me with a curiosity to investigate the realities and experiences of doing this work in a more personal sense, particularly from my position as a graduate student. Rooted in this curiosity, my thesis aims to explore the following research question: How does one graduate student describe the realities of doing community-driven research, including its opportunities and challenges?

To answer this research question, I analyzed my own experiences working on a community-driven research project with the University 101 Learning Community (Uni 101) using autoethnography and case study methods. My goals with this research were to connect

with my community, to learn what it means for me to be a researcher and a sociologist working beyond the academy, and to help make knowledge, research, and education more accessible.

This thesis explores the intersections between university and community and offers insight into the experience of doing work that falls outside of academic norms. I draw on Freire's (1993) critical pedagogy to illustrate the liberatory potential of education, and to interrogate how graduate education within sociology can support students in developing their own critical consciousness. I also apply the concept of scholarship with commitment to explore how scholars can engage in praxis through their research by working within their communities outside of academia, and how this approach can blur the boundaries between activism and scholarship. Both critical pedagogy and scholarship with commitment require the individual to include subjectivity and emotion in their work (Freire, 1993; Risman, 2006; Kilty & Crepault, 2016), which I share with the reader throughout this thesis. Resisting the traditional separation of reason and emotion is a central theme in this work and demonstrates the potential of learning through lived personal experiences.

In this section, I aimed to introduce both the context and intention of this research. In the following section, I review the histories of education and scholarship to illustrate how they have shaped contemporary academia. I discuss the relevant literature on community-driven research and scholarship with commitment to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with this work, situating my own research goals and questions within the existing literature. After placing this research in this academic context, I offer both a personal and a community context for this research in Chapter Two to situate myself as a researcher within the Uni 101 community. I then outline my research paradigm and design to discuss how I

approached this research, and review the methods employed to answer my research question. Following this, I discuss the ethical considerations for this work, as well as my processes of data collection, reflexivity, and data analysis. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five, I share my research findings. In Chapter Six, I discuss these findings and explore how they connect and contribute to the existing literature. I then discuss the limitations of this research, discuss possible areas for future research, and finally, offer some concluding thoughts on the key takeaways from this project.

Literature Review

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, was a proponent of critical pedagogy—a teaching philosophy that focuses on fostering critical thinking in students and encourages them to challenge structures of power and oppression. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is considered a classic text in the field of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2010). Named “one of the most important educators of the twentieth century” (Giroux, 2012, p. 116), Freire’s influence continues to inform educators around the world.

Freire’s critical pedagogy emerged from his rejection of what he referred to as the ‘banking concept’ of schooling. In the banking model, Freire viewed education as “an act of depositing, in which students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (1993, p. 53). Freire was critical of this model of education and how it was grounded in a deficit view of students, positioning them as passive objects “rather than active subjects capable of changing the world” (McInerney, 2009, p. 27). Within the banking model of education, “the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly” (Freire, 1993, p. 54). Thus,

knowledge is given by those considered knowledgeable to those who are considered the opposite. Freire discussed this assumption of ignorance as a tool of oppression, negating “education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” (1993, p. 53).

In this sense, banking education acts as a tool of the oppressor. When students are trained as passive listeners, to accept what is taught to them without questioning it, they are actively dehumanized in that they are separated from their own agency. Freire discussed the ways in which banking education functions to suppress creativity and serves the interests of the oppressors, “who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (1993, p. 54). The banking model of education can also be applied to post-secondary education. In capitalist economies, universities are increasingly defined through their ability to produce a skilled, knowledgeable workforce (Giroux, 2012). Students, instructors, and administrators who understand education in this corporate and neoliberal sense may have little interest in exploring the political elements of education to work towards liberation and freedom (Giroux, 2012). Although there has been an increased interest amongst educators in viewing education as a venue for emancipatory social change in recent years (Carroll, 2014), elements of the banking model of education linger in institutional policies and practices. Freire challenged many of the ideas that shape the Western academic tradition, and argued that authentic thinking, or critical thinking concerned about reality, “does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (1993, p. 58). Freire’s idea of authentic thinking was grounded in his understanding that thought only became meaningful or valuable when it was paired with action in the real world.

Authentic thinking is critical to a liberatory education grounded in critical pedagogy—what Freire (1993) referred to as *problem-posing education*. A liberatory education in this sense is one that fosters the conditions for self-reflection and critical consciousness for students (Giroux, 2010). Critical consciousness gives one the ability to engage in praxis by recognizing the oppressive social forces in one’s life and taking action upon them, essentially combining learning with social change (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 2010).

A problem-posing educational model begins with disrupting the teacher-student hierarchy, “so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (Freire, 1993, p. 53). This collaboration between learners and educators requires solidarity between learners and educators. Freire’s work focused on education in oppressed communities, and he noted that solidarity exists only when one “stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with” (p. 32). Disrupting the historical power dynamics in education, then, is essential to the project of liberation. However, according to Freire, liberation cannot be achieved through acts of ‘depositing’ but must be done through praxis. The idea of praxis, defined by Freire as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 57), is central to his educational philosophy.

Freire understood education as inherently linked to social change. The central task of critical pedagogy is to educate students to become critical agents “who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change” (Giroux, 2010, p. 717). Critical pedagogy focuses on building students’ awareness of the forces that have governed their lives and shaped their perspectives (Giroux, 2010). From this awareness, then, comes a transformative potential; with an

understanding of the social world around them, students may be in a position to actively change it.

In practice, Freire argued that this kind of pedagogy must be collaboratively developed with each group of unique learners. In order for education to be critical and transformative, Freire believed it had to be meaningful—essentially, he emphasized the importance of including students' personal experiences in relation to the curriculum (Giroux, 2012). Freire described the importance to reflection and experience:

If students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing (p. 19).

For Freire, pedagogy cannot be neutral—it must be meaningful to its students (Giroux, 2010). To be meaningful in this sense, it must be personal. Students must have space to draw upon personal experiences as resources in their own learning to foster critical reflection about what they are being taught. Freire understood lived experience as a crucial element of critical pedagogy, although only when it has been informed by theory, self-reflection, and criticism (Giroux, 2012, p. 119).

Pedagogy of the Oppressed has been widely celebrated and continues to have significant influence in the field of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2010). However, it is important to note that Freire's work emerged to some degree in response to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Tuck and Yang (2012) discussed the key differences between Freire and Fanon, particularly in terms of decolonization. Most significantly, Freire "situates the work of liberation in the minds of the oppressed" while Fanon "positioned the work of liberation in the particularities of colonization" (pp. 19-20). Tuck and Yang are critical of Freire's vague and

abstract use of the terms ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressors’ without explicitly discussing the particularities in this context. Fanon’s conceptualization of decolonization is not quite as simple as individuals freeing their own minds; from his perspective, violence is required to disrupt colonialism. In contrast, Freire’s analysis may seem euphemistic, particularly in his imagining of liberation as redeeming and freeing for both the oppressed and oppressors, arguably disregarding the ugly realities of different and specific forms of oppression and colonization. While critical pedagogy should not be considered a means to an end in regard to liberation and decolonization, its relevance to our education systems still warrants discussion and analysis.

Freire’s critical pedagogy encourages an education that is couched within the personal and the political. Emphasizing self-reflection, collaboration, and critical agency, a critical pedagogy is a necessary tool to liberate learners. As Giroux (2010) stated, Freire’s work remains relevant, particularly at a time when education “has become one of the official sites of conformity, disempowerment, and uncompromising modes of punishment” (p. 720). With education being closely tied to success under capitalism, there can be material consequences for those not conforming to traditional educational trajectories. Further, the focus on career training rather than critical thinking maintains—rather than challenges—the status quo. Despite this challenging time for education, Freire’s critical pedagogy encourages a sense of hope for humanizing and liberating all learners.

Not only are these challenges prevalent in education systems from the student perspective, but similar challenges are also a growing area of concern for academics and how they practice scholarship. The values that Freire argued must be central to education—self-reflection, collaboration, and critical agency—are also central to what Ernest Boyer termed

“scholarship of engagement.” In 1995, Boyer, the President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, delivered a speech advocating for the scholarship of engagement. By doing so, Boyer sparked much discussion and debate on the purpose of scholarship, as well as the roles and responsibilities of scholars.

Boyer’s work on the scholarship of engagement emerged from criticisms of academic work as being self-referential as well as disconnected from the needs and realities of the broader community (Renwick et al., 2020). Boyer (1996) argued that the focus of academia has shifted over the years and asserted that higher education has become “a private benefit, not a public good” (p. 23). Further, he discussed how university campuses are largely viewed as places “where students get credentialed and faculty get tenured” (1996, p. 23), and not necessarily as institutions promoting or creating social change. Boyer suggested that since the Second World War, we have “defined the academy as a home for the professoriate” (p. 88) and in the process have deprioritized students and community engagement.

Boyer’s (1996) model expanded the traditional understandings of scholarship into new realms. He named four different forms of scholarship: the scholarship of discovery, of integration, of application, and of teaching. Together, these four types were understood as academic engagement (Boyer, 1996; Renwick et al., 2020). The scholarship of discovery was closest to the academic tradition of “research”, intended to uncover new knowledge. The scholarship of integration placed this knowledge in wider context for interdisciplinary conversations and allowed for additional interpretations from differing perspectives. The scholarship of application combined theory and practice to put research into action. Finally, the scholarship of teaching emphasized the importance of communicating and sharing knowledge

to various audiences. Boyer suggested that the work most valued by the institution was the scholarship of discovery, and he criticized universities for focusing on research and teaching at the expense of the scholarship of service (Militello et al., 2017). Boyer's scholarship of engagement encouraged a shift away from the rigid binary of research versus teaching, and invited scholars to reconsider their roles as academics (Renwick et al., 2020).

Boyer (1990; 1996) called on universities to pivot their focus towards applying knowledge to address the real issues in the social world. He emphasized the need to continually go from theory to practice, and to "connect thought to action" (1990, p. 77)—a process Freire would refer to as "praxis." Boyer believed that the scholarship of engagement had the potential to create "a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other to enlarge and enrich quality of life for all of us" (1996, p. 33).

Boyer (1990; 1996) also argued for an increase in community collaboration in academia. He recognized that scholars should not work in isolation and encouraged academics to view scholarships as "a communal act" (1996, p. 27). He discussed the need to create a community of scholars that would collaborate and share knowledge (Renwick et al., 2020). In this sense, he believed the intention of education should be "not only to generate new knowledge, but to channel that knowledge to humane ends" (Boyer, 1990, p. 78), emphasizing the moral responsibility of scholars to utilize their knowledge outside of the institution. Boyer shared Oscar Handlin's perspective that the true value of scholarship could not be demonstrated solely within academia, but rather through its service to the social world. Quoting Handlin's statement that "a troubled universe can no longer afford the luxury of pursuits confined within an ivory

tower” (in Boyer, 1996, p. 33), Boyer argued that the conditions of contemporary society required scholars to participate in community engagement. Ultimately, Boyer argued that scholarship must be “creatively reconsidered” to better reflect the realities and needs of contemporary society (1990, p. 13).

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2000; 2003) built upon this idea of social engagement in scholarship and questioned if and how scholars can participate in the political sphere and social movements. Similar to Boyer, Bourdieu addressed the need for increased collaboration in academia, and called on scholars to combine theory with active engagement in their communities. Including a political agenda in one’s research while following the traditional methods of scientific inquiry was what Bourdieu (2000) referred to as scholarship with commitment.

Bourdieu criticized scholars who opt “for the cozy virtuousness of confinement within their ivory tower” (2003, p. 12) and described scholarly political engagement as being vaporous, in that it was intangible and not connected to action. Within academia, Bourdieu (2000) saw scholars as having a limited understanding of the possible impact of their work; he discussed the ease with which scholars may mistake scholarly debates at conferences with actual change in their communities. Bourdieu was convinced that this needed to change, first by bringing scholarship outside of the academy. He argued that “we must at all costs bring the achievements of science and scholarship into public debate, from which they are tragically absent” (2003, p. 13). By bringing scholarship into the community, Bourdieu saw the potential to create new relationships between researchers and social movements. Specifically, Bourdieu spoke of the need to create an alliance between researchers and activists, although perhaps

not necessarily arguing for researchers themselves to take on the activist role (Poupeau & Discepolo, 2004).

Bourdieu saw the role of the scholar as distinct from the role of the activist. He discussed the idea “public intellectuals,” meaning people who “invest in a political struggle” their specific skills and values of their craft, or, “in other words, people who enter the terrain of politics without forsaking their duties and competencies as researchers” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 40). Bourdieu viewed the unique skillsets and knowledges of public intellectuals as “indispensable to social struggles” (p. 42). However, the concept of critical reflexivity was a crucial prerequisite of doing this work; Bourdieu argued that public intellectuals must subject themselves to an ongoing examination of their own position and the relevant power structures when engaging in this work. This combination of political engagement, critical reflexivity, and scientific rigour was what comprised the practice of scholarship with commitment.

While Bourdieu called on academics to engage in scholarship with commitment, he recognized that some within the ivory tower may look down upon this work. Bourdieu (2000) discussed the ways in which this commitment to political or social change may be seen as “a violation of the famous axiological neutrality” (p. 41) and thus researchers engaging in scholarship with commitment may face challenges in straying from academic tradition. The lack of institutional recognition for doing scholarship with and for the community is exactly what Michael Burawoy called attention to in his 2004 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association.

In his address, Burawoy (2005) presented his argument for public sociology, sparking debate regarding the role of academics in society, the different forms of sociological

scholarship, and “the ability and responsibility of sociology to be socially transformative” (Fairbairn, 2019, p. 295). Burawoy explained how by involving deep and active collaboration with the community, one uncovers knowledge through “a process of mutual education” (2005, p. 7-8). This collaborative approach to sociological research is what Burawoy referred to as public sociology. In practicing public sociology, Burawoy suggested the boundaries between the university and the community become more permeable and flexible.

To analyze the different ways of doing sociology, Burawoy (2005) established a typology categorizing the discipline into four key areas: policy, professional, critical, and public. He described policy sociology as a goal-oriented approach aiming to provide solutions for problems defined by a client. Professional sociology exists primarily within the academy and is the sociology that generates new knowledge through methods and theories. Critical sociology examines the foundations of professional sociology, and “attempts to make professional sociology aware of its biases” (p. 10). By exposing and challenging the assumptions and blind spots of professional sociology, critical sociology promotes new research paradigms that include alternative perspectives. Finally, public sociology aims to bring sociological tools, theories, and research outside of academia to connect with other communities and to the broader public. Ultimately, public sociology is concerned with “social knowledge for the public good: for sociology as something that is revolutionary, challenges existing power systems, shifts ideologies and, consequentially, changes experienced reality” (Fairbairn, 2019, p. 286). Burawoy connected these sociologies by stating that “critical sociology is the conscience of professional sociology just as public sociology is the conscience of policy sociology” (p. 10). Thus, while each is distinct from the others, they are all related and interdependent.

Burawoy (2005) also explored the differences between two types of public sociology: traditional and organic. As Fairbairn (2019) stated, “the distinction between traditional and organic public sociology lies in the process of education and the public role in knowledge creation” (p. 287). Traditional public sociology includes that which reaches beyond academic audiences to public ones—for example, research that is disseminated in newspapers or other public media outlets. As Burawoy wrote, “the publics addressed are generally invisible in that they cannot be seen, thin in that they do not generate much internal interaction, passive in that they do not constitute a movement or organization, and they are usually mainstream” (p. 263). In contrast, organic public sociology involves working closely with a “visible, thick, active, and often counter-public” (p. 264). This research is not just simply shared with the public after the fact, but is created by, with, and for the public through active collaboration. In other words, traditional public sociology is typically shared with mass, anonymous audiences, while organic public sociology takes a more grassroots approach to the research itself and how it is shared. While Burawoy assigned the name ‘public sociology’ to this practice, it is important to consider that sociologists have a long history of doing this kind of work, particularly Black and feminist scholars engaging in community, care, and activist work by different names (Romero, 2020; Collins, 2007; Risman, 2006; Creese et al., 2009). W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, advocated for a sociology that could “be utilized as a liberating force” (Morris, 2015, p. 66, as cited in Romero, 2020) and embraced the roles of the activist-scholar and public intellectual. Regardless of the term used to describe this kind of scholarship, the work of these Black and feminist scholars must not be discounted.

Burawoy's typology, and particularly the case for public sociology, initiated much discussion and debate within the discipline. Some scholars argued that the distinct categorizations between professional, policy, critical, and public sociology can be limiting in that they do not necessarily account for multidisciplinary fields (Creese et al., 2009). Though Burawoy (2005) argued that the four parts of his typology are mutually interdependent rather than mutually exclusive, Ericson (2005) pushed further that some degree of public, professional, policy, and critical sociologies are all simultaneously "embedded in any sociological analysis" (p. 365, as cited in Kilty & Crepault, 2016). To address these criticisms and move beyond the limitations of Burawoy's model, I refer to the organic approach of public sociology instead as 'scholarship with commitment'. Following Kilty and Crepault's (2016) discussion, I use this term as it emphasizes a political, moral, or ethical commitment to the work and to a larger social justice project beyond just making the findings accessible to the broader public. Community collaboration is a necessary part of scholarship with commitment and is consistent with what Burawoy referred to as a "process of mutual education" (p. 8). Using the term scholarship with commitment also allows for a broader conceptualization of social science research beyond the discipline of sociology.

The call for scholarship with commitment reflects Freire's (1993) push for praxis and to combine knowledge with action to promote social change. Burawoy's (2005) argument for scholarship with commitment underscored the importance of this praxis, particularly within sociology. He criticized the contemporary institutional landscape, and the ways in which academics often lose sight of their original passion in the process of fulfilling institutional expectations. Burawoy discussed sociology's goals at its inception, speaking to how early

sociologists set out to change the world. However, the fight for sociology to gain institutional validation and to be recognized as a legitimate science distracted the focus of many sociologists from the initial goal of changing the world. In his words,

The original passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable environment, political freedom, or simply a better world, that drew so many of us to sociology, is channeled into the pursuit of academic credentials. Progress becomes a battery of disciplinary techniques—standardized courses, validated reading lists, bureaucratic rankings, intensive examinations, literature reviews, tailored dissertations, refereed publications, the all-mighty CV, the job search, the tenure file, and then policing one's colleagues and successors to make sure we all march in step. (p. 5)

This focus on academic credentials and disciplinary techniques highlights the pressure scholars face within the university that values productivity and conformity and acts as “an instrument to the state” (Romero, 2020, p. 24). “Success” in this environment often requires a researcher’s focus to shift from a passion for social justice to meeting institutional demands. The pressure to play by the institution’s rules in order for sociological work to be deemed legitimate may wear down researchers, leaving them with a limited capacity to be engaging in new and creative approaches to committed scholarship. However, despite these institutional challenges, Burawoy reminded us that “the sociological spirit cannot be extinguished so easily” (2005, p. 5), perhaps nodding to the long and continuing history of scholars engaging in this work, even despite the lack of adequate institutional support. To address these challenges, Burawoy’s push for scholarship with commitment aimed to validate the subdiscipline and garner more support and resources to encourage more researchers to take on this work.

The long history of researchers engaging in committed scholarship perhaps also exemplifies the inherent value of doing this kind of work. Patricia Hill Collins (2007) reflected that scholarship with commitment, particularly in the discipline of sociology, centres the value

in the work itself, rather than the value it can bring to the researcher; in other words, it is about connecting with community and sharing knowledge rather than building a career. Collins noted the passion and commitment involved in this work. In her chapter “Going Public: Doing the Sociology that Had No Name”, she wrote:

I suspect that people work at sociology for very much the same reason that some individuals become dancers, actresses, singers, painters, or poets—training for their craft may be part of their passion, but they would find a way to dance, act, sing, paint, or write even if no one paid them. (p. 111)

Here, Collins argued that doing the work for its own sake is of greater importance than the sake of one’s career or the validation from one’s university. Collins demonstrated the need to reconnect with one’s passions and commitments in engaging with this work, rather than focusing on meeting academic criteria or institutional productivity. However, resistance to academic expectations is limited in that activist scholars must still conform in some ways in order to maintain their positions and meet the material conditions for their own livelihoods.

Sprague and Laube (2009) pointed out that sociology has a responsibility to serve the wider public and doing so can strengthen support for the discipline by informing the public about the importance of sociological work. As Francesca Cancian (1992, as cited in Sprague & Laube, 2009) noted, the soundest test of any sociological theory is its ability to enact change in the real world. Sprague and Laube argued that engaging with those outside of the discipline and outside of the academy can in fact increase the richness and rigour of sociological scholarship. For example, a presence within a community allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issues under study (Kilty & Crepault, 2016). Similarly, Smith (2005) noted that while professional sociologists are merely accountable to their peers, public sociologists are accountable to the communities they work with, increasing their responsibility

“to get it right” (p. 42, as cited in Sprague & Laube, 2009). Ultimately, a commitment to a community “motivates the scholar to conduct methodologically rigorous and socially useful research” (Sprague & Laube, 2009, p. 253). The value of scholarship with commitment, then, is not only its potential to produce more rigorous research, but also its potential to create meaningful change in communities.

Social change is a critical component to scholarship with commitment. Risman (2006) asserted that what makes scholarship with commitment worth doing is “the mission to use a sociological imagination, research, and analysis to help create a more just society” (p. 283). Scholarship with commitment, then, encourages a blended role of scholar and activist (Kilty & Crepault, 2016), where research is conducted collaboratively for the mutual benefit of the communities involved (Risman, 2006). Collins (2007) emphasized the role of these value commitments as transcending mere collaboration with community members. In her words,

Caring about the public, seeing all of the others not as devalued entities that one must ‘mentor’ or ‘help’ but rather as potential partners for the betterment of society itself provides a core vision or ethos for this kind of work. (p. 108)

Caring for, and being committed to, the communities involved in the work is thus critical to engaged scholarship. This value-driven standpoint, according to Risman (2006), is an essential component of this work and should not be considered a methodological weakness. Creese and colleagues (2009) remind us that the pressing question involved in doing scholarship with commitment is not a matter of *if* we should be socially and politically engaged through our research, but rather *how* we can do this most effectively. Creese and colleagues argued that research is inherently connected to political agendas, whether we acknowledge it or not. Therefore, scholarship with commitment requires the researcher to be explicit about their

values, and respect “the values supporting scientific research, such as transparency, truth, and honesty” (Bellot et al., 2014, p. 63, as cited in Kilty & Crepault, 2016).

While scholarship with commitment offers a means to balance one’s values and activism with their scholarship, the tension between academia and activism has long created complex challenges for researchers. For example, Harter and Broderick (2014) discussed how university systems traditionally “privilege research over action” (p. 239), hindering the ability for scholars to engage in work that meets the community’s needs as well as their own. Similarly, Fairbairn (2019) outlined the ways in which universities are not necessarily “institutionally prepared” to support researchers doing scholarship with commitment in terms of “awards, distinctions, promotion, or tenure” (p. 289), which may ultimately push social justice-oriented researchers to pursue work outside of the academy. For those who do stay within the university setting, the institutional pressure and neoliberal attitudes in this context may result in these scholars being “disciplined into academic docility” (Fairbairn, 2019, p. 291). Both of these outcomes leave bleak opportunities for the advancement of scholarship with commitment in the academy. It is in this sense that Sprague (2008) discussed how the ivory tower “transforms activist into academic, while giving ‘academic’ its popular connotation of ‘irrelevant to the real world’” (p. 701). For social justice-oriented scholars who do stay within academia, this tension may cause them to feel “caught between two worlds” (Kilty & Crepault, 2016, p. 621; Sprague & Laube, 2009), facing pressure to compartmentalize their research and their activism.

These tensions between academia and activism have contributed to the ongoing fight for scholarship with commitment to gain legitimacy and acceptance in the academy.

Historically, “sociologists have been discouraged from pursuing social justice issues and applied

research” (Romero, 2020, p.3). Scholars have argued how the organization and structure of sociology often devalue applied or public work (Sprague & Laube, 2009; Romero, 2020; Kilty & Crepault, 2016). The challenge of this work gaining validation is exacerbated in that “making the case for the legitimacy of a scholarly project in the academy requires using its criteria, and the academia values exclusivity, inequality, and intellectualization” (Sprague, 2008, p. 701), which are in conflict with the values of scholarship with commitment. However, despite these challenges, recent years have seen notable increases of many different forms of public scholarship, including community-engaged learning initiatives, activism in the academy, and collaborative community research projects (Gordon da Cruz, 2018; Beaulieu et al., 2018). While certainly worth celebrating, the realities of this work continue to be complicated by navigating personal, professional and institutional dynamics, conflicting time frames, and research grants and funding, all of which can be significant challenges in executing this work from an institutional standpoint (Muhammad et al., 2015; Greenberg et al., 2020; Wallerstein et al., 2017). Additionally, the ‘publish or perish’ mantra emphasizes the ways in which academic success is measured primarily by the yardstick of publications, and not necessarily by its ability to create tangible change. Recent trends to measure research impact based on its economic and social benefits may at first glance seem to encourage the application outside of the institution and create change. However, within the neoliberal university, research impact is often conceptualized more as “a proxy for return on investment” (Rhodes et al., 2018, p. 140) rather than a measurement of meaningful change. Essentially, “the exceedingly risk averse corporate university devalues the kind of community engagement that scholarship with commitment typically requires” (Kilty & Crepault, 2016, p. 618). This tension between doing

scholarship with commitment while working within the ivory tower creates many challenges for the researcher, as well as for the work itself. These challenges may be felt particularly acutely by graduate students.

For graduate students who are often at the beginning of their careers and entering the discipline with a strong and untainted passion for social justice (Romero, 2020), the tensions between activism and academia may have a particularly strong impact. The institutional challenges to this work may perhaps be felt more deeply by graduate students, who do not have the same freedoms as career academics as they are bound by the limits of their degrees and the institutional requirements in place for their “successful” completion. Regardless of these challenges, Greenberg and colleagues (2020) argued that graduate students ought to be identified as a “unique public” that not only contribute value to the collaborative process, but also benefit significantly from publicly engaged sociological research. There is much for students to learn in practicing scholarship with commitment, yet these opportunities are largely limited by the faculty that is willing to support and encourage this kind of work. How to approach graduate students’ involvement in scholarship with commitment has been debated throughout the discipline’s history. More recently, Romero (2020) reviewed how Robert E. Park from the Chicago School “discouraged graduate students from engaging in activism” (p.10) and instead encouraged their role to be that of an objective and detached researcher. In contrast, W.E.B. Du Bois rejected this practice; Morris (2015) discussed how Du Bois’ understanding was that “one could not be a calm, cool, detached scientist” (p. 114, as cited in Romero, 2020) in the face of injustice, in particular while Black folks experienced such violence and oppression. This disagreement between Park and Du Bois illustrates not only how identity shapes one’s

experience in doing research, but also how the dominant sociological tradition has been one created by the white male standpoint. Power, privilege, and positionality are all deeply implicated in the challenges involved in this work, and in the social justice project in sociology. These historical and contemporary tensions demonstrate the need for structural and practical supports for researchers and communities engaging in applied scholarship.

While Burawoy called for increased institutional support and recognition to ameliorate these challenges for researchers doing scholarship with commitment, others have been critical of institutionalizing this work (Fairbairn, 2019; Kilty & Crepault, 2016; Collins, 2007). For example, Kilty and Crepault cautioned that the routinized practices that come with institutionalization may “threaten the organic nature” of scholarship with commitment (p. 629). Rather than focusing on legitimating scholarship with commitment within the institution, perhaps the focus of scholarship with commitment should be on loosening the ties to the academy in order for it not to act as a gatekeeper for community-driven research. Scholarship with commitment aims to recognize the fluid role of the researcher, and “de-center the university institution to promote interdisciplinary and community-based work” (Fairbairn, 2019, p. 287). This de-centering of the institution calls not necessarily for scholarship with commitment to gain a seat at the academic table, but perhaps a more radical consideration to build a new table altogether. By shifting away from traditional norms and markers of success like publications, awards, and tenure, perhaps scholarship with commitment can establish its own markers of integrity and success that reflect community values. For example, Collins (2007) reflected that she did some of her best sociology while working in her community, “all without publishing one word” (p. 101). In this context, bureaucratic validation and rewards may be

superfluous if this validation can come directly from the community. Burawoy (2005) and his critics would likely agree that the success of scholarship with commitment “will not come from above but from below” (p. 25), meaning it is dependent on cooperation amongst scholars and community members rather than institutional administrators.

This blurring of the boundaries between academy and community is precisely what scholarship with commitment calls for, and consequently necessitates a deeper understanding of how sociological work functions outside of the academy. Fairbairn (2019) encouraged scholars to consider that “if the goal is social change, we must pay attention to how sociological work done by non-academics contributes to the field” and also to remember that “the sociological imagination does not require a license to practice” (p. 295). Acknowledging the lived experiences and knowledges held in spaces beyond the ivory tower, then, is a necessary component of the social justice goal of scholarship with commitment. Within sociology—a discipline supposedly oriented around social justice and liberation—significant pressures and forces have resulted in research projects having to fit into “business models” and meet institutional goals rather than social justice ones (Romero, 2020). To return to the discipline’s social justice roots, there is an imminent need for scholarship that goes beyond the academy’s walls. By collaborating with communities, and acknowledging the expertise already existing within them, scholars can disrupt the traditional researcher/subject binary. Kilty and Crepault (2016) asserted that by “challenging the traditional academic script, scholarship with commitment works to avoid the institutional norms that maintain the division between academics and the publics they study” (p. 622). However, this resistance to institutional norms, of course, does not come without consequence. Without secured institutional support, scholars

are often left in precarious positions when engaging in scholarship with commitment—particularly young and emerging scholars.

This literature review highlighted various scholars pushing for changes both in the educational system and the entire research process, including who and what it is for. Freire's (1993) banking model of education largely prioritizes efficiency over students' growth and enlightenment, and similarly scholars such as Boyer (1996) and Burawoy (2005) have criticized academia for focusing on more economic and bureaucratic interests than community or social justice ones. Romero's (2020) reflection contended that not much has changed within sociology despite the work and advocacy of many scholars. As a graduate student coming to witness the institutional realities of academia, I questioned why the dominant discourses in sociology did not seem to be taking these arguments into account. I felt a deep frustration that the realities of contemporary scholarship were not necessarily living up to the legacies of scholars like Freire, Collins, and Du Bois. Inspired by the emphasis these scholars placed on praxis, activism, and community work, I wanted to explore the experiences and realities of doing community-driven research, from a graduate student perspective. Indigenous researcher Shawn Wilson (2008) discussed how a literature review in the Western tradition is typically a means of putting a research project into its context, and how by sharing our own backgrounds and axiology we can bring a personal context to our research and our scholarship. After reviewing the relevant literature and situating this project in an academic context, I now shift to discussing the broader context of this research and my connection to it.

Chapter 2: Methodology

To answer the question, “How do graduate students describe the realities of doing community-driven research, including its opportunities and challenges?” I undertook a qualitative study utilizing autoethnography to explore the experience of doing community-driven research as a graduate student. This research is somewhat unconventional given the nature of community collaboration. However, as Fillmore and colleagues (2014) asserted, when doing community-driven research we must “avoid trying to fit into a preconceived methodology” (p. 58) as these projects often develop in ways extraneous to, and separate from, traditional research trajectories. Community-driven research often emerges from grassroots relationships and experiences that are complex, challenging, and rewarding. I begin this chapter by placing this research in a personal context in terms of what brought me to this work, and then placing it in a community context by introducing the University 101 Learning Community and our collaborative research project. Following this, I outline my research paradigm and design, data collection techniques, reflexive practices, and approach to data analysis.

Personal Context

Working from Wilson’s (2008) understanding that “we cannot remove ourselves from the world in order to examine it” (p. 14), I recognize that this research is largely guided by my own perspective, and thus it is important for the reader to understand not only what drew me to this work, but also who I am as a researcher and student. Particularly for researchers conducting autoethnographic work, various scholars have emphasized the importance of

beginning the work by “finding yourself in the story” to unpack one’s own experience with the topic (Leavy, 2017, p. 145).

My journey to this research has been complicated. When I first entered university as an undergraduate, I was relatively young and naïve, without much of a plan for my education or career—until I found sociology. Having grown up with a father who was raised in apartheid South Africa, I was aware from a very young age of my own privilege and of social inequities at a general level. While my childlike understanding of oppression did not allow for much critical engagement, this awareness manifested itself in a sense of personal guilt and helplessness. My exposure to sociology, however, introduced me to concepts and theories that enabled me to analyze what I had witnessed and experienced throughout my life that I had not previously had the language to understand or explain. It felt so freeing to acquire these sociological tools and to see real possibilities for radical structural change.

This optimism did, of course, eventually fade as I succumbed to the pressure of meeting deadlines, writing papers, and competing with my peers. I began to feel frustrated by the ways that academic sociology felt like all talk, without ever having to walk the walk. I felt frustrated by the lack of engagement and action in the scholarship I was taught, and as I learned more about all of the problems both of our world and our discipline, I began to lose hope in our abilities as sociologists to create real solutions to social problems.

As I neared the end of my undergraduate degree, I was confronted by a number of challenges that amplified these frustrations. I was struggling with a deep and ugly grief after losing one of my oldest friends. I struggled to come to terms with his death, particularly when I understood it as a failure of our social and structural systems. My world had fundamentally

shifted, and I could no longer bear the monotony of my coursework and what felt like academic apathy. I wanted to do work that felt like it actually mattered.

I found myself searching for this meaning and a sense of connection in volunteering with local community groups and non-profit agencies. One experience in particular that influenced me during this time was in a fourth-year course on community-engaged learning and applied sociology, where students worked directly with community partners to develop sociological projects. I worked with an organization that aimed to connect different communities through storytelling, and it was in this space that I began to understand the importance of human connection and lived experience. Witnessing the expertise in this setting—the way these community members interrogated and analyzed the same systems as I had attempted to do in lecture halls—I understood the richness and value of their embodied knowledge, and was humbled in my own understanding and the frivolousness of my use of academic jargon. This reckoning is what ignited my commitment to doing research that centred this expertise, and de-centred the expertise of the academy.

With this renewed hope in sociology, I felt motivated to pursue graduate school. I envisioned my graduate training as better aligning with the values of scholarship with commitment. Although I was still apprehensive about pursuing graduate school primarily out of fear of being pushed into what Fairbairn (2019) named “academic docility”, I was inspired by scholars such as Du Bois, Collins, Freire, and Burawoy who valued public work, the role of the activist-scholar, and engaging in praxis. I was determined to find a place for my sociology outside of academia and to pursue community-driven work that centred lived experience. Soon

after embarking on this journey, however, I realized I was not equipped to be doing this work and had no idea where to start or how to begin.

After the first few tumultuous months of graduate school, I came across the work of Uni 101. The same struggles I experienced between trying to connect my education, research, and community I saw mirrored in Uni 101. The excitement and enthusiasm for learning in Uni 101 struck me as so powerful, and I knew this was a community I wanted to be a part of. As I established relationships within this community and began to consider how to design my thesis project, I quickly ran into the conflict around how to translate our community-driven project to fulfill my thesis requirements. At the time, this felt very much like a selfish endeavour—I struggled to reconcile the disconnect in wanting to engage in a community-driven project but using the experience to get a graduate degree. With my supervisor's support and guidance, I eventually decided that for this research project to be as non-extractive as possible, what I could best explore was my own realities and experiences, rather than exploiting those of the Uni 101 community. This project then developed into a case study of my graduate experience working with the Uni 101 community, using autoethnography as a research method, to explore the realities of doing scholarship with commitment. I saw my own struggle of pursuing community-oriented research in graduate school as an entry point to explore the broader tensions between academia and community engagement in general. With this understanding of my personal background as a student and a researcher, I now turn to the background of the Uni 101 community and our project together.

Community Context

Uni 101 is an accessible education program at the University of Victoria that offers non-credit courses designed for people “who otherwise are excluded from post-secondary education” (Clarke et al., in press, p.1). Uni 101, like many similar programs across Canada, was modelled after the Clemente Course in New York (Shorris, 2000). Rather than focusing on vocational job training, these open-access university courses were designed in line with Freire’s pedagogy to develop students’ critical and reflexive thinking to equip them with skills to be more actively engaged in their own lives and communities (Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015). The program was initially launched in 2006 in collaboration with the Faculty of Humanities and expanded to include the Faculty of Social Science the following year (Sharpe, 2016). Since then, Uni 101 has taken in approximately thirty students each year. The program receives funding from various areas of the university, as well as from individual donors and in-kind sponsorships. The philosophy behind the program is “learning for the sake of learning” and making the university accessible to the local community (Clarke et al., in press, p. 7). Programs like Uni 101 attempt to reduce the barriers between the community and the university as much as possible.

Uni 101 is one of many similar programs modelled after the original Clemente Course in New York. The Clemente Course was the first open-access university-level course, developed in 1995 (Shorris, 2000). Despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ statement regarding the need for equal accessibility in higher education, many individuals continue to face significant barriers in accessing this education (Jury et al., 2017). Confronting such barriers was the intention behind the Clemente Course, and the subsequent programs designed in its wake. The Clemente Course was established with the mission to expose students to the humanities,

as opposed to the vocational job training that is often considered appropriate for economically disadvantaged individuals. The lessons embedded in the humanities and social sciences that are taught in these programs are designed to foster skills in critical and reflective thinking that empower students to be more actively engaged in their own lives and communities (Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015). Accessible education programs such as Uni 101 have largely adopted this Clemente model in aiming to confront structural barriers to higher education for those who face barriers such as poverty, disability, and mental illness (Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015).

The Uni 101 program offers two main courses: Uni 101, which offers a broad overview of the humanities, and Uni 102, which focuses on the social sciences. For alumni of both courses, there is Uni 201, an ongoing, drop-in style course that covers a wide range of topics that cross academic disciplines. The Uni 101 program reduces barriers by providing students with support such as childcare, bus passes, and meals. Typically, the courses run for a semester, meeting twice a week for 101 or 102, and once a week for 201. The topic area of the course changes each month, with a new volunteer instructor designing a syllabus for the four-week period. Before each class, there is an open coffee room where students can socialize and share a hot drink. Class typically begins with a seminar that includes a creative activity, then small group discussions on readings related to that week's topic. After the seminar, the group breaks for dinner where teaching assistants, student liaisons, and students eat together at the university dining hall. The final part of class is the lecture and question period, where the volunteer instructor delivers a lecture on their area of expertise.

In addition to the Uni 101, 102, and 201 courses, Uni 101 also offers a Leadership Program. The Uni 101 Leadership Program is designed to foster leadership skills for alumni of

Uni 101, training them as Student Liaisons in the classroom, tasked with facilitating discussions and providing peer support for new students. Though it is not required for graduates of the Leadership Program to take on the role of Student Liaisons, the program is required for those in Student Liaison positions. The Summer Leadership Program typically runs from April to June, about five hours a day for four days a week. However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the summer of 2020 the Leadership Program shifted online, where the group met via Zoom twice a week for two hours.

My supervisor and I approached Uni 101 in the winter of 2019, proposing a collaborative project to explore students' experiences in the program. This idea was initially rejected due to concerns over it being more extractive than collaborative. However, the program coordinators were open to developing a project with me and the Uni 101 community, but first asked me to participate in the Summer Leadership Program in order to gain familiarity with the community and to build trust. Additionally, I began volunteering as a Teaching Assistant in Uni 102 in January 2020, and then in Uni 201 in September 2020.

During the Summer Leadership Program, the opportunity arose to work with another UVic faculty member and volunteer lecturer in Uni 101, Dr. Audrey Yap. Dr. Yap proposed a project to the group that would explore social barriers to belonging and connection, and how educational communities such as Uni 101 could help break down some of these barriers. After discussion and deliberation, the Leadership group voted to go ahead with the project.

Working alongside Dr. Yap, I took on the roles of research assistant and co-facilitator of the project. Through a series of brainstorming sessions, interview workshops, and conversations on research ethics, our group worked together to develop a shared

understanding of both the research process and the project itself. We worked collaboratively to develop our research approach in line with the community's values, with each decision requiring either the use of in-depth discussion to reach consensus or tiered voting strategies. Ultimately, this process brought us to the following research questions: What are some barriers to meaningful connection and belonging, and what are some things that can help us to overcome those barriers? We decided to investigate these questions by exploring the stories and experiences of the group through a series of peer interviews, where Leadership students signed up to interview and/or be interviewed by each other. Together, we brainstormed an interview guide of questions the group felt comfortable asking and answering. I facilitated a short series of interview workshops with the group in preparation for this next phase of the research. The interviews were hosted and recorded by Dr. Yap or myself and were conducted over Zoom. I transcribed the interviews which we later analyzed together to identify key themes, and collaboratively wrote an article about our findings. In addition to the article, we created and designed a series of postcards together that reflected the project's findings, with the intention to share the postcards with past and present members of the Uni 101 community.

The project was designed to explore belonging and connection in learning communities like Uni 101, and to understand what factors help or hinder educational environments where students have a sense that they belong and where they can thrive. Ultimately, the hope was to share information that could help replicate the values and practices of learning communities like Uni 101 in more traditional academic settings. In this sense, this research holds potential to further the development of supportive educational communities like Uni 101. In my time with

Uni 101, I have learned to embed their values and practices into my own work. In the following section, I discuss my research paradigm and discuss how it guides and informs this project.

Research Paradigm

As this research is based largely on my own reflections, experiences, and interpretations, it is critical for the reader to understand not only who I am as a researcher, but also how my ontology, epistemology, and axiology inform my methodology. My ontology refers to how I view reality, while my epistemology refers to how I learn about and understand that reality. My axiology is the set of morals or values that guides my search for knowledge, both in terms of what I choose to study and how to do so in an ethical way. The way that I view and learn about reality is aligned with both critical constructivist paradigms, and the morals and values that guide my search for knowledge are reflected in an anti-oppressive framework. In the following section, I discuss these paradigms and outline how they guide the overall research process.

A critical paradigm focuses on examining the power dynamics of a given context, particularly the social conditions reinforcing this power and the fluidity of these power relations (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). A critical paradigm challenges dominant discourses and promotes social justice (Leavy, 2017, p. 13) and is aligned with this research as it examines power relations within my experience in academia in general, and the Uni 101 collaborative research project in particular. This examination of power also employs an anti-oppressive framework to expose how these relations work not simply in the subject of the research, but also in the research process as a whole (Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 17).

The power dynamics explored in this research among myself, academia, and the Uni 101 community are subjective and, in this sense, connect to a constructivist paradigm. A constructivist paradigm emphasizes people's subjective experiences by suggesting that we actively create meaning and construct our realities through social interactions (Leavy, 2017, p. 13). Following this perspective, this research is grounded on the understanding that individuals create meaning and produce knowledge through their interactions (Creswell, 2009). Within this paradigm, researchers value subjective interpretations and understandings of people's experiences and circumstances (Leavy, 2017).

An anti-oppressive perspective views knowledge in a similar way, as produced through interactions among people who are socially and politically located (Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 19). A constructivist perspective aligns with this research as it does not endeavour to uncover a singular truth, but instead aims to explore meanings, insights, and understandings that can support resistance and social justice (Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 20). Based on this understanding that meaning is created between people and not objectively waiting for discovery, this research does not claim to report a singular truth or "the way it is" but rather aims to explore my own relationship to it and how I created meaning through this experience. As an autoethnographic project, this work reflects my own way of seeing the world and the meaning created through my interactions with the Uni 101 community.

Both critical and constructivist paradigms assert that the goal of research is not only to acquire knowledge, but also to apply that knowledge outside of academic spheres. Thus, the axiology of these two perspectives is that research holds a responsibility to address social problems. More specifically, an anti-oppressive approach requires the researcher to embody

this axiology by taking an active role in working towards social justice (Potts & Brown, 2015).

Practicing scholarship with commitment from an anti-oppressive framework means that “there is a political purpose to our research work, whether that purpose is change on a societal level or within our own lives” (Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 17). While I do not anticipate that this thesis will result in direct changes at the societal level, this research certainly inspired changes in my life as a researcher, student, and community member. Here, I echo Wilson’s (2008) statement that “if research doesn’t change you as a person, you haven’t done it right” (p. 135).

Guided by these critical, constructivist, and anti-oppressive perspectives, my research is centred around the interrogation of power dynamics, the meaning created in collaborative research, and the larger goal of social justice. Potts and Brown (2015) discussed how anti-oppressive research encourages resistance to dominant ideas not only in the research outcomes, but in the overall processes as well—therefore making the value and intention of social justice present in each step of the research. With this understanding of my research paradigm outlining my epistemological and ontological position, I now move on to discuss the research design and the strategies I used to investigate my research question.

Research Design

As this project was dependent on community collaboration, it required some flexibility in its development. I share Fillmore and colleagues’ (2014) perspective that researchers must allow themselves to let go of pre-existing expectations and academic norms in order to lean into the creativity and flexibility that is part and parcel of community-oriented research. This project, then, was somewhat unconventional in that I needed to meet the community’s needs, the university’s, and my own. To explore my lived experience working with Uni 101, I employed

a qualitative approach to reveal the richness of this experience. I believe this project would have been limited by a quantitative approach in that the uniqueness of the experience could not be adequately captured by or translated into numerical analyses. As Potts and Brown (2015) suggested, while quantitative methods offer a means of counting, measuring, and quantifying certain social phenomena, the experiences and insights of those involved remain largely unexamined by numerical measurement. Thus, this project's exploration of my experience was best suited to a qualitative approach that allows the researcher to uncover insights about the experience that exceeds the potential of quantitative methods that are ill-suited to exploring subjective realities (Leavy, 2017).

While qualitative approaches certainly offer tools to investigate the deep, rich, details of a certain experience, there are still concerns around qualitative approaches in the history of social sciences. There is a growing body of literature documenting the harms and limitations of traditional research models, especially in the context of research conducted on marginalized communities (Danaher et al., 2013; Boilevin et al., 2019). *Research 101*, a manifesto created collaboratively between representatives from the Vancouver Downtown Eastside and researchers from Simon Fraser University, stated that research can often “feel cold, impersonal, [and] dehumanizing” and can “increase inequality, contribute to stigma, exploit peoples’ pain, [and] exhaust community members” while at the same time benefiting the researchers more than the community under study (Boilevin et al., 2019, p. 6). Potts and Brown (2015) further articulated how research often functions to maintain the status quo by suppressing certain voices and ideas. However, an anti-oppressive research framework can do the opposite by

potentially serving as a tool for social change with liberatory power (Potts & Brown, 2015, p. 19).

To align my research with the values of mutual respect and liberation, I approached this work with intentional resistance to conventional Western research norms. These dominant research norms encourage social scientists to favour a detached voice in their writing in order to separate intellect from emotions (Davies, 2012; Wilson, 2008). In sociology, Game and Metcalfe (1996, p. 4, as cited in Davies, 2012) stated that the discipline has traditionally presented knowledge in a “dispassionate and disembodied” way, largely because emotions and academia are typically seen as “incompatible entities” (Bloch, 2002, p. 113, as cited in Davies, 2012). Although viewing research and emotion as fundamentally opposed to each other is dominant in the Western tradition, Hampton reminds us of the limitations inherent in this view:

Emotionless, passionless, abstract, intellectual, academic research is a goddamn lie, it does not exist. It is a lie to ourselves and a lie to other people. Humans—feeling, living, breathing, thinking humans—do research. When we try to cut ourselves off at the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to the project around us (1995, p. 52, as cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 101).

While there are certainly scholars who share Hampton and Wilson’s view of resisting false claims of objectivity in research (Davies, 2012; Wall, 2006), the dominant norms in academia are still rooted in using the academic voice over a personal one and conducting research as ‘objectively’ as possible. Utilizing a personal narrative in research has been viewed as going “against the grain of academic writing” (Davies, 2012, p. 750) as one is expected to be as objective as possible. However, as human beings, researchers have emotions and subjectivities about the topics they study (Davies, 2012) and there should be a place for the personal in

academic writing. From a critical and constructivist standpoint, I argue that if one accepts that all knowledge is socially situated, then exploring the social requires building upon both individual and social experiences. Therefore, to investigate both structural and personal realities of a graduate student's experience with community-driven research, I employed autoethnographic and case study methods for this research.

Research Methods

As a qualitative study, this project utilized an autoethnographic case study to investigate the ability of graduate students to engage meaningfully in community-driven research. In this section, I will discuss these research methods and why they are appropriate in this context.

Although not a central method to this project, Dorothy Smith's method of institutional ethnography informed my approach to this research as it grounded in using everyday experiences to understand the broader social world. In her book *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for the People*, Smith (2005) discussed her experience as a sociologist who was unable to see her work at home in relation to the discipline, and how women's voices and stories were left out of the discipline. Following this realization, Smith developed her approach of institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry that begins "in the actualities of people's lives" in order to "explore the social from there on" (p. 22). Smith (1987) suggested that institutional ethnography explores the social relations that we construct in our daily lives.

Smith's work and her frustrations with the discipline resonated with me as they felt similar to my own. I struggled to connect my own experiences navigating academia as a graduate student pursuing community-driven work with the formal sociology I was taught. Smith asserted that sociology "had almost nothing to say" about her experiences, and I too felt

disconnected from the discipline, particularly in how I at times felt it had failed to prepare me for doing community-based work. I had little knowledge of the methodological tools needed to design and implement a community-driven research project, or the personal and emotional skills required to build relationships and create meaning with communities of diverse social locations. Smith (1987) discussed institutional ethnography as a means to explore and analyze complex social relations—not from an abstract theoretical perspective, but from a personal and practical one, in which one’s own experience is used as an “entry point” to explore the everyday world (p. 160). Rooted in personal experience, this research adopts Smith’s (2005) approach of standpoint sociology which positions the embodied knower as the expert of their own experience. My expertise lies in my own experience working with the Uni 101 community, and therefore this case study forms the foundation for this research.

Case studies are often used in qualitative research as they “allow for an in-depth exploration of research processes” and have an “intentional flexibility to understand the phenomenon within its context” (Hernandez, 2019, p. 45). Case studies use this in-depth exploration of a particular program, event, individual, phenomenon, or process to reveal a deeper understanding than is possible by other methods (Leedy & Omrod, 2005; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). To gain a deeper understanding of practicing scholarship with commitment as a graduate student, a case study enables me to analyze my own experiences within a unique and defined context. Case studies often provide unique insights and are well suited to answering questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ (Yin, 2014). However, like any other research method, case studies do have a few weaknesses. These weaknesses often relate to the generalizability of case study findings, given that the data is often generated within a specific and narrow context (Leedy &

Omrod, 2005; Yin, 2014). However, in doing community-driven research, Milne and Hamilton (2021) discussed how different research partnerships will have unique needs and challenges based on the researchers and communities involved. Although the findings from this project may not be generalizable to other settings, I believe they should reveal the nature of community-driven research projects.

Using Uni 101 as the community group for this case study was fitting for a number of reasons. The Uni 101 Program is connected to, and in many ways dependent on, the university's funding and support. While the program embraces accessibility and is committed to disrupting traditional hierarchies in education, it is bound by the university's bureaucracy and institutional red tape. Uni 101, then, is in a relatively unique position to offer insights on the challenges of doing anti-oppressive work within a historically oppressive institution (Lincoln & Stanley, 2021). My own struggle with trying to practice scholarship with commitment within my graduate program is similar to Uni 101's position as a community service program that is bound by the university's policies and procedures. The parallels between myself and Uni 101 trying to navigate the university bureaucracy while trying to work beyond it provided a unique opportunity to connect my personal experience with the broader context of community and university relationships.

This case study is also autoethnographic in that it is grounded in my own personal context working with Uni 101. Autoethnography is particularly well suited to gaining insight into personal experience as it requires "turning the ethnographic gaze inward to the self, while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1997, p. 227, as cited in Muhammad, Wallerstein, et al.,

2015). Autoethnographic research allows the researcher's personal experiences and insights to explore the larger cultural context (Leavy, 2017, p. 144). While traditional ethnography does not necessarily reflect or value the researcher's subjective position, autoethnography fills this deficit by establishing space for the researcher's own lived experience to be included (Mizzi, 2010, p. 2). This method has been used to explore the identities and experiences of researchers (Milne & Hamilton, 2021, p. 3) and Humphreys (2005) argued that it can connect the personal to the social and improve both the richness and reflexivity of the research (p. 840, as cited in Mizzi, 2010). As a qualitative research practice, autoethnography relies on rich, in-depth detail to explore the personal and the social. However, it is important to note that these experiences are not only captured through personal journal writing.

Hoskins (2000) distinguished reflexive autoethnographic writing from personal journal writing in that autoethnographic writing connects the personal to the political "in a way that brings life to abstract theoretical positions" (p. 56). While some have criticized autoethnography as a research method for placing too much emphasis on a single subject (Atkinson, 1997; Sparkes, 2000), Wall (2006) argued that these critics "fail to realize that no individual voice speaks apart from a societal framework of co-constructed meaning" (p. 155). Therefore, autoethnography is not merely an autobiographical narration, but rather an analysis of everyday experiences within the broader political and social context. Through this framework, personal narratives become a means of creating meaning and constructing knowledge from lived experiences (Hoskins, 2000) and is "an active demonstration of 'the personal is political'" (Ettorre, 2016, p. 4).

Given that autoethnography relies on personal experiences, this work “has a storytelling quality” (Leavy, 2017, p. 145). My approach of narrating this experience reflects the unique nature of these methods. In the context of autoethnographic work where the researcher is often intimately connected to the data, the complexities of researcher subjectivities and emotions are particularly challenging. Autoethnography is a “process which does not include doing or writing research as one is taught in traditional academic settings” (Averett, 2009, p. 361, as cited in Ettore, 2016) and therefore rejects traditional expectations of objectivity or neutrality in research. These traditional academic norms leave little room to examine and explore the human experience of the researcher. As a method in opposition to these norms, autoethnography embraces the value of emotional knowledge and personal experience by “transforming personal stories into political realities by revealing power inequalities inherent in human relationships and the complex cultures of emotions embedded in these unequal relationships” (Ettore, 2016, p. 2). With this understanding of the methods employed in this research, I now shift to discuss the ethical considerations involved in this work.

Ethical Considerations

While it may be easy to assume that because autoethnography involves writing about one’s own experiences, research ethics may not apply in the conventional way, it is important to recognize that the self does not exist in isolation and therefore it is often impossible to share personal experiences without implicating others in the process (Wall, 2016). While the majority of my data was my own personal reflections, these reflections were couched within a separate research project and a specific community, and thus I had to navigate my own journaling and analysis sensitively and respectfully. Dr. Yap and I received ethics approval from the Human

Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A) for our collaborative project in Uni 101, and this ethics application also accounted for me drawing on experiences in this project for my thesis.

Data Collection

As an autoethnography, this research relied on documenting my own experiences working with Uni 101 on a collaborative research project. The data is primarily based on my weekly journal entries where I described my experiences with the community, the project, and the relationships that emerged during this work. Individual freeform journaling can be a useful tool in autoethnography, providing space for the autoethnographer to critically reflect on thoughts, feelings, experiences, processes, challenges, and successes connected to the research (Milne & Hamilton, 2021). Autoethnographic writing combines “stories from the past with ongoing self-discovery in the present” (Chang, 2008, p.130). In this sense, journaling is not necessarily intended to depict experiences in an objective sense, but rather to extract meaning from these experiences (Ettorre, 2016).

In my journal entries, I generated what Geertz termed “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). Tracy (2010) discussed thick description as an “in-depth illustration that explicates culturally situated meanings” (p. 843). Thick description requires the researcher to acknowledge and report on the particular and nuanced context of their data (Tracy, 2010; Geertz, 1973). One challenge with qualitative research is that “things get bigger, not smaller and tighter, as we understand them” (Gonzalez, 2000, p. 629, as cited in Tracy, 2010). To demonstrate this complexity, Tracy suggested that researchers show the data to the reader rather than simply telling them what to think of it. Following Tracy’s suggestion, my use of thick

descriptions in my journaling attempted to provide enough detail to “show” the data to the reader.

I began my journaling in September 2020, when the Leadership group and I embarked on the collaborative research project with Dr. Yap. I continued journaling until May 2021, when the project concluded. This timeframe was selected to focus the journaling on the collaborative research project, rather than the community in general or individuals’ personal experiences or interactions. My journaling was kept to big-picture observations of the project dynamics, or reflections on my own role and my own experiences. I avoided observations of any individuals or my one-on-one interactions to avoid exploiting their stories or experiences. My observations focused on the dynamics between myself as a graduate student, Dr. Yap as a faculty member, and the Uni 101 Leadership group as a community. My journaling was intentionally structured in this way to ensure the research was as minimally extractive as possible.

Keeping my journal throughout the project allowed me to document my thoughts in a way that resonated with me and my values as a researcher, as opposed to writing only in academic language in academic spaces. Sociological writing requires “a deeper contemplation of invisible systems” (Hudd et al., 2013, p. 36, as cited in Mannon & Camfield, 2019) to explore the forces that influence our lives. My narrative journaling allowed me to explore the “invisible” forces that impacted my ability to engage with the Uni 101 community. Although this work is grounded in my own experience, my experience is merely the entry point for a wider investigation into the dynamics of scholarship with commitment and the intersection between university and community.

Reflexive Practices

In a project such as this one that is dependent upon the researcher's experiences, it is critical to have reflexive practices in place to navigate personal subjectivities and to maintain academic integrity. I am afforded multiple layers of privilege as a white, able-bodied, cis-gendered person. This privilege requires critical reflexivity in my role as a graduate student, a researcher, and a community member. I share Will van den Hoonaard's (2014) sentiment that in seeing myself as a qualitative researcher, I see my role "as a 'learner' rather than an 'investigator'" (p. 180) as the term 'investigator' can imply a singular truth that can be uncovered. In this sense, I recognize that I am not separate from or outside of this research project, but rather I am a part of it.

Following Strega and Brown's (2015) suggestion, I approached critical reflexivity as "an ongoing process rather than an event" (p. 9) that is interwoven throughout the research process as a whole, and not restricted to a singular paragraph of who I am or what I believe. Instead, my positionality and critical reflexivity is incorporated into this entire thesis as a core component of my research practice. My journaling included an element of reflexivity to continuously reflect on how my "positionality and ideology are shaping decisions, relationships, and interpretations" (Strega & Brown, 2015, p. 9) and to hold myself accountable at each stage of the research process. As Jackson and Bazeley (2019) highlighted, this process of reflexivity is an important step in recognizing and recording my existing knowledge to evaluate how it may influence my understanding of the data. By engaging in this reflexive work, I aimed to examine how my own identity shapes my experiences and perceptions with the goal of "gaining greater self-awareness and questioning the seemingly objective nature of perception" (Sutherland,

2016, as cited in Murphy et al., 2020, p. 2). This practice allowed me to examine the ways in which power, oppression, and privilege manifest in my own positionality and the community's context (Murphy et al., 2020). Further, this ongoing practice of reflexivity, rather than a standalone reflection at the end of the project, served as "a catalyst for action and change" rather than just "an academic exercise" (Deal, 2019, p. 66) required for my degree.

Having an active volunteer role in the Uni 101 Program allowed me to become familiar with the community—including the physical space of the classroom, the teaching practices, course content, social environment, and relationships within the program. This familiarity provided my analysis with insights that may not have otherwise been possible and allowed me to move beyond my initial position as an outsider to the community. My presence in the community as a volunteer and a participant also enabled me to practice cultural humility in my work with Uni 101. Wallerstein and colleagues (2018) discussed cultural humility as "an embodied approach" that extends beyond traditional understandings of scientific research in order to include "the culture of building alliances between groups and individuals from diverse backgrounds" (p. 4, as cited in May et al., 2020). I practiced this cultural humility by building alliances with program participants, volunteers, and staff through my participation in the program and my position as a volunteer teaching assistant. While the formality of my role as a teaching assistant gave my presence in the classroom a certain purpose, it was the informalities of simply being present in that space that fostered cultural humility. Sharing meals and having tea between classes created more relaxed opportunities for us to get to each other, and for me to gain a deeper understanding of the community as a whole. Holding this more casual space allowed for discussions of our days, our hobbies, or our politics, giving us different

opportunities to connect with each other and identify our shared interests. This cultural humility was a critical methodological and reflexive practice that went beyond simply building trust and developing relationships. By engaging with the community and the people within it, I not only gained a better understanding of the realities of that space, but I also quickly became aware of the limits of my own understandings of the unique positions and perspectives of the participants. Becoming aware of what I did not know, and what I might never fully understand, humbled my approach as a researcher and as a peer.

To reflect further on my role in this community and this research, I created reflective memos throughout the coding process to reflect on my own interpretations as I moved through the data and the research in general. These memos further provided an element of transparency within the data, as they reflect my general worldviews and “embody the assumptions underlying the analysis” (MacQueen et al., 2008, p. 119). With an understanding of these reflexive practices, I now shift to discuss my approach to data analysis.

Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis, situated within the framework of grounded theory. These phases include familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report. However, it should be recognized that analysis is not a linear process; rather, it is recursive and therefore there was movement back and forth throughout the six phases. It is critical that these processes be cyclical so that data can be revisited, recoded, and recategorized. As Saldaña (2013) asserted, “qualitative

inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on emergent patterns” (p. 10) and thus it is important to revisit the data to draw out this kind of deep reflection.

Because the data for this project was based on my own experience, I did enter the analysis phase with an existing familiarity with the data. However, following Braun and Clarke’s model, I still immersed myself in the data in the analysis phase by engaging in repeated active rereading of the data. During this active rereading, I physically sat with the data and took notes on my initial considerations to provide deeper reflection as well as uncover possible patterns in the data.

Following this process of familiarizing myself with the data, I moved to the phase of generating the initial codes. I coded each journal entry inductively, using NVivo 12 Qualitative Data Analysis software. I utilized this software as it provided an enhanced means to the management, reporting, and visualization of the data (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). NVivo offered a more secure and organized means of storing and analyzing the data than manual coding. For example, the ease of switching between analyzing the data within a specific code and the data as a whole would have been more challenging and time consuming to do by hand. I created a codebook to document the working definitions of each code as I went through the data. I used descriptive codes, which were subsequently collated into categories.

Once the data was coded, I began to search for themes. In this phase, I considered the initial ways the codes may fit together into broader themes. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested, I created mind maps and tables to visualize the data and sort it into themes. Next, I reviewed and refined these themes to consider their relation to the entire data set and project as a whole. With an understanding of how these themes fit together, I then moved to defining

and naming the themes to provide more clarity around their meanings and their relations to each other.

At each step of data analysis, I wrote physical memos to capture my insights as they occurred. As Deborah van den Hoonaard (2015) asserted, taking memos throughout the process is critical for the integrity of the later analysis. This practice fosters reflexivity in the analysis process and can support the researcher in reflecting on their ideas and interpretations about the data (2015, p. 156). van den Hoonaard recommended the researcher to not yet “narrow down” the aim of the first round of coding, and instead allow the “richness” of the data to come forward naturally (2015, p. 160).

In this chapter, I discussed the background of this research project to provide context for myself as a researcher and the community involved. Further, I discussed the research paradigm guiding this work, along with the methods utilized in this project and why an autoethnographic case study was the most appropriate approach for this work. To answer my research question, I outlined how the data was collected and analyzed. In what follows, I aim to communicate more than the abstract theoretical underpinnings of alternative, community-driven research methodologies. Instead, I hope my experience is felt by the reader in a way that reflects the reality of what it means to do this work; not simply in a theoretical sense, but also in a human one. In the following chapters, I discuss the key findings from this research and explore the relationships built and lessons learned by working in depth with a community group, and what it meant to me as a student, as an academic, and as a community member.

Chapter 3: Trust as a Critical Component of Community-Driven Research

Understanding and aligning with Uni 101's values and establishing trust with the community was a required prerequisite for me to work with the group. My initial participation in the program, nearly nine months before our research began, was the program coordinator's way of "vetting" me to ensure that I was serious about working with Uni 101, that I knew what I was getting into, and to give the community an opportunity to get to know me before they decided if they wanted to work with me on a research project. Establishing trust and building relationships in the community were not practices exclusive to the outset of the project, but rather they were ongoing throughout our work together. This emphasis on the value and role of trust is consistent with the literature on community-driven research. Greenberg and colleagues (2020) discussed how "successful collaboration is predicated on the fundamental need for transparency and trust and for university-based researchers to respect community stakeholders as *equal* partners" (p. 23). Within this finding, two subthemes emerged: the barriers I experienced in building trust with the Uni 101 community, and the role trust plays in community-driven research.

Barriers to Building Trust

Establishing trust is a critical component of collaborative research. While the importance of trust can be applied to community-driven research across the board, how that trust is established varies in different community spaces. Given the historical harms caused or exacerbated by research, many community members may be hesitant to place trust in academics (Guillemin et al., 2016; Leavy, 2017). Thus, researchers must tread thoughtfully and cautiously in building relationships in these spaces. For me, my awareness of my position as a

graduate student representing an historically oppressive institution initially exacerbated my own self-doubt and inhibited me from bringing my full self into the community and into the work itself. Codes within this category included insecurity, tension, guilt, self-doubt, and “outsider”. In my journaling, I often reflected on my role and what I felt it represented.

In September, during the initial planning and preparation stages of our project, we began having conversations to define and understand each of our roles. One of these initial conversations was centred in an activity exploring our individual skillsets as well as our interests and what we would be willing to take on in the project. My own sharing in this context was challenging, and feelings of self-doubt emerged. Before the class where we planned to have these discussions, I reflected in my journal:

To introduce the activity, Audrey suggested she and I share our ‘superpowers’ or expertise first with the group to model the activity, then have everyone contribute their responses. Although this practice and this approach makes sense to me, I’m at a loss for what to share. I’m uncomfortable claiming “expert” title to anything besides my own life. I have a BA and limited life experience—I am not an “expert” in anything, and realistically what “expertise” I do have is severely limited.

At the beginning of the project, I often felt a deep conflict on what my role in this space was, or what it should be. The lack of clarity around my role often resulted in these feelings of self-doubt or insecurity, which then inhibited my ability to participate meaningfully in the group. In November, I wrote:

I keep coming back to the question of what my role is here. Not having a clear answer to this is becoming increasingly frustrating... I don’t want to contribute too much to general discussions about the project, because I want to leave the space in discussions for the leadership folks. Their perspectives and ideas need to be centred here, not mine—but when I’m not in a facilitation role, then that ultimately means I remain quiet. Towards the end of class today, a student commented on how quiet I had been, and checked in if I had anything to contribute to our discussion. While I so appreciate these check ins and their attempts to make space for me here, I feel such an awkwardness in how to contribute at all. It often feels like I’m overstepping, or trying to be someone I’m not, in

a role I'm not, when I contribute just as a 'participant.' My role as a facilitator feels equally murky—I keep questioning what qualifies me to be doing this work in a leadership role, when everyone else in this group feels like an expert and I feel like the novice.

I struggled to make meaning from my position as an outsider in my capacity as a graduate student, but also as an insider as a participant and facilitator. In September, I reflected that “My role feels relatively insignificant in the grand scheme of things, and I'm not sure how to reconcile that.” My liminal position as a graduate student, particularly when there were others more established in the context of this project in facilitator positions, resulted in the sense that there were “too many cooks in the kitchen.” With multiple program coordinators, and a faculty member with extensive research experience, my position as a graduate student and novice researcher resulted in my feeling that I did not necessarily bring anything to the table that the group did not already have. At times, this internal conflict resulted in me withdrawing to be a quiet observer rather than an active participant. However, although my feelings of self-doubt and insecurity influenced my participation in and engagement with the group, the project and the Uni 101 community required a certain level of engagement from me and this is largely what enabled me to lean in more fully to the group.

Role and Value of Trust

While I often stood in my own way of engaging more fully in the group, this may have influenced both how I perceived the Uni 101 community's trust in me as well as my how I perceived the level of trust existing within the community. My own self-doubt of the community's trust in me, while a significant force throughout the project, was based on my internalized ideas and not the result of any external feedback from staff or community members. This subtheme explores how trust was ultimately established in this context despite

these challenges, how I navigated my nuanced position in the community, and how this trust was critical to the project as a whole.

Community building is an integral piece of Uni 101; establishing a sense of belonging is foundational to students feeling supported and comfortable engaging in discussion and activities. My presence in the program required my participation in these community building activities, and so even despite my insecurities and self-doubt about my role, I was able to connect meaningfully with members of the group. The emphasis on being seen and heard is largely what feeds the sense of connection and belonging in the community space, with the group as a whole as well as with individuals. Uni 101's values and their focus on community building transcended my individual self-doubt.

Wilson (2008) discussed the practice of establishing trust in community spaces, and how "small talk" can be a tool for building relationships and connections outside of academic hierarchies. Wilson stated that small talk can be key to "getting everyone into mutually respectful relations" and allowing the group to get a feel for where others are at, what is on their minds, what might be distracting them, and most importantly, getting the group "thinking on the same wavelength" (p. 99). In Uni 101, this practice was enacted through informal social and emotional check-ins before every class. These check-in questions (e.g., "What's something you've been learning about lately?") allowed us to share our experiences, feed our curiosities, and learn more about each other. Hearing what book someone was reading, or something they learned from a podcast they listened to, or something they learned while working in their garden, set the tone for authentic sharing. This sharing often prompted a sort of virtual show-and-tell, where folks might show off a recent creative project they had been working on or read

an excerpt from a poem that had resonated with them. In addition to building community, this practice also helped us understand where we were at as a group, what were realistic expectations for our class that day, and if we needed to adjust our plans.

The communal practice of sharing was particularly meaningful to me as it helped deepen my connections to the group. For example, showing the group the embroidery project I was working on for my niece, my beach glass collection, or the art a friend had gifted me, were all relatively simple things, but they captured parts of life that I would not typically share in a research context. Receiving book recommendations or advice on how to better care for my houseplants added an element of reciprocity to this sharing, where I felt a deep sense of belonging. In December, I reflected on this practice of sharing, stating that “It’s all been so surprising to me, how easy it is to connect within this group. The ease with which I feel seen.”

The culture and values of Uni 101 encouraged me to bring my full self into the community, allowing me to overcome my own inhibitions and doubts about my presence and my role there. The sense of connection and camaraderie I felt within the group aided in my personal reckoning of my own doubts and insecurities. For example, before moving into the data collection phase of our research, I facilitated a short series of interview skills workshops with the group to ensure we were all entering the interview process with similar understandings and skillsets. After these sessions, I received some words of encouragement and reassurance from folks in the group, and I reflected on November 25th in my journal that “The sense that they are cheering me on and want me to succeed is so meaningful in my own moments of self-doubt.” The support and connection I felt to the group in many ways overpowered the uncertainty I felt about my own position.

Having this sense of trust not only fostered a sense of connection for myself and the community, but it also strengthened our sense of relational accountability. Wilson (2008) discussed how relational accountability facilitates a research relationship “that goes beyond the informant-researcher duality to becoming co-learners” (p. 113). From this framework, honouring one’s relations and serving a meaningful role in a community are foundational principles of the research, and thus should be prioritized over other research goals such as statistical significance. This sense of accountability both to the work and to the community was a critical component of the sense of trust within the group and supported our practices of collaboration.

In March, I reflected on my own sense of relational accountability to the group, without yet having the language to name it. After receiving a message from a Leadership student thanking me for being there and for the work I was doing, I journaled about my gratitude for this group, for the way they made me feel so seen and heard, and for the resulting sense of accountability that came with these relationships:

I continue to find myself surprised by the depth of the relationships we have built, how I have come to feel so secure in my position here, and the sense of accountability I feel to this group and to this work, even beyond the scope of this project. This kind of trust and accountability feels so new to me. I am not necessarily used to this kind of trust in a “professional” setting; this trust has always been reserved for my closest relationships outside of “work” and it brings so much meaning to our work together. I feel so much more pressure, but in a good way—I guess motivation—to do this work well, to do it right, to do it in a way that matters.

Relational accountability was particularly important in the group as it gave us a foundation from which to navigate conflict when issues emerged during the project, as participants trusted that they would be dealt with appropriately. For example, in February, when we were deep in the midst of the data collection process, an issue arose regarding the anonymity and sharing of the

data that largely resulted from my own misunderstandings. I reflected on this conflict in my journal:

Today, I uploaded the first few interview transcripts to our shared folder which the Leadership students, program staff, and Audrey and I all have access to, and I'm now regretting it. Shortly after uploading the initial transcripts, I received messages from one of the program coordinators and from a student about their discomfort with their interview transcript being shared with the entire group and asking what could be done to change this. While no names were mentioned in the transcript, each interviewee had been assigned a numerical code, and a document identifying who these codes were assigned to was also available in the shared folder, so the in-group anonymity was limited in that sense. In hindsight, I see so clearly that I assumed too much trust amongst all community members. In some ways I think I idealize a lot of values and relationships within this community. It exceeds my expectations in so many ways, and so I almost assumed it always will, in every sense.

The depth and authenticity of the relationships I've witnessed here have been unlike others in any other community space I've been a part of, but it was unfair and naïve of me to think there were not limits or boundaries to those relationships or the trust within them. I should have been more careful posting the transcripts. I saw the analysis and the entire research process as collaborative with all of us on an equal playing field to the point where I thought I shouldn't have to hide anything from the group. If we are all equally co-researchers, then we should all have access to the data in the same way. However, as much as I idealized our lack of hierarchy and collaboration, the vulnerability in these interviews and the personal relationships and dynamics within the group required a greater degree of privacy, and I should've known that.

It seems like such a difficult balance between not wanting to "hide" data or exclude anyone in the group from any step in the process and being fully collaborative through the entire process. But these folks are still entitled to privacy given the sensitivity of the content and sometimes a safe space isn't enough—a safe space doesn't force people to share. I feel so disappointed in myself and so deeply guilty for putting this student in this position—I know what it feels like to regret vulnerable sharing, and to experience those feelings on top of the fear that you could be identified when you didn't expect to be makes my stomach turn. I should have known better.

While my sense of guilt and insecurity had to some extent inhibited my ability to connect with the group in some capacities, here I see the depth of this guilt as a reflection of my commitment to the community. While this issue was not necessarily a methodological error on my behalf as a researcher, it was a mistake on my behalf as a community member because it

was in conflict with the interests of my community and, therefore, I had a responsibility to remediate it as quickly as possible. I felt it was the established trust between this particular student and I that led them to feel comfortable approaching me about such a sensitive issue, not from a place of anger or frustration, but rather from a place of vulnerability. The shared understanding of my accountability to this community created an expectation that issues like this would be addressed with compassion and care. Later, I wrote in my journal about how this conflict was resolved:

I quickly deleted the document with the students' names and the assigned codes since it had served its purpose, and reassigned new codes to further anonymize the data. After talking with this student further, I sensed they were still uncomfortable with folks potentially being able to identify them from the transcript, and with what they had shared in the interview. I wracked my brain for what else could be done. I hadn't announced that I had started uploading the transcripts, so thought the majority of folks hadn't seen them, so perhaps I could mitigate the damage in another way. In our next class together, I suggested that we analyze the transcripts question by question rather than looking at each interview as a whole, to anonymize them even further. The group agreed, so I compiled the transcripts to organize them by response and not by individual.

This situation exemplifies what Prins (2005, as cited in Nelson & Dodd, 2017) referred to as a 'critical incident' in community-driven research. While these incidents can certainly be tense, Prins discussed that they can also serve as opportunities to encourage "a transition from informal to more intentional decision making" and help co-researchers to "clarify their expectations of each other" (p. 58). Nelson and Dodd (2017) discussed how this can be a common occurrence in community-driven research, where constructing clear expectations and protocols does not happen until a particular event or conflict necessitates it. In this case, the student expressed in conversations afterwards that they appreciated how we were able to pivot our approach to the analysis and data sharing to keep the responses as anonymous as

possible. Our established trust and accountability to each other made it easier for students to express their concerns throughout the project, knowing that we had the ability to adjust our approach as needed to meet the needs of the group.

The challenges I experienced in building trust with the Uni 101 community were largely grounded in my internal conflict about my own role in this space, but the values and practices of Uni 101 fostered a culture of acceptance for myself and my role as a researcher. The opportunities to share about our interests or creative projects created deep connections within the group that situated us as peers without a rigid hierarchy. Building these relationships enabled us to establish the trust in each other's knowledges, expertise, and abilities that was critical to the project's overall success. My connections and relationships within the group cultivated a sense of accountability to the Uni 101 community and ultimately pushed me to reconcile my own doubts, enabling me to fully engage with our work together.

Chapter 4: Community Collaboration Requires Resistance to Academic Norms

I often felt caught between my roles in the Uni 101 project, not only because different roles required different expectations of me, but that my roles as a student, a community member, and a researcher were often in direct conflict with each other. Embracing the values and practices of scholarship with commitment felt unlike the “typical” way of doing research. While working in a grassroots community context, I became aware of many academic norms that I had internalized and accepted without question. While I understood that there was a need to do things “differently” in community-driven research, I was unsure what the realities of this would be. Throughout the project, I was challenged by how difficult it was to resist the norms and traditions I had been taught. However, the ability of the Uni 101 community to integrate emotions, subjectivity, and care into their work showed me the importance and value of exploring and embracing alternative ways of knowing. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged: silencing the academic voice, and making meaning and embracing subjectivity.

Silencing the Academic Voice

Throughout the project, I had a challenging internal conflict about following the academic “rules” I had been taught to follow when conducting research. There were instances where I had to check myself and consider who was being served by adhering to these academic traditions, and Leadership students were often checking me, too, about how these academic norms were often harmful or exclusionary.

In September, when we were discussing potential project outcomes and planning our research design, I felt overwhelmed by the group’s creativity and the number of different ideas for our project. The group suggested presenting our findings through creative means, such as a

children's book, a postcard project, or a board game. While I was intrigued by all of these ideas, the voice in my head highlighted my doubts. I wrote in my journal:

After so much time in traditional academic spaces, my initial reaction to these creative approaches is that they are the opposite of what "rigorous research" really is. I don't want to bring my doubts into the group, but it is hard to mute or redirect that voice in my head that tells me that this isn't "real" research, that emotions don't have a place here, or that no one will take this work seriously if it doesn't conform to the objective and traditional standards of interviews or surveys.

In my attempt to resist this academic voice in my head, I was confronted with the limits of my own perspective and position. This lingering academic voice reflected some challenging dynamics associated with hierarchical power relations. As much as I was a collaborator in the project, I was also a representative of a powerful institution with a specific qualification that differentiated my position from the rest of the Leadership group. While I was determined to resist these hierarchies, I held doubts of how I might be able to do so. I reflected in my journal to examine my background and where these doubts were emerging from:

This situation is made so complicated by my position as a graduate student and my research experience being limited to that within academia. My knowledge and perspectives largely make me partial towards more structured research models—my initial project ideas have still reflected these methods, and collaboration means little more than simply using the same methods for interviewing and data analysis, just doing it "with" the community. My training in these traditional means are so deeply ingrained in me that it is challenging to think beyond them, and to think of alternatives outside of this limited scope. I keep questioning what benefit a collaboratively written article would bring this community.

Up until this point, I had questioned and criticized academia as an institution separate from myself. This grappling with my own education, background, and role all reflecting this institution caused me to later reflect on how I was "embodying the harms that I am trying to resist." The harms I was attempting to avoid in making this research as minimally extractive as possible and disrupting power dynamics were ultimately reflected in my own role as a member

of the institution who gained advantage and status from my position as a graduate student, perpetuating inequitable power dynamics and hierarchies. My precarious position taking up space both in academia and in the Uni 101 community created a deep sense of discomfort within myself and was a significant barrier to my ability to navigate these differing roles smoothly. I felt continually pulled in multiple directions, and this inner conflict of how to be showing up as both a community member and an academic impeded my own ability to authentically engage with the group and with the project.

My own understandings of what research means, and who research is for, were continually challenged throughout this project. In my journaling, there was a clear trajectory as I grappled with these questions. At the beginning of the project, I wrote with a relatively romanticized understanding of resisting academic norms and hierarchies as we explored ideas for our research project. However, at the same time, I struggled with what this resistance looked like in practice; what it meant for me to give up control and power over the project, biting my tongue when I wanted to jump in and point out the methodological “imperfections” of our research design or research questions. For example, in November, when we were finalizing our research design, Dr. Yap and I led an activity to generate questions for our interview guide, brainstorming questions the group would feel comfortable both asking and answering. After this class, I reflected in my journal that:

I felt a significant degree of awkwardness in not knowing how to step in with critique—I thought this activity was simply to brainstorm, but the list of questions seemed to quickly become the interview guide itself. The questions were certainly getting at the important topics, but they were not structured in the specific format I had been taught. I don’t want to tell them what to do or how to do it, but the questions are not necessarily following the typical guides for constructing strong interview questions. The issues of embedded assumptions, leading questions, priming participants, and double-

barreled questions are all flaws I had been taught to look out for, and that I had been chastised for in my own work as an undergraduate.

In hindsight, I can appreciate how my feedback and specific knowledge of interview skills could have been shared as something for the group to consider, had I navigated that conversation with respect and care—but my feelings of discomfort and awkwardness of “knowing better” held me back from engaging in this discussion. I was reminded multiple times throughout this project that collaboration is hard work, and disagreement and challenging conversations were an inevitable part of us working together. My critique of these questions could have been an example of healthy disagreement, although at the time my self doubt inhibited my ability to see it this way. I was so focused on adhering to the academic rules I had been taught that I could not imagine how they could be applied in a community context, or even if they should be applied at all. Once I began questioning and challenging these academic norms, I recognized how deeply they had been ingrained in me, and how they had defined and confined my understanding of what research is and what it should be.

Towards the end of November as we were preparing for our interviews, I facilitated a few of our classes on interview skills. One session focused on what to expect in the interview setting and how to conduct yourself as an interviewer. A particular component I discussed in detail with the group was active listening skills and the importance of body language. For example, I spoke of the importance of maintaining eye contact and remaining still, especially when conducting interviews via Zoom, in order to appear engaged and focused rather than distracted and uninterested, and to help ensure the interviewee felt they were being heard. One of the students who is neurodivergent was quick to point out how ableist this approach was—for them, fidgeting is a strategy to maintain their focus, and it is very unnatural and

difficult for them to hold eye contact and remain still during a conversation. If they try to do these things, it takes up all of their focus, and they are unable to actually listen to what the interviewee is saying. In the moment, I was caught off guard by these comments, as I was repeating the same interview etiquette I had been taught and had read about for years—I had never critically questioned these interview practices before. As I considered these points, however, they all quickly made sense to me and even reflected my own experiences. I had lacked confidence as an interviewer because I was so focused on maintaining eye contact and trying to think of my next probe that it inhibited my ability to be fully present in listening to the participant's stories. I later reflected on this in my journal:

Stories like this, experiences like this, make me reflect on the ableism within the institution and its inaccessibility and how our practices and tools were designed for a specific kind of person, excluding all others. Why do we continue to do things in the ways that we've always done them, when we know better now? Academia is so closely linked to tradition and ritual, almost in a religious sense, in a way that seems to make progression and reform so much harder. Being in Uni 101, which I have largely come to see as a radical space, only makes me more aware of the un-radical, inaccessible, oppressive nature of the institution. In some ways it seems like it would be so easy to apply Uni 101's values and practices into more traditional education settings. I keep questioning why all learning environments aren't this supportive or accessible, or aren't sites for vulnerability, belonging, and connection.

This reckoning ignited my resistance to the academic norms I had been taught, and I found myself constantly questioning myself, my own knowledge, and the value of such exclusive and privileged academic tools in settings other than university campuses. However, as much as I embraced this resistance and rejection of traditional norms, I struggled to let go of that academic voice that had intensified during my time in the academy. As much as I wanted to lean fully into the community side of this work and leave my academic baggage at the door, I held a deep fear of not being taken seriously by going too far against the academic grain. I

reflected in October that my “resistance” to institutional norms was limited in that it was ultimately “only to the point where I am still rewarded academic success, or at the very least a pat on the back from my department or my peers.” My roles as a community member and as a graduate student often felt like they were in opposition to each other, but both roles were required of me in this project. Making sense of this discrepancy was challenging, and often left me with a deep sense of imposter syndrome. I felt I was unable to find balance between the conflicting demands of these roles; in March, I reflected that “disrupting these hierarchies in reality should mean that I do not need that validation from others in my department or discipline, but that voice inside my head still feels nearly impossible to conquer.”

As we wrapped up the project in May, I reflected that even after all of this time working together, I was still plagued by these doubts and challenges. This became particularly evident at the end of the project where I felt frustrated that certain areas of the project had been disrupted. I wrote of this frustration in my journal:

In our interview today, the student interviewing treated the interview like one of our coaching conversations where they continued to probe the participant on their personal experiences that weren't necessarily related to the project. While the interview started on the right track with the initial question, after that the interviewer followed a different thread from the conversation to the point where no other interview questions were addressed, and the interview had gone in what I interpreted as an entirely different direction. I tried to step in, to send the student a few private messages in the chat so as not to completely interrupt, but this was to no avail. At the end of the interview, I did finally unmute and intervene, encouraging the students to look back and on the interview guide and maybe explore a few of the questions that hadn't been covered. The interviewer told me that they had been covered, they just hadn't asked them in the way they are listed in the interview guide, so I just had to go “look” for those responses later in the recording because they were in fact there. In the moment, I felt defeated and frustrated—I didn't want the interviewee to feel that they hadn't been able to share what they had wanted or intended to, or that they had shared too much that was unrelated to the project. Maybe I was too gentle in my approach, offering “suggestions” and not telling them what to do, but I was so frustrated that my voice would be so dismissed and disregarded, and not heard as one of authority. But isn't that

what I wanted? Not to be in a position of power in this context, to be just one of the group? Now it feels so deeply frustrating that I don't necessarily "know best" in this particular instance, but I can see how complicated this situation is.

In this particular instance, I wanted my voice to be one of authority in the "facilitator" role, but I felt my voice was understood as more of a peer, with my comments interpreted as mere suggestions and not as clear direction. However, I realized that to be heard and treated as a peer in this group was what I had been striving for throughout the context of this project. Later, in my journal, I reflected on this interaction, and realized the complexity here, noting that "the 'academic' part of me wants to intervene and correct these issues, but the community member part of me wants to embrace this messiness and go with the flow." While I was unable to find the perfect balance between my roles, my awareness of the complexity of this resistance helped me navigate these shifting boundaries.

Making Meaning and Embracing Subjectivity

In resisting academic norms and traditions, I found myself leaning into more 'radical' alternatives to research, to reimagining how we do research and who it is for. This reflexivity and reckoning with my own positionality and education helped me to embrace more flexible approaches in the research, as well as acknowledging the different layers to my perspective.

Prior to this experience, my understanding of research in the social sciences was largely based on what I had seen and read in my textbooks. Following rigorous methods, scribbling notes, and writing up findings into academic papers were the structures of academic research generation that were familiar to me, and so initially fitting Uni 101 into this structure was challenging. As I moved through the project, and even now as I write this thesis, I have been struck by the juxtaposition between our collaborative project and my thesis. I often felt

alienated and isolated in the process of writing my thesis—not only in the very individual experience of writing, but also in the sense that my engagement with the Uni 101 community was an experience that I was not sure my academic peers could necessarily relate to or understand. My feelings of isolation were in a stark and direct contrast to the deep connections I felt both to the community and to the work in the Uni 101 project. This experience opened my eyes to how research can be done differently, how it can be creative, fun, and grounded in the intention to share ideas and make meaning together. I learned how research can take on an entirely different meaning when it is done collectively and collaboratively rather than individually.

While the nature, structure, and content of my thesis differs significantly from our collaborative project in Uni 101, both emphasize the importance of subjectivity and emotion. Prosser (2015) discussed the concept of research with emotion as an approach that involves “emotion as a different type of knowledge and a different type of relationship between researchers and participant” (p. 175). Research with emotion allows us to use our feelings to express what is important, and to connect with participants or collaborators both cognitively and emotionally (Prosser, 2015). However, this type of research does not necessarily fit into structures of traditional research practices. As Wilson (2008) argued, “the Western tradition teaches us to separate our head from our heart and our spirit as well” (p. 119), as researchers have historically been pushed to be as objective and detached from their work as possible. In a more nuanced way, the expectations and demands of the academy often discourage emotive and creative ways of knowing (Finley, 2003; Prosser, 2015). However, this kind of emotional knowledge can provide an invaluable layer to research analysis. Emotion is constructed in social

and historical contexts, and thus can be a useful lens to explore structural injustices and to establish sites of resistance (Prosser, 2015). In March, when we were deep into the analysis phase of our research, I reflected on this added value from embracing subjectivity and emotions into our process:

I've found there is so much more meaning in doing this analysis with the same folks who've invested so much into the work already; who have a stake in how these stories are interpreted. Seeing themselves in the data, seeing their stories, and seeing the connections between themselves and others. They understand each other's stories already in a way that I could not as a new member to this community—their interpretations are so much deeper than an analytic narration of their words, but connecting back to their own experiences to make sense of the other stories, gives the analysis a level of richness that I think would be absolutely been missed had Audrey and I done that analysis on our own.

It was not Dr. Yap's or my research experience or academic knowledge that resulted in these rich insights from the data. Rather, what strengthened the analysis was the lived experiences and subjective perspectives of the group, along with their shared understandings of being in Uni 101 and what it feels like to have a sense of belonging in this community. Collaboration in this sense of being present throughout the entire project, and not just in its initial design and data collection, was what the authenticity and richness of our project hinged on.

While the benefits of doing research with emotion quickly became clear to me, the historical opposition of research and emotion felt like a challenging hurdle of my work and my own identity. Prosser (2015) asserted how research with emotion requires empathy as well as a willingness to be vulnerable. My role as an empathetic and supportive community member required my emotional knowledge, but my role as a researcher seemed to expect me to compartmentalize my emotions to keep them separate from my work. Finding balance between these roles that felt so vastly different was challenging. However, I began to

understand how emotion in research was not just about writing emotions into observations or leaning into personal subjectivities; I saw how leading with emotion guided so many of Uni 101's practices of care. I was fascinated by Uni 101's ability to insert these practices of care into research work. This centering of care was not something I had experienced before, and again exemplified the ways I became aware of alternative ways of knowing, learning, and doing research. In May, I reflected on what I saw as these practices of community care radicalizing the way we do things in Uni 101:

Caring for each other first is central to the work in Uni 101. I've seen the value in the flexibility of reading the room, deciding when we're having a bad day and what that means. If we can't focus, if there's negativity in the group, we sit with those feelings and try to make sense of them together. People are met where they're at; we hold space for people to talk about their day, or not to talk at all if they're not up for it. Something so basic as caring for each other is so inherently human, and to call it "radical" feels wrong, but to care for each other in this way, under the conditions of a society which privileges our productivity more than our wellbeing, it is radical.

While the idea of leading our work from a place of care seemed so simple, the impact this had on the group's participation and engagement was profound. In January, one of the comments that came up in our research was how the "life happens" attitude in Uni 101 affects learning. One student stated that in this context, "you relax enough to learn something because you don't need to worry about being chastised for having the wrong answer, or missing class." This particular quote resonated with me deeply—I had seen this precise moment of "relaxation" in students in Uni 101, where you could see almost a release in their bodies as they were able to relax once their needs were met in the immediate context of class; having a warm meal, a means of transportation for the way home, and a place to be in community and to learn without any pressure or expectation. Ensuring these needs were met enabled students to engage so deeply and so meaningfully in class and demonstrates how much more we are able

to contribute to our communities when we are cared for. While this quote resonated with me in terms of what I had witnessed in Uni 101, it also resonated with me in terms of what I felt was missing from my own education. I reflected on this quote in my journal, relating it to my experiences in my undergraduate degree and graduate coursework:

My own experience was exactly this. I coasted through the majority of my undergrad without deeply or critically engaging with much of anything; I wrote the papers, I skimmed the readings, I took the notes—but it rarely meant anything to me, because I was so stressed about my grades, about making ends meet, about being “wrong”, about messing it all up, about being found out as an imposter. I couldn’t relax enough to enjoy it, and I certainly never engaged as deeply or as critically with the material or my peers as I see folks do in Uni 101. Even in my graduate education, I have not felt I’ve had the ability to relax enough to fully immerse myself in my work or necessarily to enjoy it. It seems like such an obvious thing, to consider how feeling comfortable and supported in your education allows you to go deeper with it, but I have never reflected on this in my own experience. Knowing this now, however, makes me realize how troubling it is that our academic culture glorifies stress and not these practices of care.

The care I was met with in the Uni 101 community, from its foundational values and from the relationships I built with community members, lead me to feel so secure in that space that I was able to relax enough to take on the risk and discomfort of doing this work that I did not necessarily feel prepared, equipped, or qualified for.

Although I was not able to fully silence my inner academic voice, I was still able to resist its dominance and to think beyond it. The culture and values of Uni 101 created an environment where I felt comfortable leaning into certain discomforts and moving beyond my academic comfort zone. My experiences in Uni 101 have taught me the value of including emotion, subjectivity, and care into research and education.

Chapter 6: Investing in Community Work Fosters Growth

Throughout this experience of my work with Uni 101, I have reflected on my own growth in a number of capacities—as a co-researcher on our project, as a sociologist, as a community member, and as a person. This growth was rooted in my numerous lessons learned in Uni 101, as well as the challenges I faced in doing this work. My lessons learned in Uni 101 were at times overwhelming and almost always surprising. This experience has in many ways caused me to reflect on the value and potential of education, though it has also made me question and doubt my own educational experiences. The ideas within this finding capture some overall reflections from my experience, and thus some ideas are intertwined with the discussions around trust and resistance outlined earlier.

Perhaps one of the most consistent reflections in my journaling was my own reckoning with my position as an academic, and a student, and a community member. Navigating these different roles felt at times like it was made more difficult because of the expectations that I attached to each role, from expecting myself to be as objective as possible as researcher, to be fully engaged as a community member, or to be a semi-expert as a graduate student. However, Uni 101 taught me how to show up as my full self, and not just in a singular role. The many different roles that I have taken on in the Uni 101 community, and the many different ways I have been invited to show up authentically in this space, has allowed me the capacity to blend and build upon my roles. I found myself no longer trying to switch between roles, from when I was facilitating versus participating, or when I was an “expert” versus a “learner”. This reflection aligns with Wilson’s (2008) work; in reflecting on his own experience, he stated that:

There is no longer a distinction between the differing roles I fulfill, either academic or personally. I am all my roles and relations (and more) as one congruent whole. No role is more important than any other, nor are any roles excluded. (p. 136)

It is in this holistic sense that I have learned to reject my instinct to compartmentalize different parts of myself and my identity, and to recognize the impossibility of these efforts. All my roles inform my work and recognizing how they can exist simultaneously allowed me to bring more personal and authentic parts of myself into this community and this research and enriched my experiences and my relationships in Uni 101.

The multiple roles I embodied, however, often seemed to conflict with each other, making it difficult to decipher how to show up in different contexts in Uni 101. For example, in March, when we had wrapped up our interviews and were working through our analysis phase, I reflected on how I understood my position and role in this project. As much as I felt I had been so warmly welcomed as a community member in this space, my differing roles still had me feeling like an outsider. In my journal, I wrote about our interview process and reflected on my own role in it:

I wish I had been interviewed. I'm surprised even to have this reflection, in the sense that I was so committed at the beginning to staying on the sidelines, not wanting to overstep, and this research not being about me. At first, I thought that I shouldn't be taking up any space in the interviews—I saw this project being about the Leadership folks, their stories, what they have to say. Now, though, I think it would have disrupted the hierarchy even further had I participated, and although my stories might not carry the same weight as theirs, out of respect and practicing vulnerability, I wish I had something to share with them in return. I feel so honoured to have this role, that they trusted this process enough to allow me to hold their individual stories, but it doesn't feel fair that I have heard all of their stories in their entirety, but I have given nothing back in terms of my own vulnerability.

The nuance here regarding my role and participation in the project highlights the challenges around this community collaboration and reciprocity. While my experiences are very different

than theirs, I could still relate to the questions about a sense of belonging, about supportive learning environments, about my experiences in Uni 101. My lack of participation at this level seemed to make my position as a facilitator even more distinct; they were sharing their stories, and I was an observer and what felt like an institutional representative, making sure the “rules” of the interview were adequately followed. In order for us to be truly on the same playing field, my participation in an interview and sharing my own experiences could have contributed to a more reciprocal relationship between the Leadership students and myself. While my insights may not have added much to the data, the mutual process of sharing and my participation could have added to our overall practices of collaboration.

These reflections on community dynamics and how I continued to learn from them were a common theme throughout my journaling. In December, I journaled about my gratitude for this learning:

I’ve been reflecting on my almost year with Uni 101 and what I have learned from being in this group. What I’ve learned about myself, about what I value, about what things like accessibility and community really mean, what “learning” means, what “education” should mean. I feel so connected to this group. The spaces they hold for my own curiosity, struggles, learning, and vulnerability is unlike any other space or community I have been involved in. The profoundness of these relationships was never an expected outcome, but it is one I will always hold with gentleness and gratitude. I’ve learned more about myself, about how I want to be in community, what community means to me, than I ever would have expected.

These reflections capture my growth in a very personal sense beyond my growth as a researcher or sociologist. I relate to Wilson’s (2008) reflections of his own work in that the “changes that have occurred were not big revelations, flashes of insight or dramatic differences in my life or lifestyle” (p. 136) but rather this change was a consistent, subtle, and long-lasting shift of my perspective, my awareness, and my values. The growth and change I experienced

was not dramatic or immediate, but still deeply impactful in how I view the world and my role in it.

While much of my growth and learning in this project was personal, I also reflected on my learning as a student and researcher both during this experience and in my previous education. So much of my experience during this project was centred in the idea of learning by doing, which seemed like a radical departure from the previous paradigms I was taught. Learning to me meant preparation, reading, memorization, and performance. Jumping in headfirst to the work in Uni 101 and figuring things out as they happened was not something I had been exposed to in university, but I reflected that this did not make this form of learning any less valuable. When we were about to embark on the interview process of our research project, I had expressed to one of the program coordinators that I felt a bit apprehensive about us entering the data collection phase already and thought we might need more time to prepare. After hearing and validating my concerns, the program coordinator offered me some reassurance and told me that “you can’t learn to ride a bike by reading about it.” This quote has stuck with me. I have learned so much in my time with Uni 101, and I could never have learned even half of it by reading about it. While our project or classes were not without challenges, each bump in the road was a learning opportunity and the support we had as a group allowed us to fumble through these messy moments and come out the other side with stronger understandings of the work we were trying to do and how we could better work together. As much I had held frustration and anger at the institution for not better preparing me for this work in both my undergraduate and graduate courses, I can reflect now that perhaps it was not intended to. Letting go of my belief that I needed to be formally qualified, trained, or prepared

in some way was what allowed me to engage in the deepest learning opportunities of this project, by being given the space and flexibility to figure it all out as we went along. While I was deeply challenged in doing this work, embracing this idea of applied learning enabled me in some capacity to make peace with my frustrations towards my previous education and the academic institution in general. I had never experienced a community space like Uni 101, where this learning was welcomed with such patience and care, and this exposure fundamentally shifted my perspective on what it means to enter community spaces and what I bring to them in my own position and role. The community support I felt in Uni 101 was more beneficial to me than formal institutional support could have been.

During my time working with Uni 101, I have developed deep relationships within the community that have become integral to my own sense of belonging. I reflected in February on the ease with which these relationships were built, and the depth of their meaning to me:

There is mutual support in this group that I can tangibly feel. I've said before that I feel held by this community—and I truly don't know a better way to describe it. It feels almost physical; they have my back in a way I have not experienced in any other community space before. This experience has brought so much nourishment to my life and I can't imagine my life without it—especially my life in a pandemic. Uni 101 is exactly what holds me up right now.

My life became intertwined with the Uni 101 community, and similarly to what Burawoy (2014) described as the process of public sociology, I became “bound up with the fate of the people” (p. 280) involved in this work and community. Further, this connection was not limited by the timeline of the project. I continued volunteering as a teaching assistant in Uni 201 and attending Leadership classes after the project was completed and was later offered a graduate fellowship position to facilitate Uni 201. I was so happy and grateful to have an ongoing role in this community that would extend beyond the timeline of our research project together.

However, these commitments were still somewhat limited as these positions required me to be a registered and tuition-paying student. In one of my last journal entries in May when we were wrapping up the project, I grappled with a number of different challenging feelings about what things looked like for me moving forward:

Writing this has been so challenging because it has signaled the end of my time in this community, and that has not been something I'm ready to confront. While there is a side of optimism, in the understanding that spaces like this are possible, and necessary, and present, I grieve the loss of my role in this community and fear the possibility of not being able to find another like it in the future, for me to find a place in.

While I remain uncertain about exactly what this commitment and my involvement will look like in the future, the lessons and values I have learned in Uni 101 are ones I will carry with me. Although I feared not being able to find another community like this one, I am reassured in knowing that I found Uni 101 in a similar time of doubt.

My ongoing commitment to this community reflects Nelson and Dodd's (2017) assertion that engaging in collaborative community-driven research has the potential to transform graduate students practicing scholarship with commitment into "lifelong engaged scholars and community members" (p. 418). What I have learned throughout this experience will follow me, not exclusively in the sense of my future research endeavours, but how I see myself and my research, and my role in my community. I have found a place for myself where I am nourished by these connections, which have meaning beyond the academy that will not expire when I receive my degree.

This ongoing learning process from my experiences in Uni 101 also reflect my growth as a sociologist. Engaging in such deeply reflective work over the course of three years has meant that I have come to understand my own positionality and relation to social structures in a much

more complicated way. Working in a grassroots community context, particularly one based on values of learning and accessibility, I have learned how to embody my sociology in an applied way beyond just an academic one. Through engaging in sociological conversations with folks in Uni 101, I have come to better understand the value of lived experience in gaining sociological knowledge and have also learned how to better approach these conversations in translating academic jargon into accessible language. As a social scientist, my research skills have been significantly enriched by thinking critically about traditional research practices and learning the value of research processes that embrace creativity and emotion. While my experiences in Uni 101 certainly made me aware of my own knowledge gaps and the limitations of my perspective, I believe my recognition of this complexity has added depth and nuance to my sociology.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

As Cousin (2013) asserted, findings are not simply just “found” —they are also made. In Cousin’s words, “we can only *represent* reality, we can never mirror it and the act of representation is always going to be adrift from the event” (p. 6). From this perspective, I acknowledge that I can only represent and interpret the findings from this experience based on the values and discourses I know (Cousin, 2013) and thus my discussion of these findings is limited by my own perspective. This research sought to explore the realities, challenges, and potential of graduate students engaging in community-driven research. The key themes that emerged from this work are broadly related to the trust, resistance, and growth involved in doing community-driven research. These findings intersect and overlap in different ways. For this reason, and to resist the academic urge to compartmentalize them neatly, I discuss the findings holistically rather than independently. In this chapter, I discuss the findings from this research and connect them to the literature, review the limitations of this study and suggest areas for future research, and close the chapter with some concluding thoughts and reflections.

Discussion of Findings

A common thread in the findings was the idea of role conflict and making sense of my own position as both a student and a researcher, a participant and a facilitator, an observer and a community member. This conflict is a common challenge in autoethnographic work. Tavella (2016) discussed how the “dual role” of being a researcher and a participant of the setting can lead to conflict as “being a member may hamper the execution of research activities, and being a researcher may impact on the achievement of membership in the setting” (p. 64). My own experience and the confusion I felt regarding what space I should be taking up and what was

expected of me in the project reflects this tension. Navigating unclear roles and expectations can be a challenge for community-oriented researchers, and perhaps particularly for graduate students.

Situated in the ambiguous position between student and faculty, graduate students are often on the periphery of academic spaces and thus face specific challenges (Hubrig et al., 2017; Grady et al., 2014). Nelson and Dodd (2017) found that a lack of clarity in terms of protocol, expectations, and role definition can be exacerbated by the relative inexperience of graduate students entering the research setting. Following set protocols does not always fit the approach of community-driven research as the roles and responsibilities must be defined based on the specific expertise and context of the group. Therefore, these tensions regarding role conflict and confusion are likely to emerge in community-driven research. While in certain capacities the unclear position of graduate students can be a challenge, Nelson and Dodd (2017) suggested that graduate students or emerging scholars may in fact be in an advantaged position when it comes to sustaining the community's trust. The power distance between graduate students and community members may be lesser than that of an established faculty member, so this may contribute to the community's capacity for trust. Nelson and Dodd reflected that in their own experience, "all parties were able to view the 'mistakes' that occurred early on as a part of an inevitable learning curve and, rather than assign blame, consider the challenge an opportunity for co-learning" (p. 416). This dynamic, then, helped to create a more lateral distribution of power, where students and community members can both be perceived as co-learners without one party being seen as an external expert (Nelson & Dodd, 2017). My position as a novice researcher and a student may have supported my ability to build

trust within the Uni 101 community as mistakes were expected of me from the group as I was new to this work and very much learning as we went. While in hindsight I can appreciate how my lack of qualifications may have allowed me to connect more easily with the group, I continually doubted myself and felt frustrated by how unprepared I had been for this work in an academic sense.

In his own experience of scholarship with commitment, Bourdieu (1998) reflected that “I would not have engaged in public position-taking if I had not, each time, had the—perhaps illusory—sense of being forced into it by a kind of legitimate rage, sometimes close to something like a sense of duty” (p. 280, as cited in Burawoy, 2014). My own rage towards my discipline and academia in general similarly fuelled my commitment to this work. First from seeing a lack of community engagement in my discipline, and then from questioning my own ability to do community-research based on my limited education, my frustrations ultimately pushed me to explore and identify the challenges and opportunities of scholarship with commitment, and to address the components of academia that I saw as so deeply unjust and unfair. My experience is reflected in O’Meara’s (2011) finding that there are insufficiencies in graduate student education that do not adequately prepare them for community engagement. After years of harbouring this frustration with my own education and academia in general, I became in some ways blinded by it. With an eye always focused on detecting any flaws or harms in any given work or approach, I began to lose faith in there being viable and realistic alternatives to research and education that were not embedded in the same unjust systems that I was so quick to criticize. In some ways, my rage inhibited my ability to appreciate alternatives to traditional research. My experiences in Uni 101, however, shifted this

perspective. Seeing the outcomes of our collaboration, and witnessing Leadership students reflecting sociologically on their experiences without the academic jargon, pushed me to let go of my own academic baggage and frustrations and to appreciate potential community-oriented and collaborative work.

While my findings illustrate the reality of doing this work, the depth of both the opportunities and challenges left me often questioning whether or not this research was truly worthwhile. My answer to this question shifted at different parts of the project, but ultimately what made this work worthwhile for me reflects Freire's philosophy. Freire (1993) argued that authentic thinking could not exist in ivory tower isolation, and that education must draw on lived experiences in order to be meaningful. Freire rejected practices of objectivity and neutrality in education and instead embraced the value of emotional and personal experiences. In his words,

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people (p. 81).

The learning, growth, and meaning that I have taken away from this research are impactful precisely because it was grounded in my lived and emotional experience and critical reflection. By resisting the academic urge to detach myself from the research, I was enabled to engage with it more deeply in learning and re-learning based on my own experiences. Collins (2013) conceptualized Freire's critical consciousness as a process of "resisting separation of reason from emotion, thought from feeling, and feelings from action" (130). Learning to embrace my own emotional experiences was not an easy process, but a deeply meaningful one.

From a research perspective, there is much to be learned from an emotional layer of analysis that allows researchers to lean into these emotions to connect both cognitively and emotionally with co-researchers (Prosser, 2015). I believe that my acceptance of my emotional self in my research enriched my analysis as a sociologist. By deepening my connection to, and understanding of, the personal, my understanding of the social was enhanced as well. There is much we can learn from including this emotional layer of analysis, and taking this approach allows us to lean into these emotions to connect both cognitively and emotionally with co-researchers (Prosser, 2015).

The grassroots collaboration required in the Uni 101 research project pushed me to resist the academic norms I had been taught, and most importantly to disrupt the traditional researcher-researched binary. With everyone in the project considered co-researchers, our approach reflected Freire's (1993) pedagogy by reconciling the teacher-student or researcher-subject contradiction so that we could all simultaneously be teachers and students in our process of learning together. This kind of committed scholarship is not simply about doing work that involves a community, but rather about deep collaboration and personal commitment. Collins (2007) discussed how a deep level of care and commitment are crucial to this work, in a deeper and more engaged sense than simple collaboration.

Centring lived and emotional experiences is not only what enriched our research project in Uni 101, but it is also what made the actual experience of doing the work meaningful to me, and I believe to the Leadership group. While I argue that it is in fact 'worthwhile' to engage in this work, I also acknowledge that "the sociological imagination does not require a license to practice" (Fairbairn, 2019, p. 295) and that grassroots sociology can take many forms that are

independent from the institution. This experience taught me that I do not necessarily need academia to “do sociology”—I understand and relate to Collins’ (2007) reflection that some of her best sociology was done outside of formal academic contexts and without publication. My work with Uni 101 has been my best sociology, and I do not need that to be affirmed by any publication in order for it to be true.

My research sought to explore how a first-person account of a graduate student’s experience might help us to better understand the realities of doing scholarship with commitment, including its opportunities and challenges. Although the evidence from my own experience may not be widely generalizable and my research question may not have a conclusive answer, my findings offer insights into the lived and emotional experiences of working in community as a graduate student and the meaning that can be drawn from grassroots and collaborative research. This work has given me a deeper understanding of the value of knowledge without pursuit of a singular answer and an appreciation for exploring the individuality of lived experiences. With this research, I add my voice to the ongoing conversations of what it means to do community-driven research, what makes it challenging, what makes it rewarding, and what it means to do this work as a student (Nelson & Dodd, 2017; Kilty & Crepault, 2016; Milne & Hamilton, 2021; Greenberg et al., 2020). For other graduate students like myself who felt disillusioned by traditional research models and the neoliberal academy, I hope this work might offer some assurance that there are alternatives and that research can be done a different way.

Research Limitations

As a qualitative project, this research is grounded upon the assumption that there is no singular “truth” and therefore consensus, wide generalizability, or validity are not necessarily achievable or appropriate goals (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004, p. 122). While it is true that this work relies solely on my own experience and cannot be widely generalized, it is important to note that neither autoethnography as a method or myself as a researcher intend to speak for any large population. This research is specific to its context, and the level of richness that came from exploring a singular experience is one of this study’s strengths. However, because this work reflects my own perspective, it is limited by the conditions of my positionality. In discussions of oppression in the academy and in research, this work would be strengthened by including perspectives of those who have historically been excluded from academia and who continue to face significant barriers of oppression. My whiteness has shaped my experience in the academy ways I cannot separate myself from; racialized scholars would have very different experiences and insights that would shape the analysis. Future research could explore community perspectives as well as academic ones, and investigate the realities, potential, and challenges for community members doing collaborative research with graduate students and career academics.

Concluding Thoughts

When I first embarked on my work with Uni 101, I aimed to define the best practices of doing community-driven work in an institutional context—and I failed. I expected to uncover how exactly one should go about doing this kind of work, resulting in a structured list of best practices both ethically and methodologically. In hindsight, I see now that the very idea of a list

of 'best practices' could be considered a bureaucratic endeavour, attempting to standardize approaches to community-driven work. I quickly came to understand how each community has unique knowledges, values, and needs, and structured guidelines may limit the potential of fully utilizing the community's specific expertise. After learning the importance of flexibility in this work, I see now that having general values and paradigms to guide the work is more important than a comprehensive "how-to". I pivoted this project to explore the realities of doing scholarship with commitment from a graduate student perspective, including its opportunities and challenges. Ultimately, my findings emphasize the challenges and value of building trust in the community context, the importance of resisting academic norms, and the opportunities for growth that come from investing in community work. While my individual experience does not qualify me to make broad or far-reaching institutional recommendations, it offers insight into the reality of this work, the potential of 'radical' approaches to research and education; the power of learning from emotional experiences; and the value of finding community and solidarity in an inherently isolating and individual experience.

Throughout my experience writing this thesis, I have felt there is an ugly irony to it. Taking an experience that was so deeply meaningful to me and turning into something to serve an academic audience, and to ultimately legitimize my status as a researcher, felt antithetical to the message I have tried to convey. I struggled with this moral conflict, and with the vulnerability that has been required of me in writing this thesis. However, as much as I often detested having to write this thesis as an institutional requirement, I feel in an odd sense grateful that this project was accepted by the university, that something so personal could still meet the same requirements that have historically favoured objectivity and detachment. This

work, to me, is still ending in a place of hope—seeing the possibility and reality of alternatives to research and education, and knowing community spaces like Uni 101 exist, have left me more optimistic and grateful than I was at the outset of this project.

I have been challenged to confront my own doubts of sharing my experiences so vulnerably and personally in this work, and of whether or not it would be considered “real research”—I am grateful for the long history of feminist and Black radical scholars fighting for the role of activist-scholar, and the importance of making the personal political. I am reminded of Audre Lorde’s (1984) quote that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”—there is a growing need for a radical reimagining of research and education to utilize alternatives beyond institutional traditions in order to reconnect education with the goals of liberation and justice.

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Appendix A Certificate of Ethics Approval



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Certificate of Approval - Annual Renewal

<p>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Audrey Yap</p> <p>PRINCIPAL APPLICANT</p> <p>UVIC DEPARTMENT Philosophy PHIL</p>	<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="background-color: #e1eef6;">ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER</td> <td style="background-color: #e1eef6;">20-0502</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="background-color: #e1eef6;">Expedited review - delegated</td> </tr> <tr> <td>ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE</td> <td>04-Dec.-2020</td> </tr> <tr> <td>APPROVED ON</td> <td>19-Nov.-2021</td> </tr> <tr> <td>APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE</td> <td>03-Dec.-2022</td> </tr> </table>	ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER	20-0502	Expedited review - delegated		ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE	04-Dec.-2020	APPROVED ON	19-Nov.-2021	APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE	03-Dec.-2022
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<p>PROJECT TITLE The Stories We Write Together: Narrative Identity and the Transformative Potential of Learning Communities</p> <p>RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS Rachael Barton-Bridges - Graduate Student RA, University of Victoria</p> <p>DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING University of Victoria (UVIC),</p> <p>DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL Uni 101 Interview Questions (1).docx - 08-Nov.-2020 tcps2_core_certificate.pdf - 08-Nov.-2020 tcps2_core_certificate.pdf - 09-Nov.-2020 Consent_Form_Template-Uni101-Nov8.docx - 11-Nov.-2020 Uni 101 Approval for Research.docx - 11-Nov.-2020</p>											
CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL											
<p>This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.</p> <p>Modifications To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.</p> <p>Renewals Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.</p> <p>Project Closures When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.</p>											
Certification											
<p style="text-align: center;">This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.</p>											